

CROWD PLEASING MOVES:
ACTING TECHNIQUE, SOCIAL PERFORMANCE, AND THE POPULARIZATION
OF THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN THEATRE

by

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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

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Abstract

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Samuel T. Shanks

Adviser: Professor Marvin Carlson

This dissertation explores the ways in which American acting reflected and incorporated various ideals of social performance that were common during the first half of the Nineteenth Century. In this unusual period in American theatre history, playhouses hosted mixed audiences who vied with one another for cultural dominance. While many American spectators did not stray very far from the cultural practices of their elite-minded European ancestors, others advocated for modes of social performance that more directly reflected the egalitarian ideals espoused in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

As the century progressed, increasingly capitalistic production strategies combined with the rising power of America's expanding middle class to create a much less open theatrical experience. The vibrant, mixed playhouses were eventually replaced by separate venues patronized by relatively homogeneous groups of like-minded spectators. The so called highbrow middle-class theatres enjoyed the support of

governmental protection and the cultural authority bestowed upon them by the increasingly hegemonic commercial middle class. This shift represented a cultural movement away from the “American” ideals of egalitarianism and instead reflected the nation’s gradual adoption of the economic and cultural goals of imperial capitalism, a system embodied at its apex by the aristocratic monarchies of Western Europe.

The first chapter examines the dynamics of the mixed audiences that filled most American playhouses in the first half of the Nineteenth Century. The second chapter explores the acting styles that dominated those stages. It examines the imported Kemble/Siddons Grand Tradition, as well as the different ways in which that tradition was adopted by four prominent “American” actors: Anne Brunton Merry, Mary Ann Duff, Edwin Forrest, and John Randolph Scott. The third chapter examines the influence of capitalism on the American theatre in the form of the Star System, and the ways in which that influence changed over time. The fourth and final chapter examines the rising middle class as it slowly adopted cultural elements from the aristocratic, imperial cultures of Europe as well as the ways in which other Americans attempted to resist this movement.

To my parents:
Robert and Lynn Shanks

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Introduction

The American theatre during first half of the Nineteenth Century is considered by many historians to be utterly unremarkable. For them, theatre in the United States was nothing more than a pale imitation of the English theatre. In relation to the acting that dominated American stages at the turning of the Nineteenth Century, Edwin Duerr wrote, “Nothing much can be said... except that it was thoroughly British.”¹

To some degree the dismissive attitudes of historians such as Duerr are warranted. Native born playwrights wrote little, and what they did produce was highly derivative of British models. Furthermore, these plays generally do hold up to the level of literary scrutiny that scholars are used to applying to the works of Shakespeare, Dryden, O’Neill, and the other members of the major canon of playwrights. The vast majority of actors that were working in the American theatre were not even born in the United States. Of the few native stars that were active during this period, only Edwin Forrest and Charlotte Cushman receive regular attention from scholars, and that attention is not always positive.² In short, most theatres were built to reflect British models, and were run primarily by British managers who, for the most part, seemed uninterested in actively exploring American culture or identity. It would seem as if Duerr was correct. Particularly from the point of view of aesthetic innovation, the early nineteenth-century American theatre indeed functioned as a distant touring province of

¹ Edwin Duerr, *The Length and Depth of Acting* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1962) 285.

² Forrest’s acting, in particular has been much maligned as being inferior to the period’s major British stars.

the British theatre. No historians dispute the validity of this. Yet once this fact is stated, this phenomenon is rarely explored any further.

If one examines the American theatre of this period from a social perspective, however, a far more complex and intriguing story begins to unfold. From a social perspective, the American theatres of the early Nineteenth Century were contested spaces in which different, often opposing groups, fought to define the nature of the young nation's emerging cultural identity. Few historians have investigated the significance of the ongoing British domination of the American stage in the larger context of early nineteenth-century American culture. Instead, most historians have chosen to focus on those few actors and scripts that represent only a small minority of the theatrical activity that was occurring in America at the time. Many important questions have subsequently gone unanswered. Why were American citizens, who were so proud of their hard won political independence, so reluctant to cut their cultural apron-strings? And what were the implications of this cultural allegiance?

This dissertation will investigate these questions. In doing so I will be paying close attention to the acting, social dynamics, and production practices of the period in the hope of focusing attention on issues that I believe are critical to understanding American culture in this period. Rather than continually searching for details that made the American theatre different from the British, I will look at both the similarities and the differences, analyzing the significance of each.

It is my contention that the ongoing dominance of British actors, scripts, and managers in the American theatre, while partly the result of a form of cultural inertia, was primarily the cultural reflection of the nation's ongoing, even growing, dedication

to the globalized economic system of imperial capitalism. Just as many Americans sought to attain the level of wealth that imperialism had brought to the British aristocracy, so too did they seek to emulate the cultural proofs of that financial success. It is perhaps more accurate to describe American tastes in theatre not so much as “pro-British” as “pro-luxury.” As the world’s leading economic power, the English happened to serve as the taste makers for many cultural forms. As the dominant English-speaking power, the London theatre naturally served as the benchmark for the rest of the Anglophone world.

The Scramble for Cultural Definition

Dealing with cultural identity is, at best, complicated, and when dealing with groups on the scale of an entire nation, nearly impossible. Yet issues of cultural identity on a national scale continue to be attractive as subjects of study. In the case of early nineteenth-century America, part of this appeal stems from the desires of the people who lived at the time, many of whom were actively working to define what America’s cultural identity ought to be. Achieving a coherent national cultural identity may never have been possible, but that did not stop many people from trying, and some were clearly more successful than others. These *attempts* to define the national culture are easier to study, and are perhaps attractive as subjects of study precisely because of their futility.

The period that followed in the wake of the American Revolution was rife with such attempts. With the political structure of the country suddenly divorced from the

traditional, class-oriented culture, and with the very class structure that it supported under attack, the United States became a cultural battlefield. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution provided some much-needed political structure, which allowed the country to begin understanding what it was and how its different parts related to one another, but a similar degree of cultural structure would take much longer to develop.

Some Americans naturally looked to their immediate heritage for a sense of cultural definition, but this instinct would never lead to homogeneity on a national scale. The cultural histories of wealthy planters, stoic Puritans, and transported convicts, not to mention the varied backgrounds of the increasingly populous immigrant population, were simply too diverse.

Other Americans mined the more philosophical passages of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution for ideals that could be applied to cultural as well as political situations. The ever-famous “all men are created equal” served as justification enough for the wholesale dismantling of the intricate system of deference by which people had publicly acknowledged the pre-revolutionary social structure. Many of these same people also looked to Native American cultures as sources of cultural inspiration. Although their gaze was, of course, highly selective and often somewhat creative, their adoption of cultural attitudes and iconography from Native American culture served as a means of unifying people of diverse backgrounds under a more neutral banner. These “nativists” would form hundreds of organizations that worked to define and support an American cultural identity that was distinct from those of the European nations, was rooted in the precepts of democratic ideology, and was steeped (however lightly) in the

cultural environment of the New World context. Together, these organizations would form one of the largest social movements in nineteenth-century America.³ As such, their voices were, of course, heard in the nation's theatres. The incessant demands by nativist spectators for spontaneous performances of "Yankee Doodle," their protests of perceived slights against nativist ideals within performances, and their merciless heckling of performers and wealthy box-dwellers alike made the American theatre of the early Nineteenth Century a treasure-trove of amusing and spectacular anecdotes.

Still other Americans continued to look abroad for cultural definitions that transcended nationalistic pursuits. Their search for a Neo-Platonist "beau ideal" of culture inevitably led them back to the cultures of the great European powers, particularly Britain. Especially in terms of theatre, the aristocratic culture of London held enormous allure, even for those who were not descended from English stock. This allure came in spite of Britain's previous status as imperial mother to the United States. As I will argue throughout this dissertation, the real allure of British culture came, not from its eighteenth-century dominance of the pre-revolutionary colonies, but from its nineteenth-century dominance of huge swaths of the rest of the globe. For many Americans, whom I will be referring to as "elite-minded," Britain symbolized the pinnacle of capitalistic imperialism, an economic system that an increasing number of Americans were becoming immersed within as the nation industrialized. Since many of these elite-minded Americans also controlled sizable sums of wealth, their influence in the theatre was often seen in terms of control rather than sheer numbers. Wealthy, elite-

³ Dale Knobel, *America for the Americans: The Nativist Movement in the United States* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996) xix.

mindful patrons financed the construction of many of the nation's finest theatres, and managers such as William Dunlap often found himself beholden to their will as a result. Not all elite-minded spectators were wealthy and influential, however, others came from the "middling orders" and attended the theatre as a means of learning about and emulating a cultural system that was, in many ways, beyond their means, yet whose overt luxuriousness was nevertheless alluring.

The scramble for cultural definition that defined this era played out in every corner of American life, from houses and streets to churches, taverns, and even the court. But in the playhouses, these conflicts became unusually visible, and by studying what happened in the American theatres of the Nineteenth Century we can find unique clues that can help us to better understand how our national cultural identity was forged.

The Anglo-American Theatrical Context

Although the British theatre culture clearly extended its arms to American soil, American stages differed from other regional theatres, such as those in Bath or Bristol, in several important ways. Most obvious was their physical distance from London and the tight circle of critics and spectators that composed the London audience. While patrons from London might visit the theatre in Bath on a holiday, they generally did not follow the changing tides of the American theatre.⁴ The expense and inconvenience of transoceanic voyages, together with the comparative friendliness of American critics

⁴ Gresdna Ann Doty, *The Career of Mrs. Anne Brunton Merry in the American Theatre* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971) 5-6.

and audiences, meant that for many of the actors who did travel to America, the journey was a one-way trip. Major actors such as Thomas Abthorpe Cooper, Anne Brunton Merry, Mary Ann Duff, and George Frederick Cooke rarely, if ever, returned to England after coming to America. America's comparatively open-minded political environment also allowed some actors such as Merry and Cooper to continue their careers in spite of unpopular political connections that had hindered their careers in England.⁵ It was not until the 1820's when Stephen Price, of New York's Park Theatre, began importing stars such as Edmund Kean for limited tours that a permanent system of round-trip touring became established.⁶

This system of organized touring became an increasingly attractive option for major stars due to another of the American theatre's distinctive features: its size. The exponential growth of the American audience, combined with an ever-growing appetite for British stars, made America an extremely lucrative place to tour. Although an American tour could do little to add to the prestige of those stars already established on the stages of Covent Garden and Drury Lane, it could frequently guarantee a sizable profit.⁷

Thus American stages continued to be dominated by British actors throughout the first half of the Nineteenth Century. And, not surprisingly, the acting styles that they utilized were decidedly British as well. The "Grand Tradition" of acting, most associated with John Kemble and his sister Sarah Siddons dominated the London stage

⁵ Doty, *Career of... Merry*, 47; F. Arant Maginnes, *Thomas Abthorpe Cooper: Father of the American Stage, 1775-1849* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company Inc., 2004) 71.

