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A

"THAT BENEFIT RACKET": WOMEN AND THE BENEFIT IN NEW YORK THEATRE, 1840-1875

by

MARY HELEN HUFF

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2000

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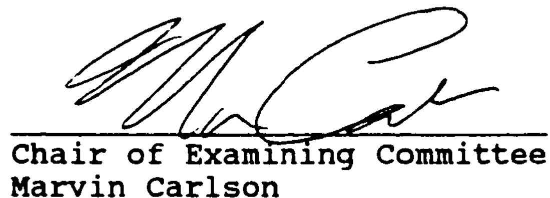

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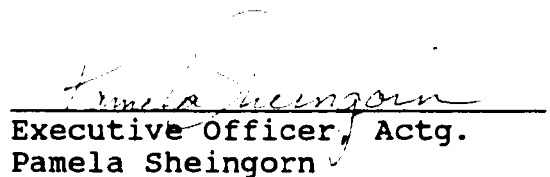

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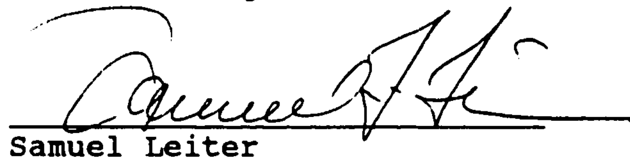

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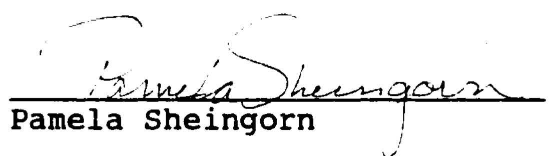

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Abstract

"THAT BENEFIT RACKET": WOMEN AND THE BENEFIT IN NEW YORK THEATRE, 1840-1875

by

Mary Helen Huff

Advisor: Professor Marvin Carlson

This study examines female agency located in theatrical benefit performance in New York City between 1840 and 1875. Contractual and charity benefits offered autonomous performance sites that were free from traditional rules and regulations of the theatre manager. The beneficiary was in charge of mounting the performance, arranging the bill, providing publicity, and, most importantly, casting the performers.

For female performers, this autonomy was crucial. In a profession and society that denied women a subject voice in representation, the benefit offered a protected site where women could construct a female voice and presence. By writing and performing in plays that featured female subjects, and by "cutting and pasting" scenes from the traditional male-authored canon, theatrical women constructed new positions through which they could negotiate power and agency.

The female-identified constructs of voluntarism and reciprocity were crucial to the operation of the benefit. Voluntarism provided the means by which nineteenth-century women were able to move from the confines of the domestic sphere to the larger public sphere. Gender-specific reciprocity served as a form of "social currency" which women used to operate communally and work together. Women used the

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familiar concepts of voluntarism and reciprocity in the benefit to build agency and power in the theatrical community, and in the larger public sphere.

Charity benefits were also used by women to support causes and generate agency, both in the theatre and in the larger society. Women banded together in benefits to offer support to other women and children as well as to support public charitable causes. This dissertation examines the charity benefits of dancer Fanny Elssler, actress-manager Laura Keene, actress-playwright Anna Cora Mowatt, and actress Charlotte Cushman.

Lastly, the study examines the end of the benefit system in the American theatre, and its corresponding decline in female agency in the professional theatre. Yet, while the benefit and its agency for women disappeared from the theatre, it was transferred to theatrical-style benefits for upper-class elite "society" women and clubwomen. Ultimately, by 1892, when theatrical women finally had their own clubs as forums for female community, the benefit returned to provide agency for theatrical women.

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This dissertation is dedicated to Luis Mario Acevedo, for his unfailing and neverending love and support during this long journey. It is also lovingly dedicated to my parents—Lessie Wells Huff, and the late Ben Clyde Huff—my constant supporters, here and in other realms; my siblings, Marie Huff Highnote, Sandra Huff Boyle, and Gerry Clyde Huff; and my aunts and uncle, Mary Othel Wells Robinson, Mildred Wells Carter, and L.K. Carter—for their encouragement and support. Thanks be to God!

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This project would not have been possible without the help of numerous people. I would like to thank the Theatre Department of the City University Graduate School and University Center for their financial grant to travel to the Harvard Theatre Collection for research. I would also like to thank the members of my committee—Professor Marvin Carlson, Professor Samuel Leiter, Professor Emeritus Marion Holt, and Professor Pamela Sheingorn—for their thoughtful insights, constructive criticisms, emotional and mental support, and encouragement. Their kindness and generosity is very much appreciated.

A dissertation is completed within a small community of friends, family, and supporters. Without their help, I would not have completed this task. My first grateful acknowledgement must be to the members of my dissertation group at the Graduate Center—Anne Beck, Dana Sutton, and Eszter Szalczer. We formed a group to help with the second exam, and continued on through our dissertation proposals. Their example, guidance, gentle prodding, and support meant the world of difference to me. This "female community" has my eternal gratitude. Dana's wealth of knowledge on the nineteenth-century theatre and knowledge of the Boston YWCA, Anne's thoughtful comments on the social position of women, and Eszter's command of academic writing were especially welcome.

I would like to thank the staff of the New York Public Library, both at the Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts, and at the Rare Books and

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Manuscripts Division of the main branch on 42nd Street. Their professionalism and guidance were invaluable. I would also like to thank the student staff at the Harvard Theatre Collection for their kindness and generosity.

Outside the graduate school itself, several people provided assistance and support. I would like to thank Orly Krasner ("been there, done that") for her emotional support and generous time given to me both over the telephone and in person. I would like to thank Rose Bonczek for her unfailing belief in me and, especially, for Civil War photographs. My grateful thanks to my longtime friend Julie Daffin Dickson for her love and support, and to Samuel Christian for his faithful encouragement and phone calls. My appreciation to Karl Levett and Ed Kelleher for actually reading my proposal, and offering their private collection for my perusal. Lastly, my appreciation to Rosabel Wang and the Theatre Research Data Center for ongoing support in many ways.

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Introduction

This dissertation is a critical examination of female agency in the benefit performance and its connections between women, charity, and voluntarism in New York theatre and society between 1840 and 1875. Theatrical benefits emphasized many of the attributes and features women's historians identify as female: a narrowly defined constituency, a combined personal commitment and labor by participants with small-scale fundraising, a strong emphasis on voluntarism and community, and an emphasis on self-support.

A benefit performance is defined as one where the proceeds of the event are given to either a person, group, or cause, rather than to the owner or manager of the performing venue. It is a performance site where performers have control over what is produced and, in the nineteenth century, were free from the control of management. It would be considered a non-profit endeavor in that it is located outside the normal capitalist system of profit making.

The benefit tradition in the theatre has a long history. While found throughout much of Europe, it was the English model that directly affected the American benefit. During the last years of Shakespeare's career, the third evening of a play's performance run came to be known as the "author's benefit," with the proceeds traditionally devoted to the playwright. Group benefits for female and apprentice actors, groups without economic power and agency, became common in the English Restoration theatre. These events, however, were not systematic but rather scattered throughout the theatre.

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The benefit system is traditionally dated as beginning with the individual contractual benefit clause negotiated by actress Elizabeth Barry in 1687.

It is no coincidence that the benefit tradition begins with the first appearance of women in the English theatre. Actresses were prevented from owning shares in the performing companies, and the benefit, negotiated individually with management in their contracts, gave them the potential to earn a substantial amount of money to make up for the lost revenue. More importantly, however, the contractual benefit offered a performance site where women employed strategies that empowered them both economically and socially. As the tradition expanded and emigrated to America, theatrical women found that by using their traditional ties to caregiving, charity, and voluntarism, they could build communities of women that used reciprocal aid to create a female-identified site of alternative gender ideology and performance. Benefits were sites of localized, collective activity in women's culture involving theatre and performance, charitable fundraising, women's voluntarism, and social activism.

By the eighteenth century, male performers had co-opted the benefit and also used it as an entrepreneurial tool for monetary advantage. While benefits were utilized by both genders, women used them differently and reaped different degrees of agency from them. I argue that benefits were female-based prototypes of community and communal aid, invented by women, then co-opted by men in the theatre for their own use. Further, I argue that women gained far more from the benefit system and needed it more than did men. It was more crucial for women since they were denied so many options in society. There were simply fewer opportunities for women in the public

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sphere and the theatre was no different. The nineteenth-century patriarchal repertoire featured male subjects, and highlighted male interests. Male actors outnumbered females three to one, and women were limited in other theatrical occupations as well. In a society where women were confined to the home and a domestic ideology that gave them little power and agency in the larger world, the benefit always remained more crucial for women than men.

The charity benefit, a part of the system created shortly after the contractual benefit, extended voluntary, charitable aid not only to theatrical workers, but to groups and causes in the larger society. As in contractual benefits, women used charity benefits to support other women and causes in their communities. Theatrical women used female domestic strategies in both contractual and charity benefits to create agency in the larger society.

Two characteristics were common to all forms of benefits: the beneficiary was to receive profit, and participation by other actors was voluntary and reciprocal. Moreover, voluntarism, identified with women in America throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was a primary component in women's use of charity, a female-identified activity. Voluntarism and charity were crucial for women because they served as the conduits through which women escaped the confines of the domestic "private" sphere of the home and entered the male-dominated "public" sphere of the larger society. Reciprocity was also a crucial element in the benefit system. To mount a benefit, a performer had to not only enlist other performers to volunteer, but had to pledge reciprocity in return for their participation. Reciprocity became a form of

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benefit currency, to be spent as needed for immediate or later results. By volunteering their time, professional skills and talents, and reciprocating for each other, performers built power relationships, free from the manager's rules and regulations. By using reciprocity, the female performer molded voluntarism as a commodity of direct exchange through which to negotiate power in the theatre community. In addition, gender analysis reveals that women reciprocated more often for each other than did men. This created a strongly feminized performance site.

Respectability and popular appeal were also important in how theatrical women constructed and used benefits for agency. Women found social agency by developing and using the respectability located in "true womanhood." Strong popular actresses such as Anna Cora Mowatt, Laura Keene, Fanny Elssler, and Charlotte Cushman used the construct of respectability as a form of social currency with which to gain agency and surpass traditional societal suspicion of the "duplicitous" actress. By using the benefit as a nexus of female respectability, popular appeal, and traditional female-identified characteristics of voluntarism and charity in the public space of the theatre, these women found a considerable degree of agency in the larger public sphere.

I begin my study in the 1840s because it was an important transitional decade for women. American society began to open up to women as they found increased safety in former urban "bastions of male activity," including the theatre. More women ventured out into the "public sphere," the domain of men. Women, such as the actress Fanny Kemble, became accepted public speakers. The Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 was the first public demonstration of female suffrage and feminist struggle. The

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1850s witnessed the rise of respectability for women—both in audiences and on stage—contributing to more female audience attendance and the creation of matinees targeted toward these women. Theatre manager Laura Keene created charity matinees for women and children, and the decade ended with the increased participation of women fighting for social causes such as temperance and abolition. The 1860s featured women engaged in huge, highly successful fundraising endeavors—including benefits—for war purposes. Yet the 1860s also saw the rise of modern business practices in the theatre that ended the benefit tradition. Benefits became incorporated into professional theatrical organizations such as the American Dramatic Fund, men's theatrical clubs, and women's clubs. By 1875, the commodification and objectification of women in theatre, combined with the loss of the benefit, resulted in a loss of agency for theatrical women. However, women in the larger society—"society" queens and clubwomen—co-opted the theatrical benefit and established a paradigm of female benefit activity. This paradigm enabled theatrical women to recover the benefit tradition in their clubs in the early 1890s.

My study was confined to New York City and its major theatres, including the Park, the Bowery, the Olympic, Burton's, Chatham's, Niblo's Garden, the Academy of Music, the Lyceum (under Brougham), Wallack's, Laura Keene's New Theatre, Booth's, the Winter Garden, and the Union Square Theatre.

Little analysis has been given to the theatrical benefit in the literature. Indeed, few theatre historians have approached the benefit in any detail. Most either dismiss the benefit as "frivolous" exploitation by performers or limit themselves to the

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economic aspect. Theatre historian Robert D. Hume has examined the history, financial structure, and workings of the English benefit, but with no special attention to gender function and role in "The Origins of the Actor Benefit in London," in *Theatre Research International* (1984). St. Vincent Troubridge, in *The Benefit System in the British Theatre* (1967), outlined the English benefit system chronologically and thematically, but again with no specific gender analysis. David Edward McKenty's dissertation, *The Benefit System in Augustan Drama* (1966), came closest to my interests. While also lacking a feminist slant, McKenty approached an analysis of some of the intertheatrical elements that made up the benefit system. He, however, did not focus on these strategies in detail as a strength of the system.

Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix has examined the sexology of performance in 1890s America by looking at cross-dressed benefits of the Professional Women's League in "'A Doublet and Hose in My Disposition': Sexology and the Cross-Dressed Theatrics of the Professional Women's League," in *Theatre History Studies* (1995). While hinting at the subversive possibilities of benefit performance, she does not directly examine the site.

Little has been written about the role of women and charity in the theatre. Social historian Robert Bremner in his classic work *American Philanthropy* (originally published in 1960 and revised and reissued in 1988) has explored the history of American philanthropy and charity, revealing the important role of women, especially in the nineteenth century. Yet he does not include theatrical women. Feminist cultural historian Kathleen D. McCarthy has explored the role of women, charity, and the fine

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arts in *Lady Bountiful Revisited: Women, Philanthropy and Power* (1990); *Noblesse Oblige: Charity and Cultural Philanthropy in Chicago, 1849-1929* (1982); and *Women's Culture: American Philanthropy and Art, 1830-1930* (1991). She argues that charity was one of the "few routes to public stature" open to women in the nineteenth century. Yet she does not include the theatrical profession or actresses.

Feminist historians and cultural critics such as Karen Blair, Christine Bolt, Nancy Cott, Karen Halttunen, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, among many others, have charted the place of women in social and cultural change and have argued the importance of women as *agents* of change. Bolt and Cott examine the place of women in society, especially the transition from the domestic to the public sphere. Halttunen has specifically examined the importance of parlor theatricals and their effect on American women and society. Smith-Rosenberg articulates an alternate gender ideology as practiced by women in many nineteenth-century social situations. None include theatrical women as part of their analyses. Blair, however, tangentially touches on benefit activity when she discusses the importance of theatrical and paratheatrical activities of women's clubs in *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914* (1980). Beverly Gordon, in *Bazaars and Fair Ladies: The History of the American Fundraising Fair* (1998), articulates the importance of voluntarism and charity not only as a means of fundraising, but also as a means of entering into and building agency in the larger public sphere. She also includes a wealth of information on women in Civil War organizations, especially the United States Sanitary Commission.

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These historians and critics argue that women's communities, in the form of benevolent societies and church groups, operated to provide women with opportunities to give aid, and influence and practice social policy. Women's historians also argue that communities of women used these traditionally female-identified characteristics as venues by which to enter the public sphere. In the theatre, women used the female-identified characteristics of the benefit to extend themselves into the public arena.

My dissertation contributes to an understanding of how charity and voluntarism operated in the nineteenth-century American theatre as tools women wielded to secure, manage, and negotiate economic and social agency and power. It contributes to women's history and gender studies by articulating how theatrical women used a particular contextualized site of performance to build agency. Most importantly, it contributes to feminist theatre history as it extricates the female performer from traditional historical accounts that deny her a separate voice and identity. The public stage of the theatre is a unique site to seek out avenues of social change for women since it is a rare public site that is dependent upon private behavior. As anthropologist Juliet Blair argues, the actress inhabits a sphere that is both public and private in that "she works in a public place where she is seen acting in ways that most women reserve for a private context."[1] The study also operates as a social and cultural history of the American theatre as it charts how a non-dominant social group (women) built communities that fostered non-hegemonic, or alternative, ideologies that co-existed alongside dominant social categories.

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My study helps to reveal the social role of theatre, or the specific impact of theatre upon society, as well as society's effects on theatre. It contributes to the study of how women extended the private sphere into the larger, more public community by using voluntarism and charity. It encourages scholars to think about the ways women use and manage power and how rules are negotiated in societies. Little research has been done on the role of charity and voluntarism in the theatre as it intersects with illness or need in all communities. In light of the response of today's theatrical establishment to the impact of AIDS in the form of voluntary charitable organizations such as Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, and theatrical women's involvement in causes ranging from female war refugees to abused women and women suffering from breast and ovarian cancers, my project helps situate this communal impulse of female theatrical artists in a firmly rooted historical tradition and extends it into an international community. Lastly, the intertheatrical performance aspects of the benefit can contribute to performance studies. For the above reasons, my project is a valuable contribution to American historical studies, women's studies, and theatre studies.

Chapter One, "Women and Society: Charity, Voluntarism, and Community," will examine the position of women in nineteenth-century culture and will set theatrical women within this context. The "cult of True Womanhood" will be examined and the constructs of the female "domestic" sphere and male "public" sphere will be articulated. Voluntarism and charity as agents for social change and female empowerment in bridging the spheres will be analyzed. The crucial importance of female community will be highlighted. Lastly, the chapter will introduce the benefit as

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a communal site for female activity and agency where women used strategies of voluntarism and elements of charity, and will stress the importance of this for the actress and the theatre.

Chapter Two, "Communities: The Theatrical Benefit," will begin with a brief history of the benefit performance, situating it in theatre history and women's history. The differences between charity and contractual benefits will be delineated. The interaction and importance of reciprocity and voluntarism will be explored. I will link the benefit performance to career advancement for the female performer, as well as discuss its power as a negotiating tool. Intertheatricality and strategies in the benefit will be examined and explained. The semiotics of playbills will be examined, revealing information on the marketing and advertising of benefits and the role of popular appeal.

Chapter Three, "The Nineteenth-Century Female Performer and the Benefit Performance," will firmly place the female performer in nineteenth-century society. The benefit, with its elements of voluntarism, reciprocal aid, and female community is examined as an ideal site in which women could find agency as well as economic power. Feminist theory will be used to examine the positioning of the female performer and agency in the benefit. I will argue that the intertheatrical elements of the benefit were more crucial to women than men and specific intertheatrical strategies used by women will be examined. The use of popular "celebrity" appeal and patronage by the female performer will be delineated. The importance of the construct of respectability for the nineteenth-century female performer will be analyzed and its intersection and interaction with her benefits will be examined. Lastly, the construction

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of a female subject position in the benefit and its potential to disrupt the patriarchal dramatic canon will be analyzed.

Chapter Four, "Theatrical Women and Charitable Benefits," will examine charity benefits in more detail. It will focus on how several actresses used charity benefits—and celebrity and respectability—to build bridges into the larger public sphere. Charlotte Cushman, Fanny Elssler, Laura Keene, and Anna Cora Mowatt, and the charitable causes they sponsored in charity benefits for the larger society will be examined and delineated. Further connections will be made between women and their traditional usage of voluntarism, caregiving, and nationalistic causes—all combining with respectability in the charity benefit performance to develop a more public agency for women.

Chapter Five, "Decline of the Benefit Tradition: Transition and Displacement of Female Agency," will examine post-Civil War changes in the benefit tradition that had a drastic effect on women. Economic and social changes affecting the theatre will be examined including new business practices and the concurrent change in theatrical management; the rise of professionalism and hegemonic respectability and its effects on the theatre "profession"; the rise of institutional philanthropy and its control by the dominant gender, leading to its exclusion of women in the institutional structure; and the rise of institutional theatrical charity and its exclusion of women from power. These changes resulted in transition and adaptation as the benefit declined in the professional theatre and was "abolished" in the late 1860s. The change to a "spectacle" theatre product based on visual allure will be charted, and its effects

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(commodification and objectification) on women will be delineated. The effect of the loss of agency in the benefit, combined with the changing role of women in the theatre will be articulated. While agency for theatrical women declined in the profession, it became a part of voluntary associational life as it was displaced to women's clubs, the "society benefit," and by the 1890s, theatrical women's clubs such as the Professional Women's League.

An interdisciplinary approach is used in this dissertation. Feminist theory and analysis is my main methodological tool since it reveals social and cultural constructs that prevented women from enjoying equal opportunities in theatre, as well as strategies that empowered women. A feminist analysis allows for the creation of a female subject, part of current feminist thought and practice. It can help historians analyze how women created alternative gender ideologies that constructed female subjects and female-centered sites of performance.

I will also use semiotics to examine benefit playbills, gifts, souvenirs and mementos, and other historical artifacts, and analyze how women utilized these semiotic elements to build agency. Semiotics also assists in examining the construct of celebrity, as the semiotics of the performer (role and performer), combined with the presence of the celebrity beneficiary, complicates the benefit performance. It can also assist in analyzing the creation of multiple, or secondary, meanings by the reformation of existing theatrical material that is highlighted and foregrounded in benefits. Reciprocity theory, a form of sociological theory that explores how human societies use altruism and community to form reciprocal arrangements based on mutual need, will be

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used to examine how crucial mutual aid was to the benefit and how it operated as a form of "social currency" to be spent, hoarded, or saved. I will use performance theory to analyze the intertheatrical elements of benefit performance that devalued language/text in favor of event/experience. Anthropological theory assists in examining the benefit as a liminal site of community where transformation and "free and familiar" contact could occur, where rules and regulations are temporarily suspended, and where role inversion is normal.

Playbills, scrapbooks, programs, and news clippings from the Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts were extensively examined, as were playbills from the Harvard Theatre Collection and New York Historical Society. Actors' memoirs and stage "manuals"—such as Leman T. Rede's *The Road to the Stage* (1827) and *The Guide to the Stage* (reprinted, 1868)—greatly contributed to my study. Memoirs helped highlight the personal agency for all performers located in benefits and the two stage manuals bluntly stated the practicality of a "good" benefit. Both provided a wealth of information on the structures of benefits. In addition, the New York Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts collection included the records of the United States Sanitary Commission, including information on benefits staged by Cushman and other women. This location also included the records of the American Dramatic Fund, whose bylaws specifically mentioned benefits as fundraising tools.

The benefit of the American theatre offers theatre historians a paradigm of female agency where women constructed alternative ideologies of performance and behavior. In a society built on dominant gender ideology, the benefit was a liminal site

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where women practiced communal reciprocity and mutual aid. In a theatre dependent upon traditional, male-oriented, patriarchal dramatic texts in which women were seen as objects in the hero's environment, supporting the male protagonist, the benefit offered opportunities for women to create female subjects and a female-centered bill of fare.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Juliet Blair, "Private Parts in Public Places: The Case of Actresses," *Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps*, ed. Shirley Ardener (Oxford: Berg, 1993), 200.

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Chapter I

Women and Society: Charity, Voluntarism, and Community

Introduction

The nineteenth century witnessed many changes for women as they extended their private, domestic life into the larger social one. Women sought opportunities to expand their roles into the public sphere and used their traditional historical involvement in charity and voluntarism through the conduit of localized, all-female, communities as strategies to affect this expansion. One must understand how important voluntarism and charity were to all American women as agents of social change. As the position of women shifted and struggles over their position were enacted, charity and voluntarism remained consistently associated with upper- and middle-class white women. In addition, voluntarism was long used as a strategy by female communities, such as benevolent societies and church groups, to give aid and charity to others. This same strategy became the public conduit that empowered women to move into the public sphere. It also allowed women to influence and practice social policy, in effect generating agency in the public sphere.

Women's histories seldom include theatrical women and only recently have feminist theatre historians begun to place them in the context of larger social issues. Yet theatrical women did not exist in a vacuum. They struggled with similar issues of gaining access to power and agency and used traditionally female strategies to affect change. The theatre already had a site where a female community used voluntarism and charity to generate agency and empowerment—the theatrical benefit. The actress

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was in a unique position since she worked in a public profession that offered more equality between women and men. Yet even here, women encountered the dominant gender ideology that created a theatrical fare predicated on male subjects in male-centered dramas. Women needed the voluntarism and female communal empowerment of the benefit to generate agency for themselves. Voluntarism in the benefit enabled communities of theatrical women to organize and band together for professional and communal support, and extend their concerns, interests, and causes into the larger, public sphere.

The Position of Women in Society

Before I can get to the position of women in the theatre, however, I must explore the larger position of women in nineteenth-century American society. In order to understand this position, one must begin with a clear explanation of the binary sphere argument of women's history. This argument maintains that society was divided into two parts or spheres: the private, domestic sphere, which centered on the home environs, and the public sphere, which centered on business, economic, and political life in the marketplace.

As part of the ideology of the domestic sphere, the Cult of True Womanhood (also known as the Cult of Domesticity) has been cited by feminist historians as a primary paradigm for nineteenth-century women's history.[1] This model argues that in the early decades of this century, middle-class women were increasingly isolated in the home, where they were encouraged to devote time and attention to traditional "female

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duties": child care, the running of the household, care of the sick and elderly, and the moral well-being of the family. Women were so identified with these characteristics that, later in the century, moral reformist Lydia Sigourney remarked that "there is a certain class of benevolent deeds which falls so peculiarly within the province of females, as to have obtained the name of feminine charities. I allude to the relief of the famishing, and the care of the sick."[2]

As part of their confinement to the domestic sphere, women were effectively cut off from economic and political avenues of power. Most professions were closed to them, and married women had no legal right to property, money, or even their children. Men operated in the public arena, where they had more options and opportunities for social, economic, and political power. They dominated in occupations ranging from clergymen, doctors, lawyers, politicians, and storeowners, to clerks, laborers, and theatre managers. Occasionally, women were found in some of these occupations, but it was the exception rather than the rule.

Since women were thus contained within the home and effectively barred from participating in the outside public world, they focused on developing the qualities valued in the domestic sphere. They quickly discovered that they could turn the restrictions of their confinement into advantages by publicly praising the very elements that defined the domestic sphere and the authority of the woman in the home. In effect, they played on the dictate that if man ruled the public sphere, woman ruled the domestic. This binary split became the basis of the Cult of True Womanhood, where "the home was seen as a temple, and women were the high priestesses."[3]

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In addition, the "true woman" was the mirror image of the "common man," the corresponding mythic male construct of the emergent middle class. This aspect of domestic ideology dictated that domestic tranquility serve as "the guardian of society against the competitiveness of a male-dominated world."[4] To preserve this tranquility, the "common man" and the "true woman" were responsible together for the family's good. While the common man was noted for his self-reliance, talent, competitiveness, and ability to earn a living for his family, the true woman was centered on domestic life, dependent on her family, self-sacrificing, nurturing, and morally pure and pious. True women were associated with compassion, coming to the aid of others in need.

Yet another historical strand of female domestic ideology was located in the problematic ideology of Republican motherhood. As the country entered the age of Jackson and the Republic, it went through major political, economic, and cultural struggles to define itself. Women were seen as foci for maintaining the stability of this nascent Republic. If fortunes rose and fell, if social and economic mobility proved unstable, one thing should remain the same—the home and the true woman tending it. Good Republican mothers kept good Republican homes and raised good Republican children. Women thus became responsible for promoting not only morality, but also proper Republican virtues.

Yet Republican motherhood ideology also positioned women as immodest, easily corrupted, and hopelessly vain. Drawing upon Rousseau's philosophy of the natural and the virtuous, nineteenth-century Americans considered gender as rooted in immutable biological differences. They adhered to the Rousseauean view that women

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were more emotional, closer to nature, and thus more "natural," while men were more rational and informed. In some ways contradictory to domestic ideology, since Rousseau viewed men as virtuous and women as sentimental, it still constructed women as particularly problematic and subject to containment. This strand of Republican ideology held that any potential danger to the home threatened the development of the growing Republic. Thus, homebound women needed rational, patriarchal guidance to keep their passions in check and curb the threat to the nation. Most attempts by women to escape their domestic confines were met with harsh resistance.

Ironically, the containment of women within the home served two contradictory cross-purposes: the dangerous influence of the corrupt, irrational female was confined and limited to the home, yet these same "corrupt women" were entrusted with the moral guidance and education of the family. Most women of the nineteenth century, therefore, found themselves in an untenable situation. If they ventured into the male-dominated public sphere and tried to compete on its terms, they were deemed to be dangerous to society and risked being marginalized and ostracized. Yet confined to the home, they lost any real power and influence in the public arena. As the century unfolded, however, women, unsatisfied with the limitations of the domestic sphere, found that the very qualities of the homebound female served as a way to enter the public arena.

By midcentury, women's influence began to spread from the home to the larger public sphere, and women as well as men began to extol the virtues of domestic life. Women's magazines and novels blatantly appealed to a woman's place in the home, yet

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also served to encourage women to extend the influence of the domestic into the public arena. Contemporary women's cultural and artistic historian Elizabeth Ellet's 1851 treatise, *Domestic History of the American Revolution,* focused on home life and duties such as making stockings, yet also advocated women's political action through the home by the boycotting of tea. Privileged women such as Catharine Beecher and the editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, Sarah Josepha Hale, helped define the thrust of domestic ideology by arguing that female self-sacrifice and maternal duties were crucial in claiming a role for women in the public sphere. Women encouraged each other to "claim an ever-widening share of responsibility within the voluntary sector as educators, missionaries, charity workers, and agents for reform."[5]

As part of domestic ideology, women were assumed to be self-sacrificing for the good of others. Even more importantly, this self-sacrifice was seen as being crucial to female self-fulfillment. Domestic ideology appealed to women by encouraging them to "conceive the grand and noble ambition, the only one worthy of woman's soul, of rendering yourself necessary to your fellow-creatures, within the natural reach of your sphere, and of adding something to the beauty of this beautiful earth, of which God has made you the brightest and most precious blessing."[6]

Since women had functioned as caregivers and moral standard bearers for their families within the home, it was logical that they would utilize those same skills in their attempts to enter the public sphere. Just as women subjugated themselves and their needs to serve the family, they now turned that subjugation into a pathway out of the domestic arena by serving the public needs of other women, children, the elderly, and

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the sick and indigent. Within this framework, women used their "natural talents" to safely extend their presence into society. The very traits that defined the nineteenth-century woman—selflessness, self-sacrifice, care and nurture of others, compassion, and moral responsibility—paradoxically served to empower women and allow them to move out of the domestic environs.

In addition to the above traits constituting the "true woman," piety and virtue came to be viewed as female characteristics of "moral superiority." This moral authority also became part of the ideology of nineteenth-century gender difference and was a logical outgrowth of women's association with religious institutions. It deemed that church activities leading to female benevolence were acceptable since "no sensible woman will suffer her intellectual pursuits to clash with her domestic duties, and religious work promoted these domestic duties."[7] Women represented the majority in Protestant churches by the mid-1700s and their numbers became even larger during the nineteenth century. They found the church to be a particularly hospitable home and alliance since it preached moral virtue and Christian piety, female-identified characteristics already familiar to women.

The ideology of domesticity and the association of women with moral superiority led to the larger cultural construct of the "respectable" woman. By the 1840s, women's own virtues had become the standard of respectability. Taking advantage of an 87% literacy rate for these white women, increased numbers of women's publications emphasized making a "happy, moral home."[8] Catharine Beecher, one of the "doyennes" of female respectability in mid-nineteenth-century

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America, argued that "in matters pertaining to the education of children, in all benevolent enterprises, and in all questions relating to morals and manners, [women] have superior influence."[9] The construct of respectability and its view of the morally superior woman served two functions, one liberal and the other conservative. The liberal function dictated that if women were more moral, thus more respectable, than men, they could extend their moral influence into the public sphere. Through the power of superior morality, women could transform society through changes in social and cultural issues. This liberal function was the basis of the moral reform movement.

The conservative function of respectability, however, held that the morally superior woman was only to be found in certain elements of society. Non-white, ethnic, immigrant, and working- or lower-class women were generally marginalized and overlooked in this construction of moral superiority. It did not take into account real differences among women, especially the class privileges of its white, heterosexual, married, mostly middle- and upper-class proponents. Through the new construction of elite, superior female virtue, privileged women questioned other women's femininity, or morality. Thus the construct of respectability worked to support women in the public sphere, but it also served to divide women from each other.

The actress was generally not accepted by these privileged women who guarded the morality of the Republic and was denied aid as well as inclusion. Early women's charitable networks proved ill-suited to assist those women whose professional aspirations placed them at the margins of acceptable, "ladylike" behavior. The

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construct of respectability did little for the actress until mid-century and continued to be problematic for women in the theatre. Despite the historical realities that belied the hegemonic view of domestic ideology, by the 1850s respectable virtue came to be viewed as an exclusively female quality to be applied within settings dominated by women. Ironically, this respectability also served as a way for women to take a place in the larger public sphere. As the respectable woman and her interests and concerns moved into the public arena, she was not seen as a threat to male dominance. As a result, the construct of respectability remained strong and dominant, especially in the privileged world of the middle and upper classes.

Yet women in nonprivileged classes and occupations were probably aware of and aspired to the concept of respectability for themselves. There was, however, one crucial difference between women of these separate classes that prevented the complete hegemony of the respectable woman. Respectable women of virtue did not earn money by working for wages. Most contemporary women's historians now argue that many more women worked in the nineteenth century than previously thought. Therefore, in a discussion of women's place in the nineteenth century, women's work and wages must be included.

Shifting class boundaries and the emergence of a strong middle class during the century led to a profound shift in the nature of work in the 1820s, 30s, and 40s. These shifts produced an increase in the number and visibility of women working inside and outside the home for wages. Without enough money to support their families and themselves, they simply could not afford the construct of respectability. Many of these

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"other" classes of women worked for wages, while elite women did not. By looking at wages of working women and comparing them to the wages of men, a more rounded view of the position of other nineteenth-century women comes into focus.

In 1850, the average wage for skilled male workers—tradesmen, mechanics, and artisans—was $300 a year. With an average rent of $275 a year in the 1850s, a salary earned by the male breadwinner was clearly not enough to support a family. Many of their wives worked in one or more of the occupations of the marginalized female, such as domestic worker, seamstress, cook, or laundress.[10] Domestic workers made up as much as 50% of female workers. Their work was hard and tedious and was noted by *New York Herald* reporter George Foster, who wrote that "a large and increasing class of our female population, [seamstresses are] a sad enough picture for present."[11] Foster further estimated that 30,000 women in New York City, including widows, wives with disabled husbands, and daughters of deceased or disabled fathers, were working women and that "more than half the prostitutes and female criminals in the city came here from the country to earn a living in some honest way."[12]

Domestic ideology also ignored the widespread practice of unwaged, income-producing home work, such as taking in related and unrelated boarders. Much of this domestic work done in the home was hidden work, that is, subsumed into general home work and discounted as being of little wage-earning potential. As much as 60% of unskilled white households, 50% of skilled white households, and 45% of clerical white households may have practiced boarding. Most domestic housing in the city had attic rooms and extra bedrooms for boarders and "every room in every story" had its

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"separate family or occupant, renting by the week or month and paying in advance."[13] Boarders produced income that, taken together with other female-oriented home work, such as home teaching, home music lessons, sewing, and writing, located working women even in "genteel" homes in larger urban areas.

For wage work outside the home, women's occupations paid far less than those for men. For a family of five in 1851-1853, an annual income of $300-$600 was possible for a skilled laborer earning $6 a week. However, a woman's weekly wage was half that and domestic service offered $6-7 a month. A typical wage in the 1840s and 1850s for a "sweated" (in factory) seamstress was $1-3 a week for a 15-hour workday. In a skilled profession such as the theatre, however, the disparity in salaries was far less. A newly hired actress could make $5-6 dollars a week, while a newly hired male actor earned $6-8 dollars a week.

Society devalued women's wage work for several reasons. It was considered unnatural, not part of women's "nature," and therefore of little intrinsic value. Since working for wages was deemed to be outside the domestic arena and thus unacceptable for women, they had few options, strategies, or powers to change their working conditions. Working men simply had more options than working women. In the theatre, an occupation that generally offered better wages for working women, men still had more positions available to them. Men were actors, treasurers, orchestra members, scene painters, scene movers, lighting technicians, prop men, wardrobe keepers, ushers, and house and box office managers, while women were excluded from most of these positions. Women were confined to working as actresses (and were

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outnumbered by actors three to one during the century), ballet girls, or female dressers.[14]

Women and men also differed in the institutions and associations available to them. While men's political, economic, and personal needs and opportunities were continually met and widened through their public sphere associations—friendship societies, military and civic institutions, and clubs—women's roles were narrowed to fit the domestic sphere. Men used their associations to form networks and alliances to further their own interests and desires. For example, the college environment was almost exclusively male and many men participated in institutional activities that lasted throughout their careers and lifetimes. While elite white women were encouraged to be educated, opportunities for education were carefully limited. Higher education that aided women in their homebound duties was desirable, as long as their "intellectual pursuits, accomplishments, and household duties were compatible."[15] Elizabeth Blackwell, America's first woman to earn a medical degree, found not only extreme difficulty in attaining her medical degree, but encountered prejudice in trying to set up a practice. Her case proved that, outside of the domestic sphere, education was a liability for women. Confined to the narrow world of home and hearth and denied these more wide-ranging social privileges, women managed to form their own ties with other women through several venues incorporating voluntarism and charity.

The church served as one of the few institutional outlets where women could find some degree of agency and empowerment through the practice of religious benevolence and voluntarism. The association of femininity with benevolence was an

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ideological given among antebellum Protestants and, as feminist historian Nancy Cott has asserted, "no other avenue of self-expression besides religion at once offered women social approbation, the encouragement of male leaders such as ministers, and, most important, the community of their peers."[16] The church practiced moral virtue and Christian piety, female-identified characteristics already familiar to women through the doctrine of domestic ideology. Further, the rhetoric of Christian activist benevolence called for women to act together, volunteer their time and skills, and care for the poor and downtrodden. Through the church and its ideological mission of charity and benevolence, women volunteered to aid the poor and suffering.

The Importance of Voluntarism for Women

Women's practice of charitable fundraising and voluntarism bridged the private and public spheres for nineteenth-century women. Privileged women used both as they raised money for benevolent causes and found public agency through charitable philanthropy, moral reform, and church activities. Still not welcome in the working arena, women turned their formidable energy, time, and skills to voluntary work and charity, two areas in which they were eminently qualified. Even marginalized women would have been familiar with charity and voluntarism, since they may have been targets of the moralizing reform charity movements of elite women.

Women's historians have done much to illuminate the importance of charity and voluntarism in women's history. From venues as varied as Protestant churches to fundraising networks of domestic women, voluntary associations were power

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organizations when run by elite white women. They provided well-developed domestic networks that linked women to each other and strengthened their position in society. Feminist historian Mary Ann Clawson has argued that same-sex social organizations were a "constituting element in any system of gender-based power relations."[17] These voluntary social organizations also allowed women to carry out social and even some degree of political policy. Feminist historian Kathleen McCarthy states that "voluntary associations played an indispensable political role in society by providing ongoing mechanisms for peaceful, gradualist change."[18] Theatre historian Rosemarie Bank, in her recent book on theatre culture in nineteenth-century American life, argues that "association women found identity, individuation, and fellowship in such groups, all of particular importance to antebellum women."[19]

An erroneous view about women's place in mid-nineteenth-century society arises from an assumption that women lacked access to money. This is partly due to the fact that voluntarism and charity were constructed as female, while wage-earning work was constructed as masculine. Financially independent women were quite rare in the early part of the century, and even after the Civil War, most wealthy women inherited their fortunes from husbands or fathers. For a woman to earn her income was rare indeed. Most women were not in direct control of money for the household and it was not acceptable for women to be associated with it. Volunteering to raise money for charity not only gave them access to monies, but also offered opportunities for them to develop and practice business and marketplace skills. It was the closest these elite women came to earning money. Thus, fundraising offered a parallel structure to men's

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wage-earning work and the increased job opportunities it created. Effectively barred from the empowerment of earning money, elite women empowered themselves by raising it. The voluntary social organization became the conduit for women's fundraising efforts.