⁶ Simon Williams, "European Actors and the Star System, 1752-1870," in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, vol 1, eds. Don Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 309-310.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 309.

throughout much of the early Nineteenth Century, and dominated American stages as well.⁸

Even Edwin Forrest, the most commonly cited exemplar of an American or “Heroic” style is, in many ways, more difficult to separate from his English contemporaries than many historians indicate.⁹ I would argue that Forrest’s style was less “American” than it was Romantic. Forrest trained with Cooper in the Grand Tradition, and later adopted elements of the romantic style of G. F. Cooke and Edmund Kean, the latter of whom he performed with early in his career. What historian Garff Wilson describes as Forrest’s “Heroic” style of acting was simply Kean’s romantic style filtered through the mind and body of one particularly unique individual. Forrest’s position as an icon of American acting has more to do with his novelty as a native-born star and with the nationalizing projects of critics and historians than with anything resembling an organically emerging “American” acting style. Forrest’s acting did, however, embody a number of qualities that were stereotypically associated with the American people; it was bold, brash, and undeniably corporeal. And it seems quite evident that these qualities greatly endeared him to the growing nativist segment of the population, but these were reflections of Forrest’s personality and not of the techniques he employed.

If one looks at Forrest’s legacy it is easy to see how limited his artistic influence was. Of the actors that Garff Wilson associates with Forrest’s “Heroic School” of

⁸ Williams, “European Actors,” 311.

⁹ Lael Jay Woodbury, *Styles of Acting in Serious Drama on the Nineteenth Century American Stage* (PhD Dissertation, University of Illinois, 1954) 88. The “Democratic Style” is a term that Woodbury uses to describe the work of Forrest and Charlotte Cushman in contrast to that of Cooke and Kean, a distinction that I find rather dubious and more connected to nationalizing projects than to discernable aesthetic differences.

acting, only Irish-born John E. McCullough had any lasting success.¹⁰ Other actors, such as John R. Scott, enjoyed limited success, but Scott often worked with little critical approval and consequently found himself working only on the margins of the American theatre.¹¹ In 1846 Walt Whitman, an ardent nativist if ever there was one, wrote a scathing critique of those that tried to follow in Forrest's artistic footsteps, describing them as "the crowd of vapid imitators" who might "spread quite all the faults of that style, with none of its excellencies."¹² Although Forrest was embraced by the nativist audience, his success as an actor cannot be attributed to his "school" of acting. Forrest was a highly idiosyncratic actor whose style of acting, though remarkably charismatic, had little lasting influence beyond his own performances. Forrest worked during a period of high Romanticism, and used a style that was ultimately rooted in the English Grand Tradition, which helped him to succeed in the melodramas and heroic verse tragedies that dominated the period. Because of this neoclassic training, Forrest's appeal went beyond merely those spectators who sought an iconic symbol of American vitality, and satisfied the refined tastes of many elite-minded spectators. He did not play Thomas Hamblin's Bowery Theatre to the exclusion of the Park, and continued to work in elite performance venues throughout his long career.

¹⁰ Garff Wilson, *A History of American Acting* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966) 30-34.

¹¹ Charles Durang, "On the Death of John R. Scott," *Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch*, April 7, 1856.

¹² Walt Whitman, "The Gladiator – Mr. Forrest – Acting," *The Brooklyn Eagle*, December 26, 1846.

What is American Acting?

If the majority of actors were British, and if all of the actors followed closely the cultural trends of the English stage, then what is it that we are saying when we use the term “American” to describe anything that actors were doing in the early Nineteenth Century? Many scholars have applied the word “American” to only those actors or techniques that originated in this country. But in doing so, they have consequently overlooked the vast majority of what happened on American stages. Only the recent *Cambridge History of American Theatre* devotes a significant chapter to the dominance of foreign performers on domestic stages. Yet even then, Simon Williams begins his study of the European stars that toured in America by discounting the significance of this phenomenon.

As scholars have almost universally acknowledged, for the first century of its existence, the early American theatre was essentially an offshoot of the British theatre, and therefore it might be argued that the institution was largely tangential to the life of the nation as a whole.¹³

Williams’s argument here is indicative of other scholars who, when faced with the paradox of the proudly democratic nation playing host to a foreign corps of actors, instinctively brush its significance aside. In reality, the theatre was more vibrant, and elemental to the lives of American citizens of all stripes in the early Nineteenth Century than it ever would be again. As James Dormon has noted,

The number of playhouses devoted almost exclusively to legitimate drama has never since been exceeded, despite the multifold increase in population and the

¹³ Williams, “European Actors,” 304.

proliferation of urban communities since 1865. Public interest in plays and players has never since been greater.¹⁴

To brush aside the pervasive “British-ness” of the early nineteenth century American theatre as “tangential to the life of the nation” is to misunderstand both the theatre and the culture of the time.

Instead I will be using the word “American” to describe any acting that occurred in America during this period. Thus when Edmund Kean toured in America, his performances became a part of the history of American acting. I would argue that this is a meaningful use of the term because his performances in America influenced, not only the acting of other performers like Forrest, but also influenced the audience as well. For elite-minded audiences, eager to follow closely the shifting trends of the British theatre, Kean’s performances were invaluable. Not only did his performances grant them the opportunity to participate in the act of witnessing a major actor, an event that tied them more directly to the audiences of London, but they provided these spectators with an up-to-date set of aesthetic standards against which they could evaluate the work of other actors.

What I hope to demonstrate is that, in a young nation that prided itself on its dedication to egalitarian rights, intensely hierarchical cultural models continued to evidence themselves in the theatre as well as in other cultural forms. Open conflicts between elite-minded and nativist spectators were common, and often define the texture of the period theatrically; nativists were usually branded as the “rowdy” spectators for

¹⁴ James H. Dormon, *Theatre in the Antebellum South: 1815-1861* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1967) vii.

which the period is famous. Yet in spite of this historic cultural shift toward egalitarianism in the playhouses, an aristocratic culture of luxury, imported primarily from Britain, continued to thrive, and eventually spread downward through the social spectrum, as the emerging middle class began to blossom and adopt many of its precepts. In fact, with the development of the star system, the theatre became an important conduit through which elements of this cultural model were made available to audiences on a national scale. Thus a particularly American paradox developed, in which the theatre became a tool for creating more egalitarian access to elite hierarchical culture. This inherent conflict between American political egalitarianism and cultural elitism would become a defining, if rarely acknowledged, element within American culture forever after.

On the Historiography of Acting

Most histories of actors and acting read a lot like biographies. There is a lot of detail about who traveled where and when, what roles they played, and how much they earned for their benefits. But there tends to be comparatively little detail in relation to the acting that these performers actually engaged in. And what little discussion of technique and style that there is tends to be shallow, lionizing, and the details of these performances are rarely contextualized within the culture of the time. There is, to be brief, little discussion of actors as artists, and much more of them as personalities and celebrity figures.

There are very clear reasons for this trend, most of them evidentiary. Newspapers and the memoirs that have been left to us by figures such as Wood and Dunlap, represent the bulk of the evidence that we have on specific actors and their work. Memoirs give us the details of who went where and when, yet provide much less detail on what the performances were like. Meanwhile the records from theatres and many newspapers detail the bills of fare and nightly box office receipts, but often do so with little in the way of serious reflection upon the details of the actor's performance. Clearly the biggest challenge in undertaking an intellectually rigorous analysis of historical acting is laying one's hands upon a sufficient amount of detail to support such analysis.

By far the most significant source of this sort of detail are the journalistic reviews from the period that were usually published directly following the performances. This is largely a matter of focus; unlike the writings of Wood and Dunlap, journalists were usually writing about one specific performance. And since the plays were largely familiar, the actor's performances and occasionally the audience's response became matters of greater concern.

Yet even here the descriptions of performances tended to be generalized and very heavily couched in snobbish, morally saturated judgments, nearly all of which emerge, not from what we would now recognize as a vocabulary of artistry or performance, but from ideals rooted in elite notions of social performance and decorum. Charles Durang's description of Mrs. Duff's acting provides an excellent example.

Mrs. Duff's acting was truly the poetry of nature; or rather she was a child of nature. She was no artiste – as so deemed by the critics. She learned the words

of the author, conceived the nature of the character, and then from her own intuitive judgment and impulses, illustrated; and when thus aroused and free, with talent and genius before her, she ever came off victorious, and made lasting impressions.¹⁵

Here Durang consciously plays down Mrs. Duff's agency as an artist claiming that "she was no artiste." And instead he implies that it is her own personal intelligence, judgment, and character as a person, rather than her skill as an actress that was the determining factor in the success of her roles.

The focus on the importance of an actor's reputation in the eyes of their spectators was also a common theme in the dramatic criticism of the time. This was especially true in relation to the female stars, for whom the image of actress as whore was still a very powerful cultural trope, and one to be carefully avoided. Of Anne Brunton Merry one writer noted that she was "not less esteemed for her public talents than for the strict propriety of her conduct in private life, and she stands a bright and confessed exception, to that too general prejudice entertained concerning the private virtues of dramatic performers."¹⁶

Source materials such as these would, at first glance, seem to be great obstacles blocking our view of what was really happening in the theatres of the period, but this need not be the case. I would argue that this socially entrenched style of dramatic criticism can actually tell us a great deal about not only what was occurring in the

¹⁵ Durang, "Philadelphia Stage," May 6, 1855.

¹⁶ Thomas Condie, "Biographical Anecdotes of Mrs. Merry of the Theatre, Philadelphia," *Philadelphia Monthly Magazine*, April 1798.

theatres of early nineteenth-century America, but also what the goals of such performances were, why people went, and what they hoped to gain from the experience.

I will be employing an approach to acting history that focuses less on what we would now think of as the individual artistic perspective of the actors as artists, and more on the broader social implications of their artistic choices. This is a view of acting history that is inextricably linked to social history, and is very much the sort of study that Erika Fischer-Lichte calls for in her article “Theatre and the Civilizing Process.” Fischer-Lichte argues that we need to investigate “how acting represents and affects social and personal gestures, facial expressions, and body movements.” She claims, “acting not only mirrors but partakes in and contributes to the historical process of civilization and thus fulfills important social functions.”¹⁷ This kind of study would examine vocal techniques and the use of gesture and movement, not only in terms of their relationship to an evolving philosophical concept of “the natural,” as in Joseph Roach’s *The Player’s Passion*, but also in terms of their relationship to the audience’s social and moral notions of behavior and decorum.

This approach removes the analysis of acting history from the historical teleology of “firsts” and from nationalistic progress narratives, and tries to examine acting on its audience’s own terms. In working this way we can gain better insights into not only what the acting of a specific period was like, but more importantly, what it meant to those who watched it.

¹⁷ Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Theatre and the Civilizing Process: An Approach to the History of Acting,” in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance*, ed. Thomas Postlewait and Bruce A. McConachie, 19-36 (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000) 20, 23.

One of the biggest challenges in utilizing such an approach to acting history is our own contemporary focus on the technical artistry of performances. Our current conception of acting as a highly skill-oriented endeavor is very much a reflection of the artistic specialization of the modernist movement. We are much more inclined to think of artists and their products as independent objects that may refer to the society around them, but still stand somewhat outside of them. The self-reflexive idea of a painter creating paintings that focus upon the nature of painting is a very modernist phenomenon that has trickled down to our own historical approaches. When we look at the acting of early nineteenth-century America, by habit we want to look with the same focus on the minute details and highly theorized and self-conscious choices that characterize twentieth-century approaches to acting and to art in general.

When one examines the critical reviews of early nineteenth-century American performances, however, it is often virtually impossible to separate the critic's judgment of a performance, from ideals of social decorum that pervaded the period. Yet that phenomenon is, in itself, important. I would argue that we should not *attempt* to separate them. In order to understand the early nineteenth-century American theatre, one must acknowledge and accept its inseparable relationship to the ideals of elite social decorum that persisted in this period, in spite of America's famed egalitarian ethos.