Within the guise of the ideal domestic construct, voluntarism was highly prized as a female attribute. It was a logical outgrowth of aiding and giving comfort to others. Voluntary work within the churches and synagogues was ideal and most voluntary associations of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were religiously approved or affiliated. As women's participation grew during the century, religious institutions became dependent on women's volunteering and fundraising skills. Women baked, sewed, painted and knitted articles for bazaars, benefits, and fairs to raise money for community causes, thus creating some modicum of power and recognition in the larger community. As they were empowered to participate in and take larger responsibility within the voluntary sector, they quickly turned voluntarism into a strategy that provided agency for them in the public sphere. Ultimately, voluntarism provided one of the primary mechanisms through which privileged white women played out their public lives, as they participated in everything from asylum work to more politically volatile abolitionist campaigns.

Voluntary associations, both church and community based, began in the late eighteenth century in America. As argued earlier, male voluntary associations served as meeting forums to advance careers or enhance male bonding. Women's voluntary associations emphasized community action, fundraising, charity, and care of and

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compassion for others (usually poor "unfortunates" of society). Voluntary organizations for both genders offered opportunities for socialization and to perform and exert influence. By the 1840s and 1850s, voluntary organizations for men and women included professional societies, political clubs, bible classes, singing societies, amateur theatre clubs, athletic tourneys, and educational and charitable associations. For women, however, voluntary organizations were more crucial since women had so few options outside the home. The voluntary organization served as a conduit of agency for women to the world outside the home.

Historian Kathleen McCarthy refers to voluntary organizations as "parallel power structures" for nineteenth-century women, which provided venues to legitimize their efforts in the public sphere and to foster women's communities. These voluntary parallel organizations gave women a source of power and agency, decreasing the social isolation that left them vulnerable. Volunteer activity enhanced women's mobility by enabling women to go into places where they would not normally go, such as poor or disreputable urban areas. While men were in control of hegemonic power structures in the larger society, women found power in the structures of voluntary organizations. They offered sites through which women could practice business skills and executive capabilities by actually running organizations, conducting fundraising, executing plans, and creating and administering budgets, all public sphere skills inaccessible to women. In addition, female philanthropic organizations combined personal commitment and labor by participants with small-scale fundraising and modest donations, emphasized self-support, and stressed individual needs. Finally, for American women, voluntarism

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provided ongoing sources of recruitment, socialization, training, and advancement into public roles.

Voluntarism in Women's Communities

In addition, during a time of primitive communication and limited government responsibility, voluntarism played a strong role in maintaining stability and cohesion in community relations, forging a bond between social groups. While men were involved in civic, charitable and cultural organizations, women ministered directly to the needs of the poor, volunteering to visit them and creating institutions for their care. Civic responsibility and stewardship were the "social glue" that bound these women together.[20] Voluntarism served as "social currency" which held these antebellum communities together, nurturing a sense of communal spirit and renewing public commitment to community well-being. A community approach offered women opportunities to pool their resources, as many benevolent groups had ties to one another and shared materials, administrative support, and funds. Voluntary institutions stressed the importance of a community of skilled peers. For example, antislavery fairs were shared events of a relatively poor social and political movement and its associations. Abby Gibbons, organizing a New York antislavery fair, corresponded with fellow volunteer Sarah Hopper Emerson in New England, asking for advice in staging the fair and its activities.[21] The female fundraising titans of the United States Sanitary Commission emphasized community when they ensured that a portion of the proceeds from their large regional fairs would be returned to local soldier's aid societies to be

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used for community concerns. Through the strategies of voluntarism and fundraising for social and community causes, women wielded political power, created new institutions, and instituted social change.[22]

There were five crucial areas of "feminine charities" in the nineteenth century where women practiced voluntarism: fundraising benefits and fairs, moral reform societies, temperance groups, anti-slavery or abolition causes, and women's suffrage. Before the Civil War, membership in women's benevolent associations was a function of social and cultural status. Fundraising benefits and fairs for these associations were seen as respectable and enjoyed community approval. Moral reform and temperance movements were also generally considered respectable, but the activist nature of these voluntary associations and movements caused some social concern. Abolition and women's suffrage involvement, however, introduced new elements of defiance into women's voluntary activities and produced a new level of social anxiety.

The fundraising fair utilized the very qualities for which women were praised. Fundraising fairs gave women opportunities to improve skills in community organizing, networking, personnel management, publicity, and wholesaling, and also raised money for the benefit of hospitals, widows and orphans, and other causes by selling handmade goods and offering a variety of services and entertainments. They appropriated the domestic skills of women and transferred them from the home to a more public arena. More importantly, the fundraising fair transferred the actual site of domestic activity—the home—to the fair. Historian Beverly Gordon states that "domesticity was the given of the woman's fair, for it was what women had to work with."[23] Domesticity became

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a commodity, as saleable as baked goods and quilted items. Fundraising fairs operated as "stylized dramatizations of culturally assigned women's gender role."[24] Lastly, like most of women's activities, fairs reflected the domestic ideal and women's collective identity by supporting the betterment of the community.

Fundraising fairs descended from medieval European fairs and outdoor markets and featured a mixture of commercial trading and entertainment. By the early nineteenth century, fairs were popular in England and, by the late 1820s, they were firmly established in America. The novelty in the nineteenth century was the division into separate male and female venues, the female fundraising fair and the male agricultural fair. Gender differentiation served to highlight the activity. Female fundraising fairs were organized and operated by women and centered on women's interests and material concerns, while men's agricultural fairs, or exhibitions, shared information and ideas important to an increasingly commercialized and industrialized society. Since women were kept out of the male-dominated market system, the fundraising fair served as a parallel "closed" system for the female community, operated by women and primarily appealing to women, with profits going to one particular entity. In fact, the fair represented early women's roles in the emerging industrial era.

However, one distinct difference was maintained between agricultural fairs and fundraising fairs. Women's fairs were targeted at the newly emergent American consumer society, for which women exhibited and sold their domestic products, food, and handiwork. They foregrounded advocacy for the nurture and care of others, with

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proceeds from the sale of goods and services going to a charity or benevolent cause, whereas an emphasis on exhibition, prizes, and networking technological and business ideas about their work highlighted the men's fairs.[25]

The women running the American fairs also differed from their English predecessors. They were not the aristocratic leisure class, but rather upper-class, educated community leaders such as wives of judges and ministers. Many were considered progressive or forward thinking and were already aligned with serious social action. They not only held fairs to raise money for local charities, but also generated funds for larger regional concerns like the building of the Bunker Hill Monument and the restoration of Mount Vernon, both perceived as "women's projects." Fairs were enormously popular and were mentioned frequently in the press. Satires about fairs appeared in popular newspapers, and *Godey's Lady's Book*, the most widely read American women's magazine, ran a regular column entitled "Articles [To Make] for Fancy Fairs."[26] By the 1850s, fundraising fairs were thriving all over the country and were associated with such disparate causes as temperance, abolition, church charity, patriotic causes, and moral reform.

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, a festive quality and an exciting, carnivalesque atmosphere were associated with the fundraising fair. Women were free to adopt a somewhat freer, slightly dangerous character during fair activity. For example, fairs in the 1830s included "post offices," where attractive young women handed out playful and flirtatious pre-written letters to men who paid a small fee. This sexualized character was generally the antithesis to "proper" female behavior, but was

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accepted as "normal" in the fair. Since women of the fair were not seen as participating in "serious" work, that is, wage-earning work, perhaps they were sanctioned a greater freedom. When the money was raised and the fair ended, the women returned to culturally defined gender roles.

Fundraising fairs were sometimes referred to as "pleasure fairs" and theatrical spectacle and entertainment quickly became accepted traditions in women's fairs. Women were expert at providing an aesthetically pleasing atmosphere—after all, they were responsible for decorating and establishing the ambience at home. As the century progressed, fairs created representations of actual domestic locales, such as kitchens, and staged *tableaux* and performances as part of the event. Elaborate decorations and costuming were also hallmarks of the fundraising fair throughout the nineteenth century. As part of the domestic aesthetic, home decoration and dress, or costume, were associated with women, and women's magazines and newspapers devoted columns to these topics as they still do today. By midcentury, elaborate "floral temples" were major attractions at fairs, with some fairs recreating panoramic vistas such as "a miniature Central Park."[27]

By the time of the Civil War, this "theatricalized representation" was standard at fairs of all types. At the 1863 Rochester Christmas Bazaar, organizers arranged a series of *tableaux*-like booths, each of which featured costumed salespeople, set against appropriate backdrops and thematically related sale goods. The Yankee booth, complete with costumed family (Mr. and Mrs. Jonathan Slick and their children Sophronia, Jerusha, and Jonathan), sold cider, doughnuts, and comic "Yankee

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notions"; other American archetypes were reflected in the Young America and Wigwam booths. Also included were booths representing other nationalities and ethnic groups: Irish, Italian, Turkish, Russian, English, Scottish, German/Swiss, Chinese, Japanese, and French booths, all with corresponding *tableaux*. Finally, the largest booth was usually the National, featuring a series of historical theatre games or enactments being presented throughout each day of the fair.

At other fairs, theatrical representations of historical figures and occasions ranged from reenacting a quilting bee to recreating a Revolutionary War era New England or mid-nineteenth-century Knickerbocker Kitchen. The most popular features of the "kitchens" were staged entertainments: a series of "old folks concerts," featuring old-time music; a "donation visit," a recreation of the colonial practice of contributing goods to the local minister for distribution to the needy; a quilting bee; storytelling; and staged weddings, where an already married couple reenacted their nuptial ceremony in colonial attire before 250 ticket-buying guests.

This literal recreation of the domestic sphere drew upon "women's novels" popular at the time. For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1859 novel *The Minister's Wooing* devoted whole chapters to "The Kitchen," and "The Quilting."[28] It also corresponded with the midcentury fascination with the professional theatre's *tableaux vivants*, amateur theatricals, and costumed enactments. In the fundraising fairs and bazaars of the nineteenth century, women took a theatrical form that was culturally familiar to them and incorporated it into a playful but sophisticated strategy for making money.

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By the time of the Civil War, fundraising fairs and events were frequently advertised as "benefits" for war causes. Benefits were held by groups as disparate as a group of professors from Smith College, a horticultural society in Northampton, Long Island, and churches of all denominations. As fundraising fairs became larger and more regional in scope during the War, these small local community "benefits" were still the backbone of women's fundraising networks.[29]

Transition in Women's Communities

Moral Reform

Women were the pioneering forces behind the nineteenth-century moral reform movement. As early as 1797, several prominent New York women, including Isabella Graham and Sarah Hoffman, formed the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children. In 1806, women formed the New York Orphan Asylum Society which was popular and active in fundraising circles until the 1880s. These early reform societies combined traditional female-centered care of destitute women and children with attempts to legitimize and control the morals of society, and they used localized communities of women to press the cause.

The New York Female Reform Society was founded in 1834 and its hundreds of branches attempted to end prostitution and establish one female standard of sexual behavior for all. It called on women to ostracize "licentious" men as much as they did the "fallen" woman. The NYFRS built its mission on the construct of women's respectability.

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This and other moral reform societies did serve to give women a newfound freedom from the confines of the domestic sphere. The NYFRS gave women new license to go where they pleased in New York City, even into the most powerfully tabooed spots for women, such as poor or disreputable neighborhoods that included brothels and theatres. Following the Civil War, former United States Sanitary Commission staffer Josephine Lowell founded the Charity Organization Society. The Society sought to reconstitute the able-bodied poor by putting them in contact with a "friendly visitor," a middle-class female volunteer who tried to bring middle-class values into the "immoral" environment. Both moral reform and the cult of domesticity served as ways to recast the societal view of women. Historian Nancy Cott makes the argument that "the language of moral reform evoked women's power; power to revenge, power to control and reform."[30]

Temperance and Abolition

More radical among the women's voluntary activities were the temperance and abolition movements. The Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the first truly national women's organization, was founded in 1873. It addressed not only temperance, but also social conditions that affected lives of women and children: prison reform, child-labor laws, working women's protective legislation, women's suffrage, and establishment of cultural institutions such as kindergartens. The WCTU combined moral reform with Christian benevolence and provided opportunities for women that eventually led to the social reform movements of the Gilded Age.

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In the 1830s and 40s, Northern women sought the ultimate moral reform, abolition. At mixed gender antislavery societies, women found that they were expected to be seen and not heard. As a result, women founded their own societies, and by mid-century, ten percent of national antislavery societies were all female. Women volunteered on a massive scale, through large and small groups, creating antislavery fairs and bazaars to raise funds to lobby Congress. But ultimately the lack of equality in the abolition movement helped give rise to the female suffrage movement. Abolition uneasily shared the stage with suffrage and ultimately served to both solidify and fracture the women's movement.

Political Action - Suffrage

By the 1840s, a shift in orientation had occurred in some women's groups. Rather than continue to focus on moral reform, they urged political action for female suffrage. Female suffrage created a unique set of problems for activist women. The entire notion of equality between men and women, as advocated by Elizabeth Cady Stanton in her 1848 address at the Seneca Falls Convention, threatened the dominant privileged-class ideology of separate spheres. Ironically, many women found the equality aspect of the suffrage fight the most threatening, as they had used the moral superiority of women over men as the basis for their participation in reform and charity.

Therefore, the 1850s were a time of turmoil for women as they oscillated between the polarities of moral reform and electoral empowerment. The older generation of moral reformers from the 1830s and 40s, and the newer, younger

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generation of the 1850s in search of political and social empowerment, struggled to resolve their differences. Eventually, many moral reformers realized the crucial importance of getting the vote and actively sought political empowerment.

Middle- and upper-class white women confronted these changing social and political contexts of benevolence and ultimately shifted the focus from traditional forms of lobbying to electoral activity. This change was met with antagonism and anxiety by the dominant male culture. As long as women advocated change in social areas that were considered traditionally female, such as the care of the poor and indigent, or moral reform, there was little cultural anxiety about threats to patriarchal culture and ideology. The right to vote, however, was political and considered part of the traditional male public sphere. Any encroachment on or perceived threat to the dominant power structure was no longer tolerated as reform.

Lastly, women fighting for the vote faced hostility from the very domestic arena from which they emerged. Their families often strenuously objected to suffrage activities and caused difficulties for these activist women. Consequently, female suffragists faced hostility from other women who were threatened by their loss of cultural "superiority" and from men because it threatened their traditional male-dominated public sphere of political and economic control. They even faced social ostracism from their own families.

However, women fighting for suffrage believed political activity held promise for the creation of a truly democratic society, which no amount of domestic reform could accomplish. Suffragists operated not only as beneficiaries of change, but as

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agents of change. Sexual equality was tremendously compelling and, in spite of the obstacles, the demand for women's suffrage was high among these middle- and upper-class white women. As a social movement, not a reform, suffragism had enormous relevance. It was the first independent movement of women for their own liberation and led to an increasing strength and vitality in their struggle for rights. The women attending the Seneca Falls Convention not only demanded suffrage, but also advocated married women's control over their own wages, the right to contract for their own property, joint guardianship over their children, and improved inheritance rights when widowed. Women quickly found that politicians and public opinion were more amenable to economic demands than political ones and, by 1860, fourteen states had passed some form of women's property rights legislation. Suffrage, however, challenged traditional assumptions of a "natural" male authority over women and a masculine monopoly of the public sphere and, thus, was far more difficult to obtain.

In the 1850s, as a result of women's struggle over suffrage and electoral empowerment, female presence was less visible in benevolent organizations. Yet during the Civil War, women returned with a vengeance to the benevolent arena. Fundraising women raised millions of dollars for both the Union and Confederate causes. After the War, the growing institutionalization of philanthropy replaced female benevolence. While both men and women practiced institutionalized benevolence, women were relegated to lesser positions, and lost the sense of localized concerns and community they had enjoyed with same-sex benevolent charitable organizations.

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Ultimately, during the nineteenth century, women used charity and voluntarism to break out of the confines of the domestic arena and build a modicum of public agency. In their public causes during the century, women continued to use these two traits, often through the parallel power structures of women's communal associations, to raise money for social causes, to struggle for moral reforms, and to agitate for electoral empowerment. In addition, while primarily associated with the middle and upper classes, all women recognized the construct of respectability. Yet, as the century progressed, many professional working women, such as actresses, struggled to be recognized as equal members of the "respectable" gender.

Just as non-theatrical women sought ways to develop and use agency in the public sphere, women in the theatre community sought ways to create empowerment and agency. The theatrical benefit, originally created by women for their own empowerment, and used by women throughout much of the nineteenth century, allowed a public theatre site through which communities of women could volunteer to aid each other for charitable and business purposes. The benefit of the American theatre offers theatre historians a paradigm of female agency where women were empowered to construct alternative gender ideologies that gave them agency. Theatrical benefits not only served as fundraisers for charitable causes (a female-identified activity), but also as venues for career advancement (a male-identified activity). The next chapter will delineate and explore the theatrical benefit tradition, and focus on how the gender-based characteristic of voluntarism operated to give women agency in the larger society.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly*, 18:2, Part 1 (Summer 1996), 151-74.

[2] Lydia Sigourney, *Letters to Young Ladies* (Hartford: P. Canfield, 1833), 120.

[3] Rosemarie Bank, *Theatre Culture in America, 1825-1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 101.

[4] Kathleen McCarthy, *Noblesse Oblige: Charity and Cultural Philanthropy in Chicago, 1849-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 17.

[5] Kathleen McCarthy, *Women's Culture: American Philanthropy and Art, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 4.

[6] George G. Foster, *New York by Gaslight and Other Urban Sketches*, ed. Stuart M. Blumin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 185.

[7] Welter, 152.

[8] Bank, 102.

[9] Catharine Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841, New York: Marsh, Capen, Lyon, & Webb; rpt. New York: Schoken, 1977), 14.

[10] Bank, 102-103, Foster 77. Bank gives extensive information on salaries and the economic situation of working-class women.

[11] Foster, 229.

[12] Foster, 233.

[13] Foster, 213.

[14] The actress and her position in society and in the theatre will be clearly articulated in Chapter 3.

[15] Sarah Josepha Hale, "Editor's Table," *Godey's Lady's Book*, 22 (April 1841), 189.

[16] Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 141.

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[17] Mary Ann Clawson, "Nineteenth-Century Women's Auxiliaries and Fraternal Orders," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (Autumn 1986) 12:1, 40-61.

[18] Kathleen McCarthy, ed., *Lady Bountiful Revisited: Women, Philanthropy and Power* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 11.

[19] Bank, 151.

[20] McCarthy, *Noblesse Oblige*, 4, 6.

[21] S.H. Emerson, ed., *Life of Abby Hopper Gibbons Told Chiefly Through Her Correspondence,* vol. 1 (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1897), 99.

[22] Beverly Gordon, *Bazaars and Fair Ladies: The History of the American Fundraising Fair* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998), 5.

[23] Gordon, 6.

[24] Interestingly, Gordon also provides evidence that men's fairs typically exhibited women's handiwork because they found it a way of "increasing interest and attendance at their events." Gordon, 9.

[25] Gordon, 10.

[26] Gordon, 70.

[27] Gordon, 72.

[28] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing* (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1859).

[29] See Chapter 4 for an in-depth analysis of the great Sanitary Fairs of the Civil War and theatrical benefits associated with the Fairs.

[30] Nancy F. Cott, quoted in McCarthy, *Lady Bountiful Revisited*, 10.

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Chapter II

Communities: The Theatrical Benefit

"There is no duty more indispensable than that of returning a kindness. All men distrust one forgetful of a benefit." (Cicero)

Introduction

This chapter will explore the theatrical benefit tradition and will argue that, while it certainly involved monetary profit for those connected with the theatre, it also functioned as a place where favors, gifts, kindnesses, and advantages were exchanged, and debts were paid through reciprocal exchange. It is this non-monetary exchange system that I will focus on in this chapter. I argue that this emphasis on exchange offered performers a currency of power and agency not found in regular performances.

As part of this exchange system, benefit performances displayed characteristics, not found in the rest of the production season, which highlighted the performer and her relationship with the audience. Some of these characteristics were reciprocity among the players, the performer as producer, a highly complex interplay of theatrical elements, an emphasis on the cultivation of audience appeal and patronage, the use of traditionally feminine virtues of voluntarism and charity, and gender difference. While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to present an entire picture of the benefit system, I will attempt to illuminate several features that highlighted the long-lasting benefit tradition and how they provided agency to performers.

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In brief, the benefit system operated in two ways. The primary model, a "contractual" benefit, was a method of paying actors a supplement to their contractual wage. A "charity" benefit, however, used the benefit format to raise money for a person or cause. Charity benefits were held for benevolent causes both in and out of the theatre. In the contractual benefit, players negotiated with management for one or more benefits per season. This benefit provided the performer with an opportunity to risk capital in hope of great gain. The player, or beneficiary, operated as producer as she selected the bill, arranged for special dances, songs, and variety acts, advertised her program, sold tickets personally, and was responsible for the financial success of the performance. In an age where risk was the means of acquiring wealth, the benefit operated as a private business enterprise for the beneficiary. The performer was in business for herself, often making in one night more than a season's salary. Before the above characteristics can be examined in detail, a short historical context must be provided.

History

English precedents to the benefit are found as early as 1613 in the "author's night," or third night of a play's run. These nights gave playwrights an opportunity to make a small additional profit on their play.[1] Benefits for performers, however, do not occur until the Restoration. During this time, two important developments affected the theatre. In the theatre community, women appeared on stage for the first time; in society, it was the age of the entrepreneur. As with those of playwrights, performers'

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benefits also began as opportunities to make extra money. Some group nights for young non-sharing apprentice actors, both male and female, are recorded where they acted for their own profit on Wednesdays and Fridays during Lent, a slow time seen by the sharing actors as not worth their attention. Several references from an October 1681 "secret agreement" allude to "the days the young men and young women play for their own profit."[2]

Another early benefit prototype was the "women's play." A performance of *The French Conjurer* by Thomas Porter, performed at Dorset Gardens in June 1677, was called "the woman's play" in the prologue. Pepys' diary records that theatres occasionally permitted the women of the house a yearly performance for their own profit. On September 28, 1668, at Drury Lane, Pepys reported: "Knepp's maid comes to me, to tell me that the women's day at the playhouse is today, and that therefore I must be there, to increase their profit . . . the house, for the women's sake, mighty full."[3]

Although these "proto" or group benefits were probably very important to these young actors, they were scraps given to the least powerful members of the performing community. Only with the individual performer's benefit did the form rise to the level of being a powerful factor in contract negotiations. The actress Elizabeth Barry "was the first Person whose Merit was distinguish'd by the Indulgence of having an annual Benefit-Play, which was granted to her alone," negotiated with manager William Davenant and performed on January 16, 1687.[4] The inclusion was noted in her

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contract and was the first performance of its kind to be called a benefit. More importantly, it was the first to demonstrate the financial power and agency of the benefit. Since women were not allowed to own shares in the company, this was a crucial development for women in the theatre. Mrs. Barry remained the only performer to receive a benefit until the division of the company in 1694-95. By 1703, Mrs. Bracegirdle had also negotiated benefit articles in her contract. Cibber points out that benefits were common in both companies by the early 1700s as "these benefits grew so advantageous that they became at last the chief article in every actor's agreement."[5] By the end of 1703, even actor-manager Thomas Betterton saw the profit-making potential of the benefit and appropriated it from the women as a benefit article in his contract. After this triumvirate of leading actors guaranteed themselves benefits, lesser performers began negotiating for the inclusion of the article in their contracts.[6] Although sporadic, the system steadily spread and by 1717 the tradition of the benefit system was strongly established.

It is estimated that by the early 1700s more than £50 (after expenses) could be earned in a benefit, and its proceeds became a crucial supplement to the performer's regular salary. In a time when the total season's earnings for a top performer were £150-200 and house expenses were approximately £40-45 per night, the benefit represented a financial windfall. For the female performer, the monies earned at a benefit were even more important, since women's salaries were lower and women continued to be excluded from owning shares or interests in management. Benefits at

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Drury Lane grew during the 1713-1716 benefit seasons, from an average of two to three per week to four to five per week. During this same season, Mrs. Oldfield was the highest paid actress with a salary of £200 plus a "benefit clear of all charges, granted to compensate her for Doggett's insistence on excluding her from the group of managers." All principal, and some lesser, actors received benefits and most performers were charged overhead (house expenses).[7]

Charity benefits were established later and offered monetary aid to both the theatrical community and people and causes in the larger society. The first advertised charity benefit was at Drury Lane in June 1698 for a "gentleman in prison." In June 1700, an advertisement for both houses announced benefits for "English slaves held by Barbary pirates"; and in July, Lincoln's Inn Fields advertised a performance "for the assistance of a gentleman in distress, his wife, and three children."[8] By the 1750s, both contractual and charity benefits were an established part of the English theatrical system.

While benefits existed on the European continent, it was the English model that directly led to the American benefit tradition. On the immigration of Lewis Hallam and his company to America in the 1750s, the benefit system immediately became a part of the American theatre, as virtually all American actors and managers were English transplants. Throughout the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, most contractual benefits were held on Friday evenings, a night generally associated with good attendance, while charity benefits were given at any time of the year.[9] The "free

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list"—friends of the manager, critics, actors from other theatres, civic leaders, and society leaders who were admitted free of charge—was suspended during benefits. Half-price admission midway through the performance was also suspended and, in general, higher admission prices for certain parts of the house were charged.

Early American companies shared profits, but, as in England, the benefit system remained even after meager salaries became common. Seasons were especially precarious in America and salaries fluctuated with the season. Benefits were crucial to an actor's very survival, and everyone in the company received a benefit, even the surbordinate players. Benefits appeared more frequently during the season in America than in England, perhaps because they were so crucial in ensuring survival for performers.[10]

General Terms of Contractual Benefits

American company performers usually negotiated for one contractual benefit per year in which the beneficiary chose the material to be presented with "his particular friends and admirers rallying to his support."[11] Contractual benefits gave the public an opportunity to show their appreciation of the performer's talents and to demonstrate their esteem for her. Any performer could attempt to negotiate for more than one benefit; however, most did not succeed, although stars often successfully negotiated for two.

While there were many varieties in form, contractual benefits generally fell into several categories:

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- The free or clear benefit in which all house charges were paid by management. This was the most desired form of benefit and often demanded by stars in the nineteenth century.
- The half-clear benefit in which house charges were equally shared by management and beneficiary.
- The one/third or "benefit proper" in which the performer paid an agreed, or recognized, sum as charges for the use of the house, sets, staff, and orchestra. The performer could negotiate the percentage, but it was usually a one-third/two-third split.
- The half benefit in which the performer paid all house charges and, in addition, split the rest of the proceeds in half with management.
- The joint, or shared, benefit in which two or more performers joined together as recipients of a whole or "half" benefit. These performers may have been relatives such as married couples, sisters, brothers, mothers and daughters, fathers and daughters, or lesser known apprentice actors who joined together to share the proceeds from one joint benefit.
- The guaranteed benefit where one or more benefits were guaranteed to the performer. First used by Mrs. Barry in her renegotiations for her benefit articles, it was usually given only to stars and was frequently combined with their guaranteed salaries in the nineteenth century.

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In stock theatres, most contractual benefits occurred from late spring until the end of the season. By the mid-1800s, managers had reserved the coveted first slots in February for themselves and also generally took the last night of the season. In the case of stars, benefits were taken at the end of their engagements. Dates of contractual benefits were assigned based on the status of the actor in the company. Those with the most seniority or highest salary received the earliest benefits. For example, the Olympic had two types of contractual benefits: the best-paid and most popular actors received a "clear" third of the night's receipts, while less important members received half the receipts after $100 was subtracted for house operating expenses. Major stars could demand and frequently receive more than one benefit in a season. Sometimes an actor had to postpone a benefit due to illness of self or other performers participating in the benefit. Since the theatrical community was small and all performers wanted the largest house they could muster, having a benefit at the same time as another performer at another theatre was avoided whenever possible.

Traditionally, performers gave notice of benefit dates to management three to four weeks before the benefit and the bill had to be approved by the manager. But these appear to be nominal approvals. Seldom did managers ever ask for, much less force, changes. The approval was mostly to protect the manager from any liabilities should a charge of libel or similar be put to the performer. All monies came from either admission at the door or from tickets pre-sold by actors, friends, and family. The latter was the most difficult to assess, since it was sometimes arduous for the

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beneficiary to collect these funds. Often tickets were sold with only pledges of payment (similar to telethons or phonathons today), although this is less often the case after mid-century. House charges were generally fixed by the manager, but could rise and fall with the market and the economy. They included some combination of minimal salaries to stage staff, orchestra and orchestra leader, money-takers, dressers, and supers, and expenses for lighting and properties. Management did not pay the performers appearing in the benefit. This control over house expenses was frequently a source of dispute between manager and performer, since performers frequently suspected managers of cheating.

Financial Incentive

Benefits had several assets for the performer. The most obvious, of course, is financial. By the time of its import to America, the benefit had become a crucial financial tool for actors. Actor Harry Watkins records a diary entry of his benefit in 1846: "$14 in house, expenses $12.50. Through the liberality of the painter and musicians, I cleared $6. I suppose the stars would say that was no benefit at all. There they would be mistaken for I had nothing on my feet before, and now I have a good pair of boots and enough money left to buy something to eat."[12]

The financial importance of the contractual benefit in the old stock system should not be underappreciated. When stock actors signed their engagements for the year, or the nine-month season, they expected "benefit terms." A nineteenth-century theatrical periodical argues eloquently for this aspect of the benefit:

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> From this moment benefit making was his fixed idea, and this was never lost sight of, for to him it was of vast importance, meaning new clothes for his business, something for out-door wear, a new wig or two, fresh tights, perhaps a pet sword, which had met his admiring gaze in a second hand shop--the clearing up of the few odd debts necessarily incurred--and (if a married man) a week or two out of town for his wife and children; and last, but not least, the means of keeping him free from debt, whilst out of an engagement.[13]

Since such a large proportion of potential profit could be made at a benefit, performers went to great lengths to insure a good audience and an appealing program. Unlike managers, who could make up for a bad night, an actor could not afford to have a bad benefit. Therefore, the benefit often contained some striking attraction or novelty, such as a new play or an unusual casting of a favorite play, which would bring in more playgoers. In addition, the tickets pre-sold by performers could often hedge against poor attendance at the door on the performer's night.

Profit has been the most obvious aspect of the benefit explored by historians. I argue, however, that the tradition was so long lasting because it offered more than profit. Performers were aware that the benefit not only "replenished their larders," but was also a chance for each actor "to prove his attraction, and rally his supporters."[14] Many speak of these more intangible rewards from the benefit, remarking that "you pay all expenses and have half the receipts. But the attraction about it to my mind, though, is that you can put up what you like, and choose your own parts. I should like to have a try at Romeo."[15] I argue that the benefit offered more intangible rewards where a community of performers could acquire agency. It

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was a site of empowerment for the performer and offered an alternative performance site where the beneficiary served as producer, constructing a production that privileged performance over text. Through voluntarism and reciprocity she could use the benefit as an exchange system of favors and gifts to improve her status, help others forward, and repay debts. Lastly, the benefit also foregrounded the performer and her skills in a way that revealed a carefully constructed relationship between performer and audience. A more careful examination of the benefit system, in light of the above aspects, can reveal much about performance, the performer, and their relationship to the audience.

Both contractual and charitable benefits displayed characteristics that led to the empowerment of the performer. Whether the benefit was for financial profit or had other intangible rewards of community, the characteristics marking it were the same. The rest of this chapter will illuminate some of these characteristics.

Intertheatrical Nature of the Benefit

I will use the term "intertheatricality" to mean a relationship or interplay between discrete theatrical or performative elements, above and beyond mere stage theatricality. The term is similar to Julia Kristeva's term intertextuality, which implies an open-ended play between subject and addressee.[16] Kristeva, in turn, based her term on Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of dialogism, which supposes any text to be the absorption and transformation of another. While Bakhtin refers to literary texts, Marvin Carlson suggests the term "intertextuality of performance" to describe the same phenomenon in the theatre.[17] Therefore, my concern here is the absorption of theatrical techniques and

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strategies and their transformation in the benefit, or the benefit as an intersection of theatrical performances where other performances may be read. The intertheatrical nature of the benefit offered performers a place to attempt different roles, to escape the primacy of the playtext and create new performance texts, to establish a direct relationship to the audience, and to invert the nature of the regular performance. An intertheatrical approach is the best model with which to structure an analysis of the theatrical and paratheatrical elements of the benefit performance, and to reveal how these elements combined with non-theatrical aspects to make the benefit a site of empowerment and agency for the performer.

Direct Relationship to Audience

One of the most striking intertheatrical aspects of the benefit was the performer's direct relationship to the audience. By direct relationship, I mean direct non-character addresses and communication between the beneficiary and her audience. It is important to stress the non-mimetic nature of these addresses. They were not extensions of stage characters, for the performer spoke directly to the audience in front of the stage curtain or set. The performer occupied a new site of performance where the stage character disappeared and the performer was highlighted and foregrounded. The performance was personal.

Tailored to the individual performer and rehearsed very carefully, direct addresses formed an important part of the benefit program. Audiences were educated to assign significance to these recitations, for they sometimes dealt with matters of such

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current moment as foreign affairs, scandal, or literary or theatrical matters. While "curtain speeches" were not limited to the benefit, the direct address in the benefit is not a simple curtain speech.[18] Benefit prologues and epilogues were specially written for the beneficiary for a specific benefit engagement, many times by the beneficiary, with the same address never repeated at another benefit. These direct addresses were not part of the dramatic text of the play, but rather operated as performance text, unique and different to each benefit situation.

The direct address, in the form of original prologues and/or epilogues, often framed the performance as a "thank you gift" to the audience. The beneficiary would go before the curtain and address the audience, before (and sometimes after) the benefit performance. A benefit playbill of performer George Holland noted that the beneficiary "will appear at the end of the comedy and offer a few words on his own behalf."[19] Memoirs and newspapers mention that "after having been called before the curtain, according to usage" the beneficiary gave an address to the house.[20] These addresses were appeals for audience patronage as well as signs of appreciation for the audience's "devotion to its theatrical favorites" for the benefit evening. On the occasion of a benefit for Mrs. Hallam this direct address, spoken by her at the start of the performance, is clearly intended as a thank you to her audience and an appeal for continuing support:

> Time has now swept ten rolling years away
> Since flattering plaudits graced my first essay;
> Young, giddy, rash, ambitious and untaught,
> You still caress'd, excusing many a fault;
> With friendly hand safe led me through the way,

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> Where lurking error watches to betray . . .
> I boldly can defy the world to say,
> From my first entree to the present day,
> Whate'er my errors, numerous or few,
> I never wanted gratitude to you.
> On your indulgence still I rest my cause;
> Will you support me with your kind applause?[21]

The performer used the direct address to the audience to establish, or cement, a relationship. A Mrs. McMahon, in an 1857 post-benefit speech in Boston, thanked the audience and the company, commenting on how grateful she was at the audience turnout, in spite of a lack of money on her part for advertising.[22] At the conclusion of a benefit for Mrs. Brougham of Wallack's, she went before the audience and thanked them for their patronage.[23]

Direct addresses to the audience also allowed the performer to step forward not as an actor or character but as a "friend" to certain segments of the audience, thanking them for continued support. For example, Julia Wagstaff Jones noted a direct address given by her husband, actor G.W. Jones, at his benefit in 1841. Written by G.W. Jones, it was titled "An Address to the Firemen" and made a specific appeal to an audience segment that supported him (and frequently supported other theatre performers).

> Around I see a glittering circle shine,
> Comprised of friends, with pride I reckon, mine!
> No actor now, I dross the mimic strain,
> And genuine feeling flows through every vein:
> The "Boatswain Ben" forgets his sailor phrase,
> To one and all - where'er dispers'd ye sit,
> Bucks of the boxes, critics of the pit,
> And gallery gods, up in YOUR lofty sphere,
> His welcome heart a welcome sends, sincere.

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Not least, though last, he greets, with feelings warm
The fair women whose presence yields a crowning charm.
Throw no cold water on our efforts here,
Nor quench one spark that struggles to appear!
Your hands we ask - but in another cause,
We seek their lively clappings in applause.
With such kind volleys all our aims inspire,
And now, as proof - Present, Make ready, Fire![24]

This address highlighted the tension and contradictions in the benefit between the mimetic and non-mimetic, and the stage performance and personal performance. Jones clearly noted the non-mimetic appeal inherent in the benefit as he says "no actor now, I dross (to `drive out' or `overpower') the mimic strain" but also revealed the contradictions between his stage and personal identities two lines later when he reminded his audience of his past performances as "Boatswain Ben." It also revealed the capacity for direct addresses to appeal to certain audience segments—his loyal "firemen"—with the many allusions to fire. Through the direct address, the beneficiary was able to establish a direct connection to an audience where she could construct an intertheatrical presence and popular appeal.

Beneficiary as Author/Beneficiary as Producer

Reworkings or adaptations of "old" texts or plays and the introduction of many new plays and original texts marked the benefit performance. I argue that by "cutting and piecing together" different parts of plays and other performance material, the beneficiary wrote, or authored, her own performance text as she wished. In this manner, the beneficiary operated as an author or playwright, assembling new performances out of pre-existing material. Marvin Carlson describes this intertextual

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attitude as open-ended, and refers to it as a "recycling" of theatrical elements into other pieces.[25] It is this "recycling" aspect that is inherent and foregrounded in the "pieced together" structure of the benefit as the beneficiary selects scenes, acts, songs, arias, and dances for her night.

Beneficiaries could choose whatever part of a play they wished to stage depending on their own desires and those of the other performers participating in their benefits. Benefit playbills were marked by such rhetoric as "for which occasion he has selected a bill of entertainments which he trusts will please all" or "the entertainments she has selected for this her first benefit this season."[26] Throughout performers' personal reminiscences and writings on the benefit, it was frequently stated that performers had the right to choose what play or plays to perform in their benefits. Moreover, they were under no obligation to stage the entire play. For example, at a benefit for a Mr. Abbott, he selected the fourth and fifth acts of *The Stranger*, the fourth act of *The Wife*, the third act of *Hamlet*, the fifth act of *A New Way to Pay Old Debts,* an entire farce of *Day After the Wedding*, and the second act of *The Critic*.[27] This "selective performance" aspect foregrounded the performer over playtext. By selecting scenes or acts, the beneficiary performer chose the point of action in each play she or he wished to highlight. For example, the third act of *Hamlet* contains the "to be or not to be" speech as well as the speech to the players, the metatheatrical play-within-in-a-play of Gonzago, and the closet scene. The fifth act of *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* contains the climax of the play, the duel between Welborne and Overreach,

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the "mad" scene and the final punishment to the villain, Overreach, when he is taken off the stage foaming at the mouth. Abbott, playing Overreach, gave himself the best role and selected the best scenes for that character.

Performers sometimes introduced new plays in their benefits, as at a benefit for prompter/actor Benjamin Baker at Mitchell's Olympic in 1847. Actor Frank Chanfrau had approached Baker to write a play about the "b'hoys" of the house, but manager Mitchell turned it down for a regular production. At Baker's benefit on February 15, 1847, he and Chanfrau decided to produce the play, *A Glance at New York*, with Chanfrau playing the character of Mose. It turned out to be the most popular play ever presented during Mitchell's tenure and demonstrated the power of the benefit to bypass the manager. Even Mitchell's strong disapproval of the piece was not enough to cancel its inclusion in a benefit. New farce afterpieces were also commonly introduced at benefits. A Mrs. Hunt of the Park Theatre produced her benefit featuring herself in the lead roles of "three new pieces," including the farce *The Young Scamp*, a popular piece in the benefits of actresses, in which she played a breeches role.[28] Actor James Murdoch mentioned a benefit early in his career at Philadelphia's Arch Street Theatre, in which he played the leading role in *Conrad of Naples*, written "expressly for him," by Robert T. Conrad. It was a hit, and Murdoch and Conrad pressed to have it added to the regular repertoire.[29] Performers frequently used scenes, speeches, plays, farces, and songs written "expressly for them." The Park's Mrs. Fitzwilliam presented the short comedy *Foreign Airs and Graces* written for her in which she played four roles.

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In addition, she also played the lead in the second piece on the bill, *Middly Shore,* in which she sang "a song composed expressly for her."[30]

Actors sometimes wrote their own pieces for benefits. A Mr. Ranger of the Park Theatre introduced "for the first time" a new comedy, *The Gentleman and the Upstart*, written by him in which he played the lead. Susanna Haswell Rowson's most popular and long-lasting play, *Slaves in Algiers*, was written for the benefit of a family member.[31] Sometimes this tactic backfired on the performer. Watkins mentioned his benefit of June 17, 1850 where he presented his own five-act tragedy and noted that the play was "not a success."[32]

Performers also acted as author/playwright for the night by adapting an "old" piece. Actress Clara Morris cut several pages from the death scene in the last act of *Camille* thinking the audience was "too excited to contain itself" and heightened the scene for herself explaining that "never would I have dared do such a thing had it been for more than one performance." In a regular performance, the manager had the authority to fine, or punish, the performer for altering playtexts. But in the benefit, the performer could rewrite, reformulate, and remake texts. As a result of this risktaking, Morris was hired for an engagement to play the role at Palmer's Union Square Theatre and went on to make the role one of the most famous of her career.[33]

The beneficiary performer also served as the producer of that night's performance by arranging not only the performance texts, but having complete control over casting, no matter what their position in the company. The beneficiary could take

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any role she chose and could cast anyone she wished. Performers frequently stated that the "unusual casting of a favourite piece could be relied upon to pay benefit dividends."[34]

Several strategies were used for casting. The beneficiary could put herself forward in her most popular role, and many performers used this strategy in benefits throughout their career. Some used only their most popular pieces and never featured novelty or unusual casting. But even with a popular role, a benefit could be the arena for a new interpretation. Actress Adelaide Neilson, renowned for her performances as Juliet, reconfigured her conception of the role during her second appearance in the part. The occasion was her benefit, and critics commented on the radical reconceptualization of the character stating that "Miss Neilson no longer played the part according to mere rules, but from her own quick perception and sympathy."[35] This was not uncommon. The benefit, while risky, also offered a performance site where experiments could be attempted.

The beneficiary could ask a star to assist in her benefit. In a benefit for Mrs. Judah, a minor actress in the Chatham Theatre, five major actors—Mr. & Mrs. Wallack, Mrs. Timm, T.D. Rice, and a Mr. Hill—played leading roles in her benefit, while she played her regular supporting roles.[36] Although a star could request a fee, most waived them and performed free in benefits of supporting players.

The beneficiary could arrange for an unusual casting of a popular play. She could include some form of novelty such as an all-child cast, a star not known for that

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role, or even the return to the stage of a retired performer, a strategy frequently used by women. Performers often asked members of the theatre community outside their company to participate in benefits. Many of these "volunteers" played roles they would normally not have performed in their own theatre.

Often, the beneficiary featured the first appearance of some novice performer likely to prove attractive. Sometimes this tactic was used to introduce family members of the beneficiary or other performers to the stage or to introduce newcomers thought to have genuine talent. Edwin Booth first played Richard III in his father's benefit at the National Theatre in 1851.[37] At a benefit for Broadway Theatre treasurer Nagle, a new actress, Fanny Crame, is "introduced to the stage" in the final piece.[38] While managers sometimes did this to "present and encourage Native talent" of both genders, most of the novices in benefits were female and in many cases, had some form of familial relationship with the beneficiary.[39] By using such a strategy, a family took the risk of a tryout upon themselves, rather than the manager, and introduced a new member to the theatre business. Frequently, wives were introduced to the stage via their husband's benefit. Julia Wagstaff Jones made "a great hit" when she made her stage debut on March 5, 1852, in her husband's benefit at New York's Chatham Theatre in the cross-dressed role of Edwin Gage in ***Ben the Boatswain***. She went on to a successful career as a player of maids and soubrettes at the Chatham and later at the New Bowery Theatre as a leading lady.[40] At a benefit for George Barrett, he cast his wife, Georgiana Barrett, as Lady Gay in acts two, three, and four of ***London***

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Assurance, "her first time on the stage and her first appearance in New York."[41] This strategy was often used in the benefits of women to introduce daughters, female protegés, and students to the stage. At an 1856 benefit for Mrs. S.B. Wilkins, lead actress at the National Theatre, a Roberta Stanley was introduced in "her first appearance on any stage" as the daughter of Mrs. Wilkins' character in *The Hunter of the Alps.*[42]

Beneficiaries sometimes cast their volunteers in leading roles. For example, actor-playwright C.W. Taylor in his 1856 benefit at the National allowed his volunteers to take the starring roles. One of them, G.L. Fox, generally played second leads at the National at this time, but Taylor allowed Fox to shine in several lead roles, including Solon Shingle in J.S. Jones's *The People's Lawyer,* Crummles in *The Savage and the Maiden*, and in the comic pantomime, *Frisky Cobbler.*[43]

The beneficiary could cast herself in a new "line of business," one usually higher than that currently occupied. This was one of the most common empowering strategies used in benefits and accepted as part of the benefit tradition. "Lines of business" were early forms of stereotypical typecasting in the theatre in which actors played the same roles throughout their career. Some examples of lines of business were the leading lady, the old woman, the chambermaid, the walking lady, the leading man, and the villain. Actors' memoirs as well as guides to the stage published throughout the nineteenth century mention that "actors always like playing a part out of their usual line of business upon their benefits, therefore you often find a `heavy man'

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playing `light comedy' upon that especial occasion, and vice versa."[44] Actor William Davidge stated that "in selecting a character to appear in the important event, it is not uncommon for the beneficiary to adopt one somewhat above the grade of prominence he or she may be designed for."[45]

Many times beneficiaries used a role outside their normal line of business to try to change it, or "to get a chance they never had in any other part of the season."[46] Performers could test these new roles in benefits and prove to audience and manager that they were capable of taking on new challenges. Actor Watkins was always eager to perform in the benefits of others to demonstrate his talents to managers. This posed no risk to the manager and, while risky to the performer, the payoff was potentially great, and the allure was too much to resist. Most performers used this strategy at one time or another in their benefits. At the famous Holland Benefit in 1871, one act of *Hamlet* was performed with E.L. Davenport as Hamlet and Agnes Ethel as Ophelia. Ethel was already a popular actress in melodramatic drama, and the house was "packed" as audiences turned out to see her first attempt at a legitimate tragic role.[47] Mrs. Hield, a popular performer at several theatres during the 1840s, participated in a benefit for James Anderson at the Broadway in 1848. The second item on the bill was *Katherine and Petruchio*, Petruchio being one of Anderson's "most popular" roles. During the season, Hield had played second leads (i.e., Lady Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet* and Widow Melnotte in *The Lady of Lyons*), but in this benefit she played the lead female role of Katherine. Two weeks later, at the benefit of another company

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member, she played Lady Macbeth. By the beginning of the 1849 season, Mrs. Hield had successfully changed her line of business and now played lead roles in the regular season.[48]

For women performers especially, the benefit could prove to be a site of agency by serving as a testing ground for the transition from younger ingenue or leading lady roles to "old woman" roles. Actress Ellen Tree Kean, who had made her career in leading lady roles, first played the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* during a benefit in Australia. On the same bill, composed of scenes from Shakespeare, Tree also played her regular leading lady roles of Portia in the fourth act *of The Merchant of Venice*, and Constance in *King John*, but after this benefit the Nurse became a part of her repertoire as she made the transition between these lines of business.[49] Many benefits are marked by words "first appearance in" a comedy or tragedy. Caroline Wemyss, cast in secondary dramatic roles made her "first appearance in comedy" in a benefit for Mrs. John Sefton.[50]

Sometimes the benefit gave the performer opportunities to play roles they would otherwise not be able to perform. With few exceptions, the parts taken were challenging and difficult. Some actors, such as Mr. and Mrs. Frank Rea, never successfully moved away from secondary supporting roles. But in their benefits in New York and especially on tours all over the Eastern Seaboard, they played leads in *Antony and Cleopatra, A Glance at New York*, and *The Lady of Lyons,* among others.[51] One benefit strategy for star or guest performers was to play at least one role against

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type for a benefit. For example, actress Fanny Vining and actor E.L. Davenport, appearing together at the Broadway Theatre in the 1850s in an engagement of Shakespeare, dramas, and full-length comedies, used the two character, one-act farce, *A Morning Call,* in a farewell benefit. This comic piece, very popular in benefits for couples, was not used elsewhere in this engagement as it went against their normal line of business. Actor J.R. Scott, noted as a serious actor in tragedy, often combined comic afterpieces with a tragedy or serious play. For example, in his benefit at the Chatham Theatre, he combined a full-length *Macbeth* with the farce *Review*, with Scott in the lead role of Looney McTwolter.[52] At a benefit for actor G.L. Fox, Scott played only one role, that of the lead in the comic afterpiece, and was billed as "the great tragedian, appearing in the comedy of the *Wags of Windsor.*"[53] For stars who specialized in one line of business, a benefit offered a risk-free opportunity to play a role they would never perform in the regular repertoire. Tragedian Junius Booth played comedy and farce only in benefits. In his benefit at the Chatham he played the lead in the farce afterpiece, *Mayor of Garratt.*[54] In another benefit *Othello* was the main draw, with J.W. Wallack as Othello and Booth as Iago, but the afterpiece was a farce, *Amateurs and Actors*, in which Booth played "Geoffrey Muffincap, an elderly charity boy, let out as a servant, with a comic song."[55] Charlotte Cushman even played leads in farce afterpieces in her benefits.

The beneficiary also recycled different theatrical elements such as sets, scenery, costumes, and even stage fights in order to make "her night" unique and different.

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Performers opted for the simplest of plays in the benefit, involving minimal scenery and mechanical effects, since complex staging or special effects would have increased house expenses. Even with the rise of the spectacle in the 1850s and 60s, benefit selections and staging remained simple.[56] Yet the simple staging of the benefit evening could and did vary. In addition to the previously mentioned special prologues and epilogues, special songs and dances were frequently presented. Actress Fanny Wheeler inserted a special song, a "highland fling," and a "country jig" into her benefit.[57] Performers would often insert a new piece of "stage business" into a well-known play for a benefit. In actor Gates's staging of the third act of *Richard III* he inserted a swordfight "never presented before."[58] This variety in performance and staging gave the benefit an intertheatrical blend that was crucial in producing a successful event.

Finally, the nineteenth-century benefit is contextualized as a site of a "one time only" performance where anything was possible. It was marked as out of the ordinary and not part of the norm, and operated as a performance site where "house rules" were temporarily suspended.

Carnivalesque Nature of the Benefit: Liminality and Communitas

The benefit operated as a "carnivalesque" site where the inverse from the normal was practiced and where "for this night only" rules were transgressed. Bakhtin defined the carnivalesque as "the suspension of hierarchical structures and all forms of inequality associated with it."[59] For the one night of the benefit, norms of hierarchical structure such as lines of business and managerial control were temporarily suspended,

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house rules no longer applied, and a more free and equal status between performers became the norm. During the regular season, managers used house rules to fine performers if they deviated from the playtext or spoke directly to the audience.[60] Yet in the benefit, audience and performers acknowledged that these regulations were cast aside. Regular "rules" of performance were also suspended as performers deviated from the performance norm by assembling new performance texts out of old ones.

In addition, aspects of "communitas" were found in the benefit. Anthropologist Victor Turner uses the term "communitas" to describe "free and familiar contact" on a temporary basis resulting in a "loss of self and a sense of collective enjoyment." He further describes communitas as a "shifting, informal and spontaneous form of affiliation and affective loyalty that may be generated by participation in a common task, by shared experiences among people of similar backgrounds, or by a transient social activity."[61] I argue that the benefit allowed performers "free and familiar contact" in a context of performance where the formal social structure of the professional theatre temporarily fell away and rules and regulations receded.

Performers comment often in memoirs and diaries on this freedom from rules and regulations. Actor J.B. Howe commented that his actor friend J.W. Cooke was "fond of frolic on his benefit night, declaring he never took liberties with his friends at any other time."[62] Even the running time for a benefit broke with the traditional as benefits were notorious for being very long, sometimes lasting until 3 AM.[63] The rhetoric of "this night only," or "one night only" marked the benefit as something out

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of the ordinary and as a temporary site of non-normative behavior. A performer "for this one time only" will recreate a famous character or role, or attempt a never performed role. In a similar sense, the use of numerous "firsts" also marked the benefit as carnivalesque ("first time in New York," "first appearance in this role," "first time at this theatre"). Both performers and audience participated in something special and out of the ordinary for the first time.

Thus, benefits were "special" performances, outside normative theatre behavior. This difference is even highlighted in the price structure. The public generally accepted higher prices for the longer benefit bill. However, certain segments of the house were sometimes kept at lower prices. This may have been for a two-fold purpose: it allowed for more diverse community attendance, and it also allowed for a performer's patronage groups to attend in large numbers (for example, the Bowery b'hoys or the members of local fire departments). At the Broadway Theatre during the 1850s, regular prices for boxes, dress circle and parquet were 50 cents, but at benefits, prices for these same areas were $1.00 while "prices for rest of house," normally at 25 cents, stayed the same.[64]

A reversal of roles was common in the benefit and is also a hallmark of the carnivalesque. This inversion was one of the highlights of the benefit as comedians played tragic roles, and tragedians played comedy. Actor J.J. Wallace, a player of "heavy men," played Meg Merrilies for "one night only" in his benefit. He did not play it as burlesque since fellow performers stated that the performance "rivalled that

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of Charlotte Cushman."[65] For women, this inversion potential was even more attractive. So many female performers chose cross-dressed roles for their benefits that some historians have remarked that a cross-dressed role for a woman was the "kind of thing an actress would do in a benefit."[66] Edwin Booth certainly never appeared as a blackface minstrel "buffoon" character in his regular appearances, but did so in a comic afterpiece in a benefit for his long-time dresser.[67] In the free and familiar communal site of the benefit, performers found agency to play, literally, any role they wanted.

Benefit performances were sometimes extended into all-day affairs with both matinee and evening performances. These all-day communal "festivals" of benefits demonstrate the strength of the carnivalesque aspect of the benefit. A benefit for theatre treasurer Theodore Moss, held at the Academy of Music, consisted of both a matinee and evening performance.[68] Sometimes, many theatres participated in benefits for one cause. At a "grand double festival benefit" in aid of the widow of one of the principal agents of the Academy of Music, the performers at four major theatres—Niblo's Garden, Wallack's, the Winter Garden, and Laura Keene's—participated. The bill presented four major pieces, each performed at the same time at one of the four theatres. Each of the four represented the "most successful play produced at that theatre during the year."[69] Examined in the context of the carnivalesque, even the boundaries of individual theatres became transparent. No longer bound by the manager or a theatre's rules, performers often appeared in the benefits of other performers at

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other theatres. In April 1850, Watkins appeared in a benefit at one theatre, while being engaged at another.[70] At a benefit for a Mr. Stafford of Mitchell's Olympic, a Mr. And Mrs. J. Merrifield of the American Museum are listed as "kindly volunteering."[71]

Sometimes crossing theatre boundaries meant crossing city boundaries. It was not uncommon for actors appearing in one city to travel to another city to perform in a benefit for a colleague. While engaged at New York's Park Theatre, actor J.W. Wallack traveled to Philadelphia to "play for one night only at the benefit of his friend," actor-manager William B. Wood.[72] By the 1860s, with matinees firmly established and improvements made in train travel, it was possible for an actor in New York to travel to Philadelphia, perform in a matinee benefit, and return to New York in time for that evening's performance. E.A. Sothern traveled to Philadelphia, with his company, to perform in a benefit at the Walnut Street Theatre for the family of recently deceased actor Edwin Adams, a close colleague of Sothern. He and his company then returned to New York that same day and played at the Park that evening.[73] Flexible boundaries between theatres empowered actors to extend communal aid and assistance to other actors, but at the same time be seen by more people, appreciated for "generously volunteering their time" in assisting another performer. They would also be seen by another theatre manager and perhaps given an engagement. Watkins happily announced his first appearance at Burton's in a benefit for a Mr. Johnston in May 1851. He had been trying to obtain an engagement there, but had not been successful. This benefit was an opportunity for him to prove himself to the manager.[74]

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Yet another carnivalesque factor of the benefit was its focus on enjoyment for the performer. Again, diaries and memoirs of performers are clear on this point as they speak of the sheer joy of performing in their own benefits and those of others. Perhaps one reason for this is the extremely personal nature of the benefit system and the importance of the benefit to actors' esteem. Scrapbooks kept by nineteenth-century performers poignantly highlight the importance of the benefit by the high percentage of benefit playbills in them.[75]

An implicit enjoyment of acting can also be inferred from studying large numbers of benefit playbills. A close study reveals that actors enjoyed playing something different from their usual roles. Sarah Siddons, the great English tragic actress, often played lightweight or comedy roles such as Rosalind and Juliet for her benefits.[76] Charlotte Cushman frequently played the lead in comic farces in her benefits, but seldomly played them in regular appearances. English actor Tate Wilkerson described Mrs. Edmead playing Hamlet in a benefit "for her own amusement."[77] The enjoyment extended into the house as the performer's friends, family, and associates also enjoyed the benefit inversion. Actor Joseph Jones recalls "jolly benefit nights when the artist's friends would fill the house" to enjoy the evening's "virtuosos."[78]

The sheer joy of virtuoso acting led to strange benefit permutations. At a Boston benefit in 1847 for actor Edward Eddy, *Damon and Pythias* was the only piece on the bill, itself an unusual situation for a benefit. However, a closer look at the

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benefit reveals that the performance strategy still reflected the carnivalesque and the primacy of the performer. In the first and fifth acts, Joseph Proctor played Damon; in the second act, Proctor switched to playing Pythias and Charles Thorne played Damon. In the third act, Charles Thorne played Pythias, and Junius Brutus Booth, Jr. played Damon. In the fourth and fifth acts, Booth, Jr. played Pythias. The Beneficiary played Damon in the fourth and fifth acts and Pythias in the first.[79] This is not an isolated instance. My study revealed many instances over a thirty-five year period where similar performance strategies were used.

Even the presence of gifts at benefits marked the benefit as outside of the norm. Gifts can serve as souvenirs or mementos for both the audience and the performer. They act as stand-ins for the ephemeral and the extraordinary, and concretize an event as non-ordinary. Givers and receivers of souvenir gifts in effect receive a part of a heightened extraordinary reality, and are able to share in it to a certain extent. Anthropologists even define gifts as obligatory, or part of culturally defined and sanctioned exchange. Gifts are often exchanged as part of a liminal or limonoid ritual – that is, as part of a passing from one status, or place, to another.[80] They are also phenomenological in nature since they tell us *how* that heightened reality may have been experienced.

Actors' memoirs, obituaries, newspaper and journal articles often tell of gifts or mementos being exchanged between performer and audience. Strolling player Watkins speaks proudly of being presented with a "beautiful sword with an inscription" during a

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July 1852 benefit performance at a theatre he was managing in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.[81] At his benefit in 1872, performer Felix Morris was presented with a testimonial gift of a book of Shakespeare plays and sonnets. He remarked on the event that "a tremendous call brought me before the curtain, and after a shower of bouquets, I was allowed to return thanks, which I did in a few carefully prepared remarks."[82] Frederick Belton mentioned a benefit where he was presented with a silver cigar case, which contained twenty-five gold pieces and a check for $350, all given by actors and friends.[83] Clara Morris mentioned Diamond Jim Fisk giving gifts to all the actresses and actors on their benefit nights at Daly's in the 1870s.[84] Actor Joseph Jones remembered audiences making "some present to the beneficiary," often throwing "showers of bouquets at their favorites" and said that they were given "with an honest hearty good will."[85] This direct exchange of gifts between audience and performers illustrates yet another characteristic of the benefit—the cultivation of popular appeal.

Construction of Popular Appeal

The interactive relationship between the stage world and the audience extended beyond the exchange of benefit gifts into the influence of marketing or advertising on the audience's relationship to a particular performance or performer. The theatrical business was one of controlled production and consumption. During the regular season, the manager was responsible for advertising and promoting the business of theatrical production; however, on the benefit night, the performer was responsible for her own promotion. Since I have already established that the benefit was a risky "one

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night only" entrepreneurship for the performer, we can now examine how performers built the popular appeal that was so crucial to the benefit system.

Benefit playbills can illuminate how the business of theatre spilled over into the carnivalesque world of the benefit. Playbills for benefits were not typical in that they did not highlight the name of a playtext. Rather, they highlighted the word "benefit" and the name of the beneficiary, and operated as part of the performer's construction of popular appeal. These bills, and advertisements in newspapers, were created and paid for by the beneficiary, and featured direct appeals for support and patronage. Thus, self-promotion served as yet another strategy in the benefit to give primacy to the performer.

Most playbills put the word "benefit" in large, bold, all-capital typeface at the top of the bill, most often with the beneficiary's name in the same typeface directly below it, sometimes taking up as much as three or four inches. Audiences could not help but read these playbills as support for the performer, in effect foregrounding the beneficiary and benefit. This type of advertising was consistent in all theatres during my time period. For example, Mitchell's Olympic Theatre regularly featured Mitchell's name in large typeface on regular playbills. However, on benefit playbills for individual performers, Mitchell's name did not appear and the performer's name took the primary position.[86] A Park playbill advertising Clara Fisher's benefit prominently listed her name, but did not mention the name of the play(s) to be

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performed. This was markedly different from non-benefit playbills for the rest of that week that highlighted the names of the plays.[87]

Many benefit playbills devoted as much as 25-50% of their area to the benefit announcement. For example, the words "Benefit and Last Night of Mr. & Mrs. James Wallack who will appear on this occasion in two pieces" occupied 25% of the top of one benefit playbill and appeared in large, bold, all-capital type. The playbill did not mention the plays. Sometimes the volunteer was also highlighted on the playbill in a larger, heavier typeface. For example, in a benefit for Mrs. W. Isherwood "on which occasion Miss Clarke has volunteered," Clarke's name appeared in the same heavy typeface as Mrs. Isherwood, and was highlighted in the cast lists of both plays in which she appeared, *Naval Engagements* and the first act of the "popular drama" *Nicholas Nickleby*.[88]

Playbills also highlighted the character role of the beneficiary or her volunteers, not the most important characters or leading roles. In the cast lists of regular playbills, the lead roles were usually in the first position, with male roles usually being listed first. For benefits, this order was thrown out. The beneficiary or a volunteer usually came first in the cast list, even if the role was secondary. Only in the very minor roles (i.e., maids) did they remain in the last position on the cast list. But even there the name of the beneficiary was highlighted and set apart by a large, bold typeface or all-capital letters format. For example, many women chose Pauline in *The Lady of Lyons* for their major role on benefit night. For this performance, their name and role might

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not only be highlighted in a different typeface but might also appear first in the cast list, before the role of Claude Melnotte, the male lead, which was usually listed in the primary position in the cast list.[89] Likewise, the secondary female role of Dolly Mayflower in *Black-Eyed Susan* was listed as the major role, again in large bold type, in the benefit of Mrs. Yeomans, who played the role.[90]

Reshaping the playbill was only one strategy the performer used to construct popular appeal. A stage periodical from the period lays out some of the strategies performers should observe to curry popular favor:

> All through the engagement the actor was compelled to work his hardest, so as to make himself popular with the general public; to make himself as popular as possible both in and out of the theatre. The actor must make no offence; accept every invitation; when in society, make himself as agreeable as he possibly can; make friends with as many tradespeople as he can; make note of every address to send a circular; play at as many benefits as he possibly can, so as to get a constituency from the other theatres.[91]

Actors posted bills for their benefits and were given a certain percentage of house tickets to sell on their own. By mid-century, benefit tickets could be purchased in coffeehouses, newspaper offices, hotels, and bookstalls all over the city. Lesser actors paraded through the streets with bills in hand, announcing their benefit, and went into stores and shops actively drumming up support.[92]

Performers carefully cultivated a following from within the theatre by appealing to certain segments of the audience population, relying upon this personal following to make their benefits successful. They attempted to negotiate a benefit toward the end of

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the season so that they had time to build popular appeal and become a "great favorite in their own locality" and "have a profitable benefit."[93] From the beginning of the season, performers appealed to these constituencies and gender frequently played a major role in soliciting this aspect of popular appeal. Sometimes there was cross-gender appeal, especially for female performers. For example, while male actors also curried favor with local volunteer fire departments, actresses were much more popular and better supported. The passion of these volunteer firemen for popular Olympic and Bowery rival actresses Mary Taylor and Constantia Clarke produced intense partisan battles that were played out in benefits.[94]

The rhetoric of "audience requests" is frequently seen on playbills, and performers' memoirs often remark on it. Whether this was a result of "puffery" on the part of the performer or not, it was a strategy used by the performer for building popular appeal. Performers were careful to highlight their willingness to give the audience what it wanted. For example, Mrs. Rea "respectfully" announced that in "consideration of numerous requests, she was giving a benefit."[95] Julia Dean frequently used this strategy in constructing her benefits by saying "in compliance with numerous requests," she would appear in her "great Shakespearean character of Juliet."[96]

Benefits were enormously popular with nineteenth-century audiences. At the Olympic theatre in the 1840s, the benefit nights were usually the most attended of the season, and "appreciation for the Olympic actors was attested to by the excellent

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benefit nights that the company's members enjoyed during the closing weeks of the season."[97] Performers were careful to give thanks and appreciation to their audiences. Again, common rhetoric such as "takes this opportunity to give heartfelt thanks . . . sincere and heartfelt thanks . . . in thanks for great kindnesses . . . shall always entertain a most grateful remembrance" was common in benefit playbills as performers worked on constructing and cultivating patronage. They were careful to appeal to audience approval. Madame Ponisi positioned herself as one "who solicits the patronage of her friends and the public," but also "presents for their approval a most diverse program in which the following artists have kindly volunteered."[98] Attempts "to please all" marked benefits as a way of "returning thanks to friends and the public for the many favors received at their hands."[99] Frederick Belton recalled that "on my last benefit, being as usual called before the curtain, I thanked my friends briefly and heartily."[100]

Even with the firm establishment of the star system in the American theatre by 1820, local actors still used the benefit to build popular appeal. The star system represented a shift from the completely independent theatrical communities that had given birth to the benefit, as it supported a type of "pre-industrial entrepreneurship," in which vigorous individuals solicited the attention and loyalty of large numbers of others for personal profit.[101] But in the stock company, non-star performers could also work as individual entrepreneurs to improve their professional status in the company. Even if they never became stars, they could find "sufficient compensation in their fellow-

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citizens' recognition of their ability in their particular 'line of business'."[102] It was economically crucial for a stock company player to maintain a good reputation and build up a local following. This agency for the local performer was located in the benefit as it supported the interests of both stock performer and star. Moreover, the benefit still depended upon members of the local theatrical community for support.

Reciprocity in the Benefit

In addition to the above intertheatrical elements that gave primacy to the performer, I argue that the elements of reciprocity and voluntarism, inherent within the benefit system, also provided agency to the performer and contributed to the longevity of the benefit system. Without reciprocity and voluntarism within local theatrical communities, the benefit tradition would never have survived as long as it did.

Reciprocity, often referred to as mutual aid, virtue, or cooperation by anthropologists, has, at its heart, self-interest that societies use for the greater good of the community. Individuals may act in self-interest, but life is characterized as much by cooperation and mutual benefit as by competition. This paradox between self-interest and helping others is especially apparent in small communities.[103] Benevolent help in the form of reciprocity operates best in small communities since the more people help each other, the more the community thrives. Moreover, when members of a community help each other, they expect help in return, and in so doing, they develop a sense of trust. Most local community institutions—such as women's benevolent institutions, friendly societies, voluntary associations, and ladies' aid societies—use

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principles of reciprocity, trust, and cooperation to achieve a sense of power and autonomy within the larger society.[104]

The theatre is an excellent example of a small, local community in which the benefit acted as a communal activity where reciprocity and "the most generous spirit of appreciation and mutual assistance among actors" operated to create some sense of power and autonomy.[105] Freed from the casting authority of the manager, performers recruited each other to perform in benefits, knowing that the favor would be reciprocated.

Reciprocity builds cooperation and trust, which is of social and economic value. Trust is as vital a form of social capital as money is actual capital.[106] Therefore, trust can be lent, risked, traded, hoarded, or squandered. Further, human beings choose whom to trust in a cooperative venture, based on past experience, word of mouth about people you do not know, and signals from those who indicate they wish to cooperate. In the benefit—a cooperative venture among theatre personnel—beneficiaries solicited those whom they could trust to appear. Reciprocity also acted as a hedge against future lack because it traded a present benefit for a future benefit. Since neither manager nor beneficiary financially compensated performers for participating in a benefit, those appearing did so because they expected to receive reciprocal benefits in the future. In short, the benefit tradition was based on the "if you help me now, I will help you in the future" form of entrepreneurship. Reciprocity resolved the conflict between short-term expediency and long-term prudence. One

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received an immediate reward, but also had an obligation for the future. Moreover, reciprocity depends on some degree of power. Only people who have it can truly reciprocate. In the benefit, there is a more equal degree of power between performers than in the regular season.

Since the beneficiary "cast" the plays as she saw fit and produced the evening, it was important for the community of performers to assist each other at all costs. Performers knew the importance of mutual aid and reciprocity in maintaining the empowering benefit system, often mentioning the "fixed rule amongst performers, to lend each other every help they can in time of benefits."[107] Actress Clara Morris speaks of the "warmness and easy familiarity, a trust and mutual aid" for one another in the theatrical community.[108] Watkins recalls that he gave $5 to another actor in financial distress and stated that "it was characteristic of the vagabond theatre that mutual aid was always extended. The Theatre has always been like that."[109]

The obligation of reciprocity had a strong hold on performers that was seldom forgotten. Early theatre manager Sol Smith relates the following:

> My old friend J.M. Field took a benefit at the St. Charles [Theatre], New Orleans, about the time I was to pass through that city [1840], and as I owed him a night since 1835, when he played for me at my benefit at the Park Theatre, as well as an abundance of good will, I accepted his invitation to `appear' for him in one of my comic characters.[110]

Many performers relate stories about stepping in at the last minute to assist in a benefit when someone already committed fell ill.[111] Benefit audiences paid higher prices partly to see a wide variety of entertainments and performers on a long bill, and beneficiaries

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could not afford to cancel if someone was sick or unable to perform. If someone had to drop out of the performance due to illness, it could have serious consequences. Actor James Murdoch related a story from early in his career on his substitution at the last minute as Hotspur in a benefit for visiting star Thomas Abthorpe Cooper, who was to play Prince Hal in the fifth act of *Henry IV, Part 1.* Murdoch was playing subordinate roles as a walking gentleman when the actor playing Hotspur became ill. Cooper did not want to cancel the benefit, so he asked Murdoch to play the role. Cooper received his benefit, and young Murdoch was able to perform a role he would never have been offered at this stage of his career.[112] Actor-manager Sol Smith recalled filling in at a benefit where he performed in selected acts from *Hamlet, Merchant of Venice,* and *Richard III.*[113] Moreover, when actors reciprocated, it was customary to give their best efforts. Many times a performer offered their best-known role for the benefits of others. Olive Logan played Lucretia Borgia, "her best character," for the benefit of Mr. Crisp, her acting partner in many engagements.[114]

Reciprocity also dictated that the individual in a small community who attempted a "free ride" on the charitable contributions of others would be confronted with higher social pressures than one who did the same in a large community. There could be serious consequences if benefit reciprocity was not observed. Again, performer Watkins has something to say on the subject. He mentioned his benefit in Boston in 1849 in which actor Joseph Proctor declined to play. Watkins was furious about the slight and remarked "I'll not forget this!"[115] Where non-reciprocity was

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practiced by a few, there was no great harm to the community, but practiced by the many, the consequences to a small community would be devastating. Actor Edwin Forrest was notorious for his refusal to participate in the benefits of the actors who supported him in his star engagements. Other performers disliked Forrest not only for this, but specifically because he did volunteer in benefits for managers. During his engagement at the Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia in September 1839, he offered manager Wemyss "one night gratuitously for you at the end of the engagement; select any play you think proper." In November 1839, he performed in seven benefits for the manager of the National Theatre in New York. But he expected the actors in the company to assist him in his benefits, for which they were paid by management, an exception in the benefit system.[116] It is tempting and logical to believe they had to be paid by the manager since they refused to volunteer due to Forrest's lack of reciprocity. I have found no examples of female stars refusing to participate in benefits. Performers such as Charlotte Cushman, Laura Keene, and Anna Cora Mowatt went out of their way to assist in benefits, especially those of other women. Star performers often came out of retirement to assist in someone's benefit. Madame Celeste's only appearances after her retirement were in benefits of other performers.[117] Actor-manager Smith noted his participation in twelve performances after his retirement, ten of which were benefits.[118]

Even a perceived action of non-reciprocity could exact a severe penalty from both theatre performers and audiences. Sarah Siddons, in a notorious incident in her

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career, was attacked by two lesser actors for a perceived refusal to participate in their joint benefit. One of the actors involved took his case to the newspapers and the public, and, in defense, Siddons had to go before an angry theatre audience and plead her case.[119]

The desire of the actor to stay before the eyes of the public was a strong factor in the reciprocal value of the benefit. Our itinerant Watkins related his participation in a June 1851 benefit: "Called on H.B. Phillips at the Lyceum Theatre. He is anxious that I play for his benefit. I shall do so [for] I must keep before the public in order not to be forgotten."[120] Watkins' diary revealed that during the summer of 1853 he appeared in over a dozen benefits for others.

Even managers recognized the power of reciprocity. It was traditional for managers to request participation by performers in their benefits. Actor James Fennell mentioned being asked if he would play at a manager's night.[121] At their end-of-the-season benefit, it was also traditional for managers to acknowledge their company of performers with a "gracious" compliment. Without reciprocity, the managers' benefits would not have been successful. Reciprocity worked as a restraint on the manager; if he wanted the actors to appear in his benefit, he needed to reflect a sense of courtesy and reciprocity about theirs. This may explain why managers' attempts to regulate the benefit so often failed. Reciprocity served as a form of "checks and balances" for the theatrical benefit. Lastly, the reciprocal benefit tradition depended upon voluntarism to be effective and benefits are strongly marked by its rhetoric. Voluntarism is also an

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important component in charitable enterprises and, in the theatre, the benefit was the venue through which charity was extended.

Voluntarism

Voluntarism was crucial to the benefit system and contributed to the primacy of the performer. Anthropologists see voluntarism as central to small communities as it serves to build trust. It is often associated with groups having little power in the larger community, enabling them to operate in the greater society from a position of empowerment.[122] It also serves as a venue for the exchange of goods, information, fortune, and power between "free individuals" in these communities.[123]

As I argued earlier, apprentice actors, both male and female, voluntarily worked together in the Restoration theatre's benefit prototypes. In nineteenth-century America, benefit playbills continued to highlight the role of voluntarism by foregrounding the rhetoric of "thanking" and announcing volunteers. Actor E.L. Davenport advertised his benefit, in which he produced *Julius Caesar,* by announcing that he had "obtained the volunteer aid of the Eminent actor, Mr. J.W. Wallack, Jr.," and profusely thanking all of his volunteers.[124] Voluntarism also utilized popular appeal and the "one night only" characteristic of the benefit by using such language as "on which occasion the following highly popular performers volunteer to appear"or "a host of volunteers `for this night only.'"[125] Benefit playbills often marked the word "volunteer" in large, boldface type or in all capital letters, and beneficiaries often highlighted their volunteers. At manager Holland's benefit, the playbill advertised his volunteers, Mrs.

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Timm and Mrs. Watts, two of the most popular actresses at Mitchell's Olympic, appearing in the benefit in *Cinderella*.[126] Mr. & Mrs. Barney Williams, players of Irish guy and girl roles in comedies and farces, highlighted Mrs. F.B. Conway, a serious actress specializing in drama and Shakespeare roles, as their only volunteer in a benefit in the 1850s. While the bill consisted mostly of short Irish farces, protean (quick-change) farces featuring Mrs. Williams, comic interludes, dances, and songs, the first item on the bill was the fourth act of *Merchant of Venice*, highlighting Mrs. Conway in the role of Portia. This was the only part she played in the evening's offerings.[127]

The concept of voluntarism was central to the operation of both the contractual and charity benefit. Contractual benefits relied on the use of volunteers to help other performers through the strategy of reciprocity. In charity benefits, managers volunteered their theatres, and performers and technicians volunteered their time and skills to form community relations with the larger community and extend communal charity. Charity benefits provided charitable aid for the theatrical community as well as for the larger population. They featured the same characteristics as the contractual benefit—reciprocity and voluntarism—and used similar intertheatrical strategies, such as the construction of popular appeal to build and maintain good relations with the theatre-going public.

Finally, all benefits are marked by a strong focus on gender. In the contractual benefit, women clearly built their performances out of selected scenes and acts that highlighted female roles, while men constructed their nights around the same male roles

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featured in the patriarchal canon. Likewise, gender dictated, to a large extent, the choice of volunteers. Women generally had more female volunteers while men had more males. This strong focus on gender is also apparent in the charity benefit. In the theatre community, male performers tended to be more involved in communal aid for other male performers, while female performers supported women more strongly. Men tended to support traditionally masculine groups such as the Elks and Masons, while women tended to support more female-identified organizations such as moral reform and benevolent organizations for women and children. In addition, voluntarism and charity are identified as traditionally feminine virtues and have been clearly associated with American women as strategies for empowerment and agency in their move from the domestic to the public sphere in the nineteenth century.[128]

This chapter has argued for the agency and empowerment of the performer in the benefit and examined some of its features—intertheatricality, the foregrounding and primacy of the performer, the carnivalesque, the construction of popular appeal, reciprocity, and voluntarism—that facilitated that agency. In addition, it suggested a gender-specific component to the benefit in light of women's association and involvement with charity and voluntarism. In the next chapter, I will argue that the female performer not only found agency and empowerment in the benefit, but that it was more crucial to women than men as women simply had fewer options in the theatre and society. A feminist analysis of the benefit can illuminate the specific agency it offered for the nineteenth-century female performer.