What we now think of as the elements of technical artistry, while not unimportant, were of secondary importance, and, according to the many reviews from the period, were appreciated only to the extent that they reflected more generally accepted behavioral norms. By studying acting in this way, the theatre can become a

useful, high-profile barometer for the struggles over the ideals of social decorum that were so prominent in this period.

In my analysis of the journalistic reviews from the period I will be focusing upon what the writers appear to value in their analyses of actor's performances. Which techniques are given repeated attention, and to what end? What ideals seem to be implicit in their judgments, and how do they inform our understanding of the aims and achievements of these actors. I will be especially interested in the ways in which these critical perspectives do or do not seem to change over the decades. My research indicates that, despite the rise of Edwin Forrest and the Bowery B'hoys, they changed less we think they should have. Instead they seemed to evolve from being the inherited values of a paternalistic elite ruling class, largely unshared by the bulk of the populace, to a hegemonic force whose penetration down the social spectrum became much more profound and which helped to mask the extent of its influence.

Other Important Factors

While an examination of acting and social performance, as an interwoven entity, will form the core of this dissertation, there are two other cultural developments that need to be included, as well as they exerted enormous influence on the early nineteenth-century American theatre.

The rise of consumerism went hand in hand with the spreading of the Industrial Revolution to American soil. The advanced commoditization of goods combined with increasingly efficient methods of production made more and more products affordable,

and thus available to larger and larger segments of the population. Within the theatre the clearest example of the rise of consumerism was the development of the star system, which became the dominant mode of professional theatre production from the 1820s through the mid-century point.

The star system was made possible by advances in the national transportation infrastructure and by the systematizing of touring schedules pioneered by Stephen Price, the Park Theatre's most successful business manager. In its essence, the star system amounted to the careful commoditization of leading performers followed by an unprecedented level of distribution to previously untapped markets in the form of touring. I will explore the benefits and problems associated with this mode of production in greater detail in my third chapter, but as the influences of capitalist economics echo throughout nearly every corner of this study, it is worth signaling its importance at the outset.

Similarly pervasive was the rising importance of novelty and spectacle within theatrical productions. Although now we most often associate spectacle with more low-brow forms of entertainment aimed at appeasing the unwashed masses, at the beginning of the Eighteenth Century a trend toward spectacle could be seen in even the prestigious patent houses of London. Since the term spectacle has so many derogatory connotations, and since it also has specific meaning as a genre of theatrical performance during this period, I will be generally avoiding this term. Instead, for the sake of clarity, I will be employing Jean Alter's concept of "performant theatricality."

In *A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theatre* Jean Alter argues that the theatre fulfills two primary social functions: the referential and the performant. Together these

functions operate as the sources of what he calls, “the dual appeal of the theatre.” Alter’s referential function relies primarily on the theatre’s narrative and mimetic elements. As he states, “When it refers to an imaginary story, theatre is involved in a process of communication; it fulfills a referential function, carried out with signs that aim at imparting information. From the perspective of a semiotic theory, this referential function, or referentiality, clearly constitutes the central feature of theatre.”¹⁸ This referential function is central to the use and operation of theatrical elements such as narrative scripts, most scenery and costumes (particularly in the early Nineteenth Century), and most conventional acting techniques as well. These all work together primarily to communicate stories and philosophical ideals to the spectators.

Standing in contrast to the referential function of theatre is what Alter calls the performant function. He describes this function as that “which satisfies our natural desire to achieve or witness something extraordinary. Such performances are not communicated with signs; they are experienced directly; they fall outside the operations of semiosis.”¹⁹

Alter argues that these two functions are at once mutually exclusive; only one may dominate the stage at a time, and yet perpetually co-existent; no theatrical performance is utterly devoid of either of them. The extent to which one manages to supersede the other, is largely a matter of momentary focus. Alter describes these two functions as competing with one another, moment-to-moment for the attention of the spectators. In a production of *Henry V*, for example, the St. Crispin’s Day speech fulfills

¹⁸ Jean Alter, *A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theatre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) 32.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

a specific narrative purpose, and yet it provides such rich material for rhetorical acrobatics, that frequently the actor's delivery of the speech is so phenomenologically compelling that spectators find themselves applauding in celebration of the *performer's* virtuosity, the narrative purpose of the speech having moved somewhat into the background.

Although Alter argues that the referential function of theatre is the more dominant, I would argue that this is not always true, and is at best an oversimplification. The extent to which performances may be dominated by performant or referential moments would be better conceived as a continuum. To one side would be works of naturalism and high realism, where verisimilitude and narrative are the primary focus. This is not to say that such productions do not also involve performant-oriented moments. On the contrary, the very sight of a meticulously recreated physical setting frequently elicits spontaneous applause at such productions, but such moments are relatively minor. At the other end of the continuum would be paratheatrical entertainments such as circus, in which the focus is wholly on feats of daring and skill. Even within such performances there are ring-masters who frequently relate simple narratives, such as the exotic origins of various performers. The skillful setting-up of an acrobatic routine, by referencing the spectator's own anxieties, serves to heighten the impact of the ensuing performance and thus referential theatricality retains a vital, if subordinate role.

Within the context of much of twentieth-century theatre, particularly in America and Western Europe, Alter would be generally correct in citing the referential function as the more dominant. Yet in relation to the theatre of early nineteenth-century

America, I would contend that this point is at least debatable. Conceptual elements such as the referential and performant functions are not quantifiable entities, and even if they were, accurate measurements of historical productions would obviously be impossible. Yet when one examines what literature does exist from the period it seems clear that performant elements seemed to preoccupy the interest of many of the writers of the time, and appear to have provided much of the appeal of theatre-going.

One particularly famous example would be G. H. Lewes's analysis of the acting of Edmund Kean, which focuses on those "flashes of lightning" that he saw as being Kean's moments of greatest triumph within otherwise unremarkable performances.²⁰ What Lewes saw as "flashes," were those moments when Kean's artistry was at its most ascendant, and considering how spectacle-oriented Kean's acting high points were, it seems safe to consider these "flashes" as moments in which the performant function was clearly the focus of attention. These seem to have been moments in which the spectators' desire to "witness something extraordinary" was being fulfilled.

Another prime example would be Edwin Forrest's stage combat sequences, in which his physical power and presence became so overwhelming that even his fellow actors began to fear for their safety.²¹ Moments of spectacular combat such as these constituted an important part of Forrest's appeal. Forrest may have appeared on stage in the guise of Richard III, but performant theatricality of his own charisma was always

²⁰ G. H. Lewes, *On Actors and the Art of Acting* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1875) 2. Although in her essay, "'Reading Shakespeare by Flashes of Lightning': Challenging the Foundations of Romantic Acting Theory," *ELH* 62.4 (1995): 993-954, Tracy Davis does an admirable job of articulating the ways in which Lewes and others misunderstood Coleridge's famous description of Kean's acting, Lewes's misconception of Coleridge does not really affect his own reading of Kean's performance, which he also witnessed personally. He may have misunderstood what Coleridge was trying to say, but he nevertheless uses the quote in a way that reflects his own reading of the performance.

²¹ Wilson, *American Acting*, 24.

operational, and was a constant source of fascination for both critics and the public alike.

I would also cite numerous other occasions within the mixed bill of fare, which was the norm for the theatre of this period, as instances in which performant theatricality was clearly the focus. Performances of operatic arias as stand-alone turns (to borrow the vaudevillian term), which were common additions to an evening's bill, are clear examples of this. Within the context of a full opera, arias typically represent moments that are narratively grounded, yet provide ample opportunities for singers to draw attention to their own virtuosity. Arias are usually more technically demanding than most of the rest of an operatic score, and exist in part to allow the performer an opportunity to display the full range of their abilities. Soloquies and other significant scenes were also frequently lifted from the works of Shakespeare and other major playwrights and performed independently.²² By offering only the arias and soliloquies, as elements within a larger bill, theatre managers were clearly favoring the performant theatricality inherent in such performances. Although the audiences, in many cases, would have been familiar with the full play or opera, and could therefore engage the referential function of the narrative context with their own memories, the focus on these moments on the performant function was nevertheless significant.

It is important to note, however, that although it seems clear that theatre managers were providing ample opportunities for performant theatricality to gain center stage, they were nonetheless only opportunities. I would argue that, although such opportunities were numerous and could be built into the structure of an evening's

²² Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988) 17, 23.

entertainment, the success of such opportunities was still dependent upon the skill of the performer and the appreciativeness of the spectator, neither of which could be counted on to appear at any given moment. In fact, historian James Dormon cites the plethora of bad performances in the nineteenth-century southern theatres that he examines as a potential, and understandable source of some of the rowdiness of the audiences, who felt perfectly empowered to voice their displeasure.²³

Yet despite the inconsistency of these moments, performant theatricality remained a large part of the theatre's appeal during the first half of the Nineteenth Century. The importance of performant theatricality is perhaps best thought of as an ethos of the period. It was not specifically class based, and pervaded nearly every form of theatrical performance. There are many factors that may have contributed to this trend such as the emergence of melodrama and the increasing sophistication of theatrical stage machinery, but it is difficult to say whether these were causes of the trend or merely indications.

Performant theatricality was not necessarily limited to events within the playhouse either. In the early Nineteenth Century, the theatre was only one part of a growing array of public leisure activities in which Americans took part. Horseracing, cockfighting, parades, picnics, bear-baiting, and circuses provided Americans with unprecedented access to a wide array of leisure activities in the decades of economic growth that followed the revolution. Nearly all of these provided moments that would have focused on performant-oriented events rather than referential ones.

²³ Dormon, *Theatre in the Antebellum South*, 242-246.

Of those entertainments listed above, the circus provided perhaps the most obvious example of this, due primarily to its focus on displays of skill, novelty, and spectacle in general. The first major circus in America was opened in Philadelphia in 1792 by John Ricketts. While equestrian shows had been performed in American cities since before the revolution, Ricketts's circus was a significantly more complex affair. It involved a dazzling array of equestrian tricks, such as spearing oranges and picking cups off the ground at full speed, drinking wine while straddling two horses, and other spectacular feats, but it had added dimensions as well.

All throughout his performances, Ricketts maintained an attitude of urbanity and classicality. Within a few years Ricketts would construct a purpose built amphitheatre for his circus (directly across the street from and in competition with the Chestnut Street Playhouse) and began incorporating processions, pantomimes, performances of band music, and comic dances and songs. The addition of these paratheatrical elements represented, on the one hand, the growing level of sophistication in American entertainments, and on the other hand American's growing taste for the novel, the spectacular, and the exotic while contained in a more refined and cosmopolitan environment.²⁴

I would argue that the complexity of Rickett's circus, which intermingled displays of great skill with cosmopolitan ambiance, merely served to heighten the impact of the performant theatricality that was the core of his performances. Although the traditional equestrian acts embodied the critical characteristics of performant-

²⁴ Peter G. Buckley, "Paratheatricals and Popular Stage Entertainment," in *Cambridge History* (see note 5), 446-449.

oriented entertainment, namely the display and acknowledgement of virtuosic performance, I would argue that those displays were, in fact, a part of the traditional circus context. By adding an aura of urbanity to his performances, Ricketts was creating a more referentially oriented context that, through contrast, heightened the displays of skill that he subsequently performed. A circus acrobat who does tumbling routines may be very impressive, but being marked as an acrobat, a social outsider whose primary job is to do impressive feats, creates a context into which those feats figure naturally. By having that same acrobat take on the persona of a more recognizable social type (such as a cosmopolitan socialite), those same feats become impressively antithetical to that same persona and thus accentuate the theatricality of the moment in much the same way that a stunningly performed aria or soliloquy might.