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ENDNOTES

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[3] Cited in *The London Stage*, Part 1, 433.

[4] Colley Cibber, *Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley Cibber, Comedian* (London: R. & J. Dodsley, 1756), I, 291-2.

[5] Robert D. Hume, "The Origins of the Actor Benefit in London," *Theatre Research International* 9, no. 2 (1984): 99-111.

[6] See Verbruggen's Petition, 1703 in Judith Milhous' *Thomas Betterton and the Management of Lincoln Inns Fields, 1695—1708* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), appendix E.

[7] Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, "Profits at Drury Lane, 1713-1716," *Theatre Research International* 4, no. 3 (Autumn 1989): 4:3, 241-55, note 21.

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[9] Frederick Belton, *Random Recollections of an Old Actor* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1880), 198. The earliest extant American playbill is for a December 20, 1753 benefit at the New Theatre in Nassau Street, "for the benefit of the poor." (Harvard Theatre Collection, benefits folder)

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[11] Bruce A. McConachie, "William B. Wood and the `Pathos of Paternalism'" *Theatre Survey* 28, no. 1 (May 1987): 1-14.

[12] Harry Watkins, *One Man in His Time: The Adventures of H. Watkins, Strolling Player, 1845-1863, from His Journal*, ed. Maud and Otis Skinner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1938), 12.

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[13] Untitled, "Benefits," *Stage Door*, 1850, 52-55, in U.S. Stage Benefits clipping file, New York Public Library.

[14] Watkins, 11.

[15] Jerome K. Jerome, *On the Stage—And Off: The Brief Career of a Would-Be Actor* (New York: Holt, 1891), 138.

[16] Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 59.

[17] Marvin Carlson, "The Haunted Stage: Recycling and Reception in the Theatre," *Theatre Survey* 35, no. 1 (May 1994): 5-18.

[18] Credit for the introduction of the curtain speech to the United States is given to Edmund Kean during his US tours in the 1820s. Before that, curtain speeches were limited to the stage manager. By the 1850s, stars routinely gave curtain speeches.

[19] Playbill, Daly's Fifth Avenue Theatre, May 16, 1870.

[20] *Spirit of the Times*, April 30, 1869.

[21] Seilhamer, 3, 386.

[22] Untitled Boston newspaper, 1857, scrapbook of Mrs. Frank Rea, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

[23] Undated newspaper clipping, scrapbook of Mrs. Frank Rea's, NYPL for the Performing Arts.

[24] Hand-written copy of benefit address, papers of Mrs. Julia (W.G.) Jones, NYPL Rare Books and Manuscripts, Literary Box A-K.

[25] Carlson, 5-18.

[26] Playbill, Bowery Theatre, February 4, 1846; Playbill, Chatham Theatre, October 7, 1846.

[27] Playbill, Park Theatre, October 13, 1838.

[28] Playbill, Park Theatre, June 17, 1844.

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[29] James Edward Murdoch, *The Stage or Recollections of Actors and Acting from an Experience of Fifty Years* (New York: n.p., 1880), 17.

[30] Playbill, Park Theatre, February 8, 1840.

[31] Seilhamer, vol. 3, 153.

[32] Playbill, Park Theatre, January 2, 1840; Playbill, Park Theatre, November 21, 1840; Watkins, 102.

[33] Clara Morris, *Life on the Stage: My Personal Experiences and Recollections* (New York: McClure, Phillips and Company, 1891), 386.

[34] Undated *New York Clipper* article, scrapbook of Mrs. Frank Rea, NYPL for the Performing Arts.

[35] Westland Marston, *Our Recent Actors* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1890), 87.

[36] Playbill, Chatham Theatre, June 11, 1845.

[37] William Winter, *Life and Art of Edwin Booth* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 6.

[38] Playbill, Broadway Theatre, June 30, 1852.

[39] Playbill, Broadway Theatre, February 2, 1856.

[40] Diary of Mrs. Julia (W.G.) Jones, NYPL Rare Books and Manuscripts, Literary Box A-K.

[41] Playbill, Niblo's Garden Theatre, September 11, 1851.

[42] Playbill, National Theatre, September 13, 1855.

[43] Playbill, National Theatre, March 21, 1856.

[44] *The Stage Door*, 55.

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[45] William Davidge, *Footlight Flashes* (New York: American News Company, 1866), 195.

[46] John Lester Wallack, *Memories of 50 Years* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1889), 49.

[47] Playbill, Academy of Music, January 21, 1871; Morris, 162.

[48] Playbills, Broadway Theatre, March - October, 1848.

[49] Ellen and Charles Kean, *Emigrant in Motley: The Journey of Charles and Ellen Kean in Quest of a Theatrical Fortune in Australia and America, as told in Their Hitherto Unpublished Letters*, ed. J.M.D. Hardwick (London: Rockcliff, 1954), 157.

[50] Playbill, Bowery Theatre, June 12, 1847.

[51] Benefit playbills, scrapbook of Mrs. Frank Rea, NYPL for the Performing Arts.

[52] Playbill, Chatham Theatre, July 12, 1845.

[53] Playbill, Chatham Theatre, August 25, 1854.

[54] Playbill, Chatham Theatre, March 3, 1846.

[55] Playbill, Park Theatre, November 18, 1843.

[56] See Appendix A for a listing of the most popular benefit plays and scenes.

[57] Benefit playbill, reproduced in *The Theatre Magazine* (May 14, 1854): 223, NYPL Billy Rose Theatre Collection, benefits clippings file.

[58] Playbill, Bowery Theatre, March 29, 1850.

[59] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed, and transl. Caryl Emerson. Theory and History of Literature Series, vol. 8 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 122-23. See also Michael D. Bristol, *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York/London: Routledge, 1985), 22-25.

[60] Leman Thomas Rede, *The Guide to the Stage*, ed. Francis C. Wemyss (New York: Samuel French, 1868), 52-3.

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[61] Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1974), 274-5. Also see Bristol, 36-9.

[62] J.B. Howe, *A Cosmopolitan Actor and His Adventures All Over the World* (London: Bedford Publishing Company, 1887), 95.

[63] Diary of Mrs. Julia (W.G.) Jones, entry for December 23, 1859.

[64] Playbills, Broadway Theatre, January 1851 - June 1856.

[65] Kate Ryan, *Old Boston Museum Days* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1915), 116.

[66] This will be more clearly articulated in Chapter 3.

[67] Diary of Mrs. Julia (W.G.) Jones, hand-written notes.

[68] Playbill, Academy of Music, June 29, 1858.

[69] Playbill, Academy of Music, March 10, 1860.

[70] Watkins, 87.

[71] Playbill, Olympic Theatre, December 14, 1849.

[72] Playbill, Walnut Street Theatre, March 13, 1854.

[73] Sothern played a series of benefits for the Adams family from July to October 1877. Playbill, October 31, 1877, Walnut Street Theatre; Obituary for E.A. Sothern, April 2, 1910, *New York Clipper*.

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[75] Of all the playbills in the scrapbook of Mrs. Frank Rea, 95% of them are of benefits.

[76] St. Vincent Troubridge, *The Benefit System in the British Theatre* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1967), 123.

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[77] Jill Edmonds, "Princess Hamlet," in Vivien Gardner and Susan Rutherford, eds., *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre, 1850-1914* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 59-76.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Ryan, 45; Playbill, Boston Theatre, June 15, 1847.

[80] See Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Bagrielle Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (1925; Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1954), 13.

[81] Watkins, 153.

[82] Felix Morris, *Reminiscences* (New York: International Telegram Company, 1892), 83.

[83] Belton, 198.

[84] Morris, 303.

[85] Undated letter from Joseph Jones to Mrs. Julia (W.G.) Jones, NYPL Rare Books and Manuscripts.

[86] Playbills, Olympic Theatre, November 1840 - June 1841.

[87] Playbills, Park Theatre, June 29 - July 5, 1833.

[88] Playbill, Olympic Theatre, February 12, 1847.

[89] Playbill, Broadway Theatre, April 5, 1850.

[90] Playbill, Chatham Theatre, June 1, 1855.

[91] *The Stage Door*, 52-55.

[92] *The Stage Door*, 54.

[93] Davidge, 186.

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[94] At a benefit for manager George Holland on December 6, 1844, the "b'hoys" interrupted the performance of *Cinderella*, in which both actresses were appearing, to express their partisan support. Benefits were frequently sites of partisan "battles" over favorite performers.

[95] Untitled newspaper notice, April 7, 1855, scrapbook of Mrs. Frank Rea, NYPL for the Performing Arts.

[96] Playbill, Broadway Theatre, April 28, 1854.

[97] David L. Rinear, *The Temple of Momus: Mitchell's Olympic Theatre* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1987), 78.

[98] Playbill, Broadway Theatre, June 11, 1856.

[99] Playbill, Bowery Theatre, February 4, 1846.

[100] Belton, 198.

[101] Douglas McDermott, "The Theatre and Its Audience," eds. Ron Engle and Tice Miller. In *The American Stage: Social and Economic Issues from the Colonial Period to the Present* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 9-23.

[102] Alfred Bernheim, *The Business of the Theatre* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964), 31.

[103] See Matthew Ridley, *The Origins of Virtue: Human Instincts and the Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Viking, 1996) for an excellent articulation of how reciprocal altruism operates in human societies. Also see Lawrence C. Becker, *Reciprocity*, University of Chicago Press, 1986 and Arrmen Albert Alchian, ed., *The Economics of Charity*, (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 1973) for further reading on this subject.

[104] Ridley, 262.

[105] Frederick Warde, *Fifty Years of Make-Believe* (New York: International Press Syndicate, 1920), 42-3.

[106] Ridley, 250.

[107] *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, March 24, 1773, quoted in Seilhamer, 1, 313.

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[108] Morris, 180.

[109] Watkins, 88.

[110] Sol Smith, *Theatrical Management in the West and South for Thirty Years* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1868), 150.

[111] Watkins, 20.

[112] Murdoch, 78.

[113] Smith, 137.

[114] Undated newspaper notice, scrapbook of Mrs. Frank Rea, NYPL for the Performing Arts.

[115] Watkins, 60.

[116] Richard Moody, *Edwin Forrest: First Star of the American Stage* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), 178. Also Playbill, Bowery Theatre, October 15, 1841, where he appeared in two of his most popular roles, Jack Cade and Spartacus in *The Gladiator*.

[117] Madame Celeste Clippings file, Harvard Theatre Collection.

[118] Smith, 237.

[119] Troubridge, 124; James Boaden *Memoirs of Mrs. Siddons* (London: Henry Colburn, 1827), 98-100, 106-113, 115-118. Also see Ellen Donkin "Mrs. Siddons Looks Back in Anger" in *Critical Theory and Performance*, eds. Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 276-90.

[120] Watkins, 134.

[121] James Fennell, *An Apology for the Life of James Fennell* (1814; New York: Benjamin Blom, 1969), 304.

[122] See Chapter 1 for a clear articulation of the intersection of women's groups and voluntarism.

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[123] Ridley, 263.

[124] Playbills, Broadway Theatre, April 29 and 30, 1857.

[125] Playbills, Niblo's Garden, August 20, 1845 and September 11, 1851.

[126] Playbill, Bowery Theatre, December 6, 1844.

[127] Playbill, Broadway Theatre, July 24, 1854.

[128] See Chapter 1 for a more extensive discussion on the role of voluntarism and charity as strategies for women's empowerment and agency.

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Chapter III

The Nineteenth-Century Female Performer and the Benefit Performance

Introduction

This chapter will begin by charting the changing position of the nineteenth-century actress both in the theatre and in the larger society. It will then examine the benefit as a principal site of female agency for theatrical women and situate the actress in the historical epoch. The evolving changes in her social and professional position, especially her place within the upper class and emerging middle class's cultural construct of respectability, will be traced. The chapter will then address specific strategies used by theatrical women in the benefit as they negotiated power structures and built careers. The crucial importance of the benefit as a site of female agency will be specifically explored by using current theoretical methodology to analyze intertheatrical aspects of the benefit such as authorial control and female subjectivity, the creation of new performance texts, women's use of voluntarism and reciprocal aid, and the operation of patronage and celebrity.

The Evolving Place of the Actress in Society

During the period examined in this dissertation, the theatre underwent a transformation from small local companies struggling for acceptance by the larger society to an entertainment form shaped and commodified by economics. The theatre profession itself was a microcosm of the larger society in that it reflected the evolution of the class system and its corollary development of respectability. These developments, both in the larger society and in the theatre, focused on the role and

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function of women. The changing role of women in the theatre corresponded with the changes in women's roles in the larger society. The suffragist movement, abolitionism, temperance, social reform, and the emergence of more highly educated women, such as doctors and teachers, challenged the containment of women within the private realm of the home. The position of the actress was more complex since she was not confined to the domestic sphere but operated in the very public arena of the theatre. Female performers were perceived as exploiting their sexual appeal and, until the latter part of the century, were marked as being outside genteel society. They were viewed as disreputable, as was the theatre profession, and both were frequently associated with prostitution. Being an actress connoted a shameful life and as late as 1857 actress Mary Ann Duff was buried in an unmarked grave because of her "dark secret of having been an actress."[1] While the actress embodied womanly virtue on stage, she was often viewed suspiciously by audiences because of the perceived duplicity inherent in acting. By the 1870s, however, the perception of the actress had changed. Prostitution was no longer so tenaciously associated with the theatre, more upper and middle-class "respectable" women attended the theatre, and the institution of matinees targeted these women. Both the theatre and the actress began to be accepted in "polite" society, yet contradictions and tensions marked this change in reception.

Through the construct of respectability, the mid-century witnessed a renegotiation of the public position of the female performer. Theatre was becoming more accepted by the emerging middle class, and Laurence Senelick, among other theatre historians, equates the increased number of women in the nineteenth-century

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audience with the rise of respectability.[2] As the theatre became more respectable, it began to draw more upper and middle-class women to the profession of actress. Indeed, theatre historian Tracy Davis refers to the "performer's increasingly middle-class status" at mid-century.[3] The female performer thus began to have a presence in both worlds: the public world of the mimetic stage and the private world of middle and upper-class society.[4]

The move to respectability for the actress began in the 1830s and is mostly associated with Fanny Kemble as she shifted the actress away from her association with "sinful" sexuality. Kemble used the public platform already granted to the actress to create a new image of the female performer. By the 1840s, she had established a successful career as a public reader of Shakespeare, a popular occupation for respectable women during the nineteenth century. Austrian ballet dancer Fanny Elssler toured America in 1840 and made the ballet a respectable popular art. She was enormously popular and her engagements at the Park Theatre precipitated huge outpourings of what the press called "Elsslermania."

During the 1840s, Anna Cora Mowatt made her debut on the New York City stage, first as a playwright then as a performer. She was the first major American female performer to come out of the elite upper-middle-class and embodied "impeccable" character and recognized social position. Mowatt had experienced little contact with the professional theatre as a young girl and, like many others of her class, viewed the professional theatre with suspicion. She did, however, participate in the parlor theatricals movement that swept through the country in the 1840s and 50s.

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These domestic entertainments were very popular with the elite, especially women, and served to help break down the prejudice against theatre. Mowatt even wrote and staged many of these amateur home performances for friends and family.

In 1840, however, her husband's financial ruin necessitated a major life change for Mowatt, and she began performing public staged readings to which she invited other social friends. At her first reading in New York City, Park Theatre manager Edmund Simpson attended and made her "a highly lucrative proposal" if she would appear upon the stage."[5] Despite her reservations about actually performing on a legitimate theatrical stage, she did offer Simpson a play she wrote, *Fashion*. Presented as a "new play," it was a success and somewhat assuaged Mowatt's reservations about performing. She accepted manager Simpson's offer, and her first appearance on the stage was in the benefit of W.H. Crisp, the original Count Jolimaitre of *Fashion*.

The public rhetoric concerning Mowatt's career reflected the anxieties and tensions associated with the change in society's reception of the actress:

> A lady of your character and attainments elevates and adorns the stage, and we have no doubt that your influence will be widely felt in purifying it from the abuses which sometimes mar its beauties, and that you will cause it to perform its proper task—"to raise the genius and to mend the heart."[6]

An article in the *Ladies' Companion*, however, denounced Mowatt for doing public readings and suggested that "if public readings must be given, [a woman] should read before an audience entirely of her own sex!" Another critic, however, composed a poem in praise of Mowatt on stage: "Ne'er heed them, Cora, dear, The carping few, who say, Thou leavest woman's holier sphere, For light and vain display."[7] Mowatt's

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own writings revealed not only how her personal viewpoint on the position of the actress changed but also the low regard some still held for the female performer. She sympathetically praised female performers "who bear the too often contemptuously uttered name of `actress'; women who, with hearts full of anguish, nightly practise forgetfulness of self, and of their private sorrows, to earn their bread by delighting a public who misjudges them" and goes on to strongly defend women's participation in the profession:

> The woman who, on the stage, is in danger of losing the highest attribute of her womanhood—her loss in any situation of life where she was in some degree of freedom, particularly one in which she was compelled by circumstances to earn her own livelihood. I make this assertion fearlessly, for I believe it firmly. There is nothing in the profession necessarily demoralizing or degrading, not even to the poor ballet girl.[8]

Mowatt's *Autobiography*, published in 1854, was popular with women and may have influenced many of them to attend the theatre. It may also have influenced their participation on the stage, both professionally and in amateur performances, as more women from the upper classes became involved with theatre. Mowatt's ability to attract female audiences to her benefits generated discourse on the presence of "hundreds of women in overflowing houses." Privileged women who saw themselves as respectable paragons of virtue were discovering the "pleasures of the drama through Mrs. Mowatt; for they knew that when she was on the stage there would be nothing to offend the most delicate sensibilities."[9] The inference was that it was her personal embodiment of respectability that brought in female audiences, since she was doing the same repertory as the other actresses of the time.

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Charlotte Cushman's triumphant return from England in 1852 established her as a star. Her careful construction of a respectable social image for herself contributed to her popularity with both men and women and brought in even more audiences. She, like Mowatt, came from upper middle-class "genteel" society and used her position as a member of that class to construct a new respectability for the unmarried actress. Cushman skillfully used the press to cultivate her class image and the social acceptance of the actress.[10]

Concurrent with the rise of respectability for the actress and her acceptance by elite society was an increase in the number of women attending theatre. During the 1850s, more women than ever attended the theatre; fully half the audiences at some theatres were female. Theatre managers, led by Laura Keene, were quick to capitalize on this social change and instituted daytime matinees, which women could attend unaccompanied by a male escort. They became so popular that "in order to accommodate the immense number of ladies who have been unable to [attend] daylight performances, on account of the great crush attending the regular matinees" managers arranged to give "special" matinees to handle the crowds of women.[11] An early matinee benefit of Fanny Elssler was highlighted by an increased female presence in the audience. To accommodate the crowds, the benches of the pit were converted into stalls which women occupied "just for this night," a condition which Elssler noted was "an unusual sight, for only men were usually admitted there."[12] French tragic actress Rachel gave a matinee performance of ***Adrienne Lecouvreur*** during her 1855 tour for an

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audience composed entirely of women. The receipts were very large for a Saturday matinee, a total of $1,600.[13]

Direct appeals were made to women to attend matinees. A handbill pitched to women advertising for an Election Day matinee read

> Ladies you can vote. Buy your tickets at the box office, Park Theatre, for election afternoon matinee. Repeaters invited to vote often. Your vote taken. No registry required. Vote often, is our motto. Tickets only 15, 25 and 50 cents, which gives you a vote, and also a brilliant entertainment at the Park Theatre election day matinee. A Grand Double Bill.[14]

By the early 1860s, the female actress—epitomized by Laura Keene and Charlotte Cushman—had fully assumed the mantle of respectability. Keene, like Cushman, carefully constructed and cultivated an image of elite propriety. She mastered the use of the matinee and was the first to market it to female audiences. Her theatre was very popular with women and her benefits drew especially large numbers of female audience members.[15] Keene even pioneered children's matinees, knowing that children would bring women in. She was credited with the innovation of the charity matinee, which combined women's charitable impulses with the economic potential of the afternoon performance. Her staging of "women's plays" encouraged female subjectivity and female audience attendance.

By the late 1850s and 1860s, this newly acquired respectability changed who became an actress. The actress, especially in the more respectable theatres such as Wallack's, had become an arbiter of society, as the "fashion" actress became common. Instead of coming from established theatrical families, these "social" actresses came directly from the educated upper classes. They were usually married to rich men and,

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especially in the economic prosperity of post-Civil War New York, did not need the financial security of a salary. They were also more at home on stage in the "social" comedies and dramas that characterized the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s, such as Robertson's *Ours, Caste*, and *School.* These plays needed a new style of acting—an underplayed drawing-room style that reflected an upper-class conception of gentility and respectability. Society actresses, with their embodied knowledge of elite social mores, were considered "natural" actresses for these roles.

Wallack's became the place to see and be seen and its premier actress, Mrs. Hoey (Josephine Shaw), became known for her extravagant wardrobe, her marriage to a rich man, and the social position that came with the marriage. The actress's social position became an important arbiter of not only her value in society but the changing view of society toward the theatre profession, as seen in the following press rhetoric:

> Tomorrow night Mrs. Hoey, the accomplished and popular leading lady of the Wallack's Company makes an appeal to her friends, and is sure to receive a warm and hearty response. Her benefits always secure a brilliant attendance, for no lady is held in higher esteem; indeed her social position gives dignity to the profession of which she is so bright an ornament.[16]

The position of the actress throughout much of the nineteenth century offered opportunities for independence, fame, and fortune, and a special dispensation from normal categories of gender and moral and social categories that defined woman's place. By the end of this period, the actress occupied a new position of respectability in the theatre and in society.

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The Place of Women in the Theatre

Yet even as women began their struggle for political and economic rights in the late 1840s, the theatre received little attention. At the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, feminists paid little attention to theatrical occupations available to women. Yet prior to the 1840s, the theatre offered one of the highest salaries for women's wage-work. Fields of employment over which women exercised a controlling prerogative—such as dressmaking, laundry work, factory work, and construction of paper goods—were usually low-paid, often seasonal, and susceptible to sudden termination when market conditions changed.[17] The theatre offered a public employment arena where pay scales were relatively on a par with men. Women working in the theatre were not accused of taking employment away from male earners and encroaching on traditional male occupations. They even had opportunities to rise to positions of management. One of the first positive mentions of the theatre as a suitable profession for women is in Bessie Rayner Parkes' 1865 *Essays on Women's Work* in which she acknowledges the "one art in which women have from first to last achieved success, renown and emolument commensurate with those of its male performers - the histrionic art."[18]

The American theatre of the 1830s, 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s operated within the stock repertory company system, often augmented by stars. Situated in large cities, these institutions prepared younger members of the acting profession for roles in the stock repertoire. By 1850, there were more than 50 stock theatres in major American cities. The stock system provided agency for women in that it created stable communities of female performers and workers, who, in the ingrained benefit system,

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used two traditionally female-identified aspects that generated agency and power, voluntarism and reciprocity. Yet while stock theatres offered a more stable environment for women than many institutions in the larger society, men still enjoyed dominance since most theatrical occupations were, in effect, closed to women. As argued earlier, women in the theatre generally worked only as performers, ballet girls, or wardrobe mistresses. Infrequently, a female performer found a management position. Men, however, worked in the theatre as managers, performers, stage managers, prompters, doorkeepers, ushers, machinists, scenic artists, scene painters, prop masters, gas engineers, orchestra leaders, musicians, wardrobe keepers, box office keepers, treasurers, bookkeepers, advertising agents, boxkeepers, sceneshifters, handbill distributors-stickers, pit office keepers, box office keepers and assistants, office bookkeepers, stage door keepers, even bill posters and janitors-porters.

Moreover, while salaries for women in the theatre were higher in regard to other professions or occupations available to women, there were salary inequities, and they seldom received the same remuneration as men. When salaries of performers at all levels, utility to leading player, were averaged, women earned 80 percent of men's wages. Yet in other fields where men and women were employed at the same jobs, women typically received only 50 percent of the standard male wage, and they were *only* found in the lower status jobs.[19] Professions where women dominated—millinery, dressmaking, tailoring, sewing, domestic and factory work, teaching—paid far less than the theatre.[20] In the 1840s, weekly salaries at the leading theatres ranged from $5 for new female hires and $6 for new male hires to $25-30 for established company

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members.[21] During the 1840s, supernumeraries (mostly male) were generally hired for a run and paid a daily fee of about $1; in contrast, ballet girls earned around $5 per week for more strenuous and time-consuming work, including rehearsals. By the 1860s, actress Olive Logan estimated that weekly salaries of leading actresses and actors ranged from $40-60, but could go as high as $100.[22]

In addition to fewer employment opportunities and lower salaries, female performers had to provide their own costumes and accessories, which were more extensive and numerous than men's.[23] As "society" women became admired as actresses, female performers were not only required by management to provide their own expensive dresses but were expected to keep up with the changing dictates of female fashion. An actress's dresses were not merely theatrical costumes but symbols of her status within the profession.[24] For many actresses, "the dresses took more than the words," whether it was more money to purchase them or, in the case of minor actresses who could not afford to buy, more time to make.[25] Society actresses like Wallack's Mrs. Hoey, "the wife of a rich mercantile man, who could well afford to spend $1000s on the wardrobe of his wife," were able to afford the very high prices of fashionable taste.[26] It quickly became "absurd for any lady to think of going in for leading business with less than $400 worth of dresses" and it was not unknown for an actress to "pay as much as $1200 for the costumes she required for one play."[27]

Another contributing factor to female inequity in the theatre was dominance of a male-centered repertory. Most companies performed plays that featured more male roles than female and thus required more male actors than female. Since male roles in

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this overwhelmingly patriarchal canon were simply seen as more important than female roles, male actors could negotiate for higher salaries. However, it was possible for a particular woman to earn as much or more than her fellow actors when box office appeal was the determining factor.[28]

In light of the above, the benefit represented a more crucial site for women than for men. During benefit season, when beneficiaries retained receipts, box office appeal could radically affect the economic situation for the actress and offset the salary inequities. Performers' memoirs frequently mention that a good benefit could bring in a season's salary. In fact, the largest single night's receipts for the 1864-65 season at the Olympic Theatre (formerly Laura Keene's Theatre) was for the April 3 benefit of the manager, Mrs. John Wood (Matilda Vining). She performed as Lady Gay Spanker in *London Assurance* and brought in $1,344.70.[29]

Moreover, in a profession that reflected the dominant male-subject position of the larger society, the benefit offered more to women than simply economic advantage. It offered opportunities for empowerment and female agency by featuring gender-specific reciprocal voluntarism, intertheatrical strategies that built new performance texts highlighting female subjectivity and created new female-authored playtexts, and avenues of moving from one "line of business" to another. It also highlighted the role of sponsorship patronage and celebrity in building popular appeal. I argue that the benefit was the most important feature of the nineteenth-century stock theatre system for women as it combined traditional social elements associated with women, such as communal reciprocity and voluntarism, with direct economic agency and power. The

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rest of this chapter will examine these disparate elements of the benefit system and how they operated for women.

The Benefit and the Female Performer

By the mid to late 1860s, the position of the actress had radically changed from what it was in the 1840s, yet one of the constants in the career of a female performer was the benefit. While new roles for women were being played out within the larger society and within the theatre, the female-created benefit served as an alternative site of production where women found economic and career agency. In addition to male actors, other male theatrical employees took benefits. All theatrical personnel were eligible for benefits, but since there were more men working in the theatre, there were simply more benefits performed for men, giving them more economic opportunities.[30]

While benefits for both women and men shared some qualities, gender strongly marked the differences. For example, all benefits were marked by the carnivalesque aspect of "for this night only," the female-identified characteristic of voluntarism, and the semiotic foregrounding of selected volunteers. Yet, gender strongly affected this selection as more male volunteers were found in men's benefits and more female volunteers in benefits of women. Olympic Theatre treasurer Tryon used primarily male volunteers for his benefit.[31] A benefit for Mr. H. Isherwood, scenic artist at Brougham's Lyceum, announced performer Walcot as "kindly volunteering his valuable services."[32] His benefit bill featured four items on the bill and included only one female volunteer playing the lead female role in ***Beauty and the Beast***, while

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highlighting Walcot in "his original character" of the leading male role in the two-character farce, *A Man Without a Head*.

In addition, men's contractual benefits foregrounded the male performer and highlighted the same male-centered plays found in the regular repertoire. These plays were almost always written by men and featured men as protagonists, or "subjects," of the drama, and they formed the majority of plays staged in the nineteenth-century American theatre. For example, benefits for performer William Davidge and scenic artist George Heister of the Broadway Theatre show absolutely no change in bill from the regular male-centered repertoire. Men's benefits reinscribed dominant patriarchal playtexts and traditional male subject positions. While this pattern was common for men's benefits, it was not typical of the female benefit.[33]

Women used the powerful intertheatrical elements of the benefit more frequently than men to construct new "performance texts" that positioned women in subject positions. In effect, they "rewrote," or recontextualized performance in their benefits. By using selected pieces from the regular repertoire, writing their own plays, and commissioning pieces written especially for them, they could create performance texts that focused on female subject positions. In essence, the female performer could exercise some degree of temporary authorial control. While not creating a permanently new subject position for women in the traditional canon, women could temporarily displace the male subject and substitute a more feminized one, changing the inscribed position of women from an object to a subject.

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Women as Author of Benefit

The alternative performance site of the benefit gave women opportunities to create and produce plays. The traditional dramatic canon of the nineteenth century consisted primarily of plays written by and about men and gave few opportunities for women since "roles for actresses in most plays were remarkably limited" to supporting roles that cast women as objects of male desire, fantasy, or need.[34] Few plays were written by women and managers were reluctant to initially produce a play written by a woman. By mounting a benefit play that proved popular with audiences, however, women could then have their plays produced by the manager.

The historical record demonstrates that women used this strategy much more frequently than men. Some women wrote and performed in their own benefit plays that challenged the dominant patriarchal authorial pattern. Playwright-performer Susannah Rowson wrote her plays as original pieces for the benefits of herself and her family members.[35] Playwright Louisa Medina also used her own plays in her benefits.[36] Matilda Heron introduced her version of *Medea* in a benefit at Wallack's.[37] Both it and her version of *Phaedra* became pieces frequently used in her benefits. Anna Cora Mowatt, author of *Fashion*, frequently used the play in her performer's benefit and even "judiciously" cut it to ensure that it went "quicker and with greater spirit."[38]

Charlotte Barnes wrote many plays for her benefits and those of her parents in which she played the lead roles. Amelia Howe Kritzer argues that it was the only way Barnes could get her plays produced since her plays were female-centered and featured strong female subjects. In *Octavia Bragaldi*, written for her father's benefit at the Park

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on November 8, 1837, she played the lead role. Ireland recorded it as a success and noted that Barnes repeated it in "almost every city of the Union." In a benefit for her parents, Barnes presented her play *La Fitte, The Pirate of the Gulf,* in which she played the lead breeches role, Theodore, and recited an original epilogue "written by her."[39]

In addition, women's benefit plays seemed to incorporate more intertheatrical strategies than those of men. Barnes's benefit plays incorporated strategies such as direct addresses to the audience, and her monodrama, *Captive*, included "a Scene in a Mad House" with all characters played by Barnes.[40] Julia Dean Hayne's benefit announced "most respectfully, for the first time in this city, for the approbation of her friends and the public, a dramatic composition of her own, entitled *Mary of Mantua*," in which she played the lead.[41]

Female performers also commissioned plays that featured strong female roles for their benefits. Julia Daly's 1862 Winter Garden benefit featured *Our Female American Cousin* "written expressly for her." Instead of the traditional male hero of *Our American Cousin*, Daly's play featured a female character as the protagonist, the American relative.[42] Malvina Pray Florence often included new one-act comediettas or farces "written expressly for her" in her benefits.[43] Pray Florence, who specialized in Irish and Yankee characters, and "protean" (quick change) roles, played six roles in a benefit protean farce "written expressly" for her. The farce included the roles of a Spanish dancer, a French opera singer, a young American actress, a Yankee boy, a "child of nature"and a sailor boy.[44]

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Performers sometimes even rewrote classical plays for their benefits. In addition to the Greek classics rewritten by Heron, Restoration comedies containing good roles for women were frequently adapted and updated. Mary Gannon, in an 1860 benefit, "revived for the first time in six years" Congreve's *Love for Love* "carefully revised, curtailed, and altered" with Gannon as the second ingenue lead, Prue. It also featured good female roles for her volunteers Mrs. Hoey, Mrs. Walcot, and Mrs. Sloan.[45] By creating new adaptations of old plays, female performers could work with "more interesting material than they found in the existing repertoire."[46]

Female performers also more drastically altered existing plays for their benefits. By taking selected scenes that highlighted a female character out of the context of the original play, the actress made the female character the subject of the scene. The beneficiary performer became the playwright, or author, as she produced and staged new performance texts that "collapsed distinguishing structures" to blur the traditional boundaries of playwright and performer.[47] She resisted the absolute presence of the playwright by revising existing plays into new performance texts. For example, two-character scenes taken from Shakespeare were one of the hallmarks of the female performer's benefit. When taken out of context of the complete playtext and used in a woman's benefit, this intertheatrical strategy could support an increased subjectivity for women by placing a more equal focus on the two characters in the scene. An undated benefit playbill from Drury Lane highlighted four two-person scenes from Shakespeare—Ophelia and Hamlet, Anne and Richard III, Desdemona and Othello, and Juliet and Romeo—and featured the same female performer playing all the female roles

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and different male actors in each scene.[48] This playbill vividly illustrated the potential of the benefit to disrupt and rearrange the structure of traditional playtexts and restructure them into new performance texts that upset traditional subject positions.

The Benefit and the Female as Subject

Feminist theory and criticism can assist in not only a discussion of how we read texts but also for identifying alternative conditions of production and reception.[49] Theatre history is replete with women who have attempted to establish a point of view that is distinct from that of men. Yet women had no lexicon, terminology, or cultural framework with which to articulate this point of view. Whether women in history were aware of it or not, theirs was a struggle for a subject, rather than an object, position in representation. For most of the traditional theatrical canon, men were the subjects of the drama.

The subject represents power since the subject "owns the drama" and its experiences define the boundaries of the dramatic field.[50] Other characters become objects of the subject's affections, hostilities, losses, and gains. Just as women were denied rights such as the ownership of property in the larger sphere, they were denied subject positions in the dramatic texts of the theatre. A strong subject position can be as simple as the representation being grounded in women's experience rather than on men's fantasies about that experience. Plays written by women could highlight the female experience and create female subjects, but throughout theatre history, there have been few opportunities for women to obtain this agency.

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The benefit, however, provided an alternative place of representation where women restructured their position from objects into subjects. They could stage characters in plays written by women such as Hannah Cowley, Susannah Rowson, Susannah Centlivre, and others that revealed female experiences and frequently featured female subjects as protagonists. Yet they could also present alternative representations of women by transforming "fragmented" parts of playtexts into new performance texts that placed women in subject positions. Women could not change the plays, but they could change the ways parts of plays were presented and thereby transcend the written text.

Since female performers had the power to pick and choose acts, scenes, or arias from the traditional male-written texts, they could structure a more female-centered bill of fare by using the character's voice from the text to construct a new subject position in performance. The power of the performance text inherent in the benefit offered enormous potential for female agency. While men could practice this fragmented restructuring, they did so far less frequently than women did, perhaps because the representational system in place already gave them a strong subject position. But for women, relegated to supporting roles and objectified by male playwrights, the restructuring aspect of the benefit was very powerful. Most popular plays provided at least one scene in which the female performer could "explode into a vitality and power that were absent from the rest of her role."[51] These were scenes where the actress could make "points" or "hits," such as Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking scene in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Lady Teazle's celebrated screen scene in Sheridan's *The*

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School for Scandal, Portia's trial scene in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, and Mrs. Haller's recognition scene in William Dunlap's *The Stranger* (all popular in women's benefits).[52]

Feminist theory and criticism on the "collective subject" is helpful for the benefit since it can "mark a work with multiplicity rather than the old protagonist-antagonist polarization."[53] In a benefit, the old protagonists and antagonists were swept away as other structures were created. Further, the benefit could refracture or "split" the female subject into multiple parts or positions. Feminist critic Sue-Ellen Case has argued that when women are put into subject positions, they alter the structure of the position by splitting what had formerly been represented as a whole.[54] Case suggests that this collective subject can alter the internal structure of the position by presenting characters in "rapid succession which alienates the audience from any empathetic relationship to a single character."[55] The collective subject constructed in women's benefits had this potential to split into the female character as written by a male author and the female subject in the new performance text as embodied by the actress.

I argue that the benefit performance splits the subject even more. When selected scenes of plays followed one another in a benefit, drama as traditional mimesis can be transformed by displacement. Benefits semiotically split the figure of the actress into both stage character and beneficiary character.[56] This double performative nature of the benefit, or the dialectic between stage character and beneficiary character, also provided a site of non-mimetic agency for women. In the benefit, the female performer emerged from the shadow of the character and was foregrounded and split into

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performer and beneficiary. The benefit underscored the power of the performer and the art of acting over that of the playtext, yet also highlighted the non-mimetic power of the individual beneficiary. The restrictive limitations of male-dominated mimesis were diminished, and new areas of female self-creation and self-definition could occur.

Direct connections between performer and audience, such as benefit speeches from the stage —what Case calls "personal material"—also encouraged a non-mimetic presence. They constructed the actress as a female subject outside of the stage representation, highlighted appreciation and acknowledgement, and lent a self-reflexive air to the benefit performance. For example, women's benefits at the Chatham and Bowery Theatres are marked by direct addresses to audiences in the form of recitations and speeches inserted into the plays and interactes. This temporarily interrupted objectification and allowed women a place of performance where the patriarchal view of the female as object could temporarily recede into the background and women as subjects could be restructured and foregrounded. In the benefit, women could construct a female subject both *inside* and *outside* mimetic representation.[57]

Women's Benefit Strategies

Since the potential subject positioning inherent in the benefit was so crucial to female performers, numerous strategies were utilized. Performers made clear that it was their "responsibility to arrange the program" and this necessitated personal approaches to the leading actors, actresses, singers, and dancers whom they hoped

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would give their services. Fanny Elssler, planning a benefit at the Paris Opera, relates how complicated this producing task must have been:

> Much patience and tact is required. Mme. Persiani and Monsieur Tamburini have consented to sing with pleasure, but only Tamburini will sing in costume and as I have told him that Monsieur Duprez and Mlle. Garcia will sing the last act of [Rossini's] *Othello*, he had told me he wants to sing the duet from the second act with Duprez. We must find out whether this suits Monsieur Duprez. Mme. Persiani wants to sing two pieces, and if you can persuade Mario to sing, everything will be arranged. Although I do not see how it is possible to make Mme. Persiani sing in costume, she has agreed to sing, even in the concert. Everything is going well.[58]

As producer, the beneficiary could arrange everything as she chose. Gender marked the vast majority of women's benefit choices. In addition, the "one night only" aspect encouraged a carnivalesque alternative production style that allowed performers to create new roles and new performance texts.