The example of Rickett's circus brings to light another important aspect of the relationship between the referential and performant functions, specifically the ways in which their close interaction could be affected by the audience's reception of them. For it was only through the audience's recognition and acceptance of Rickett's urbane airs that the heightening that I just described could be brought about. To this extent, the audience's complicity in the heightening of the performant event was critical.

In their introduction to the anthology *Theatricality*, Tracy Davis and Thomas Postlewait use the idea of "breakthrough into performance" as a means of helping to "distinguish theatre from other kinds of artistic types or media as well as from the more pervasive utility of role playing." This conception of theatricality (a term which Postlewait and Davis discuss in its multiplicity of historical connotations and usages) goes beyond merely indicating the "gap between reality and its representation," and

helps “to describe the ‘heightened’ states when everyday reality is exceeded by its representation.”²⁵ I believe that the performances by Kean, Forrest, and Ricketts that I have referred to above fit perfectly into this model.

These were performances in which the performer’s skill was so great that, in the moment of virtuosic performance, the extent of the artist’s craftsmanship became undeniable and broke through into the spectator’s consciousness. In Postlewait and Davis’s discussion, the complicity of the audience is critical because their role suddenly becomes, not merely “to recognize reality, but to create an alternative through complicity in the ‘heightening’ of the breakthrough into performance,” a point at which “both performer and spectator are complicit in the mimesis.” This creates a kind of “mimetic conundrum” in which the “performers and spectators are true to themselves, though paradoxically the representation may lack truth.”²⁶ In such a moment of theatricality, truthful representation ceases to be the goal. Rather, the creation and acknowledgement of a display of virtuosic performance becomes central, with the narrative or representative context functioning only as an excuse or as a means of heightening the moment through contrast.

What is perhaps the most important aspect of these moments of performant-oriented theatricality is that, unlike the activities that were occurring in the house, their appeal cut across socio-economic and ideological boundaries. Edwin Forrest played at the Bowery and the Park Theatres alike, and spectacular pantomimes and melodramas

²⁵ Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis, “Theatricality: An Introduction,” in *Theatricality*, eds. Davis and Postlewait (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

were performed at both Drury Lane and Chatham Garden. This was often what brought such divergent social personalities together under the same roof.

Entertainments such as these, as well as the growing theatre culture, not only appealed to the varied tastes of the American public, but also echoed the spectacle of the American experience during this period. America's experiment with democracy encouraged enormous advances in intellectual and public affairs by the general populace. Many Americans deemed active political participation so important that without it one could not be truly considered to be "American."²⁷ The fact that many elections were held in the center of town, in the full view of the public at large was a source of great pride for many and offered a pattern of participatory behavior that was carried into the playhouses.

The Shifting American Social Context

Spectacle became not only a favorite element in public entertainments, but also a fact of life. In the second half of the eighteenth century, America had become a society on the move. The movements of soldiers in the war created unique opportunities for ordinary citizens to see much more of the land than their fathers and grandfathers had, as did the western migration over the Appalachians into the Ohio and Kentucky territories. Together with the increases in European emigration these forces made America a much more dynamic society than it had been in the previous century. With the ancient system of social hierarchy no longer operating in the foreground, many

²⁷ Knobel, *America for the Americans*, 13.

Americans could look to public entertainments as locations in which they might see their social positions evidenced, or at least defended. Surging developments in the ongoing Industrial Revolution, such as the development of the cotton gin and the increasing mechanization of the textile industry created new waves of wealthy men and women who sought to translate their monetary wealth into social distinction. The rise in their influence would become the most important cultural trend of the period.

Theatre, along with universities, dancing societies, and private tutors, served as a means of acquiring the sort of cultural education upon which social distinction was still based. Theatre had the double advantage of serving as a place for not only acquiring a social education, but as a place to displaying the fruits of that education to the rest of one's community.²⁸ The speed and extent of the turnover in the American upper class during this period was unprecedented (just as many went bust in the period's numerous economic panics), especially in comparison to the European aristocracy. And within the context of the newly democratic American nation, the role of genteel culture, in which the theatre played a central part, started to change.

Despite the fact that many of the elected officials in the early decades of the Republic were the same members of the gentry who had held the political reins prior to the revolution, genteel culture became increasingly disassociated from the American political sphere. With the election of Andrew Jackson to the presidency and the ensuing "Jacksonian Revolution," this separation became visible on a national scale. But the Jacksonian Revolution was more of a revolution in cultural perception than anything

²⁸ Dormon, *Theatre in the Antebellum South*, 237.

else. In his survey of American theatrical history, Garff Wilson introduced this era as one of great optimism.

[Thomas Jefferson's] victory over the Federalist candidate signified a growing faith in the wisdom of the common people and greater confidence in their ability to make the democratic process function successfully. Twenty-eight years later, the faith and confidence were strongly demonstrated in the election of Andrew Jackson. He was the first American president who had risen from the masses and who could truly call himself a representative of the common man.²⁹

But, as historian Edward Pessen noted, Jackson was president during a period of laissez-faire policies, in which the American federal government had little power and very little influence upon the social, economic, religious, and intellectual developments that were shaping American civilization.³⁰ The election of an uncouth, rough and tumble war hero to the nation's highest office was an immensely iconic event, but as the theatre evidences, the cultural identity of the nation had not truly shifted yet. On the contrary, in many ways, it was moving away from the egalitarian ideal toward a more hierarchical model of culture that favored elite-minded citizens, who increasingly found themselves in control of their own cultural destinies.

As the decades progressed and the wealth of the nation increased, the number of Americans who found themselves in possession of expendable income increased dramatically. The result was the development of a moneyed middle class, one that craved the trappings of the genteel culture that was synonymous with both political and

²⁹ Garff Wilson, *Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre: From Ye Bear and Ye Cubb to Hair* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973) 56.

³⁰ Edward Pessen, *Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1978) 2.

cultural power. Yet the relationship to that cultural model was very different for the rising middle class as compared to the previous century's empowered gentry.

In *The Refinement of America* Richard Bushman makes a clear distinction between the genteel aspirations of the eighteenth-century gentry versus the nineteenth-century middle class: that of purpose. For the gentry, gentility was a necessary and inseparable component of eminence; their goal was leadership, and during the Eighteenth Century, one could not rule without it. But for the middle class in the Nineteenth Century, Bushman notes that the end goal was instead respectability: to be accepted by one's peers as a member of "polite society." The effect of this was to create a distinction between members of the middle class, which was still in the process of inventing itself, and the dominated lower-class, for whom the onset of industrialization was making existence increasingly unpleasant and far less securely communitarian than it had been in the previous century.

This distinction between eminence and respectability is important because it demonstrates a shift from the strongly paternalistic view of gentility as a marker that evidenced and legitimated the ideal of benign leadership, toward an equally hierarchical but increasingly selfish and paranoid outlook that was rooted in consumerism. The former sought the respect and adoration of those they ruled, the latter sought merely a visible distinction; complete disassociation without any need or desire for the bond of deference.

Bushman goes on to demonstrate how this shift from legitimating deference to establishing a clear distinction with regard to the lower orders of society had an increasingly divisive effect:

“...in the eighteenth [century], when gentility was the culture of the elite, the middling and lower orders looked on together from the outside. The great divide between polished and crude left everyone below the rank of gentleman with a common culture. In the nineteenth century, as refinement spread downward and the middling orders assimilated a diluted refinement of their own, the great divide between polite and coarse isolated the lower orders on the margins of American culture. Cultural class lines were not more severely drawn, but because they separated the lower from the middling orders rather than the gentry from the rest, they were more humiliating... the unwonted consequence of the democratic movement to spread parlor culture was to draw an indelible line between the middle and lower classes in American society and to make rudeness a cause for shame.”³¹

Because the gentry’s culture of gentility was so embedded, both ideologically and practically in the structure of legitimated power in the Eighteenth Century, it gave the lower and middling orders a common perspective on their own condition. Their lives were rude, not because they were woefully ignorant, but because they were ruled by others.

In contrast, the ideals of vernacular gentility, which were embraced the emerging American middle class placed the responsibility of acquiring refinement upon the individual through self-education, and created a cultural climate where refinement

³¹ Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992) 279.

appeared to be attainable by all. The absence of this refinement, therefore, became an indication of laziness and a source of shame, at least from the perspective of the elite-minded that aligned themselves with this culture of respectability. Yet this sort of snobbery hardly went on unopposed. Early nineteenth-century American theatres were filled with various kinds of spectators, many of whom disagreed on these very issues.

It is always tempting to envision the early nineteenth-century American audience as a consistently definable entity, but this was generally not the case. As I will demonstrate in greater detail in Chapter 1, the heterogeneous *mélange* that was the microcosm of the early republic resulted from a society that largely lacked options. It was not until 1797, for example, that New York audiences were presented with nightly performance options, rather than only two to three per week.³² Once multiple theatres began to open in the major cities, some, like New York's Park and Olympic theatres began to cater to more elite tastes, while the Chatham and Bowery theatres became increasingly associated with working class audiences. Yet even here the borders were highly permeable and a star performer, beloved by the masses, could cause a theatre such as the Olympic to be invaded by the "Goths and Vandals" from the less reputable theatres.³³

Despite the appearance and proliferation of working-class performance venues, it is important to note that the culture of gentility permeated nearly every theatre in the early Nineteenth Century to some degree, and that it was still firmly rooted in aristocratic European culture. The development of working class venues did not

³² Maginnes, *Thomas Abthorpe Cooper*, 79.

³³ John Thornbury, "Players and Playgoers Twenty Five Years Ago," *The Galaxy*, May 1876, 582-586.

transform the theatre into a democratic cultural form, but merely allowed greater access to it. Hamblin's Bowery Theatre, for example hosted one evening's entertainment, which consisted of Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello*, starring Hamblin himself, followed by "the Travesty of Othello." When one thinks of Hamblin's Bowery, the ultimate example of working-class, nativist theatre during this period, the afterpiece of this bill is the sort of fare that comes to mind first. In the travesty, Othello was *not* played by Hamblin and was described in the credits for the evening as "a jealous nigger."³⁴ By running the "real" *Othello* prior to the travesty, Hamblin was clearly setting up an hour's worth of jokes for the travesty that followed, but by not participating in that travesty himself, it is clear that the performance of a major tragic work of the British theatre was still a matter of some importance, even within the most overtly nativist of theatres.

In contrast, the cultural formations which we now proudly point to as distinctly "American" were rooted, not in our achievements within elite European culture, but in the most unrefined corners of our society. Jazz, the Blues, Rock and Roll, and Minstrelsy were deeply rooted in African American culture. Blue jeans, cowboys, and other icons of the Old West emerged from romanticized images of the struggles of the broad spectrum of impoverished immigrants and other settlers who pioneered the western states. And within the theatre, the now iconic fathers of American drama such as O'Neill, Miller, Odets, and Williams each foregrounded the struggles, and vernacular dialogue, of characters that were notably non-elite and unrefined. One could

³⁴ *Evening Post* (New York), September 5, 1836.

comfortably say that much of what we now think of as American culture is a kind of celebration of “unrefined-ness”.

The success of these cultural formations ultimately lay, not in their acceptance by the empowered elites (indeed inspired impassioned backlashes), but in their profitability within the American system of capitalistic commerce; in their acceptance by a critical mass of consumer-class citizens. The birth of what we now think of as a distinctly American culture in the early Twentieth Century only became possible once a sufficient portion of the American population moved into the consumer class. In America, cultural models have only been successful to the extent to which they have been profitable.

Thus, in the early Nineteenth Century, despite the pervasive American ethos of egalitarianism, cultural institutions such as theatre, which were dependent for their survival on commercial ticket sales, continued to reflect the tastes of those who had the surplus income to purchase tickets. Some productions, such as *Metamora*, did manage to cash in on the cultural desires of nativist audiences, but for the most part, a stable, commercially viable alternative to the British model of theatrical performance was very slow to emerge during this period. Yet, because many theatres attracted mixed houses the dominance of this elite culture, if rarely overthrown, was often contested.

Dissertation Overview

In this study I will be examining the ways in which the British model of theatrical production flourished and evolved in the American context during the first

half of the Nineteenth Century. I will demonstrate how the continuing dominance of this model, despite being openly contested by nativist elements within American audiences, serves as evidence of the persistence and reentrenchment of a hierarchical culture that reflected the nation's increasingly stratified economic class structure. Far from being a paradox, I would like to demonstrate how America's clear support for aristocratic British culture was nothing less than the cultural reflection of its dedication to the globalized system of imperial capitalism, at the apex of which rested the empowered British aristocracy.

The first chapter of this dissertation will examine the two most important segments of the American audience that emerged from the post-revolutionary cultural chaos in the first half of the Nineteenth Century. My exploration of nativists, and what I am describing as elite-minded patrons will focus on how these factions developed and how they vied for the opportunity to define the young nation's cultural identity.

In the second chapter I will examine how the acting of the period reflected these social dynamics, while being simultaneously grounded in English tradition. Here I will take four actors as case studies: Anne Brunton Merry, Mary Ann Duff, Edwin Forrest, and John R. Scott. These actors embodied a range of acting styles and have often been used as the exemplars of different aspects of early nineteenth-century acting. By examining their work at the level of technique, I will instead demonstrate how their approaches overlapped far more than they differed. I will also discuss how their reception by spectators and by the press depended as much upon the actors' relationship to dominant social trends, as it did upon their skill upon the stage.

In the third chapter I will examine the ways in which forces of economic inertia affected the theatre in the form of the star system. I will examine the ways in which the star system acted as a homogenizing agent, spreading the preexisting British model of theatre to the farthest reaches of the nation. At the same time, by examining the benefits and problems associated with the star system, I will demonstrate how, in trying to simultaneously service the varied segments of the American theatrical market, the star system quickly began to break down and how this collapse forced theatres to alter their tactics.

In the concluding chapter I will examine how the rise of the American middle class, and its adoption of many elements of British aristocratic culture would bring an end to the period of cultural contestation within individual theatres. Although nativist and elite-minded patrons would continue to find desirable amusements in theatres around the country, those theatre would become increasingly specialized in their fare, and would enjoy vastly different degrees of cultural respectability and support.

Although for many historians the acting of this period in American theatre history is unremarkable, the very derivativeness of it is important because it provides us with a highly visible, and generally overlooked view into the changing landscape of American culture, which has since become the foundation for contemporary American culture. By studying what the actors of the period were doing and how their performances were being consumed, we can see just how dedicated many Americans

were to the precepts of paternalistic European culture, despite the republican American context.

The first half of the Nineteenth Century would witness a phenomenal rise in the popularity of theatre as an entertainment, not only for the wealthy cultural elite, but for the entire breadth of the American populace. As a result, this period witnessed an unprecedented degree of resistance to the paternalistic cultural model, but that this resistance eventually lost traction in the face of the rising tide of conservative middle-class culture. As the genteel norms of aristocratic British culture began to be adopted by America's rapidly growing middle class, many theatres became less and less dependent upon the unrefined rabble for their financial security. By the time of the Astor Place Riots in 1849, the shift became irreversible.

Although populist theatres and entertainments would survive, even thrive in the form of Minstrel Shows, musicals, and later low level vaudeville, these productions would become more and more disassociated from what would become classified as the "legitimate stage." Respected actors would continue to be predominantly British, and respectable audiences would continue to appreciate their work and emulate their decorum. The ongoing dedication that our society demonstrated to the ideals of elite hierarchical culture during the first half of the Nineteenth Century has long gone unanalyzed by theatre historians. In examining this phenomenon more closely, I hope to provide some insight into the development of America as a nation of equals whose common goal is to continually rise above the crowd.

Chapter 1: The Dynamics and Desires of American Audiences

The first half of the Nineteenth Century brought enormous changes in the political, economic, and social fabric of the United States. The already diverse national population more than quadrupled from approximately five million to over twenty-three million souls, and a good portion of that population began to spread over the Appalachian mountains into the more than two-million square miles of new territories that the United States acquired by mid-century. This explosive growth, combined with the nation's continuing adventures with capitalism and its evolving democratic-republican government, fostered a culture of remarkable dynamism during this period. The auditoriums of America's theatres often played host to performances of this dynamism, in which America's emerging cultural groups vied for respect and dominance.

In many ways, the early Nineteenth Century was a period during which the American theatre experienced something of an identity crisis. Playhouses, which had always served as venues of public display for wealthy patrons, became places where Americans of different classes and cultures interacted with each other, and with the performers, in highly self-conscious and often confrontational ways; it was a place where they announced, shaped, and reinforced their respective identities. Astute historians such as Lawrence Levine and Richard Butsch have rightly described the playhouses of early nineteenth-century America as microcosms of early nineteenth-

century American society.³⁵ Many contemporary writers, such as Washington Irving and Walt Whitman, commented on this very fact as well, indicating that the audiences were conscious of this phenomenon.³⁶ Yet the playhouses were not simply static, miniaturized versions of American society, they were sites in which the competing elements of that society gathered, seeking *actively* to express and advocate for their social outlook or position. Many spectators seemed to be advocating for social ideals that were far more idealistic than the ones that guided their daily lives. This was a world where humble merchants would don their finest clothes and stand in defense of the most elite expressions of culture, while other generally patriotic patrons became zealous nativists when caught up in the communal energy supplied by their companions in the pit and gallery.

While, aesthetically, the theatre in America generally held fast to its British roots, the larger social and cultural environment was changing rapidly, and the forces driving that change had less to do with European culture and more to do with democratic ideology and capitalism. As the national economy steadily developed, the vagaries of market-based economics caused the hands in which that wealth was held to change frequently from generation to generation.³⁷ And rising up in the shadow of those who controlled the wealth were the masses of artisan, industrial, and yeoman workers, who found an unprecedented level of ideological support and social prestige in the underlying principles and philosophy of the nation's new government.

³⁵ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988) 25; Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: 1750-1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 24.

³⁶ Levine., 25; Joseph Jefferson, Walt Whitman, & Washington Irving are among those cited by Levine.

³⁷ Stuart Bruchey, *The Wealth of a Nation: An Economic History of the United States* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

As the numbers and public profile of these working-class citizens rose, so too did their value as a market for cultural and material products. This made them increasingly important in cultural arenas such as theatre. Much of the growth in the American audience came, not from the theatre's traditional bedrock patrons, the economic and social elites, but from the so-called "middling" classes. Theatrical entrepreneurs quickly came to rely upon these new patrons to increase revenues, and so began catering to this growing public.

The shifting demographics of American audiences became one of the primary elements to which the actors and managers of America's theatres had to respond. The growing working class audience brought different expectations and energies with them into the playhouses. These differences were often behavioral, reflecting the various socio-economic environments in which they lived, and the different ideals of decorum by which they chose to abide. Throughout this period the relative influence of these working-class spectators rose and fell, but their tastes and modes of behavior nevertheless had an economic, logistical, and even aesthetic impacts upon the theatres of the period.

However, as I mentioned earlier, the theatre upon which this impact was felt was still deeply rooted in the paternalistic British tradition, and many spectators were heavily invested in that tradition. Furthermore, the modes of construction and ways in which theatres in America were traditionally operated gave these elite-minded spectators something of a home-field advantage in the conflicts that ensued.

The collision of social and cultural forces within American playhouses contributed to an atmosphere of tension that often erupted into the displays of "rowdy"

behavior for which this period is so well known. It is before this self-conscious, opinionated, and frequently raucous audience that actors of the period found themselves playing, and finding ways to successfully navigate these testy waters was an ongoing challenge for many of them.

This chapter will explore the two primary social groups that dominated the playhouses and helped influence the shape of theatrical entertainments in America during the early Nineteenth Century. A clear understanding of these groups is necessary in order to fully understand the aesthetic and economic changes that occurred in the American theatre during this period.

Two Dominant Groups

The theatre was perhaps one of the last cultural elements to recover from the chaos of the Revolutionary era. Although it had by no means been a dominant cultural element in American society prior to the Revolution, the enterprising David Douglass had managed to construct a dedicated theatre structure in most of the major colonial cities in the 1760's and early 1770's.³⁸ Following the social unrest of the revolutionary era, which resulted in the destruction of New York's Chapel Street Theatre in 1766, and the banning of theatrical entertainments by the Continental Congress in 1774, the theatre largely disappeared from the American cultural map. A few theatres, such as the John Street Theatre in New York, managed to operate with some consistency, but on the

³⁸ Odai Johnson, *Absence and Memory in Colonial American Theatre: Fiorelli's Plaster* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 19-20.

whole, the anti-theatrical attitudes that became politically entrenched in the revolutionary period would take a full generation to abate. When the theatre finally did manage to reestablish a permanent presence in 1794; with the nearly simultaneous openings of the Federal Street theatre in Boston, the Chestnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia, and the organization of the group that would construct New York's Park Theatre four years later; the American theatre, like the American society that was to patronize it, had changed in many important ways.

Unlike the theatre of the colonial era, which served primarily as a tool of memory for members of the gentry who saw themselves as English expatriates and who longed for the cultural symbols of their distant homelands, the American theatre of the Federalist period was conceived of in far more local terms.³⁹ Boston's Federal Street Theatre, for example, was constructed by the Boston Tontine Association, an organization composed of local governmental officials, wealthy merchants, lawyers, and former army officers, as a means of improving the cultural opportunities of their city, a project in keeping with their other community-based activities.⁴⁰ These citizens clearly represented the upper echelons of Boston society during this period, but this elite group lacked the direct connections to British society that defined the colonial gentry. In their petition to repeal the city's ban on theatre, the Tontiners stressed the theatre's place as a "rational and innocent amusement" with the capability "to polish the manners and habits of society, to disseminate the social affectations, and to improve and refine

³⁹ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁰ Heather Nathans, *Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson: Into the Hands of the People* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 58.

the literary taste of our rising republic.”⁴¹ This petition was clearly an attempt to make the theatre appear as harmless as possible and made no allusions to its connection to English culture. This approach was probably a wise one considering the political task at hand. Yet these same ideas were not simply restricted to the documents of political maneuvering, they were embodied within the building itself. Although the theatre was appointed with luxurious chandeliers and upholstery items imported from Europe, the ornate proscenium arch was dominated by “the arms of the Union and of the State of Massachusetts blended with emblems tragic and comic.”⁴² As Heather Nathans notes, “The deliberate intertwining of the American and State coats of arms with the theatrical masks suggests an effort to claim the theatre as an American institution.”⁴³ Further evidence of the Tontiner’s dedication to their theatre as a manifestation of their local community can be seen in the fact that they declined an offer from Thomas Wignell to bring his Philadelphia company to Boston for a season, noting instead that they were looking to develop a company of their own.⁴⁴

Thus, despite the fact that theatres such as Boston’s Federal Street Theatre were constructed following British models, using imported European décor, they were being constructed with the intention of improving the local culture of the young republic. This distinction clearly differentiates the theatrical activities of the final years of the Eighteenth and early years of the Nineteenth Centuries from the colonial theatre of the preceding generations. When Anne Brunton Merry arrived in Philadelphia in 1796 she was respected and revered as one of the brightest lights of the London stage, but was

⁴¹ Ibid., 60.