An analysis of women's benefits reveals an unusually large percentage of breeches roles, where they appeared proportionately more often than in the regular repertoire. Actresses known for breeches roles had always included them in their benefits, yet female performers not associated with breeches roles often played them in their benefits, inverting their "normal" gender roles and lines of business. Agnes Robertson Brougham, who specialized in young ingenues, played Hamlet for her benefit in 1843, and records indicate that dozens of women played Hamlet and Romeo in benefits throughout much of the nineteenth century.[59]

Male roles in the regular repertoire were frequently inverted and cross-dressed by women in their benefits. Mrs. Timm, of Mitchell's Olympic, often played Folair, the Savage in *The Savage and the Maiden*, a role played by a man in the regular

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repertory, in her benefits and the benefits of others.[60] Isabel Dickinson appeared in the "popular character of Sir Charles Coldstream in *Used Up* and Tom in *The Eton Boy*" in her 1848 Academy of Music benefit.[61] At a farewell benefit for Julia Bennett, Melinda Jones performed a rare cross-dressed Claude Melnotte while Bennett played Pauline in *The Lady of Lyons*.[62] Mrs. Shaw Hamblin frequently did cross-dressed roles in her benefits, including Young Norval in *Douglas* and the title roles of Hamlet and Ion. In the regular repertoire, she played "normal" gender roles such as Pauline *in The Lady of Lyons*, Cora in *Pizarro,* and Constance in Knowles' *Love Chase*. At the farewell benefit of her 1846 engagement at the Park Theatre, Ellen Tree Kean performed "for the first time, and for this night only" the role of Wilford in *The Iron Chest*.[63] Charlotte Barnes played the adult male role of Douglas in Home's play "for this night only," a role not played by women in the regular repertory. Charlotte Nickinson, of the Olympic, included a new piece, *Captain Charlotte,* in her 1850 benefit, which featured Nickinson in the cross-dressed soldier role of Charlotte Clapier. The play proved to be popular and appeared in several women's benefits in the following two months, yet never appeared in the regular repertory.[64] Constantia Clarke, also of the Olympic, used breeches roles to build an 1843 benefit that included the lead role in *The Welsh Girl* and the role of Smike in the first act "orphanage scene" of *Nicholas Nickleby*. The latter act was popular and exclusively used in women's benefits. It featured only women playing the poor, young boys in the orphanage.

Female audience members would come in large numbers to see women perform cross-dressed roles in benefits. A benefit for Mrs. Coleman Pope featured Coleman

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Pope as Romeo, and her volunteer, Mrs. McMahon, making her debut as Juliet. Newspaper critics said "the house was comfortably filled, with a very orderly, intelligent, and even fashionable audience, including many ladies, a majority of whom were doubtless drawn together by a feeling of curiosity, and the rest might safely be set down as the personal friends and admirers of the heroine of the evening." Coleman Pope also included an "aftercurtain" thank-you speech to her audience, specifically thanking the women for attending and "supporting her."[65]

Women frequently included plays in their benefits that were never seen in the regular repertory. These plays offered actresses roles that they never would have played in the regular male-dominated repertoire. Many of these pieces featured not only more roles for women but frequently more female roles than male, and were marked by rhetoric denoting "first time this season" or "never acted here." Mrs. Brougham's benefit included *The Ladies' Club*, an anonymous, all-female comedy that recreated a ladies' club meeting, and featured six substantial roles for women. It had the largest number of women's roles of any piece during the season and was repeated in a second benefit for Mrs. Brougham a month later.[66] Mrs. Vernon's benefit highlighted the beneficiary in *The Single Life* and provided good roles for five other women, equaling the number of men's roles in the piece. More importantly, this benefit presented "for the first time, a comedy of peculiar construction, the cast consisting ENTIRELY OF LADIES, entitled *Ladies at Home*" and utilized all the women in the company.[67]

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Since benefits for female performers featured more roles for women, more female presence in the performance was assured. For example, from December 1839—July 1840, Mitchell's Olympic featured twenty-one benefits, five of which were for women. These five benefits included proportionately more women's roles than found anywhere else in the regular season. In a company that featured male-oriented entertainment and focused on the male subject as protagonist, the female benefit regularly offered many opportunities for women.[68]

During the 1850s and most of the 1860s, Wallack's (Lyceum) offered a repertoire of social plays that emphasized "good taste" and featured traditional male-centered subjects and interests. Not surprisingly, male actors outnumbered female actors three to one, and they used the regularly presented plays in the repertoire for their benefits. By examining playbills from 1854-1868, certain patterns can be observed for the female performers of Wallack's such as Mrs. Conway, Mrs. Hoey, Rosa Bennett, Madeline Henriques, and Fanny Morant, as well as minor and visiting actresses. Women frequently selected plays written by women that highlighted female subject positions, such as Cowley's *A Bold Stroke for a Husband*, a play seldom, if ever, performed in the regular repertoire of Wallack's.[69] The play has five large female roles, an unusually large number. Rosa Bennett, player of second female lead roles, chose Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem* for her 1855 benefit for the "first time this season" and played the second lead, Mrs. Racket, one of six good roles for women.[70] Fanny Morant also presented it for her benefit, adding a "solo on the guitar" to her

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portrayal of Mrs. Racket, while Mrs. Hoey played the lead female role of Leticia Hardy.[71]

A close analysis also reveals certain popular plays that remained constant in women's benefits. Mrs. Hoey frequently performed *The School for Scandal*, with herself as Lady Teazle, in her benefits, as well as the lead role, Leticia Hardy, in *The Belle's Stratagem.*[72] On her first engagement at Wallack's, Eliza Logan selected *The Lady of Lyons* for her benefit, appearing "for the first time here" as Pauline, and Mrs. J.H. Allen's 1856 benefit presented *The Youthful Queen* in its "first performance in this theatre" with Mrs. Allen in the lead female role.[73] This play, with its strong female subject of Sweden's Queen Christina, was another play not performed in the Wallack repertoire, yet frequently presented in women's benefits. Henriques used plays such as *Faint Heart Never Won Fair Lady*, featuring the cross-dressed role of King Charles II, and *The Youthful Queen* in her benefits.[74] Many of these plays offered roles for almost all the women in Wallack's company. Morant's benefit in 1866 featured *Married Life* and *The Eton Boy*, in which Morant played the cross-dressed lead. *Married Life* featured an equal number of male and female roles and seidom appeared in men's benefits. *The Eton Boy,* a popular piece in women's benefits, featured a traditional cross-dressed role of a woman masquerading as a military officer.[75]

Many plays performed at women's benefits, such as *The Youthful Queen* and *Mary, Queen of Scots*, plays with strong female subjects, were not found in the regular repertoire. Perhaps this very emphasis on female subjectivity made it unpopular with managers and male actors.[76] Even if they were popular with audiences, the fact that a

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large percentage of them featured female protagonists and had few male roles may have made them unprofitable in the regular repertoire from the manager's point of view. It does not negate the fact that women continued to use them for female agency in their benefits.

The women of the working class theatres, the Chatham and the Bowery, used some of the same benefit strategies as did their counterparts in the more upscale theatres. Fanny Herring's benefits at the Chatham and the Bowery between 1855 and 1865 offered agency for women by featuring more women's roles than the regular repertoire. An 1855 benefit featured two pieces that offered a number of opportunities for women—*Carline, the Female Brigand* featured Herring in five roles, including the title one and two male roles, and *Jack Sheppard*, which also featured Herring in the leading cross-dressed title role and offered six other roles for women.[77] The women of the Bowery—Fanny Herring, Anne Hathaway, Julia (Mrs. W.G.) Jones, Mrs. Nichols, and Mrs. Price—supported each other in benefits as volunteers, and their benefits were marked by a reduced number of men's roles. In an 1856 Bowery benefit, Nichols featured four principal female volunteers, including Hathaway and Price. Both major pieces on this long diverse bill had few male roles and featured all four female volunteers. The second item, *Jack Sheppard*, featured an intertheatrical strategy often used in benefits: in the first act Jack was played by Julia Jones, in the second act by Anne Hathaway, and in the third act by Mrs. Nichols, with six other roles in it played by women of the ballet corps.[78]

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The increased number of women's roles available in benefits was just one way women could find agency. Benefit bills offered more opportunities to perform, including *interactes* where performers could sing, dance, play an instrument, or otherwise demonstrate some performative ability in between the main items on the bill. They could also insert "special" or "new" dances and songs into plays, as in the benefit of Fanny Morant where she introduced a "solo on the guitar for the first time" in her portrayal of Mrs. Racket in *The Belle's Stratagem*. Lastly, the sheer length and highly varied nature of a benefit bill encouraged and called attention to a variety of performances that increased female presence and agency on stage. This female agency was foregrounded in the March 9, 1858 Bowery benefit of Mrs. Nichols, which featured a number of women's roles. The benefit playbill itself semiotically foregrounded gender and female agency by having "REMEMBER THE LADIES" at its top and featuring the names of female performers in heavy bold typeface. Yet another benefit, for Mrs. Jones, highlighted gender as an appeal for female audience support by inserting at the top of her playbill the words "A LADY'S CALL." This could be interpreted as a call for ladies to attend, as well as a call for women to support one another.[79]

Opera singers and dancers also used these same benefit strategies. Anna Thillon, a burletta singer, often featured herself in the lead role in the second act of Donizetti's comic opera, *The Daughter of the Regiment,* in her benefit.[80] Singers, both male and female, often did arias or duets from selected scenes of operas, frequently marking their benefits by thanking their volunteer partners on playbills and in

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performance.[81] Dancers at the dramatic and musical theatres used selected scenes and dances, doing as many as four different pieces on one bill.[82] Like other performers, they were free to make their own selections. The Chatham's principal dancer, Miss Cohen, volunteered for many benefits and found increased opportunities there to play dramatic roles. For example, she played the title role of the "dumb" Sailor Boy in *The Child of the Wreck*, a play introduced and popularized in this country by Madame Celeste (Celine Eliot). Dancers used these "dumb," or mute, cross-dressed roles frequently as their benefit selections. They highlighted the performance skills of dancers—strong physical agility and adeptness—yet de-emphasized spoken dialogue, in which dancers may have been weak. At Cohen's own 1846 benefit, most of the leading players in the company "volunteered." She took special care "to return her sincere and heartfelt thanks to her friends and public, and acknowledges and trusts the entertainments she has selected for this her first benefit this season will meet their entire satisfaction."[83] Dancers, like dramatic performers, used the benefit to try out a new dance they created in hopes that it would be added to the regular repertoire. Annie Walters, principal dancer at Burton's, inserted two new interactes into a benefit, including a "new Swedish Polka" performed with M. Frederic, the principal male dancer in the company. Playbills for the rest of the season indicate that these "new" pieces were added to the repertoire.[84]

Not only did the benefit provide agency for women by offering more opportunities to perform, but women also provided gender-specific reciprocal aid to one another since they featured larger numbers of female volunteers in their benefits. At a

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farewell benefit for Mrs. John Wood, principal volunteer Mrs. James Wallack appeared as the lead in the first act of *Ivanhoe*. This casting was not found anywhere else in the theatre's season and seems not to have been a usual cross-dressed role for an actress. While both actresses frequently played cross-dressed roles, in this benefit Wood appeared as the female lead in *Jenny Lind* and did not appear at all in *Ivanhoe*.[85] Even minor actresses could enlist the volunteer aid of major actresses in producing their own evening. Mrs. Judah, a minor actress at the Chatham Theatre, chose to play no major roles in her benefit and appeared in minor roles in only two pieces. However, two leading actresses—Mrs. J.W. Wallack and Mrs. Timm—were featured. Their names were highlighted in the cast lists in the same heavy bold typeface as Judah's and were specifically marked as "volunteering" for the night.[86] Minor actresses were grateful for their female colleagues' participation. Eliza Logan played Pauline in *The Lady of Lyons* for the benefit of Mrs. Frank Rea, while Rea played the maid. Rea's marginalia on the playbill noted her "deep" appreciation of Logan's participation.[87]

Female performers exhibited stronger patterns of reciprocal support than those found in men's benefits. For example, Mrs. Rea and Mrs. McMahon frequently played together at the Chambers Street Theatre in the 1840s and playbills clearly indicate that they practiced reciprocity by appearing in each other's benefits during these times.[88] Miss Turnbull, a minor actress/dancer in Mitchell's company, appeared in three pieces in her benefit, one of which was a solo dance piece in the interacte. She also appeared as the Infant Phenomenon, a role usually played by a female dancer, in *The Savage and the Maiden*. Her principal volunteer was one of the female star performers of the

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Olympic, Mrs. Timm, who appeared "for this night only" as Folair, the Savage, a traditional male role in the regular repertoire, but one that Timm frequently played in her own benefits and those of other women. Turnbull and Timm had reciprocally played these same roles in Timm's benefit earlier in the benefit season, the last time this play was performed.[89] Caroline Wemyss and Mrs. J.W. Wallack, Jr., practiced gender reciprocity in their benefits in the 1849-1850 Bowery season. At her benefit, Wemyss presented *Romeo and Juliet*, with her volunteer Mrs. Wallack as Romeo and herself as Juliet. Later, at Mrs. Wallack's benefit, the main piece was again *Romeo and Juliet* with Wemyss listed as Wallack's volunteer playing Juliet while Wallack again played Romeo.[90] Susan Denin and Charlotte Crampton both appeared at the Bowery Theatre in the spring of 1860 where they assisted one another in their benefits and marked each other on benefit playbills as the primary volunteer. At Denin's benefit she played Calanthe, the female lead in *Damon and Pythias,* and the cross-dressed lead in *The Miller*, while Crampton played the lead title role in the third major piece, *Witch Fiend of the Glen*. At Crampton's benefit, she portrayed Nancy Sikes in *Oliver Twist* and played the lead female role in *The Red Cross Knight* while Denin performed the title role in the "imitation scene" from *The Widow's Daughter*. However, they both appeared in *Guy Mannering*, in which Crampton played Meg Merrilies and Denin played the cross-dressed role of Henry Bertram, the young male lead. The bill concluded with volunteer Denin playing both male and female leads in *The Eton Boy*.[91]

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A reciprocal gender strategy frequently used by women involved familial relationships. For examples, sisters often assisted in each other's benefits, often introducing the other to the stage, and frequently served as life-long volunteers for their siblings.[92] At Mrs. Vernon's November 6, 1844 benefit, she appeared as Mrs. Malaprop in *The Rivals* with her sister, Clara Fisher Maeder, volunteering as Lydia Languish, "her first appearance in four years and her last on the Park Stage."[93] Fisher Maeder's sister-in-law, Elizabeth Jefferson, volunteered at several of her benefits in the 1840s, a fact gratefully acknowledged by Fisher Maeder in her autobiography.[94] Mrs. D.P. Bowers anonymously introduced her younger sister, Sarah Crocker Conway, to the stage in her benefit as a "young lady, her first appearance on any stage."[95] The Crocker sisters continued to assist each other in benefits until the end of their performing careers, frequently using *Romeo and Juliet* as a centerpiece. At a farewell benefit for Mrs. Bowers, she assured audiences that she would be "kindly assisted by Mrs. F.B. Conway when these talented sisters appear together in *Romeo and Juliet*," with Mrs. Conway as Romeo and Mrs. Bowers as Juliet.[96] Mrs. (Josephine Shaw) Hoey, star actress at Wallack's traveled frequently to Boston to volunteer in benefits for her sister, Mary Shaw, an actress at the Boston Museum.[97] Sisters Malvina Pray Florence and Maria Pray Williams, both specialists in Irish and Yankee "gal" characters and both married to Irish "guy" players, often assisted each other in benefits. When the Florences appeared at Wallack's in the summer of 1860, Mr. & Mrs. Williams were featured in Pray Florence's benefit, having "kindly consented to

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appear in two of their most popular pieces, thus proving their regard and esteem for the talented beneficiare."[98]

Benefits in the working-class theatres were excellent forums for female agency, featuring gender-specific reciprocal aid and more stage opportunities in female-centered performance texts. The "protean," or quick-change play, featured many characters played by the same performer and were very popular at the Bowery. Its emphasis on female roles allowed the women of the company many opportunities for stage time.[99] Fanny Herring, one of the principal Bowery actresses of the genre, built many of her benefits around it. An early Herring benefit featured a typical Bowery pattern by presenting the "first" performance of *Fast Women of the Modern Time*, in which Herring played seven roles, while her volunteer, Julia Jones, played six roles. Together they played all the roles, both male and female. In addition, each woman sang, played an instrument, or danced traditional male dances (sailor jigs and hornpipes). Also included on this long varied bill was a female minstrel band that included Jones, Herring, and all the women of the company.[100] The Bowery women also readily reciprocated and supported each other in benefits. For example, Herring played the female lead in *Our English Cousin* in her benefit, while Rachel Denvil supported her as the second lead. For Denvil's benefit later the same month, Herring reciprocated and supported Denvil in *Oliver Twist*. More importantly, Herring gave up her usual role of Nancy Sikes to Denvil while she played the cross-dressed Oliver.[101]

Female performers at the Olympic, both leading and supporting players, promoted female agency by practicing reciprocal aid in their benefits. For example,

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Mrs. Timm offered benefit opportunities for many women in the company. During the benefit season of 1843, Timm presented *Sam Parr* with herself in the lead male role "for this night only," supported by the minor actress Mary Taylor playing the second male role. At Taylor's benefit later in the month, Timm supported her by playing secondary roles to her leading ones.[102] Lead actresses Timm and Watts often reciprocated in their benefits and offered good roles to each other. At a benefit for Timm, Watts was listed as the primary volunteer and the two actresses played the lead roles of Mary, Queen of Denmark, and Christine, Queen of Sweden, in *Two Queens*. This female-oriented play contains not only strong female roles, but is centered on female subjects. More importantly, it is found at the Olympic only in women's benefits, not in the regular repertoire.[103]

At Brougham's Lyceum, a clear pattern of female reciprocity and aid emerges. Clara Fisher Maeder, Mrs. Skerrett, and Mrs. Loder, among others, assisted each other in benefits that featured female subjectivity and a more female-centered bill of fare. Mrs. Skerrett highlighted herself as Francine in *Grist to the Mill* reprising "her original character at the Park Theatre" and introduced a new play "for the first time in New York" with herself in the lead and Fisher Maeder supporting. Later that month in Fisher Maeder's benefit, Fisher Maeder played the leads and Skerrett supported her.[104]

The leading women at the Bowery and Chatham extended female agency to the all-female ballet corps, which was extensive at these theatres. Ballet "girls" were paid low wages and seldom, if ever, had a benefit. By including numbers that featured these women, Herring, Anne Hathaway, Adelaide Price, and others provided opportunities to

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these young women. Herring's 1857 benefit offered "a military dance" from *The Daughter of the Regiment*, which highlighted the "ladies of the ballet corps." Anne Hathaway offered a "fancy dance" performed by her and the "ladies of the ballet corps." Men's benefits from the same period did not include any selected pieces that highlighted this group.[105]

Female performers used the benefit to attempt to change their lines of business and rise through the company ranks from minor roles to major ones. Since minor performers could play major roles in their benefits, the temptation to display their diverse talents and skills, while risky, must have been compelling. It was especially attractive to women since fewer role opportunities were available to them in the traditional canon. A Miss Chapman appearing at Burton's during the early 1850s used this strategy to move from minor roles to larger ones. Normally cast as the maid or in small "soubrette" roles, Chapman was careful to give herself strong subject positions in her benefits. In her 1850 spring benefit, she played the five leads in the protean piece *The Actress of All Work,* a popular piece in actresses's benefits. The multiple roles of protean plays could demonstrate a wide range of performing talent, since they included old women, cross-dressed characters, and foreign characters, and featured singing and dancing skills. *The Actress of All Work* featured Maria, an actress; Sukey Stubbins, a "country girl with a country song"; Miss Euphrasia Jubbs, a London actress; Goodey Stubbins, an "old woman with an old woman's song"; and Madame Josephine, a French opera dancer.[106] Chapman's strategy of moving up in the lines of business was successful for by the beginning of the 1850 fall season, she had moved into second

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ingenue leads. Mary Taylor, one of the most popular performers in the Olympic's history, used the benefit to help change her line of business. In her first year at the theatre, she played small roles as maids and walking ladies in the regular repertoire, but at her benefits she played lead roles in such pieces as *The Alpine Maid*. By fall of 1844, playbills indicate that she was being cast in larger roles in the regular repertoire such as the female lead in *The Lioness of the North*.[107]

Since benefits were occasions in which theatre boundaries could be transgressed, women from different theatres were free to support one another. Mrs. Watt, a former member of the Olympic Theatre company, now a company member of Niblo's, returned to the Olympic in 1849 to assist in a benefit for a new actress, Miss Roberts. Roberts was careful to appeal to Watt's former popularity at the Olympic by advertising her benefit as an "occasion [where] Mrs. Watt of Niblo's Theatre has kindly volunteered" in *Ladies Beware*, a one-act farce popular in benefits for women. Mrs. Watt had performed this role in the Olympic repertory, had included it in her benefits at the theatre, and now included it in her benefits at Niblo's.[108]

Sponsorship Patronage and Celebrity

In addition to the above elements and strategies that mark the benefit as an alternate site of production and agency for the female performer, patronage comprised a crucial element of the benefit system and was manipulated by women for agency. Theatre historian Bruce McConachie refers to yearly benefits as a lingering form of "sponsorship patronage" in the theatre.[109] Since the benefit existed as a form of private

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entrepreneurship for the performer and did not involve the manager, actors had to actively solicit and nurture audience and public support. In England, royal patronage was eagerly sought after, but unpopular with actors, and upon transplantation to America, no longer tenable. New sources of patronage had to be developed.

During the nineteenth century, patronage available to men differed greatly from that available to women. Just as men had more access to economic and political institutions in the public sphere, they had more access to organizations and institutions that sponsored patronage. One of the most prominent institutions from which men of the theatre could solicit patronage was the military. For example, a benefit playbill for Park Theatre stage manager Barry announced that "Colonel Burnett and officers returned from the conquest of Mexico will visit the theatre and offer their patronage to Mr. Barry."[110] Male actors also cultivated the popular support of men's clubs and societies, institutions that centralized social agency and power for men. Like the military, these institutions were closed to women and were frequently oriented toward nationality and ethnicity. Actor J.G. Burnett often highlighted his benefits with appeals to male ethnicity by "respectfully" announcing "to his friends and the public generally, that his annual benefit will take place tonight under the patronage of the New York Caledonian Club, the members of which will appear in full Highland costume, accompanied by pipers."[111] At a benefit for musical director George Loder, the Germania Society, a male social organization for musicians of German ancestry, "most handsomely volunteered" to perform a new orchestral piece for "the first time in America."[112]

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Male performers frequently cultivated patronage by offering benefit performances to raise money for these exclusively male clubs and organizations. Actor James Anderson offered a "benefit to the Benevolent Society of the Thistle, given by the Anderson family, with the patronage of the New York Caledonian Club and officers and men of the 79th Regiment, who will attend the Academy in full Highland costume, accompanied by their famous pipers."[113] Frequently, male actors themselves were members of these clubs. Through the time period I examined, male performers gave numerous benefits for the Elks, a popular social club for men that was closed to women.

Women, lacking these institutional bases of power and influence, had far fewer options and had to develop other means to secure popular support and cultivate patronage. Since women had few social institutions of their own, they actively solicited the support of selected male institutions. Female performers used the direct relationship of the benefit to cultivate and build a personalized, individual form of patronage. A popular male institution targeted by women at the working-class theatres was the local volunteer fire company. A mutual dependency existed between these volunteer institutions and theatres. Theatre owners gave money to fire companies and performers, especially female, frequently offered benefits to raise money for them. This financial support was crucial to the volunteer companies for purchasing equipment and supplies since they were not financially supported by civic funds. Conversely, theatre owners were dependent upon the fire companies for quick responses to theatre fires, a common occurrence throughout the nineteenth century.

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Firemen composed a large percentage of audiences at the working-class theatres, and performers felt that there "was no greater honor than to play the leading role in a firemen's benefit."[114] For benefits offered to them, members of local fire companies would march to the theatre in "full firemen's regalia, led by a brass band, to be welcomed before the curtain went up with a speech from the usually female star."[115] They were also vociferously vocal in their support of female "favorites" and actresses quickly capitalized on this appeal.

Perhaps the voluntary nature of these fire companies appealed to women's association with voluntarism in the larger society. Since voluntarism was seen as a female-based characteristic, and the benefit itself depended on the use of volunteers, it is logical that women might be drawn to a similar volunteer-based organization for patronage. Benefits of popular female stars at these theatres were frequently occasions of "raucous enjoyment." One local newspaper noted that "whenever Mary Taylor [popular actress at Mitchell's Olympic] had a benefit, the fire department seemed to turn out en masse."[116] Frequently, women directly appealed to these fire companies in their benefit performances by incorporating the fireman character into stage performances. For her benefits, Chatham performer Miss Le Folle did a "fireman's hornpipe, in full fireman's costume."[117] In addition, women frequently staged charity benefits for fire companies and associated institutions. The Bowery's Mrs. Shaw Hamblin was another favorite with volunteer fire departments and often did benefits for the Fire Department Fund, a charitable institution for widows and orphans of firemen killed in the line of duty. At one such benefit, "previous to the play, an address written

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for the occasion," was "spoken by Mrs. Shaw."[118] This strong relationship between the volunteer fire companies and women in the theatre illustrates that by combining their traditional ties to voluntarism and charity with the benefit tradition, female performers could cultivate a unique form of sponsorship patronage.

Women employed a unique advertising strategy to increase female patronage for their benefits by combining savvy promotion with the gendered exchange of gifts. They advertised that "mementos" would be given to every female audience member at their benefits. These gifts act as metonymic signs, or stand-ins, for the actual "special" event, as they represent a piece of it that is actually given to the participants.[119] On arriving at the theatre, female audience members received some form of a souvenir gift, ranging from satin programs to photographs. Malvina Pray Florence distributed programs in the shape of paper fans to women at her benefit. A benefit in aid of the Relief Fund of the Ladies' Home for Sick and Wounded Soldiers pitched the allure of a "benefit souvenir program."[120] Laura Keene gave a copy of sheet music—*Laura Keene's Schottische*—with her portrait on the cover, to women in the audience, and in her direct address, she "thanked the ladies for their powerful support."[121] With the advent of easily reproduced photographic images such as lithographs and *carte-de-visites*, pictorial souvenirs became common for actresses to give to women in the audience. Lotta Crabtree presented "a magnificent chromo lithograph of Lotta to every lady visiting the pm and evening performance, as a Farewell Lotta Souvenir."[122] At her farewell benefit, Madame Cubas gave a *carte-de-visite* of herself to every "lady visitor to the parquet and dress circle."[123]

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Audiences demonstrated their patronage of female favorites not only by their attendance at benefits but by presenting them with gifts during the performance. Women in the audience sometimes gave presents of jewelry or money to favorite beneficiaries. This may have had its antecedents in a practice going back to Restoration theatre. In England, small packages and bouquets were thrown on the stage for actresses during their benefit performances by groups of match girls called "posse's."[124] At a farewell benefit for Mrs. Russell of the Chambers Street company, during which the house "was crowded from footlights to dome," she was presented with a ring "amid cheers and waving of pocket-handkerchiefs."[125] Mrs. John Wood, the burlesque and protean actress, received a diamond bracelet and ring at a benefit.[126] Mowatt offered a benefit in Baltimore for the Fireman's Library Association, where members presented her with a somewhat unusual token of their devotion—a fawn, led onto the stage in the second act of *The Honeymoon*. Local papers noted that the "audience was enchanted."[127] Mowatt also received a diamond brooch at a benefit while on tour in Cincinnati with E.L. Davenport in the spring of 1847, and an engraved silver vase by manager Watts at England's Marylebone Theatre during an 1849 benefit.[128] Dancer Fanny Elssler recalled gifts of a "silver-embroidered red satin dress, several pieces of jewelry, and a solid gold Havana cigar" given to her at benefits during her engagement in Havana.[129]

Patronage was crucial to the benefit tradition since it fostered a performer's popularity. It is a highly evaluative act that implies loyalty to an actress or actor and serves to foreground and highlight the performer. The more popular a performer, the

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more people attended her benefit. In order to make that happen, the beneficiary did everything she could to win popular support. The benefit was constructed as a place where the performer took primary position for the performance and where she was seen as the "star" of the performance, no matter her actual position in the company. By soliciting patronage, performers acquired a "public persona" that could affect their reception. Audiences were aware that the benefit was for the beneficiary and playbills and other promotional strategies used by the beneficiary were semiotically marked to bring in patrons of that particular performer.

Since the benefit was a special production of the performer, it is helpful to think of her as a celebrity for that one night. Celebrity is useful to an analysis of the benefit since it acts not only as an economic commodity and has monetary value, but operates semiotically to privilege the performer over the acting figure and the stage figure, or character. Theatre semiotician Michael Quinn states that the acting event itself contains within it a blend of performer, acting figure, and character. When the element of celebrity is added, it threatens the structure of the traditional acting event because it "highlights the performer and privileges it before the acting figure and stage character." The benefit likewise temporarily foregrounded and highlighted the performer as beneficiary, and privileged her over text.[130] The celebrity beneficiary disrupted the acting event by displacing authority from the "creative" genius of the playwright and the "interpretive" genius of the theatre manager to the "producing" genius of the actor-beneficiary.[131]

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Marvin Carlson has written about the role of celebrity in the construction and reception of the performer and its effect on the intertextuality of performance. He argues that "celebrity can form the dominant element in audience construction of the stage figure."[132] The fragmented nature of many benefits served to support the primacy of the celebrity benefit figure. For the entirety of the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, or the trial scene of *The Merchant of Venice*, or the screen scene of *The School for Scandal*, the audience was more aware of the performer-beneficiary than of the playtext(s). The selected "bits and pieces" of the benefit served to underscore the virtuosity and versatility of the celebrity performer. By casting themselves as leads, skillfully promoting patronage, and using the female-based strategy of volunteers to support them, even minor performers could be a celebrity for their benefit night.

Public identity, needed for the celebrity performance, is built on familiarity between performer and audience as it served to "split" the acting sign, or stage figure, into what Quinn calls the "actor's expressive function and the audience's conative function."[133] The audience sees not just the actor, but the celebrity. It was this very split that performers and audiences realized in the direct address of the beneficiary before or after the performance. The presence of celebrity disrupts the connection between actor and stage figure and competes with the stage figure for the audience's attention. Contemporary reviews of benefits, often contemptuous, prove that at least some nineteenth-century performers and audiences were aware of this disruption. As a newspaper critic said in talking about benefits: "As things are now," the performer "is

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compelled to drop the character he is portraying and come, in his private person, before his audience and be cheered."[134]

Celebrity is also useful when combined with feminist contextualizing on the possibilities of alternate subject positions for women. Celebrity, because of a "specificity that breaks through the sutures of any ideology, including the patriarchal one, seems to encourage the construction of figures for a variety of subject-positions" including multiple female ones.[135] This direct popular appeal of the "private person" may have encouraged the actress to invert roles and create more female-centered plays and performance texts.

Celebrity was further complicated by the audience's experience with the parts the performer has played. Both Quinn and Carlson argue that celebrity brings its own "ghosting of the image" as celebrities are "haunted" by the accretion of their earlier roles. In traditional theatrical mimesis, it is the mimetic process that is "ghosted" by previous mimetic acts by the "interpretive body of the actor."[136] Benefits highlighted the "haunting" quality of celebrity; that is, the idea that celebrity performers were "haunted" by all the roles they have played in the past. In the benefit, however, it was also the non-mimetic presence of the performer-beneficiary that exhibited a complex "ghosting" effect. She was "ghosted" by the very fact of her celebrity status. Since the benefit was a site where the personal, individual qualities of the beneficiary resisted the total transformation of the actor into the stage figure, or character(s), regardless what scene or character was enacted on stage, the beneficiary was foregrounded over stage characters by virtue of her celebrity. The performer-beneficiary becomes the attraction because the presence of the celebrity actor broke the illusion of the acting event. In addition,

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advertising and publicity reinforced this contextualization of the continuing relationship or interplay of audiences and recycled performance elements, such as "haunting," by frequently using phrases such as "upon numerous requests" on their benefit playbills.[137]

Audiences and performers could also simply enjoy the celebrity status in the benefit. Its very presence, while in opposition to mimesis, could be highly enjoyable. It was this tension between the "illusion-fostering" or referential function, through which we are primarily aware of the character, and the "illusion-disrupting" performant function of celebrity, which called our attention to the actor, that was enjoyable.[138] In the benefit, this disruption was heightened by the presence of celebrity and could be enjoyed by audiences and performer alike.

Lastly, the celebrity performer's stage presence may have been associated with her life outside the theatre, whether or not the audience's knowledge of, or the performer's depiction of, that life was accurate or "real."[139] Carlson refers to this as an extra-theatrical dimension. This was the case with benefits of nineteenth-century female stars such as Elssler, Cushman, and Mowatt. Their fans exhibited great loyalty to these performers and had an extensive knowledge not only of their repertoire but also of their lives and activities outside the theatre. This "invisible but inevitable presence" of the performer's past or outside reputation was what the beneficiary cultivated and encouraged among her supporters.

Nineteenth-century female performers were very popular with their audiences and many clearly realized the impact of celebrity on their careers and were careful to construct public personas that enhanced their careers and popularity. Fanny Elssler, the

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first major female celebrity in the United States, was publicly labeled the "divine Fanny" in the press, poems were written in her honor, and scores of young men escorted her home in processions after her performances. Elssler's public relations efforts involving voluntarism and charity, including her shrewd use of benefits, made her the first female popular star of the nineteenth century. Anna Cora Mowatt commented that "every actress who gains celebrity is tolerably sure of being courted and feted, inundated with poems, complimentary letters, flowers, rich gifts. These things seem to be the inevitable consequences—I might say the conventional accessories—of her public position."[140] The importance of celebrity influenced the actress's manipulation of her popular reception. The aura of respectability carefully cultivated by Kemble, Mowatt, Keene, Elssler, and Cushman was key to their popular celebrity.

Respectability and celebrity were potently combined in farewell benefits. Cushman and Mowatt, upon their retirements from the stage, offered performances that went on for weeks as they traveled from one city to another offering "final farewell benefits."[141] These farewell benefits, often called "gala" farewells, were at times preceded by elaborate processions in which the "performers' associates in fraternal or guild associations honored him or her by parading en masse to the theatre, sometimes in the livery of the organization."[142] Cushman had a series of farewell performances during her career—1852, 1858, 1861, 1863, and 1874—that prominently featured benefits. Her final "gala" farewell benefit on November 7, 1874, proved to be her last stage appearance and illustrated many of the factors associated with both celebrity and

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the benefit. The only role presented by Cushman at her final benefit performance was Lady Macbeth, a part highlighted by the "ghosting" of her long association with this role. Aspects for the night included the intertheatrical strategy of a parade to the theatre led by the Arcadian Society, a direct address written by William Cullen Bryant and delivered by Cushman, the presentation of "floral and laurel" tributes by luminaries and celebrities of both the theatre and the city, and a tribute by musical societies. In addition, the benefit featured the extratheatrical aspect of a "processional escort" winding through the streets of New York after the performance, accompanied by music, lit by torches, and crowded with hundreds of people. Press rhetoric called the farewell "ceremony" before and after the New York benefit "the most spectacular and elaborate farewell ceremony in the history of the American theatre, surrounded by civic, literary, and theatrical notables, with the presentation of a laurel crown, a torchlight escort with band music through the streets, and fireworks over Madison Square."[143]

Mowatt retired from the stage upon her second marriage to William Foushee Ritchie in the summer of 1854. In the spring of that year, she undertook a series of farewell appearances in Cincinnati, Boston, and New York. In each city, her last appearance was a farewell benefit that featured an emotional speech to the audience after the performance. These speeches focused on her appreciation for all the support her audiences had given her over the years and a plea to "still let me dwell in your remembrance."[144]

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Theatrical female celebrity also affected the charity benefit. Women in the theatre, like women in the larger society, used the constructs of respectability and gender-based voluntarism and reciprocity for charitable purposes. They combined them with the traditional female-identified association with charity to raise funds for some of the most important social causes of the century. Celebrity, however, strongly marked the charity benefit efforts of many theatrical women. By using these elements, theatrical women not only supported their interests in the profession, but also extended themselves into the larger sphere. In this way, they contributed not only to female agency but to social change on a larger scale. The next chapter will examine the charity benefits of some of the leading female performers of the nineteenth century.

This chapter has argued that the nineteenth-century female performer experienced a change in her public reception as she utilized respectability to construct a more powerful place for herself in both theatre and in the larger society. As women in the larger society used traditionally female-identified characteristics of voluntarism and reciprocity to form communities that encouraged more public agency for women, women in the theatre were already using the benefit to generate economic power and agency.

Moreover, the benefit was a female-created, community-based traditional practice that featured reciprocity and voluntarism as its central characteristics. The benefit was more crucial for women than for men since it had the explosive potential to create a new subjectivity for women and disrupt the patriarchal dramatic canon. In a profession that foregrounded male subjectivity and featured three times more men than

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women, it also served as an alternative site of production where women combined elements of respectability, subjectivity, patronage, and celebrity to create empowerment and agency.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Glenna Matthews, *Woman's Power and Woman's Place in the United States, 1630-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 108.

[2] Laurence Senelick, ed. *Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1992), xiii.

[3] Tracy C. Davis, "Victorian Charity and Self-Help for Women Performers," *Theatre Notebook*, 1987, 41(3), 114-28.

[4] Class issues and divisions are very complex during the mid-nineteenth century and intersections of gender and class are even more difficult to piece out. Many women's historians acknowledge the problem and use a variety of terms to address class identity and class conflict. For example, Lori Ginzberg, in *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), uses the terms "urban elite" and "upper middle-class" to refer to non-working benevolent women. Faye E. Dudden, in *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses and Audiences 1790-1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), uses the term "genteel middle-class" to describe Charlotte Cushman's class background. Yet other historians consider Cushman and Anna Cora Mowatt as "upper class," or "upper middle-class." Theatre historians equally muddy the waters. For example, Bruce McConachie, in his Marxist history, *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820-1870* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), uses a variety of terms--elite, bourgeois, business and patrician--to indicate murky class intersections. However, binding all of these class divisions was the ideology of respectability, which served to separate them from the working class. McConachie makes the argument, and I agree, that the distinction between these upper classes and the working class was based on mental work versus physical labor. As far as women are concerned, wage work was the major difference. Respectability defined women as wives and mothers, not workers. Working-class women worked for wages; women of the upper classes did not. Actresses, however, occupied a unique position in that they earned a living and thus could be considered working class. Yet by the 1840s, Fanny Kemble, a definite product of the upper class, had a career in the theatre and paved the way for Mowatt and Cushman's reception as respectable women in the 1850s. Even actresses in working-class theatres, such as Fanny Herring and Anne Hathaway of the Bowery, aspired to respectability. In light of these problematic distinctions, I will use the term upper middle class to speak of Cushman and Mowatt.

[5] Anna Cora Mowatt, *Autobiography of an Actress* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1980), 157.