⁴² William W. Clapp, Jr., *A Record of The Boston Stage* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968) 19.

⁴³ Nathans, *Early American Theatre*, 72.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 68

simultaneously claimed by the local citizenry as boon to “the American drama.”⁴⁵

Theatre patrons like the Boston Tontiners were clearly operating from an elite sensibility, and created institutions such as the Federal Street Theatre as venues in which they could indulge in the luxuriance that their wealth and social status afforded them. In this way they were not so different from the American gentry of the colonial period, yet their attitudes toward, and ownership of the cultural institutions that they were patronizing was markedly different. Rather than looking to Britain as the source and stem of their cultural lineage, they were looking at the transportable products of British culture more and more with consumer’s eyes. In much the same way that modern Americans disassociate the products of Asian factories with the cultures that manufacture them, elite-minded Federalist-Era Americans were learning to disassociate the cultural products of England from a nationalized conception of England itself. This was a new generation of theatre patrons who saw themselves as Americans and who claimed anything that occurred within their theatre as their own.

Elite-minded theatre patrons, like the Tontiners of Boston, would become one of the most dominant segments of the American audience. Although they did not always represent a majority, either in terms of numbers or in terms of box-office revenue, elite-minded patrons were typically instrumental in the construction of most American theatres during the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries, and their tastes and opinions would remain deeply influential long after the theatres were opened to the public.

⁴⁵ Gredna Ann Doty, *The Career of Mrs. Anne Brunton Merry in the American Theatre* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1971) 51.

Of course, not everyone viewed these elite-minded patrons in the same light that I have painted them in here. I mentioned above, their tendency to disassociate the cultural products of Britain from their sense of national identity is most noticeable when viewed in direct comparison to the colonial gentry and their relationship to British culture. From the perspective of many of the nation's more humble citizens, this distinction may have seemed less clear. While patrons like the Boston Tontiners clearly saw their efforts as clear steps toward the cultural improvement of the republic, the fact that they were importing cultural products from abroad for this purpose left them open to criticism.

The United States, like many colonist/settler societies, has always been a haven for the self-sufficient. Many of the most famous settler communities from the Puritans of New England to the Quakers of Pennsylvania, prided themselves on their independence, thrift and sense of industry. It is worth remembering that one of the primary objections to the theatre during the Eighteenth Century was not a religious one, but an economic one. While David Douglass's American Company was a reasonably responsible organization, one rival organization, The Virginia Company, operated somewhat like cultural pirates, sweeping into communities, collecting box office revenues, and leaving a wake of unpaid debts behind them as they fled the scene.⁴⁶ This loss of capital flew in the face of the spirit of self-sufficient communitarianism that was the bedrock of many communities, and contributed to many of the bans on the theatre. The official national ban on the theatre and other leisure activities, instituted by the Continental Congress in 1774, similarly stemmed from concerns relating to the nation's

⁴⁶ Johnson, *Absence and Memory*, 30.

ability to economically survive on its own. To the growing number of citizens who were striving to define their nation and its culture in ways that would clearly distinguish it from the nations of Europe, the importation of even the portable cultural products of Britain and other European powers was seen as a corruption of this spirit of self-sufficiency.

These nativist spectators would become famous for their insatiable desire for public demonstrations of equality and independence. This desire is most associated with the successful independent artisans who had managed to avoid the effects of the industrial revolution, but many industrial workers and yeoman farmers added their voices to the ubiquitous cries for “Yankee Doodle Dandy” as well. For these typically non-elite citizens, using the theatre as a public venue, in which they could reinforce the recently nationalized ideals of independence and social equality, clearly had its advantages. It allowed them to openly resist the entrenched dynamics of cultural power that favored the denizens of the boxes, who, although they were no longer the representatives of a foreign ruling state, still held the reigns of power locally. Yet, although nativist spectators enjoyed, at least initially, the ideological support of the larger nation, they often found themselves battling against a cultural institution that seemed to have an astonishing amount of inertia.

Social Division through Architectural Division

In order to better understand the power of this cultural inertia, it might be useful to first briefly examine the physical and social architecture of the theatres that

had become permanent parts of the American urban landscape. This, as much as anything else, contributed to its persistence.

Whereas the British theatre at the turn of the Nineteenth Century was a well-organized hierarchy of royally and commercially supported institutions, with London's Drury Lane and Covent Garden providing anchorage, the American theatre was still very young and still largely decentralized. Yet, throughout the early Nineteenth Century, America remained one of Britain's most profitable theatrical "colonies," and in many ways remained connected to the network of theatres based in London. Most of England's prominent performers toured extensively in America during this period, and the theatres in which they played must have seemed refreshingly familiar.⁴⁷

The earliest permanent theatres erected in what became the United States were essentially small-scale copies of the eighteenth-century English theatres; the pit, box, and gallery arrangement was used ubiquitously. This should not be surprising considering the then colonial status of America, but according to Brooks McNamara, a lack of competition may have encouraged this lack of native innovation as well. In *The American Playhouse in the Eighteenth Century*, he argues that since the Hallam/Douglass Company maintained a virtual monopoly throughout the colonies, they alone were able to establish the standard for theatre architecture in the region. They therefore faced none of the competition that might have led to local innovations in playhouse design. According to McNamara, "Philadelphia's Southwark Theatre of 1766 and the John Street Theatre, erected in New York in 1767, were little better than most

⁴⁷ Simon Williams, "European Actors and the Star System, 1752-1870," in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, vol 1, eds. Don Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 310.

ordinary English town theatres,” and most of Douglass’s theatres were nearly identical.⁴⁸

This pit, box, and gallery arrangement symbolized and reinforced the culture of deference that existed in the colonial period. Richard Butsch described the situation in the following way:

Each group had their proper place in the theater just as they had in society. Servants could not remain in the pit, where they held seats for their masters, but would have removed themselves to the gallery. Slaves, free blacks, and other menials also would not be tolerated among gentry. Similarly the pit was no place for a lady whose status required a box where those with whom she sat were there by invitation and proper introduction. This segregation preserved proper relations of deference.⁴⁹

The pit, box, and gallery arrangement was so integral to the concept of what a playhouse was, that attempts to demarcate “box” areas in converted warehouses and other found spaces apparently even preceded the construction of the dedicated theatres themselves.⁵⁰ Butsch also notes that itinerant companies like the Murray/Kean and Hallam/Douglass companies generally played under the direct sponsorship of local elite patrons.⁵¹ It seems only natural, therefore, that the theatre managers’ earliest impulse in improving the playhouse was the creation of dedicated boxes in which these wealthy patrons might comfortably sequester themselves from the rest of the populace. During the colonial period, these wealthy patrons not only authorized and often underwrote the productions, but also constituted the bulk of the audience both in terms of box-office

⁴⁸ Brooks McNamara, *The American Playhouse in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969) 3; Johnson, *Absence and Memory*, 20.

⁴⁹ Butsch, *American Audiences*, 24.

⁵⁰ Joseph Ireland, *Records of the New York Stage from 1750 to 1860* (New York: Benjamin Franklin, 1968) I, 16.

⁵¹ Butsch, *American Audiences*, 21.

receipts and actual attendance.⁵² The size, quality, privacy of the boxes were, of course, a constant subject of concern for the writers at the time.⁵³

Yet, as the eighteenth century drew to a close, this focus on the boxes and their occupants would begin to wane somewhat. During the colonial period, the price of admission, even to the gallery could be as much as a shilling and was therefore frequently beyond the means of most skilled and unskilled workers who often made only around ten shillings a week.⁵⁴ But, by the end of the Eighteenth Century, the construction of larger theatres with a smaller proportion of box-seats drove down ticket prices. This, combined with an economic boom that resulted in higher overall wages, dramatically increased the number of artisans and other non-elites attending the theatre. The decline in admission prices was a clear indication that theatre managers were reaching “deeper into the social hierarchy for their audiences.”⁵⁵

The decline in ticket prices was also due partly to the fact that major theatre centers such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia began featuring multiple theatres that had to compete with one another for the still relatively small American audience.⁵⁶ Managers like the Park Theatre’s William Dunlap were forced to confront the fiscal impossibility of running a theatre where the wealthy patrons constantly demanded free tickets and other favors while simultaneously discouraging attendance by mechanics and other “less desirable” spectators.⁵⁷ The proceeds from the sale of box tickets simply were not enough to keep these larger theatres solvent.

⁵² Ibid., 23.

⁵³ McNamara, *American Playhouse*, 48.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 48.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁵⁶ Nathans, *Early American Theatre*, 113.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 148

Through the 1820's and 1830's playhouses continued to grow, the proportion of box-seats continued to shrink, ticket prices continued to fall, and managers became increasingly dependent on the presence of artisans, and other non-elites in their playhouses.⁵⁸ By the 1830's, with the re-opening of the Bowery Theatre, which under the management of Thomas Hamblin became a haven for theatrical populism, the presence of artisans and other working-class patrons in the American playhouse had become a fact of life, much to the dismay of the largely elite-minded critics writing at the time.

Yet despite the growing importance of non-elites as an audience for these new, larger theatres, the general format of their layout remained largely the same: pit, gallery, and box. The ongoing use of this layout is important to note because it is perhaps the most tangible evidence of the fact that, although the Declaration of Independence had postulated the equality of men, the reality of their lives did not bear this out. Most theatres in the young republic were constructed with funds that had been invested by the elite-minded patrons who wanted opportunities to display their wealth and social position. The imperial power structure of the colonial period was replaced by a class-based power structure, the boundaries of which would become increasingly clear as the Nineteenth Century progressed. The ongoing use of the vertical separation of the audience through architecture reflected a still-present affinity among many Americans for the sort of social hierarchy that had recently been uprooted.

⁵⁸ Butsch, *American Audiences*, 45.

Vertical Bonds – A Taste for Paternal Hierarchy

As in most eras of theatrical history, the elite-minded audiences in early nineteenth-century America were a central element in any theatre's success. Losing the elite audience meant not only losing the bulk of your box-office income, but perhaps most importantly, it meant losing much of your cultural respectability. For many Americans in the early Nineteenth Century, the cultural visibility and aura of respectability provided by theatre attendance were issues of great concern, and were primary reasons for their attendance.⁵⁹

Since such concerns ran generally counter to the egalitarian ideals that were now being welded into the larger public consciousness of the young republic, elite-minded theatre-goers found themselves in an oppositional position to a large proportion of American public culture, particularly the parades, picnics, and election festivities that were becoming staple elements of public life. Whether directly acknowledged or not, theatre going was still largely an activity that looked back toward the social practices and structures of colonial British society.