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[6] Invitation to a testimonial benefit given to Mowatt in Savannah, GA during her Southern tour in November 1846, quoted in Eric Wollencott Barnes, *The Lady of Fashion: The Life and the Theatre of Anna Cora Mowatt* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1954), 176-77.

[7] Mowatt, 154.

[8] Mowatt, 215, 313-14.

[9] Cincinnati unnamed newspaper, April 22, 1854 cited in Barnes, 259.

[10] See Faye E. Dudden's chapter on Charlotte Cushman in *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses and Audiences 1790-1870* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994) 75-103, for a discussion of Cushman's development of respectability and gender appeal. Also see Lisa Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1999) for discussions on the construction of Cushman's middle-class respectability and audience appeal.

[11] Playbill, Daly's Theatre, March 11, 1868.

[12] Ivor Guest, *Fanny Elssler* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1970), 115.

[13] Léon Beauvallet, *Rachel and the New World: Tragedienne in America*, ed. and trans. by Colin Clair (New York/Toronto: Abelard-Schuman, 1967), 119.

[14] Playbill, Park Theatre (Brooklyn), November 7, 1868.

[15] Ben Graf Henneke, *Laura Keene* (Tulsa, OK: Council Oak Books, 1990), 81; cited in Dudden, 138.

[16] "The Programme," May 27, 1859, Harvard Theatre Collection.

[17] Tracy Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 115.

[18] Bessie Rayner Parkes, *Essays on Women's Work* (London: A. Strahan, 1865), 127.

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[19] Edna Hammer Cooley, "Women in American Theatre 1850-1870: A Study in Professional Equity," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Maryland—College Park, 1986.

[20] Kathleen McCarthy, *Women's Culture: American Philanthropy and Art, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 17.

[21] David L. Rinear, *The Temple of Momus: Mitchell's Olympic Theatre* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1987), 41-7.

[22] Olive Logan, *Before the Footlights and Behind the Scenes* (Philadelphia: Parmelee, 1870), 93.

[23] See Leman T. Rede, *The Guide to the Stage*, ed. Francis C. Wemyss (New York: Samuel French, 1868) and *The Road to the Stage* (London: Joseph Smith, 1827) for extensive details of wardrobe requirements for women and men. See also Clara Morris, *Stage Confidences: Talks About Players and Play Acting* (Boston: Lothrop Publishing Co., 1902), 30, 146-159 and Olive Logan, *Before the Footlights and Behind the Scenes*, 92-95, 382-385 for discussions on the inequities of wardrobe requirements for male and female performers.

[24] Jan McDonald, "Lesser Ladies of the Victorian Stage," *Theatre Research International*, Autumn 1988, 13(3), 234-249.

[25] *The Diary of an Actress, or the Realities of Stage Life*, ed. H.C. Shuttleworth (London: Griffith, Farran, Okeden and Welsh, 1885), 92.

[26] John Creahan, *The Life of Laura Keene* (Philadelphia: Rodgers Publishing Company, 1897), 123.

[27] `Corin,' *The Truth about the Stage* (London: Wyman and Sons, 1885), 20.

[28] J.K. Curry, "Women in Nineteenth-Century American Theatre Management," Ph.D. Dissertation, City University of New York, 1991.

[29] Ibid, 156.

[30] The 1870-72 benefit season in Philadelphia's theatres featured nine benefits for male non-performing theatre workers alone: benefit for doorkeepers, March 3, 1870; scenic artist and machinist, March 5, 1870; doorkeepers, scenic artists, and machinist, March 23-25, 1871; doorkeepers, April 12, 1871; treasurer, July 3, 1871; and a benefit for the orchestra leader, May 29, 1872. (William D. Coder, "A History of the

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Philadelphia Theatre, 1856 to 1878," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Philadelphia, 1936.)

[31] Playbill, Olympic Theatre, February 13, 1846.

[32] Playbill, Brougham's Lyceum, January 14, 1852.

[33] Playbills, Broadway Theatre, March 10 and March 11, 1854.

[34] Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (New York/London: Routledge, 1990), 62.

[35] While most benefit plays written by or for women were never included in the repertoire, Rowson's were frequently "accorded places in the repertory." Perhaps this was because Rowson was careful to create challenging and substantial male roles. Her most popular and enduring play, *Slaves in Algiers*, written for her 1794 benefit, featured a strong female protagonist as well as substantial male roles. It addressed the international crisis over American sailors who had been captured and enslaved in Algiers in late 1793. Several theatrical benefits had been mounted for this cause during 1793 and 1794. George O. Seilhamer, *A History of the American Theatre* (Philadelphia: Globe Printing House, 1888-1891), vol 1, 180.

[36] Undated newspaper notice (late 1830s or early 1840s) about her benefit at the American Theatre (later Bowery), scrapbook of Mrs. Frank Rea, NYPL. *Norman Leslie* and *Rienzi* featured typical male protagonists and were popular in the regular repertoire, while *La Fitte* included the cross-dressed role of a pirate as the main character and was not performed outside of Medina's benefits.

[37] Playbill, Wallack's Theatre, March 1857.

[38] Mowatt, 209.

[39] Cited in Amelia Howe Kritzer, *Plays by Early American Women, 1775-1850* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 24.

[40] Playbill, Park Theatre, November 21, 1840. Both Medina and Barnes wrote plays about *La Fitte* and which featured a breeches role—a woman masquerading as a pirate—as the lead.

[41] Playbill, Broadway Theatre, December 7, 1855.

[42] Playbill, Winter Garden Theatre, July 18, 1862.

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[43] Playbills, Broadway Theatre, summer season 1856. One playbill from this season includes marginalia from the original holder of the playbill stating that "the performance was very good; house very crowded."

[44] Playbill, Burton's Theatre, June 12, 1857.

[45] Playbill, Wallack's Theatre, April 11, 1860.

[46] Kritzer, 24. Kritzer uses this thesis to argue for Barnes's success as a playwright and actor.

[47] Michael Quinn, "Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting," *New Theatre Quarterly*, May 1990, 6, 154-61.

[48] Undated benefit playbill, Drury Lane Theatre, benefits clipping file, NYPL.

[49] Bennett, 62.

[50] Sue Ellen Case, "From Split Subject to Split Britches," in *Feminine Focus: The New Women Playwrights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 126-146.

[51] Ellen Donkin, "Mrs. Siddons Looks Back in Anger: Feminist Historiography for Eighteenth-Century British Theater," *Critical Theory and Performance* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 278.

[52] *The Stranger* is William Dunlap's 1798 translation/adaptation of August von Kotzebue's *Menschenhass und Reue* (*Misanthropy and Repentance*), written and staged in the same year. This version is distinct from the British version of the same play, also called *The Stranger*, adapted by Benjamin Thompson in 1798. Dunlap's play was one of the most popular in nineteenth-century American theatre.

[53] Case, 143.

[54] Case, 132.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Keir Elam, cited in Susan Bennett, 140-144.

[57] Donkin, 285.

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[58] Guest, 115.

[59] Playbills, Bowery Theatre, December 3, 1853 and May 16, 1860.

[60] Playbill, Mitchell's Olympic Theatre, April 23, 1841 and others from 1841-1844.

[61] Playbill, Academy of Music, September 27, 1848.

[62] Playbill, Brougham's Lyceum, June 23, 1851.

[63] Playbill, Park Theatre, February 27, 1846.

[64] Playbill, Olympic Theatre, March 6, 1850.

[65] Playbill , Academy of Music, January 17, 1857 and undated *Spirit of the Times* article, scrapbook of Mrs. Frank Rea, NYPL.

[66] Playbills, Wallack's Lyceum Theatre, March 19, 1853 and April 29, 1853.

[67] Playbill, Wallack's Theatre, March 31, 1866.

[68] Playbills, Mitchell's Olympic Theatre, December 1839 - July 1840.

[69] Playbill, Wallack's Theatre, April 14, 1854. This eighteenth-century play and Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem* were frequently used during the 1840s, 50s, and 60s by female performers in their benefits.

[70] Playbill, Wallack's Theatre, May 8, 1855.

[71] Playbill, Wallack's Theatre, March 21, 1864.

[72] Playbill, Wallack's Theatre, March 16, 1855.

[73] Playbills, Wallack's Theatre, July 19, 1858, and July 18, 1856.

[74] Playbill, Wallack's Theatre, March 2, 1863.

[75] Playbills, Wallack's Theatre, 1854—1868.

[76] Playbills, Mitchell's Olympic Theatre, May 21, 1840.

[77] Playbill, Bowery Theatre, July 13, 1855.

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[78] Playbill, Bowery Theatre, August 15, 1856. *Jack Sheppard* was originally written as a cross-dressed role for Mary Ann Keeley, an English actress, and was frequently performed in women's benefits.

[79] Playbill, Bowery Theatre, March 16, 1859.

[80] Playbills, Niblo's Garden, September 17, 1851 and August 8, 1854.

[81] For example, in a benefit for singer W. Harrison, he and his volunteer Ms. Pyne were featured in duets from the first act of *The Daughter of the Regiment*, the third act of *Bohemian Girl*, and the third act of *Cinderella*. Caroline Richings performed the "closing scene" of the first act of *La Traviata* and sung "the celebrated scena and aria assisted by the eminent tenor, Mr. George Simpson, who kindly volunteered his services." The final piece on the bill was the "new operatic romance, *Syren*, adapted and arranged expressly for Caroline Richings." Playbill, Niblo's Theatre, June 20, 1862.

[82] Mademoiselle Yrca Mathias introduced four new dances at her Niblo's benefit of September 28, 1854. Madame Monplaisir, a dancer in Ravel's company, appeared for the "first time in a new ballet" at Niblo's on September 5, 1857. Teresa Rolla, a premier dancer in Ravel's company, performed in a "new ballet expressly composed for and dedicated to her" at her benefit on October 9, 1957.

[83] Playbills, Chatham Theatre, 1846 (her benefit playbill dated October 7).

[84] Playbills, Burton's Theatre, May 2, 1850 and 1851 season.

[85] Playbill, Winter Garden Theatre, March 15, 1860.

[86] Playbill, Chatham Theatre, June 11, 1845.

[87] Scrapbook of Mrs. Frank Rea, NYPL.

[88] Playbill, Wallack's Theatre, 1860s and undated newspaper notice; playbills Chatham Theatre (1840s) and letters in scrapbook of Mrs. Frank Rea, NYPL.

[89] Playbills, Mitchell's Olympic Theatre, April 13, 1841 and May 25, 1841.

[90] Playbills, Bowery Theatre, October 24, 1849 and March 29, 1850.

[91] Playbills, Bowery Theatre, May 25 and 26, 1860.

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[92] Sisters, working together or separately, were very common in nineteenth-century American theatre. Since most of these women married and used their husband's names, it is difficult to unearth some of these relationships. Some of them can only be teased out from carefully reading historical texts and examining memoirs and playbills of the performers. Some important sisters are: Malvina Pray (Mrs. William) Florence and Maria Pray (Mrs. Barney) Williams, Clara Fisher Maeder and Mrs. Fisher Vernon, Mrs. D.P. Bowers and Sarah Crocker (Mrs. F.B.) Conway, Lucille and Helen Western, Mary Shaw and Mrs. Hoey, Susan and Rachel Denin, Charlotte Cushman and Susan Cushman, among others.

[93] Joseph Norton Ireland, *Records of the New York Stage, from 1750 to 1860,* vol 2, (New York: B. Blom, 1966), 432.

[94] Clara Fisher Maeder, *Autobiography of Clara Fisher Maeder*, ed. Douglas Taylor (reprint 1970; New York: Burt Franklin, 1897), 56.

[95] Playbill, Chatham Theatre, December 6, 1849.

[96] Playbills, Broadway Theatre, January 24, 1868 and Winter Garden Theatre, November 23, 1865.

[97] Playbills, Boston Museum Theatre, 1850s and 1860s.

[98] Playbill, Wallack's Theatre, August 16, 1860.

[99] Protean, or quick-change, plays were staged as early as 1821 in America. Originally played by both genders, by the late 1830s, it is almost exclusively an all-female genre that lasted until the late 1860s. Actresses changed characterizations often during the performances, playing from three to eight characters in one piece. Characters ranged from male to female, old to young, and embodied various ethnicities and nationalities. The form emphasized physical action, bravado, a strong voice and physique, stamina, and an ability to memorize a dizzying array of lines and stage business. Specific skills such as horseback riding, dancing, sword fighting, and marksmanship were prized. There are no books devoted to protean farces. My information was gathered from Odell (volumes III, IV, VII [1834-1875]) and from looking at hundreds of playbills and performers' memoirs.

[100] Playbill, Bowery Theatre, November 17, 1859. See Bowery playbills 1859-1868 for Herring's use of benefits throughout her tenure at the theatre.

[101] Playbills, Bowery Theatre, March 11, 1859 and March 18, 1859.

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[102] Playbills, Olympic Theatre, March 20 and 22, 1843.

[103] Playbills, Olympic Theatre, January 5, 1847 and February 14, 1847.

[104] Playbills, Brougham's Lyceum, 1850-51 season. Skerrett's benefit, December 2; Fisher's benefit, December 17.

[105] Playbills, Bowery Theatre, January 16, 1857 and Chatham Theatre, February 6, 1857.

[106] Playbill, Burton's, May 31, 1850 and 1851, 52 and 53 seasons.

[107] Playbills, Olympic Theatre, 1844 season. Benefit playbill March 22, 1844.

[108] Playbill, Olympic Theatre, November 23, 1849.

[109] Bruce McConachie, "Historicizing the Relations of Theatrical Production," in *Critical Theory and Performance*, eds. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 168-78.

[110] Playbill, Park Theatre, December 13, 1847.

[111] Playbill, Laura Keene's Theatre, July 22, 1859.

[112] Playbill, Brougham's Lyceum Theatre, June 3, 1851.

[113] Playbill, Academy of Music, May 12, 1861.

[114] David K. Dempsey, *The Triumphs and Trials of Lotta Crabtree* (New York: Morrow, 1968), 126.

[115] Dempsey, 127.

[116] Undated, unnamed newspaper clipping in Olympic Theatre clippings file, NYPL-PA.

[117] Playbill, Chatham Theatre, March 2, 1855.

[118] Playbills, Bowery Theatre, 1840-1850. Mrs. Hamblin's benefit, May 25, 1842.

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[119] See Beverly Gordon, "The Souvenir: Messenger of the Extraordinary," *Journal of Popular Culture*, Winter 1986, 20, 134-46 for a discussion of the connection between souvenirs and women's culture.

[120] Playbill, Academy of Music, December 15, 1863.

[121] Florence playbill, Wallack's, July 1875; Keene playbill/sheet music, June 21, 1856 and *New York Times* review June 23, 1856; jewelry (a ring and a brooch for Mrs. Frank Drew) Watkins, 100.

[122] Playbill, Winter Garden Theatre, May 31, 1870.

[123] Playbill, Winter Garden Theatre, February 6, 1863.

[124] Howe, 228-229. A ring and a brooch for Mrs. Frank Drew from a couple in a box. (Watkins, 100). Laura Keene and Charlotte Cushman often had gifts of money thrown to her by women in the audience. (*New York Times* review, June 23, 1856)

[125] John Thornbury, "Plays and Play-goers 25 Years Ago," *The Galaxy*, 21(5), May 1876, 581-92.

[126] *Spirit of the Times*, March 20, 1855.

[127] Barnes, 256.

[128] Barnes, 182, 211.

[129] Guest, 163-5, 175.

[130] See Michael Quinn, "Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting" in *New Theatre Quarterly*, May 1990, 6, 154-61, for an excellent discussion of the semiotics of the celebrity figure, the actor, and the stage performance.

[131] Quinn, 157.

[132] Marvin Carlson, "The Haunted Stage: Recycling and Reception in the Theatre," *Theatre Survey*, May 1994, 35(1), 5-18.

[133] Quinn, 157.

[134] Unnamed critic from *The New Orleans Picayune*, quoted in Henneke, 167.

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[135] Quinn, 159.

[136] Carlson, 12.

[137] Carlson, 18.

[138] Carlson, 14, and Quinn, 155.

[139] Carlson, 11.

[140] Mowatt, 262.

[141] See Lisa Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998) for an articulation of Cushman's "extraordinary celebrity." Merrill's book is also useful for analyzing the interstices of celebrity and the public persona cultivated by Cushman such as her use of city-to-city tours to solidify her national reputation.

[142] McCarthy, 117.

[143] Charles H. Shattuck, *Shakespeare on the American Stage* (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1976), 94-5.

[144] Barnes, 317.

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Chapter IV

Theatrical Women and Charitable Benefits

Introduction

The nineteenth-century theatrical charity benefit serves as a nexus through which women's roles in charity and voluntarism can be examined. It was a crucial site where women's traditional ties to charity and voluntarism were joined with a strong sense of female agency and celebrity. Charities and charitable institutions were acceptable venues of power for women, and the theatrical benefit, operating as an institutional charity, allowed theatre women to extend their interests, causes, and presence into the larger society. In addition, by participating in benefits for social causes, principally of a patriotic nature, theatre women found yet another degree of agency and influence.

Charity in the Benefit Tradition

Contractual benefits were only one part of the benefit system. Charity benefits were also an important part of the tradition and are the only vestige found today. Historically, there were five types of charity benefits: those for theatrical workers who had fallen upon sickness or hard times; for their dependents in the case of the sudden death of an artist; those associated with public disasters or occasions when public sympathy was aroused; those for widows, orphans, the poor, hospitals, and general charitable objects; those for deserving individuals both in and out of the profession; and those of a patriotic nature.

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Charity benefits were not cynical public relations devices, but could be sophisticated survival techniques for theatre companies. They guaranteed house expenses during periods of economic distress, yet also offered a reciprocal relationship with society.[1] In exchange for attendance at the theatre, the profession would donate the major portion of the evening's profits to a charitable cause. In this way, charity benefits facilitated the theatre's acceptance in communities that were hostile to theatre. For instance, in early America, anti-theatrical bias often encouraged city elders to prohibit theatre performances. A benefit offered to "the poor of the city" often "greased the wheels" and allowed the theatre to establish a presence in that city. For example, professional theatre had not previously been allowed in Boston, but on August 31, 1792, an "effort was made to court the good-will of the public by giving a performance for the benefit of the poor."[2] The first professional Boston theatre season opened the following fall with, ironically, a contractual benefit for the manager, Mr. Murray.

Charity benefits for the poor were often given at the end of a company's engagement in a particular city and could attract large audiences. Communal reciprocity between the theatre and the community ensured that theatre personnel benefited from the good will of the town. Regarding a benefit for a hospital for the poor in New York City in July 1774, the *New York Journal* commented that the theatre held "one of the largest crowds of the season," and that it was given "in return for the many favours they [the actors] have received from the inhabitants of this place."[3] By working together, the theatre manager and the performers volunteered to form a

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reciprocal relationship with communities—one in which both the larger community and the theatrical community gained. Similar to women, who used voluntarism and charity as means to extend their presence into the larger community, the theatre used both to extend itself into the larger community for social acceptance.

Charity benefits also served to assist the theatre community during times of crisis or loss. Before Social Security, pensions and other retirement benefits, entitlements, and institutional aid, the charity benefit was the only professional venue for aid to families of deceased theatrical performers. In the event of disaster or death, the theatre community practiced reciprocity as its members rallied together to help each other. Theatre workers volunteering in a charity benefit were well aware that they or their families might likewise need assistance in the future. The theatre profession also helped retired workers, those returning to the profession, or current workers in financial crisis by offering charity benefits.

While having much in common with the contractual benefit, the charity benefit differed in several crucial ways. First, the beneficiary figure became more complex. In this type of benefit, the performer was not seeking career advancement, audience patronage, or an addition to her year's earning. In the case of a charity benefit for a person, the beneficiary became removed from the event itself. No longer producing and finding direct agency in the event, and sometimes not even appearing in the benefit performance, the beneficiary was represented by a person or group soliciting funds for the beneficiary. In the event of a charity benefit for a cause, the beneficiary was even more abstract. It was no longer even a person, but a group or a social, economic, or

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political cause. Secondly, reciprocity operated differently in a charity benefit. Performers and theatre workers still volunteered without remuneration to perform for charity, as they did in contractual benefits, yet the reciprocal exchange was altered. Instead of the direct reciprocal exchange of favors between one person and her volunteers, reciprocity now acted in two ways. In charity benefits for causes outside of theatre, it operated to help ensure an acceptance of theatre by the larger society. In charity benefits for theatre workers, it helped to assure a future exchange of caregiving by other theatre personnel. For example, volunteering a theatrical benefit for an orphan's hospital contributed to good relations between the theatre and the larger society. Likewise, in a charity benefit for performers put out of work due to a theatre fire, the theatre community, in taking care of its own, holds out this future benefit to others in the profession. By volunteering to assist community members now in crisis, future acts of reciprocal aid would be assured.

Yet another difference was the role of the manager and her relationship to actors in the charity benefit. Managers frequently worked together with performers in these events, generally avoiding the management versus labor antipathy sometimes found in contractual benefits. This cooperation, however, ensured that individual agency for the performer and foregrounding—so strongly prominent in the contractual benefit—were altered. The operation of agency underwent a subtle, but crucial, change. Finally, charity benefits were sometimes "sponsored" by individuals or groups both in and out of the theatre to support the charitable beneficiary. Instead of the beneficiary performer producing her benefit and appealing directly to audiences for support, the

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individual or group produced and solicited support. The agency shifted from the individual performer to the group or sponsor.

This change in agency as well as the sponsorship of benefits leads to a focus on gender. Through the participation in or sponsorship of charity benefits, women in the theatre found agency both in the profession and in the larger community. Gender served as an identifying element of the relationship between the sponsors of a charity benefit and the charity cause, or beneficiary. Women tended to support and sponsor people and causes connected with female interests while men generally supported those more male-identified.

This gender difference became even more marked when the manager was involved. Managers, most of whom were male, were the primary organizers of many charity benefits. When Park Theatre manager Edmund Simpson died in the autumn of 1848, other male managers implemented several benefit performances for his widow and children. Most manager-sponsored charity benefits supported the dominant male-oriented patriarchal canon. For example, Thomas S. Hamblin, having assumed managerial duties at the Park, offered one benefit tribute, which featured traditional dramatic texts from the patriarchal canon.[4] Even playbills made direct gender-specific appeals to men. Mitchell's Olympic also offered a benefit for Simpson's family and the playbill for the event clearly targeted male theatregoers by stating: "Gentlemen desirous of making donations or paying additional sums for their seats, will greatly oblige Mr. Mitchell by enclosing the same in letters addressed to the General Committee, and placed under his care at the box office of the theatre."[5] Conversely,

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charity benefits sponsored by female manager Laura Keene supported more female-centered causes, featured a more female-centered bill of fare, and targeted women.

Gender and Charity Benefits

Theatrical women were able to extend communal aid to other women through the charity benefit. They held benefits for sick and elderly female players, helped widows and orphans both in the theatre and in the larger society, and assisted actresses who were in financial crisis. In addition, groups, using gender-specific committees, often sponsored charity benefits. Committees of women generally organized benefits for women, and committees of men organized those for men.

Committees were mostly identified with the complimentary benefit, a charity benefit meant to "compliment" another performer. This form of benefit was limited largely to the theatre community and usually extended charitable aid to a performer who was marked as a "deserving individual." For example, such a benefit for female performer Charlotte Thompson featured advertising which stated that her popularity and deserving nature were such that "numerous friends inside and outside the theatre tendered her a complimentary benefit on January 2, 1862." Women generally formed committees to offer complimentary benefits for other women, while men did likewise for other men.[6]

Men used charity benefits less frequently and for different causes. Committees of men, often including the manager, organized yearly fundraising benefits for fraternal organizations such as the Elks, a mutual aid society closed to women.[7] For example, its seventh "annual benefit," held in November 1864, featured more than fifteen acts

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appearing in this very long bill. The fare consisted of traditionally male-centered material, with a majority of male actors.[8] The women appearing were clearly in subordinate, traditional roles. In addition, male actors supported fewer causes. Edwin Booth sponsored and organized several benefit fundraisers for the Shakespeare Statue in Central Park.[9] Actor-playwright-manager John Brougham, one of the very few men who offered charity benefits for traditionally female charities, offered regular benefits for the Catholic Orphan Asylum.[10] Conversely, the New York Orphan Asylum, founded in 1806 by a group of leading New York City women, was more popular with women as a cause for benefits well into the 1880s.[11] In the theatre, gender served as a marked distinction for charity in the profession.

Women and Charity Benefits for the Theatre and Related Community

From its beginnings in the United States, the theatre had established connections between women and charity. As early as 1753, a charity benefit was held for the mother of actress Mrs. Osborne, a leading lady in Hallam's company. The benefit was advertised in a local newspaper as "the first time this poor widow has had a benefit, having met with divers late hardships and misfortunes." Further, the advertisement carried an explicit appeal to women as it requested that "all charitable benevolent ladies favour her with their company."[12]

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, women were central not only in organizing benefits for female theatrical personnel, but for related communities such as volunteer fire companies. These companies were strong supporters of female performers, and theatre women reciprocated by aiding them and their related concerns.

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Mrs. Shaw (Hamblin), of the Bowery Theatre, sponsored many benefits for the Fire Department Fund during the late 1830s and 40s. She delivered the direct address used before the play, and was generally highlighted as the "volunteer for the occasion." Other female Bowery performers who sponsored this fund were Mrs. Timm, Constantia Clarke, and Mary Taylor. While male manager Thomas Hamblin was surely involved in offering his theatre, it was clearly the women who sponsored the event. My analysis of playbills indicates that men did not sponsor these benefits. Charity benefits for the Widow and Orphan Fund of the New York Fire Department were common in theatres. Women in working-class theatres were not the only ones to sponsor this local community. In Brooklyn, actress-manager Sarah Crocker Conway was active in presenting benefits for this fund in her more upper-class theatre.[13]

Female performers were generous in assisting other women. Madame Celeste (Celine Eliot), a popular pantomime actress, was known for her generosity in performing in benefits, especially for other women. Born in France in 1814, she came to America in 1829 as the first foreign female star to tour the United States. She returned in 1834 for a three-year tour, during which she made $200,000, a huge sum of money at that time for a woman. She retired to Paris in 1870, but re-emerged frequently, to perform only in benefits "for some brother or sister professional" during the early 1870s. She traveled all over Europe and the United States for both charity and contractual benefits.[14] Local press coverage describes one charity benefit:

> After declining many tempting offers to return to her professional labors, the dear, good creature volunteered her valuable services for a complimentary benefit for Mrs. A. Mellon on the 15th of May 1878, leaving Paris for that purpose, and appearing in the second act of

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> *The Green Bushes* in the great part of her own creation, Miami, and was greeted with a most enthusiastic reception at the Old Drury.[15]

Dancer-actress Fanny Elssler was also known for generosity to others, both in and out of the profession. She toured the United States in 1840-1842 and made $140,000, one of the largest nineteenth-century fortunes amassed in this country by a woman. She gave suppers for the theatre orchestra and, at one such supper, "presented the leader with a snuff box." She fulfilled the traditionally female duty of taking care of those less fortunate by buying "warm merino dresses for the girls in the *corps de ballet* when she noticed them shivering in thin summer clothes."[16] While Elssler was publicly criticized for the financial terms she arranged with management, she also attempted to arrange guaranteed terms for Monsieur Sylvain, her "maitre de ballet," or principal male dancing partner, and her *corps de ballet*. This information was not made public. During her engagement in Baltimore, the manager, Thomas Walton, refused to pay wages to her *corps de ballet*. When Elssler heard about the offense, she paid their salaries.

Attacked by the press as "singlehandedly destroying the American theatre" because of the financial terms of her contract, she was careful to offer a series of benefits at the end of the Park Theatre engagement in 1842 with one clear benefit going to manager Edmund Simpson, specifically to make up for any loss of money to him. Her other benefit appearances in the summer of 1842 were for Jules Martin (her principal male partner, having replaced Sylvain), the St. James Orphan Asylum, and for the Theatrical Fund, an early attempt at institutional charity for the theatre profession.[17] Her final tally of appearances totaled 208 performances, with 18 personal

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and 19 charity and contractual benefits. In addition to participating in benefits, she donated over $5,000 to charities, including the establishment of a small fund for the "relief of distressed children of the drama."[18] Since she was publicly vilified in the press for her "grasping" pecuniary nature, it is possible her generosity may have been an attempt to recover some degree of propriety.[19] However, since the press did not acknowledge these charitable efforts, a misogynistic bias is more likely to be responsible for her disparaging press coverage.

Anna Cora Mowatt also assisted fellow performers and was known for her "kindness and generosity," especially to the theatre's "more humble members."[20] She relates one episode where she traveled out of town to fulfill a promise for a charity benefit.

> Mrs. Warner was about to leave America, where she had encountered a series of most heartbreaking trials. The autumn previous I had promised her my services for a benefit, at any time when she chose to call upon me. I thus hoped to make amends, in a slight degree, for the losses and discomfitures which had waylaid her whole path in a foreign land. She was to receive a complimentary benefit at the Howard Atheneum (in Boston), and requested the fulfillment of my promise. I consented to enact Desdemona to her Emilia, and went to Boston for that purpose about the middle of May.[21]

Mowatt, "for that night only," was listed as Warner's primary volunteer. On the morning of her benefit, however, Mrs. Warner was unable to leave her apartment due to illness. The benefit took place with Melinda Jones filling the role of Emilia in Mrs. Warner's absence, and with a packed house in attendance.

These female-sponsored benefits could be large, complex events that clearly gave women a site of agency from which to demonstrate support for one another. Several of these deserve mention. A complimentary benefit for Clara Fisher Maeder

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was organized by a "committee of ladies," all of whom were actresses, and was produced on September 28, 1841 at the Park Theatre. Fisher, born in England in 1811, was a very popular juvenile performer in the late 1820s and early 30s. She made a fortune from her stage appearances and upon her marriage retired from the theatre. However, in the financial panic of 1841, her husband lost her money and Fisher found herself struggling to re-establish a performing career. The women of New York's theatrical community banded together to sponsor a benefit to re-introduce her to the stage as an adult actress. The bill consisted of a full play, *Town and Country*, scenes from other plays, an olio of recitations, vocal and instrumental music by actresses and actors from the theatrical community, a "poetical address written by Mrs. Ann S. Stephens and delivered by Mrs. Maeder," and a farce, *The Bee Hive*. Prices were raised to $2 for the boxes and $1 for the pit and the committee received $2,000, after house expenses.[22]

The playbill for this benefit reveals the female support and agency possible in charity benefits. The largest typeface was reserved for "Mrs. Maeder," and the next largest for "BENEFIT," illustrating the charity benefit's still strong connection to the intertheatrical nature of the event's advertising tradition. In addition, the producers make it clear that women in support of another woman organized this benefit.

> Complimentary benefits to distinguished performers have become somewhat frequent of late years, but the countenance and support of the public are now solicited for one presenting a feature of absolute novelty—a benefit originating in the minds, and successfully carried on to performance by the exertions solely of the ladies, and moreover the very first complimentary benefit that ever was offered to a lady in this country. On behalf of Mrs. Maeder—but a few years since as CLARA FISHER--a brilliant galaxy of ladies have united their

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> exertions, and declared that the benefit, which they have taken in charge must, at least, equal any of its predecessors. They claim it as a tribute to her talents, and they solicit it also from the sympathy which is due to her for her losses and misfortunes. The Committee thinks it necessary only to add that a sure guarantee of success in the pleasing task they have assumed will be found in the brilliant array of distinguished names with which Mrs. Maeder's bill is adorned, and the varied and attractive nature of the entertainments provided for the occasions. It is with satisfaction that the Committee of Arrangements announce the following LADIES AND GENTLEMEN have in the handsomest manner volunteered their valuable aid.[23]

It was not uncommon to have all day benefit performances for charitable purposes. These collective, or "monster," benefits, were highly communal in nature and frequently featured several theatres joining together for performances, the proceeds of which would go to the charity. Sometimes they were held at one theatre, involving theatre personnel from several theatres. At other times, several theatres would stage performances at the same time. Both styles effectively ruptured boundaries and barriers between theatres, bringing the profession together as a community.

One of Laura Keene's last projects in the theatre before her death was producing and directing a massive "monster" complimentary benefit for actress Matilda Heron. Heron, one of the biggest stars of the mid-century due to her acclaimed performance as Camille, was now ill and penniless, and the theatrical community rallied to her aid. Specifically, women of the community—Keene, Emma Webb, Kate Reignolds, and Emma Waller—were the producing sponsors who organized the benefit in January 1872 at the Academy of Music. Performers from theatres all over the city participated: Edwin Booth and his company presented a brief version of *Katherine and Petruchio*; Wallack's company and John Brougham presented *His Last Legs*; Daly's Fifth Avenue

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Theatre performed the third act of their "current success" *Divorce*; and Keene herself, while very ill, presented the first act of *The School for Scandal.*

One of Keene's letters about the benefit called attention to it as an "ultra fashionable matinee" and Keene skillfully used this rhetoric in the advertising for the event. The prices—25 cents and 50 cents—were within the reach of many, and the benefit turned out to be a standing-room-only affair, which brought in $5,390. Heron appeared on stage at the end of the evening and, in a direct address to the audience, gave heartfelt thanks to organizers and audience saying, "you have raised a woman out of the depths of misery and despair!"[24]

Charity benefits held on the same day but in different theatres could afford women an extra degree of agency, even in male-organized benefits. For example, as part of the male-organized Holland Testimonial for the benefit of the widow and children of the late George Holland, actress-manager Sarah Crocker Conway produced two bills of fare. At one theatre, she presented Fanny Janauschek in the sleep-walking scene from *Macbeth*, and at another, presented herself as King Charles, the cross-dressed lead role, in *Faint Heart Never Won Fair Lady.*[25] When male-organized benefits remained in one theatre and under the producing control of male committees and managers, women seldom attained this degree of agency and subjectivity.

Women were quick to aid each other in difficult times by volunteering to appear in a benefit. Actress Julia Jones recorded that after her retirement, while recuperating from a long illness, she became financially distressed. Her longtime friend, Matilda Heron, currently appearing in the enormously popular play *Camille*, volunteered to

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play in a benefit for her. The event would highlight both herself and Jones in the leading female roles. Jones expressed her appreciation for this kind act from an old friend saying that Heron "would not listen to a word of praise for herself." She recalled Heron's kindness to an "older" widowed actress, praised her for sending a carriage to carry her to and from the theatre, and gratefully noted her insistence on acknowledging her at the curtain call.[26]

Tragic actress Rachel (Elizabeth Félix) assisted at a special charity benefit for her countrywoman, Madame de Lagrange, who had become ill during their US tour. The benefit was held at the Academy of Music in November 1855 and it clearly highlighted Rachel. The bill consisted of the first act of *I Puritani*, followed by the second act of *Athalie* with Rachel in the lead role, and ended with the last two acts of *I Puritani*. The unusual intertheatrical structure of this benefit not only highlighted Rachel as the primary feature of the performance, but also served to disrupt the mimetic world of *I Puritani*.[27]

Women Supporting Non-theatrical Charities and Causes

For most of the nineteenth century, women participated in, organized, and sponsored charity benefits for social causes more frequently than men. The majority of these benefits were for causes that were of interest to women, and addressed traditional female-associated social concerns such as women and children's interests and the poor. For example, women were the primary organizers and volunteers for benefits for the Nursery and Child's Hospital.[28] Clara Morris, Kate Claxton, and other women organized a matinee performance "in aid of the Poor of New York" with a majority

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female cast "generously volunteering."[29] Even visiting female performers supported these charitable causes. Fanny Elssler, on the final leg of her first United States tour gave a benefit for the St. Joseph's Orphan Asylum, titled "Fanny Elssler's Orphans' Benefit." Playbills for the occasion appealed to the "generosity of a New York public, as it cannot fail to be BENEFICIAL in the largest sense to the Drooping Funds of an Institution that appeals so strongly to the best sympathies of our nature." The bill highlighted Elssler in the second act of *La Tarentule*, the third act of the ballet of *La Somnanbula*, and a "Spanish gypsy girl dance."[30]

Female managers Laura Keene in Manhattan and, later, Sarah Crocker Conway in Brooklyn created and popularized the charity benefit matinee. They shrewdly picked up on the attendance of women at mid-day performances, and capitalized on women's connection to charity by using these events to raise money for certain causes. Keene frequently presented benefit matinees for women, and often offered her famous crowd-pleaser *Our American Cousin* for them. Mrs. Conway not only presented "Ladies Matinees," but offered many of these for charity, such as an 1874 "benefit matinee in aid of the poor of Brooklyn."[31] As in many charity benefits offered by women, Conway's playbills carefully noted in large, bold typeface that "the entire proceeds [were] devoted to the above charity!" Conway's charity benefits continued to offer more opportunities for female performers since she featured bills of fare that highlighted a more female subject position, which required more actresses than most bills. Generally, her benefits featured plays that offered roughly equal male and female roles.[32]

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Keene and her charity benefit matinees clearly targeted fashionable society women who found a welcome atmosphere as they "flocked to her theatre to raise funds for their various functions."[33] These affluent, upper-class women began to attend Keene's theatre not only for charity matinees, but also brought their husbands to evening performances. Thus, a new segment of society—one that did not normally attend theatre—could be induced to enter the theatre on this special occasion. Once exposed to the theatre as a respectable and socially acceptable place to be, that segment might be enticed to return for regular night attendance. The charity matinee thus contributed to Keene's respectability in the larger society, an asset she carefully cultivated. Yet, Keene also sponsored benefits on behalf of working women. For example, under her "personal supervision," she offered a benefit for the Shirt-Sewers' Union, a union in which women formed the majority of members.[34]

Visiting foreign actresses also devoted benefits to certain favorite causes. Many of their benefits were for nationalistic or ethnic "societies" that were open to women, similar to closed male societies such as the Hibernian Society. The French Benevolent Society (the Societé Française de Bienfaisance) was a favorite of French tragic actress Rachel during her 1855 United States tour and she gave several benefits for it.[35] On the eve of her departure for the United States, Rachel's final performance in Europe, at the Drury Lane, was in aid of this society and took in over $3,600.[36] Fanny Janauschek offered a benefit for the German Hospital Fund (Fond des Deutschen Lazarett) in which she performed, in German, Schiller's *The Bride of Messina*.[37]

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World calamities frequently spurred women to stage benefits to raise money. Matilda Heron "volunteered her services, and consented to give up a night in her engagement, that the theatre may be devoted" to a benefit in "aid of the sufferers who so providentially escaped the recent shipwreck of the Central America."[38] Mrs. Conway offered a benefit for the "Chicago Fire Sufferers."[39]

One of the most frequent causes sponsored in charity benefits in nineteenth century American theatre was for the relief of the poor, and women were responsible for a sizeable majority of them. While appearing at St. Louis in December 1851, Mowatt was asked by the manager, Mr. Bates, to donate a performance to "aid the poor." She stated that she was "glad to give up one night of this week and act gratuitously to Aid the Poor of this city." The proceeds were over $400 and everyone seemed to benefit in some way. Hopefully, the poor received some portion of the funds, Mowatt received an "embossed scroll containing a resolution of the General Committee for the Relief of the Poor" thanking her for her generosity, and manager Bates received approbation in the local press. The rhetoric of this local press revealed the strength of the traditional connection of women to charity and to the relief of suffering: "The impulses of a woman, always alive to the sufferings of the poor in large cities, were no sooner appealed to than her determination was made to offer a benefit. Mrs. Mowatt feels the sincerest gratification at having been able to assist and seeks no other commendation." The paper also complimented manager Bates and stated that he deserved "the applause of the public."[40]

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Rachel made a point of donating money to charity while in the United States. She donated $1,000 to the plague victims of Norfolk and $160 to seamen's orphans. Rachel's contract specifically guaranteed her right to "perform, whenever she judges suitable, for charities or benefits at evening performances, matinees or concerts" as long as they did not interfere with regularly scheduled performances.[41]

Theatre women were especially active in raising funds for patriotic causes. This might seem unusual at first since nationalism was traditionally associated with men more than women. However, charity benefits for patriotic causes have a long history in Anglo-American theatre and American women were very involved in several causes during the nineteenth century. One possible explanation is that fundraising under the guise of "caregiving" was an accepted part of the True Woman construct central to domestic ideology. Perhaps because women were so crucial in the social ideology of the early Republic, they were allowed "special dispensation" to be caregivers for national causes. Whatever the reason, women were central to the fundraising of many patriotic causes during the nineteenth century. The rest of this chapter will explore specific charity benefits sponsored by theatre women that raised funds for these causes between 1842 and 1863.