In *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, Gordon S. Wood described with great detail, the way in which, prior to the revolution, American society had been connected by an intricate series of vertically oriented paternal bonds. In this conception, a yeoman farmer who owned his own land would have been primarily concerned with his relationship to those immediately below him in the cultural hierarchy (his immediate family dependents, servants, and whatever hired help his farm may have required) and with those immediately above him (local merchants, magistrates, and the gentry to

⁵⁹ James H. Dormon, *Theatre in the Antebellum South: 1815-1861* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1967) 232. See also Butsch, *American Audiences*, 22-23.

whom he might sell his crops). Peers were far less numerous, and much less important.⁶⁰

Such an arrangement defied the schema of class divisions that we normally think in terms of. Whether you were a member of the aristocracy, or the working class was of secondary importance, and such distinctions were much less clearly defined than they would become in the Nineteenth Century. More important were the “gradations of degrees of freedom and servility that linked everyone from the king at the top to the bonded laborers and black slaves at the bottom.”⁶¹ The *quality* of one’s life was less dependent upon one’s “class” than upon the support that one received from those lower in the hierarchy and from the benevolence of those higher up. All of these bonds were personal, longstanding, relatively stable, and commonly conceptualized in paternalistic terms. The yeoman farmer acted as a father figure to his wife, children, servants, and other employees; and acted as a dependent to the merchants, magistrates, and gentry above him.

Wood’s primary argument is that the significance of the American Revolution as a social revolution was the extent to which it managed to disrupt the vertical orientation of American society. One of the more significant disruptions to that hierarchy stemmed from the increasingly dynamic nature of the American population. The interpersonal nature of colonial relationships was greatly eroded by the growth, both in size and mobility, of the American population. The population became so fluid in most areas that the now antiquated wearing-out laws, which for generations had protected communal

⁶⁰ Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1991) 6.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

stability through the eviction of most transient figures (merchants excluded), had to be abandoned altogether.⁶² Dale Knobel similarly notes that the dramatic rise in immigration following the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815, combined with the opportunities afforded by the acquisition and opening of territory to the west of the Appalachians, had put Americans on the move as never before and was transforming American society into one of strangers.⁶³

As I will discuss in the next section, some Americans responded to the erosion of traditional bonds of kinship and commerce by creating voluntary fraternal nativist organizations, which looked to the ideals of equality espoused in the newly minted Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights, as a surrogate source of the support that had been erased during this period. Others opted instead to look backwards. The solution to the anxiety generated by America's social dynamism that was favored by some was simply to find ways to reestablish the familiar vertical hierarchy that was dominant prior to the revolution. This obviously would have been especially appealing to those whose wealth and connections placed them in a favorable position within that hierarchy.

Although the new American government had been specifically constructed with the equal protection of individual rights in mind, those with means could still look for, or could even create situations in which their sense of social superiority could be displayed. Theatre construction and attendance was often an integral part of this process. Because of the public, yet localized nature of theatre-going, it was ideally

⁶² Ibid., 126-130.

⁶³ Dale Knobel, *America for the Americans: The Nativist Movement in the United States* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996) 41-45.

suited to the kinds of hierarchical displays that many were seeking. Such hierarchy was a permanent element of the buildings' structures.

For America's wealthy elites, the theatre represented an opportunity to have their social positions performed and witnessed. As Pierre Bourdieu wrote, "To the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts... corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers."⁶⁴ In attending theatrical events, patrons were consciously participating in a social event that held a greater level of status than cock-fighting, bear-baiting, or any of the other host of public activities that were not valued as highly as markers of social distinction, yet were nevertheless quite popular at the time. As Bourdieu notes, expressions of taste function to both define the hierarchy as well as to mark one's location within that hierarchy.

Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed.⁶⁵

In choosing to attend the theatre, these elite patrons were staking their claim to a particular level in the local socio-cultural hierarchy of the communities in which they functioned.

Yet the manner in which one chose to attend the theatre could be as important in demarcating status as the choice of the event itself. In Bourdieu's analysis, hierarchical

⁶⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984) 1. Although in his introduction to *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu wrote primarily in reference to the social dynamics surrounding the division between "avant-garde" and "popular" art forms, a division that historically did not emerge until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some of his ideas are nevertheless useful in articulating some of the desires of these early nineteenth-century patrons.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

distinctions between different art forms, and between the genres, schools, and periods within art-forms are of central importance. But, especially in the early decades of the Nineteenth Century, most Americans had very limited theatrical options, even in major theatrical centers such as Philadelphia, Boston and New York. Furthermore, the influx of artisan and other working class spectators that appeared initially in the late 1790's became so substantial by the 1820's and 1830's that simply the act of choosing to attend the theatre rather than the circus did not provide as much of a sense of exclusivity as some patrons may have wanted. Thus the manner in which one attended would have become doubly important.

Many elite organizations, like the Tontiners in Boston and New York, raised capital funds in the hopes of erecting theatres that could serve as social enclaves that were in keeping with their elite status.⁶⁶ Although the elite theatre establishments such as the Federal Street Playhouse in Boston, and the Park Theatre in New York found it difficult to maintain the level of social exclusivity that they desired, the impetus to do so was nevertheless constant and would only grow throughout the Nineteenth Century.

Within the theatres themselves, however mixed their audience may have been, patrons could still actively advertise their social status through their choice of seat location. In purchasing a box-seat, a patron was not only claiming a position at the top of the cultural hierarchy, he or she was also asserting that the cultural hierarchy still mattered. A wealthy landowner could no longer expect a physical display of deference from a passing artisan,⁶⁷ but in choosing a seat in the boxes, the distinction between a

⁶⁶ Nathans, *Early American Audiences* 60, 137.

⁶⁷ Wood, *American Revolution*, 145-146.

wealthy landowner and an artisan was made visually evident. Even though this distinction was literally a monetary one (ticket price), it continued to maintain its symbolic value.⁶⁸

This barrier was by no means absolute, however, and it left the door open for emulative consumption. For those whose pocket books may have been a little smaller than their social ambitions, an evening in a theatre box provided an opportunity to publicly embody an elite social experience. Such behavior is similar to the emerging middle-class parlor culture that blossomed during this same period.⁶⁹ Purchasing a box seat or a divan allowed a moderately prosperous person, who may not have actually been “genteel,” to, in the words of historian Richard Bushman, “fleck their lives” with elements of gentility.⁷⁰ This process will be explored in greater depth in the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

Many historians have remarked that going to the theatre was only partly about seeing a play. Some theatres were constructed as multipurpose venues featuring numerous lounges, dancing rooms, kitchens, tea rooms, and even card rooms, all of which catered to elite patrons who frequently sought entertainment outside of their private boxes.⁷¹ Yet simply being seen in the auditorium was of critical importance as well. One contributor to a newspaper in 1804 saw fit to admonish the local theatre manager for participating in a new fad of concentrating light on the stage while

⁶⁸ Dormon, *Theatre in the Antebellum South*, 237.

⁶⁹ Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) 273-279. The emerging parlor culture, which as Bushman demonstrates had strong roots dating back to the colonial era, became most associated with the emerging middle class during the period under discussion. Because of this, I will hold my full discussion of its relationship to the theatre-going culture until my fifth chapter, which deals more directly with the rise of the middle class.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁷¹ Nathans, *Early American Theatre*, 72.

providing less in the auditorium during the performances. The writer noted that “the manager has not yet to learn [*sic*] that all the visitors of a theatre do not attend solely to witness the stage exhibitions.”⁷² That this comment is worded in such a patronizing fashion implies that the need for a well-lit auditorium, which allows the spectators to easily view one another, was so culturally entrenched that the manager should have realized its importance. This comment also points out that auditoriums were lit because the patrons wanted it that way, and not simply because the technical means of dimming the lights had not evolved enough yet.

This example also provides a glimpse into the persistence of the vertical hierarchy within the theatre. In this instance the theatre manager was clearly being talked down to by someone who clearly viewed a theatre manager as a subordinate, but one worthy of being spoken to. The manager, in turn, had a stewardship over the company as a whole, with a complex internal hierarchy of its own. William Dunlap’s oft noted talent for mediation made him a natural choice for such a position. Dunlap’s democratic ideals, combined with his education and elite connections, symbolized the predicament of many theatre managers in this period. Though financially unsuccessful as a manager of the Park theatre, Dunlap’s role as an intermediary between elite patrons, the players, and the other patrons of lower status has nevertheless been lauded by historians, many of whom referred to him as the “Father of the American Theatre.” His role as such symbolizes just the sort of paternalistic vertical hierarchy that many were seeking to reinforce through the theatre in this period.⁷³

⁷² *Columbian Centinel*, “Theatrical,” November 17, 1804.

⁷³ Nathans, *Early American Theatre*, 147-149.

There were some very compelling reasons for favoring the traditional paternalistic vertical hierarchy. Perhaps the most salient was the fact that England's social structure was still based on the vertical paternal model. Interacting profitably with English markets was greatly facilitated by personal bonds between American merchants and their contacts in English markets. As Gordon Wood states, "The popular 'deference' that historians have made so much of was not a mere habit of mind; it has real economic and social force behind it. Artisans in America, like their counterparts in Britain, still had patrons more than they had customers."⁷⁴ Participation by elite-minded spectators within the vertical hierarchy of the theatre-going experience echoed, and potentially facilitated, the desire of many to participate in the system of patronage and dependence that was still a critical part of the British economic model.

While the local hierarchy, within which many theatres operated, may have served to demarcate the differences between the residents of a single town or city, these theatres were also always seen as layers within the larger cultural hierarchy as well. As the paternal model of society had established a tightly woven chain of dependence from the king down to the slave, so too did the theatres, and their patrons understood the multitude of layers that lay both above and below them. At the outset of the Nineteenth Century, the London theatre was still controlled exclusively by the granting of royal patents to its two primary theatres: Drury Lane and Covent Garden. Similarly, provincial theatres operated under the authority of, and with funds provided by, the local governors and magistrates. American theatres like the Park Theatre in New York operated independently of any official governmental mandate, yet functioned in much

⁷⁴ Woods, *American Revolution*, 63.

the same way as any of the British provincial theatres. Such theatres were a source of pride and a mild expression of power for those who patronized them, but the central role of the London patent houses as the kings of the theatre world was always acknowledged. Below the Park Theatre in the hierarchy lay the regional theatres and smaller touring companies led by managers such as Sol Smith and Noah Ludlow, who often had to give performances in converted courtrooms and houses when a purpose-built theatre was unavailable or nonexistent. Such a conception of hierarchy within the theatre kept the theatre of America dependent upon that of England for many generations, despite America's political independence.

Within this hierarchy, theatre managers such as Stephen Price, the most successful of the Park Theatre's managers, were of great importance. Much of Price's success as manager of the Park Theatre in the years from 1808 to 1840 was due to his connections in the London Theatre, where he was the manager of Drury Lane from 1826-1830. Price was often the primary agent in attracting England's finest talents to American shores. Edmund Kean, George F. Cooke, and a host of others all came to America through Price's intervention, with the Park Theatre serving typically as their first stopping point. From there they typically toured throughout the rest of the country, thus allowing other theatres to benefit from the paternal benevolence of the Park Theatre and of Stephen Price.⁷⁵

In the end, cultural participation could be, and often was, a means of defining and marking one's social status, one's position within a vertical hierarchy of culture and power that reached beyond the American shores all the way to London, the nexus of

⁷⁵ Williams, "European Actors," 309-310.

global power in the early Nineteenth Century.