Female Stars, Charity Fundraising Benefits and the Larger Society: Elssler, Mowatt, Keene, and Cushman

Fanny Elssler, Bunker Hill Monument, 1840

Performer Fanny Elssler used the theatre benefit format to raise money for the final completion of Boston's Bunker Hill Monument, a project with a long history of

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non-completion. By 1827, the design, by architect Solomon Willard, had been adopted, the foundation laid, and construction begun. Yet, original funds were soon exhausted and work was temporarily abandoned in 1828. In April 1830, Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of *Godey's Lady's Book,* then led an effort to raise funds to complete the monument "by an appeal to the Ladies of New England." Using traditional female-based fundraising methods—bazaars and fairs—they raised $3,000.[42] By 1834, these funds were exhausted and a new campaign was mounted. This renewed fundraising effort, the Ladies' Fund, also led by women, was successful and building continued. Once again, however, the project exhausted its funds, progress was halted, and a call went out for money. Women's groups again led the effort, and in September 1840, the women of Boston and its vicinity "took hold of the enterprise." A fair was held in Faneuil Hall, "to which every woman in the United States had been invited to contribute" and every effort was made to raise money by subscription. The women ultimately raised $43,000, more money than had ever been raised for the monument, and construction was completed July 23, 1842. Women were given credit for this fundraising effort since "all that was needed to carry the monument to its proposed height was promptly supplied by the mothers and daughters of the land."[43]

In 1840, Elssler was beginning her United States tour. While appearing in Boston, "The Elssler" volunteered to the women of Boston the proceeds of two benefits for the Monument. During the summer of 1840, they raised over $4,000. In addition, Elssler paid the theatre overhead out of her own pocket, to ensure that all profits from the benefit event went to the monument association. Yet, the fundraising women had

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originally rejected Elssler's offer. This refusal reflected the social tension between the "scandalous" Elssler and the "respectable" women of Boston. In support of the women, the conservative press argued that "the wages of obscenity should not mingle with and pollute the freewill offering of New England's daughters" and that the monument should not "go up stained with the proceeds of an exhibition fraught with indecency."[44]

The Boston women's reaction most likely stemmed from the fact that the theatre was still perceived as unrespectable, and the actress was regarded as a notorious creature associated with prostitution. While the construct of respectability was beginning to be applied to upper-class women, it had not yet extended to the theatre and Elssler received similar press coverage throughout her tour. However, with the "proverbial generosity and liberality of stage favorites, she rose to the occasion, and gave a great benefit for the good cause."[45] The women of the association accepted Elssler's offer only after the two benefits had been performed, however, receiving the funds "with thanks" and making "a foreign female dancer a contributor to the rearing of the famous Bunker Hill Monument, the pride and boast of New England."[46]

Anna Cora Mowatt and Laura Keene, The Mount Vernon Association, 1854-1863

Performer-playwright Anna Cora Mowatt and performer-manager Laura Keene both played major roles in fundraising efforts for the Mount Vernon Association. By the early 1850s, Mount Vernon, the family home of George Washington, had fallen into disrepair and rumors spread that the property was to be purchased and turned into a country resort hotel. A voluntary group of women banded together to prevent the

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sale, forming the Mount Vernon Association to raise money to purchase the estate and restore it as a "national shrine." After her retirement from the stage in 1854, Mowatt was approached to spearhead the organization. She was selected not only because of her celebrity status and "winning personality," but also because of her respectability.

Mowatt's selection reflected society's changing response to the actress. The social position of the actress had changed in the years since Elssler's unwelcome efforts on behalf of the Bunker Hill Monument. No longer shunned as scandalous and associated with obscenity and prostitution, the actress was now more accepted by genteel society.

Mowatt quickly became a leader of the organization, was elected the Secretary of the Central Committee, and the organization set out to buy the property. Since women could not legally own property, they were forced to seek incorporation and have the corporation complete the sale. The State of Virginia, however, required that they create a charter and have it approved by the state before they could legally incorporate. Never in United States' history had any group of women been issued a charter, much less incorporated under the law. Mowatt, working with the Central Committee, drew up the charter and began campaigning in early 1855 to get it passed by the Virginia Legislature. The women faced the obstacle of anti-female prejudice but persevered and the charter bill was finally passed on March 19, 1856. For the first time in the United States, it became lawful for women to band together for legal action. The Mount Vernon estate, bought by the now-titled Mount Vernon Ladies Association

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of the Union (MVLA), would be maintained as a "philanthropic, educational and patriotic enterprise." Yet, the property was not fully restored until the mid-1860s.[47]

Fundraising efforts were held throughout the 1850s and 60s, through the auspices of the MVLA, to raise money for the restoration effort. As part of this effort, several benefits were organized and produced by theatre women working with the group. Mowatt organized several early fundraising benefits for the cause.[48] Former child actress Jean Davenport, among many others, also supported the association and participated in several benefits. Laura Keene organized one of the largest benefits for the association in late 1858. The matinee bill consisted of Keene's enormously popular hit, *Our American Cousin*. Keene targeted this matinee benefit at women and children stating that "families [had] repeatedly desired a matinee of *Our American Cousin*, in order that ladies and children might have an opportunity of witnessing its performance." Keene also quickly capitalized on the patriotic connection of the event emphasizing that "the great NATIONAL WORK now occupying the attention of the Women of America and which is conceived with the grand design of perpetuating the memory of the FATHER OF HIS COUNTRY, should receive the considerate attention of all who desire the accomplishment of this noble object." She also carefully delineated her complete allegiance to the project by turning over to the association "the gross receipts of the house, without any reservation whatever—assuming upon herself any expenses that may occur, incidental to the performance."[49]

Keene's correspondence indicates that she approached female managers of the MVLA and offered her theatre for a benefit. She specifically stated that "the ladies

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and gentlemen composing the company over which I have the pleasure of presiding, embracing every artist, musician, officer, and artisan connected with the establishment, have, in the most cordial manner, made a freewill offering of their services for the proposed entertainment."[50] The "ladies of the committee" responded favorably to Keene remarking that

> the great liberality on your part of withholding none of the gross receipts for expenses, the freewill offering of the valuable services of the whole corps attached to your Theatre in every department, with the selection of a piece so marked for wit and refinement, as well as for the admirable manner it is put upon the stage, all combine to prove, better than words can express, how deeply and truly you and they sympathize with a cause which has a claim upon all who reverence the memory of the great and the good.[51]

Godey's Lady's Book backed this matinee benefit solicitation, printing the names of givers in its monthly magazine, and it was well advertised that "ladies" were raising the funds.

Another benefit for the MVLA deserves notice. A fundraiser at the Academy of Music, advertised as a "Grand Gala Festival in aid of the fund of the Mount Vernon Association" was offered in December 1863. During the Civil War, patriotic fervor helped create a cooperative climate for Mount Vernon fundraising. This benefit was a "monster" event that lasted three days, and featured theatre and opera performers from all over the city volunteering their services. It also featured a wide variety of roles and scenes that highlighted the intertheatricality of the event. Unlike "monster" benefits held for retiring male managers, this benefit was organized and produced by women who also made up the majority of performers. Women organizing the event included Matilda Heron, Agnes Robertson, Catherine Sinclair, Fanny Morant, Mrs. J. H. Allen,

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Mrs. Hoey, Mary Gannon, Mrs. Grattan, Mrs. Sloan, Mrs. Vernon, Julia Daly, and Ada Clifton. Highlights of the bill included Julia Daly in the cross-dressed role of King Charles in *Faint Heart Never Won Fair Lady*, Matilda Heron's *Medea* with Heron in the lead role, *The Morning Call* featuring Catherine Sinclair, and *Milly, the Maid with the Milking Pail* featuring Agnes Robertson. This "gala festival of entertainment" also included minstrel sketches, opera arias, patriotic musical "melanges," and a wide variety of songs and dances. Lastly, the three-day affair offered $1 tickets for a full day of events, but also included 25 cent tickets "in order that all classes of the community may have an opportunity of contributing their mite to this national homage, admission to the Monster Concert."[52]

During the days of the Civil War, this wide variety in pricing may have reflected the financial hardships of many New Yorkers. It may have appealed to different segments of the population since the performers at the benefit came from such diverse theatres as the upper-class Wallack's, as well as the working-class Bowery.

<u>Charlotte Cushman, The United States Sanitary Commission, 1863</u>

The Civil War also served as a backdrop to other patriotic fundraising by women. In the name of "the national cause," calls went out for female volunteers to organize supply efforts to the frontlines, to raise money, and to nurse the wounded.[53] Already long associated with charity and benevolence, women volunteered in large numbers. They were uniquely equipped with the background and skills to accomplish the tasks required, since they had long been volunteering their time and labor to various local social and charity causes throughout the growth of the American republic.

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Voluntarism, previously confined to the domestic sphere of women and to issues directly affecting women's lives such as the care of children and the poor, took on a more public role and emerged as a professional, strategic tool of community fundraising in the Civil War.

Although the War aroused the charitable energies of everyone, women played the most crucial roles in fundraising campaigns for Union and Confederate causes. The earliest movement created for Union volunteer aid and relief was begun by the "women of the country," and from the onset of the War, women's aid societies raised funds to assist the families of volunteer soldiers, and to aid the sick and wounded.[54] The female fundraising style was crucial during the Civil War, as female-identified models—charity fairs, bazaars and the national use of community-based volunteers—became dominant tools for fundraising.

The USSC was a private, voluntary organization formed in June 1861 to provide preventive service and physical and medical relief to northern volunteer soldiers and officers during the Civil War. The USSC modeled its service on women's volunteer organizations with central headquarters located in Washington, and branches and societies scattered throughout the northeast. Local women's groups and soldier's aid societies served as branch agencies, and women themselves played key roles in the operation and organization of the commission and its subsidiaries. Women were so central to the organization that USSC President Bellows called this phenomenon of women and charity the "uprising of the women of the land."[55] The USSC's task was to organize and direct the activities of thousands of women's societies to improve

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conditions in military camps and hospitals through on-site inspections, and to persuade military leaders to change unsanitary practices.[56]

The USSC received no funds from the federal government. It relied on fundraising efforts from the private sector and on large numbers of mostly female volunteers to appeal for money, goods, and services. It gave a new prestige to voluntary action. By using this combination of volunteers and charity, immense sums of money were raised. Ultimately, the USSC raised and disbursed $50,000,000 by the end of the Civil War.[57] Further, the organization stressed the importance of local communities. Washington-based USSC organizer Louisa Lee Schuyler called on regional managers and other female leaders to share the proceeds from Fairs and other fundraising campaigns and return them to local communities. National organizers of the USSC recognized that this emphasis on community benefited not only the Commission by keeping local areas stocked with supplies, but also allowed regions to invest their interests in smaller provincial concerns.

As war raged on the battlefields, theatres and other entertainment centers began raising money for the Union cause through benefits:

> The churches are begging for money. The theatres are giving benefits. The minstrels are crowded nightly in the same noble cause. Regiments are giving promenade concerts, and billiard tables and bowling alleys are open to the lame.[58]

Benefits not only served as fundraisers for the Union cause, but also raised money to extend caregiving to the families of soldiers, and to wounded and disabled soldiers no longer on the battlefield. The benefit was a primary tool used by both women in the larger society and the theatre to raise funds for the most important voluntary

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organization of the Civil War, the United States Sanitary Commission (USSC). The principal USSC theatrical benefit fundraiser was Charlotte Cushman, already renowned in the theatrical profession for her generosity in giving to charitable causes and for supporting other performers in benefits.[59] During the fall of 1863, Cushman raised over $8,000 for the USSC from five benefit performances of *Macbeth*, held in Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, Baltimore, and New York.[60]

Numerous local communities profited from Cushman's USSC benefits as she called for the money to be disbursed by local organizations back into regional areas. Cushman requested that the total receipts from the New York performance, $2,772, be distributed by the USSC to the local women's branch—the WCRA—and that the Boston portion of the benefit proceeds, $2,021, go to the New England Women's Auxiliary Association.[61] She also used the idea of community, both civic and theatrical, to attract local audiences. At each benefit, Cushman played the role of Lady Macbeth, while a different local actor in each city volunteered to play Macbeth. For example, Edwin Booth portrayed Macbeth in New York and Joseph Proctor played the role in Boston, with local community actors appearing in subordinate roles. By using actors from the local community, Cushman reflected the localized concerns of the USSC.

Cushman's USSC *Macbeth* illustrates many of the characteristics inherent in benefit performances. Playbills for these events continued to privilege Cushman, but also privileged the USSC as the charity by listing the words "CHARLOTTE CUSHMAN in a BENEFIT for the United States Sanitary Commission" in large typeface at the top of the bill. Benefits held by a popular actress to raise funds for an

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important charitable cause illustrate other perceptions of the benefit performance. The sponsoring actress fulfilled the socially constructed traditional gender role of caregiver by tending to the needs of others. Since charitable fundraising for these "unfortunates" was an accepted activity for the nineteenth-century True Woman, Cushman and her USSC benefits can thus be interpreted as operating within the bounds of proper society. She was perceived as a fundraiser for a cause and was recognized as donating her time and talents to the preservation of the Union.

Celebrity, already crucial to the operation of the benefit, was even more important to the charity benefit. In the construction of celebrity, the personal qualities of an individual performer could dominate over the perception of the actor enacting a role. Cushman was an enormously popular performer and the character of Lady Macbeth was her most popular and well-known role. Instead of being labeled "scandalous" by the press, as Fanny Elssler was in 1842, Cushman is praised for her efforts as caregiver to the national cause.

In addition, the construct of respectability had undergone a social and cultural shift in the 1850s, especially where the actress was concerned. The "society" actress, epitomized by Mrs. Hoey of Wallack's, was not only accepted by society, but also admired by it. By 1863, the actress enjoyed an acceptance and respectability never before realized in the American theatre. Indeed, Cushman had carefully constructed a shell of respectability around her life and career, and was praised for her "high standard of duty" as well as her "consummate image of womanhood."[62] Celebrity

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status, coupled with the now fully emergent construct of female respectability, gave Cushman a social currency not allowed Elssler.

Ultimately, in Cushman's USSC benefits, the audience community experienced a variety of performances. They experienced the celebrity actress in a bravura performance in the role that first established her as a star. They experienced the mimetic reality of the character of Lady Macbeth. Finally, they experienced Cushman as fundraiser, traditional female caregiver, and patriot as she used her popular appeal and respectability to sponsor a cause and to form a symbiotic bond of patriotism with audiences. Cushman and the USSC were foregrounded in the performance as both performers and local community audiences were united in a grand patriotic staging to raise funds for a commonly acceptable cause.

In addition, Cushman was positioned as the principal producer in these benefits, advertising her New York performance in both playbills and newspaper advertisements as "given by Charlotte Cushman, assisted by Edwin Booth."[63] Her name was in large, boldface type on the cast list, while Booth's was not. The semiotic significance of the large typeface, the positioning of Cushman as the celebrity organizer, and the words "benefit for the USSC" in all capital letters, support Cushman as the principal producer or sponsor. Further, Cushman occupied a strong subject position in her USSC benefits by acting as producer of her benefit. By doing so, Cushman retained artistic and financial control. Through the institution of charity and the traditional role of benevolent True Woman fundraiser and patriotic caregiver, she pushed through into a

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very public arena. In this way, Cushman used the agency within the benefit and created a strong, if temporary, subject position through performance.

Rhetoric surrounding Cushman's USSC benefits, and the money raised by them, reveals the torturous nineteenth-century relationship between women and money.

> The money is to be expended through our home branches in the cities where the sums were contributed so that this money may continue as long as possible to be sanctified by the touch of only woman's hands. It will thus reach our soldiers on battlefields and in hospitals, charged with the blessings, prayers and tears of American womanhood.[64]

In the nineteenth century, large sums of money, even when raised for charity carried a stigma of shame. Although money was necessary, the making of it was shameful. In addition, only men "made" money in the public sphere. If money in itself was shameful, women's association with it could not be considered respectable.

Yet, by the same standard, women were considered to be purer than men were and closer to nature's "perfect" form. Thus, a woman making, earning, or raising money presented a problem. It needed to be "sanctified" or "blessed" by the touch of respectable women. In 1840, Fanny Elssler's advantageous contract negotiation had generated a storm of protest that reflected the social bias against women being associated with large sums of money. The rhetoric associated with Elssler's fundraising attempts referred to the money she raised as being "stained with indecency" and reflected the strong prejudice against the female performer.

Cushman's active role in raising money for the USSC represents the tensions and contradictions in nineteenth-century patriarchal and capitalist society. By the time of Cushman's USSC benefits, the actress had been elevated to a "purer" state and

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awarded a place in respectable "American womanhood." The respectable women of the USSC were happy to accept the money raised by Cushman, and her benefits produced none of the anti-actress rhetoric from women that marked those of Elssler's Bunker Hill Monument endeavors. Local press rhetoric praised the large sums of money she raised through her benefits, and included the actress in the sisterhood of respectability.

Sadly, however, while the position of the actress had been socially elevated, she and other respectable women still found that their labors were suspect where money was concerned. These women had found a strong position in benefit fundraising that produced millions of dollars, but earning their own living was still unconventional and provoked suspicion. Even though women had clearly demonstrated their competency in managing the immense funds of the USSC, their business acumen was still doubted and ridiculed. True female economic agency was still to come. By the 1860s, through the charity benefit and her newfound position of respectability, the actress had clearly found a position of agency in the public sphere. The true economic reality, however, remained to be seen. Post-Civil War economic and social developments as well as major changes in the business of theatre and institutional charity would drastically alter the benefit system.

Ultimately, however, the theatrical charity benefit provided an acceptable venue for theatre women to find agency both in the theatre profession and, especially, in the larger society. Through the sponsorship of a charity benefit, women supported other women and female-identified causes. Created by women and later appropriated by

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men, the charity matinee benefit remained an important charitable fundraising tool for the theatre throughout the nineteenth century. In addition, the celebrity status of many female charity benefit sponsors intersected with the intertheatrical aspects of the form to increase agency. By trading on women's traditional ties to charity, voluntarism, and caregiving, women found they could use the charity benefit to provide aid to causes in which they were interested. Lastly, the construct of respectability developed over time and had a major effect on women's lives, enabling them to gain a presence in the public sphere. The actress, seen as unrespectable in 1840 had, by 1863, attained a respectable status that allowed her to forge new pathways into the public sphere as well. Yet, she found that while crucial to women as a way to gain power in society, respectability could also work as a liability under the limitations of domestic ideology.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Theatre historian Judith Milhous in *Thomas Betterton and the Management of Lincoln's Inn Fields, 1695-1708* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), 111-2, has argued that charity benefits may also have been a sign of economic hard times in the theatre--an attempt to guarantee house expenses when no profit could be expected.

[2] George O. Seilhamer, *A History of the American Theatre*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia, PA: Globe Printing House, 1888-1891), 20.

[3] *New York Journal*, July 1774.

[4] Playbill, Park Theatre, December 7, 1848.

[5] Playbill, Mitchell's Olympic Theatre, December 14, 1848.

[6] *Pittsburgh Chronicle*, June 14, 1852. Testimonials, yet another later form of charity benefit, will be discussed in the next chapter. Committees also organized testimonials, offered as a testament to a person's social status. However, these committees included people from the outside community, usually male civic and political leaders, and were overwhelmingly male, both in composition and in orientation.

[7] Many nineteenth-century male actors were members of the Elks.

[8] Playbill, Academy of Music, November 12, 1864.

[9] Playbill, Booth's Theatre, November 25, 1864.

[10] Playbill, Academy of Music, October 11, 1858.

[11] Playbill, Laura Keene's Theatre, December 18, 1858.

[12] Seilhamer, 1, 11.

[13] Playbill, Park Theatre (Brooklyn), October 30, 1864.

[14] Playbill, New Bowery Theatre, April 12, 1874.

[15] Madame Celeste clippings file, Harvard Theatre Collection.

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[16] Ivor Guest, *Fanny Elssler* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1970), 176.

[17] Guest, 179, 184. The Theatrical Fund and other attempts at institutional aid for the theatre will be discussed in Chapter 5.

[18] Ibid, 185.

[19] *The Letters and Journals of Fanny Elssler* (New York: H.G. Daggers, 1845), 58. The contemporaneous press coverage surrounding Elssler and the subsequent treatment of her financial negotiations by theatre historians is a rich trove of misogynistic rhetoric that deserves further study. In contrast, Edwin Forrest's careful contract negotiations for the highest salary possible were interpreted as favorable and forthright. See Richard Moody, *Edwin Forrest: First Star of the American Stage* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), 66-81, 164-86.

[20] Eric Wollencott Barnes, *The Lady of Fashion: The Life and the Theatre of Anna Cora Mowatt* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1954), 177.

[21] Anna Cora Mowatt Richie, *Autobiography of an Actress* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1854; New York: Arno Press, 1980), 420.

[22] *New York Herald*, September 29, 1841. Many, but not all, charity benefits charged higher prices for tickets. Larger theatres, such as Manhattan's Academy of Music and Brooklyn's Atheneum, frequently charged higher ticket prices. Perhaps these higher prices reflected the belief that because it was to raise funds for charity, audiences were willing to pay more in admission fees.

[23] Playbill, Park Theatre, September 28, 1841.

[24] Playbill, Academy of Music, January 17, 1872; Vernanne Bryan, *Laura Keene: A British Actress on the American Stage, 1826-1873* (Jefferson, NC/London: McFarland & Company, 1997), 162.

[25] Playbill, Academy of Music (Brooklyn), January 19, 1871; Playbill, Park Theatre (Brooklyn), January 18, 1871.

[26] Undated, handwritten entry, diary of Mrs. Julia Jones, NYPL Rare Books and Manuscripts.

[27] Léon Beauvallet, *Rachel and the New World: Tragedienne in America*, ed. and trans. Colin Clair (New York/Toronto: Abelard-Schuman, 1967), 141.

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[28] Playbill, Niblo's Theatre, December 27, 1860.

[29] Playbill, Broadway Theatre, March 26, 1874.

[30] Playbill, Park Theatre, June 27, 1842.

[31] Playbill, Mrs. Conway's Theatre, April 7, 1874.

[32] Edwin Booth appropriated the successful charity matinee and offered them during his tenure as manager at the Winter Garden (1864-67) and at his own Booth's Theatre (1869-74). Augustin Daly offered charity matinee benefits at his theatre in the 1880s. Both of these male managers, however, offered traditional male-centered fare from the traditional canon and offered no special agency for the actress or the female audience member.

[33] Bryan, 84.

[34] Playbill, Laura Keene's Theatre, February 28, 1857.

[35] Beauvallet, 30.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Playbill, Academy of Music, December 4, 1869.

[38] Playbill, Wallack's Lyceum, September 25, 1857.

[39] Playbill, Mrs. Conway's Theatre, October 20, 1871.

[40] Barnes, 246-7 and *Missouri Republican*, St. Louis, MO, December 10-20, 1851.

[41] Beauvallet, 220-4, copy of tour contract.

[42] William W. Wheildon, ed., *Memoir of Solomon Willard, Architect and Superintendent of the Bunker Hill Monument* (Washington, DC: Monument Association, 1865), 164-5.

[43] Daniel Webster, *The Orations on Bunker Hill Monument, the Character of Washington, and the Landing at Plymouth* (New York: American Book Company, 1894), 17, 44.

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[44] *Boston Weekly Magazine*, October 10, 1840.

[45] (Boston) *Evening Sun*, October 2, 1899.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Barnes, 266-82.

[48] Barnes, 281.

[49] Playbill, Laura Keene's Theatre, December 29, 1858.

[50] Keene to managers of the MVA, December 14, 1858. Harvard Theatre Collection, Laura Keene file.

[51] Managers of the MVA to Laura Keene, December 16, 1858. HTC.

[52] Playbill, Academy of Music, December 1863.

[53] United States Sanitary Commission, *The United States Sanitary Commission: A Sketch of Its Purposes and Its Work, Compiled from Documents and Private Papers* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Company, 1863), 41.

[54] Charles J. Stillé, *History of the United States Sanitary Commission: Being the General Report of Its Work During the War of the Rebellion* (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott & Company, 1866), 39.

[55] Robert H. Bremner, *American Philanthropy*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 77.

[56] Bremner, 80.

[57] Christine Bolt, *The Women's Movements in the United States and Britain from the 1790s to the 1920s* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 111.

[58] Stillé, 483-84. Also see William Quentin Maxwell, *Lincoln's Fifth Wheel: The Political History of the United States Sanitary Commission* (New York: Longmans, Green & Company, 1956), 224.

[59] Charles Shattuck, *Shakespeare on the American Stage* (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1976), 90-1. Shattuck discusses Macready's refusal during his American tour to contribute his services to other actors' benefits, "lest at every stop he

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be inundated with requests." He refused to make an exception for Cushman and she wrote him a "rather sharp note" and "refused to depend on him further." Lawrence Barrett, *Charlotte Cushman, A Lecture* (1889; reprint, New York: Burt Franklin, 1970), 24. Barrett states that Cushman "had an open hand for true charity."

[60] Funds raised from Cushman's USSC benefits: Philadelphia, Academy of Music, September 12, $1,314.27; Boston, Academy of Music, September 26, $2,020.75; Washington, Grover's Theatre, October 17, $1,800; New York, Academy of Music, October 22, $2,772.27.

[61] Entry on donor list of WCRA for April 1864, Box #993, USSC records (Records of Women's Central Relief Association). Also, Box #639, USSC, Cushman to Bellows, October 31, 1864. All records of the USSC, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library.

[62] William Winter, *Shakespeare on the Stage* (New York: Moffat, Yard, 1911), 554.

[63] *The New York Times*, October 20, 1863, 7.

[64] Ibid.

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Chapter V

Decline of the Benefit Tradition: Transition and Displacement of Female Agency

<u>Introduction</u>

This chapter will explore social, economic, and theatrical changes that privileged manager over performer, and set the climate for the elimination of the benefit and the loss of corresponding agency for women. The performer's contractual benefit, still strong in 1850, had largely disappeared from the theatre by 1875. While damaging to all performers, it represented a major loss of agency for theatrical women. With the demise of the benefit tradition, players lost the entrepreneurial and intertheatrical agency of the contractual benefit, and economic power and control in the theatre shifted to managers, the vast majority of whom were male. Women in the theatre found themselves in a newly circumscribed economic and artistic environment that commodified and objectified them and their image. Without the intertheatrical agency of the benefit that allowed for a powerful, albeit temporary, foregrounding of women as subjects of the drama, and encouraged a strong community of female performers, theatrical women had little power to oppose the economic juggernaut of post-Civil War professional entertainment.

The demands of professionalism and respectability also exerted pressures on the theatre to abandon benefits. The new business practices of the industry facilitated the development of a respectable, professional business model that had no room for the small, community-based benefit. At the same time, charity benefits for both theatrical and non-theatrical causes were also displaced from the performer's power and control.

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Professional theatrical charity organizations appropriated charity benefits that aided theatrical workers, and managers appropriated control of charity benefits for outside causes, including social causes once traditionally associated with women. Theatrical business management, overwhelmingly dominated by men, now controlled traditional female interests and concerns. Charitable causes such as the care of orphans and the sick, once a stronghold of female agency, were no longer under the aegis of theatrical women.

However, while theatrical women lost the benefit due to social and economic forces beyond their control, women in the larger society appropriated its agency. Society women, now wielding a new power based in social respectability and post-Civil War Northern wealth, displaced the benefit into private and home theatres, and used it as a charitable fundraising strategy to wield cultural and social power. Women's clubs founded by professional and working women and open to all women, staged theatrical benefits for fundraising and communal purposes. By the early 1890s, with the creation of theatrical women's social clubs such as the Professional Women's League, women performers once again recuperated the benefit as a site of agency.

Loss of the Benefit

Theatrical Changes

Before the full effects of the loss of the benefit on women can be examined, some reasons why the tradition declined in the American theatre must be delineated. Several factors contributed to the environment that discouraged and "demonized" the benefit. As the population expanded, theatrical entertainment began to be seen as a

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highly lucrative product to be consumed by the industrialized masses. While the risks of production may have been great, the potential profits were enormous as modern capitalism and new business practices converted local theatrical products into economic commodities. These post-Civil War developments changed the nature of the professional theatre and proved deadly to the benefit tradition.

During and after the war, railway transportation expanded and rapidly changed the nature of theatre travel. Tracks were extended, which enabled theatre companies to travel more comfortably, and their sets and costume wardrobes to be carried more quickly and safely than earlier carriages and coaches. Improved transportation, in turn, aided the development of formally organized local theatrical circuits. After the war, local theatrical circuits became the norm for theatrical touring companies.

The growth of circuits, combined with the increasing centralization of New York City as the theatrical capital of the Northeast, encouraged the proliferation of combination companies. Combinations toured a single play with its entire cast and by the 1868-69 season were the predominant means of theatrical production and consumption outside of New York City.[1] Profit-making touring companies, controlled by business managers with little or no theatrical background, replaced the nurturing environment of small, local stock companies.

The combination system included few elements that fostered communal support among performers. For example, the rotating repertory of the old "stock" system was discarded in favor of featuring one play on the bill. This maximum profit-making

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strategy led to longer runs of a single play with fewer production costs. While the stock company system had given actors opportunities to play a variety of roles in which they fully developed their talents, the combination company provided actors with far fewer parts in which to demonstrate their range. The combination system took advantage of the drawing power of stars, but employed a company of low-salaried actors to surround the star. Eventually, combinations focused solely on the popularity of a play and dispensed with stars altogether, further cutting production costs.

As a result, the performer was now less important to the system. Combinations encouraged a typecasting of star and supporting players—more than the old "line of business" hierarchy—and consequently narrowed and confined their talents and careers. It also needed fewer performers than the old stock system, and thus encouraged more competition for fewer jobs. The performer became simply another element in the theatrical product, as were sets and costumes. This narrowly defined typecasting had no room for the expansive entrepreneurial performer's benefit that highlighted the talent and virtuosity of performers, nor did it encourage the stable community needed for the agency of the benefit.

As part of the new business of theatre, business managers, many of whom knew nothing of the theatre, replaced actor-managers. A.M. Palmer, for example, manager of the Union Square Theatre, was trained as a lawyer when he entered the business. He had no theatrical background or experience, nor did he come from a theatrical family. With the opening up of the theatre profession to outsiders, the small, local community lost its cohesion as the business manager concentrated on the industry's

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profit-making potential. Even the few remaining small, autonomous actor-managers, such as Lester Wallack, began to utilize modern business practices.

These practices and changes in theatrical management and structure had severe consequences on players. They no longer had the comfort of the stock company's tradition of being paid for rehearsing a new play while performing in another. If fortunate enough to be cast in the one play featured in the combination company, they were no longer paid for rehearsals. If the touring play failed, the lesser actors would frequently be dismissed to face an uncertain season since other combination companies were already cast for the season.[2] Relationships between managers and actors became increasingly litigious. Both were guilty of violating contracts, and disputes not settled quickly often wound up in court. All these factors contributed to a destabilizing effect on the theatre community and the benefit tradition.

The benefit had thrived in the small, local theatre community as an opportunity for the actor to be in business for herself for one night during the season. With the development and widespread adoption of combination companies, business managers, theatrical circuits, the centralization of production, and other non-local management strategies, the benefit became the target of antagonism. There was simply no place in modern theatrical business for the autonomous entrepreneurship of the actor's benefit. The emphasis on theatre as an entertainment commodity created for consumption by a hungry public did not recognize performers as artistic individuals comprising a community. They were increasingly interpreted as one of the economic elements in the theatrical product, while the benefit foregrounded the performer as a "singular

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quality."[3] The benefit tradition needed a permanent, stable community of performers in which to practice reciprocal aid and other strategies that provided agency. After the Civil War, that stable community began to collapse.

Professionalization and Respectability

Under the impact of industrialization and the growth of a strong capitalist business system, the two social constructs of professionalism and respectability also further transformed the nature of American theatre. As the upper classes accepted the theatre and included it in their social life as an approved form of entertainment, they sought professionalism as a sign of worthiness. They wanted nothing that smacked of "vagabondage" or "begging" by the theatre or by performers. The benefit was increasingly seen as a non-professional embarrassment and interpreted as an affront to professional dignity. Critics charged that "the theatrical profession – if it aspires to the dignity of a profession – is the only one which is constantly appealing to the public in the form of benefits. Actors of all classes are constantly appearing in the character of beggars . . . without any regard for professional dignity."[4]

Players were more visible in society as it became more open to what was socially acceptable. As a result of that visibility, theatre artists actively sought respectability as a means to not only curry favor with the public, but also to build professional currency. Ironically, the construct of respectability, which women had used to build agency, was now increasingly associated with professionalism as part of an argument to persuade actors of the advantages of the new business system. They

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would make more money, contribute to the professionalization of the theatre, and become respected members of society.

By the late 1860s, the benefit was being attacked as a non-professional vestige of the old theatrical system. Business managers, supported by the discourse of the period, argued that

> with the old style of things, a leading man received eighteen or twenty dollars a week and occupied a position in society that was, to say the least, questionable - or, rather, he had no position at all. Today he receives from one hundred to two hundred and fifty dollars a week, lives at the best hotels, and moves among respectable ladies and gentlemen, thanks to the benefits of the combination system.[5]

In the face of pressure to become respectable and professional, the benefit was no longer something of which to be proud, and many players began to look upon the practice as being inconsistent with professional dignity.

The contractual benefit became a site of contention within the new business community of the theatre. Anti-benefit rhetoric became common as several New York newspapers urged that "the spread of theatres and the steady and consistent demand of enormous populations for theatrical and semi-theatrical amusements ought to stimulate actors to throw off all such depressing vestiges of the days of their vagabondage as benefits," and argued that the system encouraged "bad acting" and "notorious experiments" on stage and "tried the patience of audiences."[6] This rhetoric did not differentiate between charity benefits for performers and contractual benefits. It interpreted them all as begging and argued that they were an embarrassment to the

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profession and that a more "scientific" and structured approach was needed. Rhetoric was increasingly devoted to abolishing the benefit system altogether.

Theatrical business managers enthusiastically supported the abolition of a system that they had always disliked, as it represented entrepreneurial power for the actor. With the advent of modern capitalist business practices, the conditions were such that the businessman-manager successfully waged battle against the performer's benefit. Management alone, however, did not accomplish the final dismantling of the system. The performer's own anxiety about money and a secure job also contributed to the abolition of the benefit. Combination companies compounded the problem by offering opportunities for quick advancement. This produced an intense competition for available jobs, and decreased the sense of community needed for the benefit.

Due to the above factors and the increasingly anti-benefit stance of managers and newspapers, actors felt themselves to be monetarily disadvantaged and on the defensive. When the offer from management for better salaries finally arose, it was on the condition that the benefit would be eliminated.

Abolition of the Performer's Benefit

By 1868, actors were still being paid the lower salaries that had been established during the lean years of the Civil War and they pressed for higher salaries. In March 1868, upon his inheritance of the management of Wallack's, Lester Wallack officially

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set about abolishing the benefit at his theatre. To Wallack, they were "degrading" and he was inordinately proud that he was "the first to put a stop" to them.

> After Wallack's Theatre came entirely into my own hands, I assembled the company in my office and I questioned them severally as to what, in the years they had been with me was the largest sum they had ever cleared by a benefit. "Well, 'said one, 'I cleared for my share a hundred and fifty dollars.' Another: 'I cleared $50.' Others made $300 or $400, as the case might be. I said, 'Well, I'll tell you what I'll do; I will tack the sum, whatever it is, on to your weekly salaries, and so do away with the benefits altogether. The offer was accepted, other managers followed by example, and the obnoxious system died an easy and natural death.[7]

Wallack referred to this one-time offer as a *douceur,* and it was clear that this was a temporary arrangement, good only for that season. It was not meant to be a salary increase. The actors agreed to this arrangement and the managers had finally won the battle over the benefit. Whether performers clearly understood the impermanence of this arrangement or not, in the long run, their loss was substantial. The benefit system had allowed a *yearly* supplement to salary, while the *douceur* Wallack offered was never to be repeated. The following year did not see a corresponding rise in salaries.

The battle over the abolition of the benefit was played out in the letters columns of the *New York Times*. Letters supporting performers called the arrangement "selfish, narrow and unfair." These writers understood the intrinsic intertheatrical nature of the benefit and the changing business nature of the profession:

> It [the benefit] recognizes their position before the public and gives each of them a chance to appeal, in *propria persona* on his own behalf, to those who may be among his personal friends or admire his professional ability. To deprive actors of this chance is simply to make them still more entirely mere *employees* of a manager - mere wheels in a machine, of which all the credit, as well as all the

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> profit, goes to the management. This has been the tendency of theatrical matters for some time past, and Wallack's seems inclined to aid the movement.[8]

Correspondents representing the other position argued that Wallack had done a "wise and liberal thing in offering a private *douceur*." One argued that "Mr. Wallack, finding that the giving of these benefits would seriously interfere at this moment with the conduct of his business, proposed to purchase from each of these artists this portion of his contract." Other writers attacked the benefit as "beggary" and appealed to the profession's sense of respectability in abolishing this "inferior" system.[9]

Managers were pleased by Wallack's edict and most theatres now began to negotiate with actors to eliminate the benefit. The few benefits that appeared in New York theatres other than Wallack's after 1868 had shifted to the aegis of the manager, rather than the performer. They foregrounded the new power of the manager over the communal agency of the performer. Autonomous players no longer offered their services; the managers offered them.[10] A benefit for Wallack's actor H.J. Montague, staged at Booth's Theatre, "gratefully acknowledged" the managers—Daly, Wallack, Shook and Palmer (of the Union Square Theatre), and Jarrett and Palmer (of Booth's)—"by which the services of many of the distinguished volunteering artists appearing today were gained," while not mentioning any of the performers.

While most performers lost the contractual benefit, non-performing personnel such as managers, stage managers, business officers, scenic artists, and even ushers—all traditionally male occupations—at many theatres continued to receive an annual benefit. When stage manager John L. Vincent received his, he noted not the names of

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his volunteers, but only that they were present "with the kind permission of Lester Wallack."[11] At Union Square stage manager Tooker's benefit, he thanked managers Jarrett and Palmer, to whom he was "indebted for the gratuitous grant of Booth's Theatre and the permission of the company to volunteer," as well as the "friendly action of Daly of the 5th Avenue Theatre," and managers "Lester Wallack and Josh Hart."[12] He thanked all the above managers for "releasing" the volunteers, but gave no appreciation to the volunteer performers themselves. An April 1871 benefit for Mr. A. Kingsland, Chief Usher, and his assistants was presented at the Grand Opera House.[13] Ironically, manager Lester Wallack continued his practice of a yearly benefit until the demise of his theatre in 1887.

What was once a performer's entrepreneurial site of communal power was now a tightly controlled site of the institutional, personal, and social power and authority of the manager. More importantly, it was now exclusively a site of dominant gender power and ideology since the vast majority of theatrical business managers and non-performing personnel were male. Since women were rarely found in non-performing positions, neither they nor their concerns were now represented in the benefit tradition.

Lastly, non-theatrical charity benefits now began to fall under the producing and organizing control of the business manager. This compounded the loss of benefit agency for women since they also had used the form to sponsor traditional female charity causes and concerns. The theatrical charity benefit now became a site of fashionable, respectable, upper-class philanthropy, marked by its association with male managers. For example, Augustin Daly appropriated the "charity benefit matinee,"

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and became one of the largest theatrical fundraisers for traditional charitable causes once championed by women.[14]

As the benefits that remained within the theatre were displaced to the authority of the manager, the form also made the transition to the larger society. As part of the professionalization of charity and philanthropy, the benefit was now appropriated as a primary fundraising tool for theatrical philanthropic institutions. Yet, women found little or no agency in this displacement since these professional organizations excluded them from institutional power.

Transition: Institutionalization of Theatrical Charity

Philanthropy and charity were professionally institutionalized in the late 1860s. No longer small communal organizations run by women, these outfits were large professional organizations run by men. The Civil War's USSC, while based on models of autonomous female benevolence, paradoxically helped usher in a new age of efficiency and professionalism that ended the spontaneous, local networks of women's charity. Dominant gender ideology dictated that "undisciplined" female benevolence had to be "appropriately channeled" into new, efficient, professional channels run by men.[15] In addition, business changes mandated that local communal attempts to aid others were no longer respectable or appropriate. Assistance must now be "properly organized and administered."[16]

Under the rubric of business, men appropriated traditional female traits of moral duties nurtured in women's domain, such as charity, and controlled them in the public

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sphere. While women worked as both volunteers and paid staff members, they were not found in administrative positions, nor did they serve on boards of directors. In spite of the gains and legitimatization of women's fundraising roles accomplished during the war, they were locked out of these powerful leadership positions in the industry of charity and philanthropy. By the late 1860s, institutionalized charity was not only the norm, but was seen as the only appropriate venue for public distribution of goods and services to the poor.

This move toward institutionalization of charity was also encouraged in the theatrical profession, as pressures were applied to professionalize its own charity. No longer was it acceptable for a profession to provide charity through such "improper" channels as benefits. Theatrical workers and their advocates called for the creation of an institutionalized charitable organization that would meet all the needs of the theatrical profession, and rhetoric supporting this position appeared in the local press. *The New York Daily Mirror* was committed to "upgrading the theatre," and argued that "we have demonstrated that in theatricals as in everything else, respectability pays."[17] The *Mirror* reminded theatre people that they had fostered goodwill through their benefits for various public needs, but needed to do more for themselves. When playwright Dion Boucicault called for a benefit for Irish relief, the *Mirror* objected: "We would not do anything to check the torrent of benevolence . . . but the theatres have their own good work to do and they have no chance to do it properly because of the incessant requirements of these outside charities." The *Mirror* advocated the creation of a "professional charity" for the theatre "which ought to get precedence of

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any other organized charity benefits at the theatre." As part of the organizational mechanism of "professional charity," the benefit was assimilated as a "professional" method of raising an annual amount of money, as "managers, stars and companies everywhere will eagerly volunteer to give one benefit a year."[18]

The American Dramatic Fund (ADF), established in 1848, was the first theatrical charity organization to have a substantive impact on the quality of life for performers and other theatrical personnel. The ADF, established in New York City, was open to all members of the theatrical profession. Members subscribed annual dues to the fund, which were augmented by annual public benefit performances. Benefits were actually written into the bylaws of the Fund, whose stated purpose was "to raise by subscription from the members thereof, by voluntary donations and bequests from members and others—by Public Donors and Theatrical Benefits—a stock or fund for making a provision, for aged and decrepit Members, and such provision for the Nominees' Widows and Orphaned Children of Members and also for Funeral Expenses."[19]

While the ADF appealed to a sense of community and used some of the intertheatrical aspects that had so strongly supported the performer, women did not find any degree of agency within its benefits.[20] No women ever served on the Fund's committees that produced the benefits or on the board of trustees.[21] Women had no role, and thus no agency, in organizing and producing benefits for the ADF.

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As the benefit made the transition from the theatre to the larger society around it, there remained only two locations where the displacement made room for female agency. Before those are examined in detail, the ramifications of the loss of benefit agency for the female performer, in light of further historical and economic changes for women, should be put into focus.

Displacement: Female Benefit Agency

Female Performers: Lack of Agency and Power

At the same time the performer lost the benefit, other business and social changes had a major impact on women in the theatre. The profession, while finally accepted by the upper classes and accorded some degree of respectability, was still considered the least respectable of the fine arts. Most probably this was due to tensions between the social dictates of middle-class respectability and the social mores of modesty, and the public self-display that theatre demanded. The actress, unlike other women artists such as sculptors and painters, found it more difficult to locate the same degree of respectable agency. Other arts were more private and could be practiced in domestic-like arenas; the theatre profession demanded a non-private, non-domestic arena for performance. While the theatre profited from increasing public acceptance based on respectability and new business practices, the actress still struggled for professional and social advancement.

Within the theatre, the benefit was the only performance site where women could find an empowering, subjective agency. With the abolition of the benefit,

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theatrical women no longer had a site of communal activity. The many empowering aspects of the benefit that provided agency for women—gender-specific reciprocal voluntarism, an alternative gender ideology that constructed new performance texts highlighting female subjectivity, and the constructs of celebrity and popular appeal, as well as economic entrepreneurship—were no longer available in the new professional theatrical business. The loss of the benefit and its powerful intertheatrical and personal agency, combined with the increased number of "visual" entertainments dependent on the display of women's bodies and images, served to deny women a subjective voice in the theatre of the 1870s and 1880s.

The new visual theatre, emergent in the 1850s, was fully realized by the late 1860s. In 1866, only two years before Wallack's edict against the benefit, the four-act musical "extravaganza," *The Black Crook*, had opened featuring scenic spectacle, earnest melodrama, and long interludes of ballet entertainment. Most importantly, the production foregrounded "scantily-clad" ballet girls in the long ballet sequences. The production grossed over one million dollars in this initial engagement and became the scandal of its day. In September 1868, Lydia Thompson's British Blondes presented the first modern burlesque. The visual allure of the female, or "beauties arrayed in dazzling half-costumes," as well as the stunning scenic effects, drew in large crowds of men and women.

While strongly dependent upon ornate scenic effects, this "spectacle" theatre built much of its popularity around the female body. This new visual style of entertainment diverged from earlier theatrical styles. The antebellum American theatre

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had been an aural theatre, in which qualities of language and the histrionic talents of actors predicted success. The talent and worth of the female performer had been largely based on voice quality and dramatic talent. While an attractive face and figure would have been helpful to both male and female actors, it was not the primary criteria for stagework. However, after the Civil War, the form and physical attractiveness of the female performer became a crucial component of the new visual spectacle theatre. By 1870, the "leg show" had coarsened to the extent that women no longer attended, and men made up the vast majority of audiences for these spectacles.

Women in the theatre attempted to fight back against these developments. Actress Olive Logan launched a feminist attack on the "leg show" and complained that it was displacing respectable theatre. She established the parameters of the battle between the older theatre and its newer form, stating that

> I cannot advise any woman to go upon the stage with the demoralizing influence which seems there to prevail more everyday, when its greatest rewards are won by brazen-faced, stained, yellow-haired, padded-limbed creatures while actresses of the old school, well-trained, well-qualified, decent, cannot earn a living.[22]

The stage continued to offer opportunities to women, even for artistic self-fulfillment, but as a growing audience consumed the theatrical product, women became increasingly objectified as part of that product. As theatrical entertainment increasingly was marketed as an economic commodity, women's bodies became commodified in order to sell the product. These two binary positions—the theatre as a site of female

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objectification and commodification, and the theatre as a legitimate, respectable profession for women—were in direct opposition during the 1870s and 1880s.

For "respectable" legitimate actresses such as Clara Morris, a certain degree of artistic fulfillment and professional and social status could be attained. "Society actresses" such as Mrs. Hoey easily found social acceptance in the theatre, and often could attain a degree of artistry. However, because of the rising popularity and economic potential of the visual spectacle, the largest number of women in the theatre were now in the *corps de ballet*, or chorus. For these young women—increasingly valued for their youth, physical attributes, and other visual appeals—artistic fulfillment, social respectability, and professional agency and power were not so easily attained.[23]

Theatre managers, predominantly male, at the spectacle theatres quickly realized the economic potential of the female form in the new business of theatre. Women on stage became visual objects for male audiences to consume.[24] Under a type of "disposal economics" based on visual appeal, the young chorus girl became an economic commodity for managers. There was no lack of women available and eager to work in a relatively easy profession, and when the visual allure of looks and figure faded, these performers were simply let go and a new supply was hired. This quick changeover in personnel, moreover, did not encourage or support a stable community of female performers. Without the benefit and lacking a stable community of permanently hired females, women in the theatre found it difficult to resist economic commodification.

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Hence, the abolition of the benefit coincided with a disastrous turn of events for theatrical women. Control of theatre management by the dominant gender, new business practices that devalued and commodified women, and the rise of the "leg show" spectacle and its emphasis on the visual objectification of women, all contributed to a bleak scenario for female performers. Without the agency of the benefit, theatrical women had no professional power to fight dominant gender ideology and an entertainment industry that circumscribed them into objectified positions.

The theatrical benefit, however, while displaced from the theatre by economic and social changes, made two further transitions from the small, local community of the theatre into the larger public sphere. While theatrical women struggled with objectification in the 1870s and 1880s, women outside the theatre appropriated the benefit format. Its female agency was transferred and displaced from the theatre to two locales of female community, influence, and power—the homes and private theatres of "society queens," and women's clubs.

"Society Queens"

After the Civil War, the drive to enlarge women's sphere gradually transformed the ideals identified with the older form of female domesticity into a new and broader sense of political and civic responsibility. Under the impact of industrialization and professionalization, these new ideals led to a change in separate sphere ideology, as new roles for women became part of the progressive social movement of the late nineteenth century. By assuming more public responsibilities, they assumed a more public role. Yet, at the same time, women's domestic sphere became associated with a

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new social power as women increasingly found agency and power through, and in, society.

Women, usually wives of powerful men in business or politics, dominated this new social life of culture and leisure, since men were occupied in the process of business. These "society queens" found an outlet within the boundaries of respectable social life where they could achieve personal and public importance. They ruled society because of their husband's money, privilege, and power, since the business society that produced them also deprived them of women's traditional roles. They were symbols of a man's power and position, but, paradoxically, they themselves exercised vast power in a private world of social status that men often considered secondary.

The moral virtue of women was now displaced into a biological superiority no longer rooted in the female body, but in social and economic position, as supported by the doctrine of Social Darwinism. By promoting class harmony—thinly veiled controls on class boundaries and dominance—women changed their own boundaries. Women's traditional moral involvement with charity continued to be applied to those "unfortunates" in society, but was transformed through the prism of respectable social status and privilege. Through the construct of *noblesse oblige*, upper-class white women used their social power and substantial amounts of money to promote art and culture as ways to improve society.

As part of their movement to improve society and contribute to charity, society queens utilized the theatrical benefit for female social agency by promoting both

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traditional and new women's concerns—culture, the arts, and charity. The movement of the benefit from the public world of the theatre into the semi-private domain of society women was logical, given the increased attendance of these women at the theatre. As I argued earlier, charity benefit matinees of the 1850s and 1860s, created by women for women, were extremely popular with elite women. As society women became more predominant in the audiences of the increasingly respectable theatre, they were exposed to the charity theatrical benefit, and had quite likely seen the power of female agency demonstrated in an actress's contractual benefit. Society queens, the leaders of the increasingly powerful social elite, appropriated the benefit from the theatre, and combined it with traditional female fundraising and charitable efforts.

By combining the domesticity of the parlor theatrical with the benefit of the professional theatre and the traditional role of women in charity, society women recuperated the power and agency of the benefit to continue their traditional association with charity. Many of these wealthy women built private theatres in their homes for theatrical benefit performances. They also rented small public theatres in which to stage benefits. By controlling publicity and limiting attendance to the wealthy elite, benefits in private theatres operated as private theatrical entertainment in a semi-private public space.[25] In the privacy of their homes and in private theatres, society women were protected by the respectability that eluded the actress in the public domain of the theatre.

The semi-private theatrical benefit of elite charity began to replace traditional charitable solicitation in the 1850s. By sponsoring an opera, musicale or play in their

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home or in a private theatre in the name of charity, aspiring society queens could enhance their reputations and fulfill their charitable obligations. For example, in 1859, the Women's Hospital Association of New York, held a "society" benefit "under the special patronage of Mrs. David Godwise, Mrs. William B. Astor, Mrs. Robert B. Miniturn, Mrs. Jacob Le Roy, Mrs. T.C. Doremus," and twenty other women.[26] Mrs. E.F.L. Ellet, one of the "queens" of New York society, remarked that "methods of realizing large benefits" created "splendid successes" as early as 1853 when they were presented as parts of women's fairs.[27] During the Civil War, society women participated in home, private theatre, and even professional theatre benefits for patriotic causes.

> During the patriotic exertions of the Sanitary Fair [in Philadelphia], a number of gifted and energetic ladies fitted up a little private theatre, to hold about 300 persons, the performers to be all amateurs selected from the elite of Philadelphia society and the proceeds to be devoted exclusively to wounded soldiers.[28]

In April 1864, under the auspices of the Dramatic Committee of the USSC female-sponsored Sanitary Fair, a matinee benefit production of *Cinderella* was presented at Niblo's Garden Theatre and raised $2,705.50. Socially prominent women active in many charities around the city organized and produced this benefit. The performance featured only child performers and the audience consisted primarily of family and friends.[29]

During the same month and for the same cause, five private evening performances by social amateurs were staged at Mr. Jerome's Theatre and raised over $6,366. The performances were produced under the auspices of the Ladies' Committee

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of the Benefits and Entertainments Committee of the Sanitary Fair and featured socially prominent women and men appearing as amateur actors, with professional actor/manager Lester Wallack acting as stage manager. Plays and operas from the professional repertoire ranging from *The Honeymoon*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, to Donizetti's *Linda di Chamounix* were performed. In addition, popular comedies and farces such as *The Two Buzzards, The Ladies' Battle, The Rough Diamond*, and *Married Life* were performed. Several of these plays, especially *The Ladies' Battle*, were performed in other cities for Sanitary Fair theatrical benefits organized by society women.

The Honeymoon, The Ladies' Battle, and *Married Life* were pieces that contained strong female leading roles and were done frequently in benefits of professional actresses at local theatres. In addition, all of these comedies concerned domestic, family, and female-oriented issues that would have appealed to the women organizing and participating in the benefit. This suggests that these women were interested in performing plays that recognized and reflected the primacy of women—both as characters and performers—as well as an alternative gender ideology. The theatrical benefit, now appropriated by society women into the larger, respectable society, operated as a site where elite society women could raise money for a patriotic cause.

While the male business manager appropriated charity benefits in the theatrical profession, non-theatrical society women appropriated the form for their own charitable fundraising in the 1870s and 1880s. Mrs. A.M. Palmer, wife of the manager of the

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Union Square Theatre, sponsored many benefits, both in and out of the theatre, through the auspices of the Charity Amateur Dramatic Association. The Association held several charity benefits at different public theatres during 1874. One such event raised money for the Free Training Schools of the Women's Educational and Industrial Society "under the management of 10 women."[30] Yet another at the Union Square Theatre was for the St. John's Guild for the Relief of the Poor of New York, a traditionally feminine charity.[31] A benefit held at the Academy of Music, a frequent site for benefit fundraising, supported St. Elizabeth's Hospital.[32] Female agency in theatrical benefits was thus displaced into the social milieu of powerful women who used it to address traditional female concerns and causes.[33]

Wealthy society women, such as Isabella Stewart Gardner of Boston, used the "domestic charity benefit" to wield enormous social and cultural power. This theatrical benefit model featured plays and other entertainments, often presented in private home theatres. In the Gilded Age, society women regularly opened their mansions to theatrical performances and musical events for carefully selected audiences of friends. Fees were charged and the proceeds were given to charity. Society queens, unlike the public actress, could overcome the social taboo of performing in public by performing in their homes in small, intimate, private theatres, and staging these "domestic" performances out of the public eye.

Social women infrequently worked with female theatrical managers to stage benefit fundraisers. A charity matinee benefit staged at the Brooklyn Atheneum, sponsored by actress-manager Sarah Crocker Conway, held on April 9, 1875,

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supported the Brooklyn Industrial School Association and Home for Destitute Children, and was produced by "several ladies in Brooklyn well known for their liberality in all charitable undertakings."[34] However, due to the severe shortage of female managers, this direct, female-sponsored linkage of women's concerns to the theatre was rare after the abolition of the benefit.

Society women created a model of female benefit agency that remained strong throughout the 1890s. In addition, women's clubs combined the features of the traditional performer's benefit with the "domestic" charity benefit to create a site of alternative gender agency and community. By the time theatrical women formed their own clubs in the 1890s, a paradigm of agency existed for theatrical women to once again reclaim the benefit for their interests and causes.

Women's Clubs

Women's clubs and associations also appropriated the theatrical benefit. Earlier in the century, male professions had established clubs for communal and social reasons and sponsored philanthropic activities to support particular fields. By the 1860s, however, the trend toward a more professional status led to the formation of men's theatrical clubs that sponsored benefits for fundraising and communal rapport.[35] As the benefit tradition began its decline in the professional theatre, men continued to enjoy the communal aspects of the benefit in their private, gender-restricted clubs. The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, created in 1868, ministered to male actors, and their charity fund depended largely on benefit performances. The Lambs Club,

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founded in 1875 by male actors, met monthly for suppers and social interaction. Basically a social club for American and English male actors, the Lambs also used benefit performances to raise money for social recreation. Once a year, the Lambs produced a public Gambol—a performance written and performed by members—as a benefit to raise funds and "its proceeds contributed significantly to the club's solvency."[36] From the outset, however, women were denied entry into these clubs.

The women's sorority club movement began in the same year as Wallack's abolition of the benefit. In New York City, Jenny Jane Cunningham Croly, a reporter, founded Sorosis as a social and professional club for women. The initial cause for its creation was the exclusion of women from a New York Press Club dinner honoring Charles Dickens during his 1868 lecture tour of the United States. Clubs were one venue through which women attained respectability and attended to social needs, as well as cultivating the networking necessary for professional advancement and solidarity. They emphasized self-help and self-education through mutual aid. Social clubs for women brought together housewives and professional women from a variety of fields in the common pursuit of culture, enlightenment, and scholarly discourse. Sorosis welcomed theatrical members, and included the actresses Kate Field and Ella Dietz Clymer in its membership.

Many women's clubs utilized theatrical-style benefits from their inception. Most clubs articulated an "inherent interest in culture," and argued that the arts could "uplift" everyone in society. Sorosis itself had four major committees—literature, art, drama, and music—and actively used theatrical means to further its agenda.[37] Sorosis

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frequently staged theatrical-style benefits for community and fundraising purposes. Women's club benefits were a site of communal female agency, since they featured majority female performers and foregrounded female interests, subjects, and concerns.

When theatrical women found themselves locked out of theatrical men's clubs, it was natural that they formed their own theatrical clubs to advance their causes and concerns. Women quickly discovered that communal clubs could be used to facilitate a sense of professionalism. Theatrical women saw the club movement as a means to establish a strong base of respectability and construct their own professionalism:

> The theatrical profession is the only profession which is open to flippant intruders who have the power to degrade it. The actress must be more prudent, more rigorous in observing social laws, and outward conventionalities than any other woman . . . [T]he honor of her profession is in her keeping.[38]

The first such institution, the Twelfth Night Club, was founded in 1891, and endorsed programs of mutual aid for younger actresses. The Professional Woman's League was founded by Mrs. A.M. Palmer in 1892. Its primary purpose was to meet actresses' professional needs such as legal aid in contractual matters, providing loans, and offering such services as sewing classes so women could make their own costumes. Yet, these clubs also offered a sense of female community for performers, mutual support and reliance, and reciprocal aid. More importantly, these clubs used benefits that not only raised funds for needy actresses, but also supported female subjectivity and agency and fostered a sense of female community. [39] The benefit had finally been recovered by theatrical women and restaged once again in a strong community of female performers and their supporters.

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With the demise of the contractual benefit, all performers, women and men, lost a site of long-standing entrepreneurial agency and power. Yet, women in the theatre lost a site of performance that empowered them not only as entrepreneurs, but also as producers and negotiators. In addition, the loss of the contractual benefit meant that women no longer had a site where they could present an alternative gender ideology structured around female subjects, experiences, and community. Without the intertheatrical agency and powerful subjectifying voice of the benefit, they were reduced to commodified objects in the consumerist culture of post-Civil War America. In addition, the shift in the theatre's charity benefits from female performers and managers to male managers took away female performers' traditional ties to charity and voluntarism. While male performers surely suffered from the loss of many of the intertheatrical strategies of the benefit, women simply had more to lose.

Yet, while theatrical women lost the agency of the benefit in the 1870s, society women recuperated it in the "domestic charity matinees" they staged in private and semi-private environments. The women's club movement also recognized the communal agency of the benefit and included it in their institutional structure in the 1870s and 1880s. When theatrical women founded their own clubs in the early 1890s, they recuperated the benefit once again as a paradigm of female agency and communal support.

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ENDNOTES

[1] First tour of Joseph Jefferson and Charles Wyndham's combination company.

[2] Since the combination company was centralized in New York, casting for the entire season was done at the beginning of the season. Thus, if an actor became unemployed during the season, it was virtually impossible to be "picked up" again.

[3] Michael L. Quinn, "Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting" *New Theatre Quarterly* 6 (May 1990), 157.

[4] *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 17 January 1880.

[5] Ibid. The *Mirror* and the *Times* fully supported the new theatre producer-managers, agreed with them in most disputes with performers, and encouraged the growing professionalization of the theatre. Both newspapers attacked the old theatrical establishment as one that encouraged "begging" and "vagabondage" by performers.

[6] *The New York Times*, 7 June 1868.

[7] John Lester Wallack, *Memories of 50 Years* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1889), 54-5.

[8] *New York Times*, 7 April 1868.

[9] *New York Times*, 5 April - 11 April 1868. This exchange of letters is a fascinating distillation of the long-running argument between performers and management over the benefit. I regret that the scope of this dissertation cannot accommodate the full debate.

[10] Playbill, Booth's Theatre, May 2, 1875.

[11] Playbill, Booth's Theatre, May 6, 1875.

[12] Playbill, Booth's Theatre, May 13, 1875.

[13] Playbill, Grand Opera House, April 1, 1871.

[14] *New York Times*, 22 June 1873. Daly became the principal organizer and producer for the Foundling Asylum, once sponsored in the theatre by women. At one "grand charity matinee" benefit, he raised over $10,000 (*The New York Times*, 20 March 1874). At yet another, he reduced his performers to ushering, selling flowers,

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and passing out programs for the event (Souvenir satin program, Grand Opera House, February 18, 1874).

[15] Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 172-3.

[16] Robert H. Bremner, *American Philanthropy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 95.

[17] *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 26 November 1881.

[18] *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 14 February 1882.

[19] "Rules and Regulations" of the American Dramatic Fund, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, NYPL.

[20] John Thornbury, "Plays and Play-goers Twenty-Five Years Ago," *The Galaxy*, May 1876 (21:5), 581-92.

[21] Playbill, Niblo's Garden, August 29, 1857 and *Spirit of the Times*, 20 April 1850, 108.

[22] Robert J. Wills, Jr., "The Riddle of Olive Logan," Ph.D. Dissertation, Case Western Reserve University, 1971, 312-7.

[23] See Olive Logan, *Apropos of Women and Theatres* (New York: Carleton Publishing, 1869), 80-2, 119-20, 131-3, 135; "The Leg Business," *Galaxy 4* (August 1867): 440-4; and *Before the Footlights and Behind the Scenes* (Philadelphia, PA: Parmalee, 1870) for more direct sources on the rise of the "leg business."

[24] See Joseph Whitton, *The Naked Truth! An Inside History of The Black Crook* (Philadelphia: H.W. Shaw Co., 1897) and Leigh George Odom, "*The Black Crook* at Niblo's Garden," *The Drama Review* 26:1 (1982), 21-40, for extensive coverage of the production and its reception. Also see Faye E. Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses and Audiences, 1790-1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), Chapter 7 for an excellent discussion of the rise of the "leg show" phenomenon.

[25] See Kathleen D. McCarthy, *Noblesse Oblige: Charity and Cultural Philanthropy in Chicago, 1849-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) for a detailed study of the society queens and their involvement in charity. While mentioning theatrical benefits in homes and private theatres as a means of raising money and

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promoting social interests of these women, she does not go into detail on how these benefits operated.

[26] "The Programme," June 8, 1859, 3:788, 1.

[27] Elizabeth F.L. Ellet, *The Queens of American Society* (New York: Charles Scribner and Company, 1867), 342, 349-52.

[28] Ellet, 394-95.

[29] *Sanitary Fair Bulletin*, 225-30, USSC, Box #1007, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, NYPL.

[30] Playbill, Union Square Theatre, February 11, 1874.

[31] Playbill, Union Square Theatre, December 2, 1874.

[32] Playbill, Academy of Music, December 19, 1874.

[33] More research needs to be done on the role of Mrs. A.M. Palmer and her Charity Amateur Dramatic Association in the displacement of female agency of the benefit.

[34] Playbill, Brooklyn Atheneum, April 9, 1875.

[35] Benefits for early men's theatrical clubs featured original plays written by men that focused on male subjects, such as Edwin Milton Royle's *Squaw Man*. See DeWitt Hopper, *Once a Clown, Always a Clown* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1927), 188-93.

[36] John Thornbury, "Plays and Play-goers Twenty-Five Years Ago," *The Galaxy*, May 1876 (21:5), 581-92.

[37] See Kathleen D. McCarthy, *Women's Culture: American Philanthropy and Art, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 44; Karen Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined 1868-1914* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980), 25-7 for more information on the culture of nineteenth-century women's clubs. See Mrs. J.C. Croly, *The History of the Women's Club Movement in America* (New York: Henry G. Allen and Co., 1898) for a primary study on the women's club movement in America.

[38] "The Woman's Page: Some Words About the League," *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 20 May 1893, 12.

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[39] See Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, "'A Doublet and Hose in My Disposition': Sexology and the Cross-Dressed Theatrics of the Professional Women's League," *Theatre History Studies* 15 (June 1995), 105-22, for an examination of this early theatrical women's club and their use of all-female benefits. While Mullenix's primary objective in this essay is to address sexology and cross-dressed performance, she argues that the League's benefits were specifically mounted to "ameliorate egregious financial difficulties" among their members, caused by the financial Panic of 1893, and to promote alternative gender ideology and female community.

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Conclusion

With the demise of the benefit tradition, women in the theatre lost a site of performance strategy that empowered them not only as entrepreneurs, but also as producers and negotiators. Without the intertheatrical agency and powerful subjectifying voice of the benefit, they were reduced to commodified objects in the consumerist culture of post-Civil War America's Gilded Age. However, with the establishment of theatrical women's clubs, such as the Twelfth Night Club and the Professional Women's League, benefits throughout the 1890s once again served as paradigms of female agency and communal support.

This dissertation has illuminated how the entrepreneurial aspect of the benefit, while crucial to all performers, was only one aspect of agency for women. In this intertheatrical performance site, they could create a female community that empowered and assisted each other as well as one that provided complete producing authority. Most importantly, this strong sense of an empowered female community encouraged women to create performances that were female-centered on female subjects. On the public stage of the theatre, women used domestic strategies of voluntarism and charity to gain access to the larger social sphere. By using respectability and popular appeal in the staging of benefits, theatrical women could extend their role of caregiver and gain credence in the public sphere. Thus, the benefit served as a model of nineteenth-century female agency where women could create alternative gender ideologies. Along with such research as J.K. Curry's dissertation and book on women theatre managers,

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this study contributes not only to theatrical women's history, but also to an understanding of the social role of theatre in American and women's history.

This dissertation, however, is only a beginning step in the research of the evolution of the benefit system and women. In the professional theatre of the 1890s and early 1900s, the benefit and its association with women continued to suffer, as the following quote demonstrates:

> The benefit racket is being played this season. All the managers take a whack at the public, then they give their mistresses a chance to raise a fund to support them through the dull season at no expense to the house. When a manager finds himself short on his mistress' board bill, he suddenly discovers that some great calamity has stirred his sympathetic soul, or that a relief fund for actors is an absolute necessity. He thinks that the public should contribute to this fund, so he gets up a benefit and starts all the police force selling tickets. The sum he scoops in without actually appearing a beggar himself, enables him to maintain the airs of a millionaire, and keep his extravagant daisy quiet.[1]

For women, this quote reveals an especially misogynistic anti-benefit bias that requires more investigation. Women in the theatre, specifically actresses, were clearly equated with being the manager's "mistress" or prostitute. The reasons for this need to be examined. Only during World War I were professional theatre women able to recuperate the benefit in the theatre proper. Just as their theatrical sisters mobilized during the Civil War and used the agency of the benefit to raise funds, the theatrical woman took her place beside Rosie the Riveter, and used the national emergency of a world war to "give aid" in the form of benefits. Theatrical women staged benefits to raise funds during national crises, including both World Wars and the Great Depression. This area is ripe for examination.

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In addition, twentieth-century women have continued to use the benefit format for theatrical crises such as loss of government funding and health issues, and their benefit activity is continually covered in the local press. The *New York Times* devotes an entire column to benefits in their "styles" section of the Sunday edition. The *New York Post* and the *New York Daily News* include benefit items in their "gossip" columns. It is no coincidence that these sections were, and still are, associated with women and traditionally female-identified causes and concerns (weddings, engagements, fashions, gossip, etc.).

During the time I have worked on this dissertation, I have read these sections and kept track of theatre and women-related benefits to see if women were still using the benefit format to address their needs and concerns. It appears to be the case. For example, The Women's Project, an organization that develops new Off Broadway plays by women, has used benefits to support their work. In November 1999, it held a "benefit cabaret evening" featuring a conversation with actress Celeste Holm, who spoke about her life in the theatre.[2] At a benefit dinner in June 1999, the Project presented its Women of Achievement Awards to actresses Judi Dench and Vanessa Redgrave, producer Pat Fili-Krushel, the president of the ABC Television Network, and Susan L. Taylor, editor-in-chief of Essence magazine. The event "raised money for the renovation of the company's theatre" to substitute for the loss of government funding.[3]

Theatrical women have used current benefits to attract attention to domestic gender-related violence against women. In February 1998, playwright Eve Ensler

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"persuaded a large number of female celebrities" to perform in a benefit of her one-woman show *The Vagina Monologues* "to call attention to violence against women." The show was based on her interviews with more than 200 women about their sexuality and the violation of that sexuality. Actresses participating included Whoopi Goldberg, Glenn Close, Susan Sarandon, Lily Tomlin, Winona Ryder, Marisa Tomei, Rosie Perez, Calista Flockhart, and Shirley Knight.[4] In addition, in October 1996, Ensler staged a benefit reading of another play, *Necessary Targets*, for the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and the Center for War Victims in Croatia. The subject of the play was the experience of women as victims of war and its after-effects, and featured actresses Meryl Streep, Cherry Jones, Anjelica Huston, and Ellen Burstyn as readers.[5]

Benefits sponsored by women in the latter part of the twentieth century often have addressed severe inequities and violent discrimination against women on an international basis. Current control by the religious ruling authority in Afghanistan, the Taliban, and its subsequent treatment of women, have generated several benefits by women in the arts. During Women's History Month (March 1999), Mavis Leno (a powerful agent in Hollywood) and producer Linda Bloodworth-Thomason became activists for, and held a benefit for, the women of Afghanistan which "drew support from VIP females all over the country." Film and theatre actresses attending and lending their names to the cause included Melanie Griffith, Tippi Hedren (Griffith's mother), Kathy Bates, Ashley and Naomi Judd, Anjelica Huston, Alfre Woodard, Carol Burnett, Dorothy Rodham (First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton's mother) and CNN

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reporter Christiane Amanpour. Voice of America and Radio Free Europe broadcast the event all over the world simultaneously. The women wanted to "raise an outcry against the gender apartheid that the ruling Taliban have imposed on the women of Afghanistan - keeping them covered up, uneducated and forbidden to work in their profession, and stoning them for the least offense." They said they were "drawing a line in the sand over these 11.5 million women who live under virtual house arrest! We are working with the Feminist Majority on this project. Already we have pressured Unocal not to build a gas pipe through Afghanistan, which would have funded the Taliban."[6] Yet another benefit in March for women's rights in Afghanistan, was sponsored by *Glamour* magazine and the Feminist Majority Foundation. Speaking at this event were Meryl Streep, Laura Dern, and other Broadway and Hollywood actresses.[7]

Twentieth-century women have vigorously used the benefit format to focus attention on women's health. Early in 1999, the film *Not for Ourselves Alone*, a female-created and woman-centered film on breast cancer, was screened in a benefit to raise funds for breast cancer awareness and research. Included in the newspaper coverage was a photograph of actress Jessica Lange, with her daughter, in attendance. First Lady Hillary Clinton was also in attendance.[8] The Phyllis Newman Women's Health Initiative, sponsored by the Actors' Fund and Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, and created "in order to identify and address the health issues of women in the industry," was founded by actor-director and Actors' Fund Trustee Phyllis Newman, a breast cancer survivor. It addresses health issues that impact women in the entertainment industry and highlights The Fund's health-related services for women.

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Theatrical sponsors support this effort "in recognition of the incredible efforts the ladies of the American theatre have made, year after year, to people living with AIDS. Now it's time to insure that all women in the entertainment industry facing many different health crises, including AIDS, are offered assistance. It's fair. It's our moral responsibility, and with your help, we can all be up to the challenge." Note how the language here reflects nineteenth-century rhetoric on the "ladies of the theatre," and continues to suggest the association of a superior moral stance and care of others with women.[9]

The Women's Health Initiative has sponsored a yearly benefit since 1996 to raise funds. The advertising for these benefits reflects the continuing emphasis on an all-female community creating an all-female performance event. Their February 1998 benefit, *Nothing Like a Dame*, was advertised with "All Singing! All Dancing! All Talking! All Women!" to highlight "a fabulous lineup of distinguished divas" and an "evening of entertainment by, for and about women." The performing roster consisted of several generations of female theatrical performers including Lucie Arnaz, Lauren Bacall, Joy Behar, Betty Buckley, Zoe Caldwell, Diahann Carroll, Jane Connell, Blythe Danner, Lea DeLaria, Joan Hamburg, Celeste Holm, Anne Jackson, Linda Lavin, Sharon Lawrence, Rue McClanahan, Donna Murphy, Anne Meara, Bebe Neuwirth, Phyllis Newman, Jane Powell, Faith Prince, Chita Rivera, Elaine Stritch, Mary Testa, Kathleen Turner, Lillias White, and "female cast members from *The Lion King, Chicago* and many others."[10] Further press advertised that "the ladies of Broadway have always set an example with their incredible generosity. This evening reminds us

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of the importance of volunteerism on all levels. Tonight is about community—to really reach out and extend support. *Nothing Like a Dame* is dedicated to the spirit of women helping ourselves." This event was also dedicated to the memory of Broadway actress Laurie Beechman, who was scheduled to perform, but who died earlier that month of ovarian cancer. An examination of these contemporary benefits will hopefully lead to fruitful research on charity in the theatre, and will reveal how the theatre contributes to larger social issues of reform and change through female-associated characteristics of voluntarism and charity. Finally, it will hopefully lead to further analysis of women's roles in charity and the arts.

In addition, more research is needed on the impact of the benefit on the plays themselves. I believe that the benefit system played a significant role in determining which plays were staged during the years of the benefit tradition. Theatre historians would do well to examine this link to help determine the dramatic appetite of the time. As far as I noticed, theatre history scholars have not addressed this.

The theatrical benefit, so crucial to women in the theatre, had originally been founded in women's communal needs, desires, concerns, and causes. Its long history in the American theatre, while combining at times interests and causes for the men of the theatre, eventually worked its way into the social fabric of women's history. As it was abolished in the creation of modern theatre business practices, it was reborn in women's social, political, and cultural interests and causes. The importance of community has always been central to the theatre industry, especially female performers. The benefit served to bind that community together in the nineteenth

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century and reach out to larger communities in the greater society. Today, benefits still help the theatrical community to collectively take care of one another and extend their influence into the larger community:

> We must continue to take care of our own. It's in the nature of societies to do that. Beginning with the smallest unit of society: the family. A family takes care of its own, then it reaches out to its community and offers its hand. The theatre exists in a community. . . the performing arts community.[11]

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ENDNOTES

[1] *National Police Gazette*, 24 June 1882.

[2] *New York Times*, 21 November 1999.

[3] *New York Times*, 7 June 1999.

[4] *New York Times*, 26 September 1999.

[5] *New York Times*, 2 October 1996.

[6] *New York Post*, 21 March 1999.

[7] *New York Daily News*, 12 March 1999. Photo of Streep and Dern included.

[8] *New York Daily News*, February 1999.

[9] *Equity News*, May 1998 (35:4), 3.

[10] *Equity News*, January 1998 (83:1).

[11] *New York Newsreel*, Fall 1996 (6:4), 3.

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Appendix A

Most Popular Roles Used by Women in Benefits, 1840-1875

Play

*The Actress of All Work**
The Belle's Stratagem
A Bold Stroke for a Husband
The Conjugal Lesson
*Douglas**
*The Eton Boy**
*Faint Heart Never Won Fair Lady**
The Honeymoon
The Ladies' Battle
Ladies' Beware
The Lady of Lyons
London Assurance
Married Life
Mary, Queen of Scots
*A Morning Call**
*Nicholas Nickleby**
*Pet of the Petticoats**
*The Savage and the Maiden**
She Stoops to Conquer
Two Queens
*Used Up**
*The Young Actress**
The Youthful Queen

Scenes

Macbeth ("sleep-walking" scene)
The Merchant of Venice ("casket" scene)
*Romeo and Juliet** ("balcony" scene)
The School for Scandal ("screen" scene)
The Stranger (Dunlap) ("recognition" scene)

*Includes a cross-dressed role

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