As in pre-revolution America, if one looked up into the boxes of a local theatre, one would see patrons who were not only wealthy members of the local gentry, but who were, as a result of their wealth, influence, and personal connections, also the local magistrates, governors and judges. Despite the radicalism of the social changes that followed the revolution, many of the men who held the reins of power in early nineteenth-century America continued to be men who had been members of the landed gentry prior to the revolution. America celebrated a half century of independence before, in 1828, it elected a president whose heritage was not “genteel.” By the early Nineteenth Century, America had become the most egalitarian society on earth, yet there were still clear distinctions between rich and poor. Many of those who were well off, or who were moving in that direction, had no intention of being seen as an equal “brother” to those with less money and influence. Egalitarianism had little potential to help these elite-minded patrons further ascend the vertical hierarchy. To purchase a box seat was literally to locate oneself in a position where interaction with those who held the reins of power was possible, and where one’s visual proximity to power could be witnessed by the rest of the theatre’s spectators.

The increased potential for vertical advancement up the hierarchy was a key element that distinguished the post revolutionary paternal hierarchy from that of the previous era. The boom-and-bust cycles of the early nineteenth-century American economy created enormous economic instability, and therefore opened opportunities for vertical advancement (and regression for that matter). Vertically-oriented cultural elites and those who aspired to become elite looked to the American theatre as a place where

their social status could be witnessed by the larger community.

Nativist Attitudes

Although theatrical audiences of all sorts, both wealthy and not, had been known for their ability to kick up a row when something like elevated ticket prices stirred up their ire,⁷⁶ the increasingly numerous artisans and other working-class denizens of the pits and galleries of American playhouses seemed to have an especially poor reputation for their decorum. Often overlooked and written off as "crude" and "rowdy," these middling audience members are, in fact, among the least understood entities in American theatre history. This is unfortunate because to write these spectators off as overly-patriotic, uncouth ruffians is to ignore the complexity of the social interactions that took place in these theatres, in which nativist spectators consciously worked to bring the egalitarian ideals of the political nation to bear in one of its most public cultural institutions.

Contemporary critics such as Trollope, Kemble, Ludlow, Irving, and a host of others continually pointed out the lack of sophistication and social decorum exhibited by these spectators.⁷⁷ Fanny Kemble found the American lack of deference to be "a vulgar misapprehension, which confounds ill breeding with independence."⁷⁸ Columnist

⁷⁶ Joseph Donohue, "The Theatre from 1800-1895," in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*, vol 2, ed. Joseph Donohue (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 224. The O.P. riots at Drury Lane are perhaps the best example of this.

⁷⁷ Francis Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997) 103, 263. Fanny Kemble, *Fanny Kemble's Journals*, ed. Catherine Clinton (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) 43. Some of Washington Irving's comments can be found in Butsch, *American Audiences*, 36.

⁷⁸ Kemble, *Fanny Kemble's Journals*, 48-49.

John Thornbury recalled, with great condescension, the way in which “the rowdy strangers at the front of the pit had a habit of arriving there by being passed over the heads of the rest of the pittites,” a group he referred to as “peanut-fed philosophers.”⁷⁹

Because our own twenty-first century middle-class norms for audience behavior largely reflect those of these writers, it is remarkably easy for us to understand their frustration and to accept their comments uncritically. When they tell us that the denizens of the pit and the gallery were coarse, unrefined, and unruly, it seems difficult to disagree. The problem with this uncritical acceptance, however, is that it mutes the complexities of the social and class interactions that were occurring in the theatres of early nineteenth-century America.

By all accounts many of the patrons in the pits and the galleries were pretty rowdy, but the term “rowdy” carries with it clear social connotations that were undoubtedly important to these critics, and served to reinforce a historically dominant set of power dynamics that favored them. To describe these patrons as rowdy was to assert that a single standard of behavior existed, and that these patrons were failing – often, it is implied, through “simple” ignorance – to live up to it. To mark them thus is to deny that these “rowdy” patrons were consciously shaping their own behavior in highly sophisticated ways. I would argue that just the opposite was true. I would like to reconsider the behavior of these “rowdy” patrons as conscious expressions of a newly found and openly celebrated sense of social freedom; as expressions of the nativist sentiments that were being forged and refined during this period.

⁷⁹ John Thornbury, “Players and Playgoers Twenty Five Years Ago,” *The Galaxy*, May 1876, 582-586.

Theatre historians such as James Dormon and Richard Butsch, and contemporary commentators such as Francis Trollope have frequently noted the overtly patriotic nature of this emerging working class, yet have generally stopped short of directly analyzing what role this patriotism played in the context of nineteenth-century American playhouses.⁸⁰ Other historians have also largely failed to confront the fact that these patriotic tendencies were really just a symptom of the larger cultural context of which these working-class audiences were but a small part. The patriotism described was often just the physical manifestation of a complex array of political ideologies that would, by the 1820's begin to take a more tangible shape in the nativist organizations that began to emerge at that point.

Dale Knobel has rightly described nativism as the lost "ism" of the Nineteenth Century. In *America for the Americans: The Nativist Movement in the United States*, Knobel traces many of the organizations that kept the nativist flame alive for over 150 years of American history, from just after the revolution through the 1920's. Though now largely ignored as a historical footnote, nativism was a national phenomenon that operated on a similar scale to the temperance and suffrage movements.⁸¹

Initially, nativism arose out of the cultural and political uncertainty that surrounded the founding of the American republic. In the eighteenth century, the population of the British mainland colonies diversified enormously. According to historian John Butler, in 1680 the majority of the colonists were English. Yet by the time of the revolution, residents of English stock maintained a majority status in only

⁸⁰ Dormon, *Theatre in the Antebellum South*, 237. Butsch, *American Audiences*, 45-49. Trollope, *Domestic Manners*, 103.

⁸¹ Knobel, *America for the Americans*, xix.

the New England colonies. In the other American colonies, residents from Scotland, Ireland, Germany, France, Switzerland, and from many different regions of Africa, together, composed the majority of the population.⁸²

The establishment of America's political independence from England, however, led many to begin contemplating what an independent American cultural identity might be like. Since most post-revolutionary Americans, especially working-class Americans were non-English, and since England was the new nation's most recent enemy, continuing to model cultural and political institutions on English forms became a problematic concept.⁸³ Yet there was little else that the majority of Americans held in common. Historian John Murrin noted that "to repudiate Britain meant jeopardizing what the settlers had in common while stressing what made them different from one another."⁸⁴

Many in the diverse American population chose not to look back on their varied European roots, but to try instead to establish an independent cultural identity oriented primarily around the ideals and principles inherent in the American political system. Just as Americans had invented a country, so too did they choose to invent a culture. The nineteenth-century politician Rufus Choate described the emerging national consciousness as "not a growth but a production," something that Americans were working consciously to create.⁸⁵

⁸² John Butler, *Becoming America: The Revolution Before 1776* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) 2, 10.

⁸³ Knobel, *America for the Americans*, 4-6.

⁸⁴ John Murrin, "A Roof Without Walls: The Dilemma of American National Identity," in *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity*, ed. Richard Beeman, Stephen Botein, and Edward C. Carter (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987) 341.

⁸⁵ Knobel, *America for the Americans*, 3.

The idea that the individual must work *proactively* to create the nation was perhaps the most important element in the nativist ideology. Although nativist movements are now remembered largely for the most heinous actions of groups such as the Know Nothings and the Klu Klux Klan, the vast majority of nativist organizations were focused, not on oppressing those outside of the organization, but on supporting those members within the organization. Most were, in fact, voluntary benevolent fraternal organizations that grew, not out of rampant xenophobia or racism (though those were as much a part of early nineteenth-century American society as they are today), but out of anxiety surrounding the viability of the republican American state.⁸⁶

Independence was seen not merely as a political state, but as a personal characteristic, a way of thinking and living, and a vital requisite of citizenry. According to classical republican thought, a government could only function properly when "natural majorities" of shared interests produced public policy. Therefore, the only reliable or authentic American citizen was one who was unmanipulatable and uncoerced.⁸⁷

Not surprisingly, the biggest threats that nativists saw in the world around them were those that appeared to threaten the proper functioning of this republican government. The well documented conflicts between the largely protestant nativists and Catholic-Irish immigrants provide a prime example of this. Much of the nativist opposition to the Irish arose, not from a xenophobic reaction to foreign immigration, but to a perceived threat to the integrity of local elections. The Irish were seen as a threat

⁸⁶ Ibid., xxvii.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 14-15.

because nativists believed that they were controlled by their priests and would therefore vote as an unthinking bloc rather than as thoughtful, independently minded citizens. The ongoing image of the Irish as sick and impoverished was also a matter of concern because these states made them more likely to become dependent on ruthless politicians and other powerful figures who might temporarily help them, but who sought their votes rather than their welfare. Nativists were, of course, no more immune to feelings of religious intolerance than any other member of society, but it was as threats to the integrity of republican government that their overt criticisms of the Catholic Irish immigrants continually revolved.⁸⁸

Far from being isolated anomalies, nativist groups were a ubiquitous part of American society in the Nineteenth Century, and their ideals were a part of the popular culture. These groups alternately fed on and encouraged the "nativistic" attitudes shared by the wider American public.⁸⁹ When one considers the extent to which nativist sentiments permeated American society, especially amongst the artisans and independent yeomen who made up much of the population of the pits and galleries of early nineteenth-century American theatres, suddenly the uncontrolled outburst of independently minded, patriotic behavior seems more understandable. These moments represented expressions of cultural identity and power for nativist patrons, just as the richly decorated boxes were for elite-minded patrons.

Public displays of patriotism were central, and immensely popular, parts of public culture. Parades and elections were invested in heavily by the entire spectrum of

⁸⁸ Ibid., 50-51

⁸⁹ Ibid., xiv.

citizenry. One parade in New York in 1788, celebrating the ratification of the Constitution, featured an interesting entry by the local butchers, in which two oxen were paraded through the town with banners between their horns that read “Confusion” and “Anarchy.” At the parade’s end, “Confusion” and “Anarchy” were slaughtered and the meat donated to feed the poor. Such a thoughtful, creative, and poetic response to a general call for all to join in the parade demonstrates the depth of conviction that small scale artisans had, not only to their own welfare, but to the health and stability of their larger social universe. As David Waldstreicher notes “the butchers were being more than clever and more than even casually political. They were taking part in an allegorical battle over the meaning of the Constitution and the identities of those who opposed and those who supported its ratification.”⁹⁰

Although theatrical performances were not marked specifically as patriotic celebrations per se (though some, like Dunlap’s “The Glory of Columbia: Her Yeomanry!” clearly were), they often functioned in that way on a reduced scale. Theatrical performances were public gatherings after all, and frequently featured overt celebrations of American pride. Even the most elite theatres, such as Boston’s Federal Street Theatre, were conspicuously draped with patriotic décor.⁹¹

Furthermore, the mixed bills that were the rule of the day often included performances of patriotic songs and speeches. On many occasions, impromptu

⁹⁰ David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997) 2.

⁹¹ Nathans, *Early American Theatre*, 72.

performances of songs such as “Yankee Doodle” were even given, though usually as a means of appeasing those spectators who had been forcefully demanding it.⁹²

Within this larger cultural environment, it would be difficult to imagine how nativist spectators would *not* feel authorized in foregrounding their sense of cultural independence while at the theatre. In fact, displays of self expression in the theatre, even violent ones, are known to have been defended by the fledgling legal system during this period. One local judge in New Orleans ruled that the dollar that one patron paid at the door gave him the right to react to a performance as he saw fit, including, in this case, physically striking the police officer working the performance.⁹³

When one considers the American playhouse in this way, suddenly the “rowdy” behavior of “middling” spectators takes on a different cast. One anecdote from the period tells of a pittite who clambered his way up and over the railing into one of the lower boxes, much to the dismay of the box’s other inhabitants. Despite fervent requests from his new neighbors, the interloper refused to leave, and instead kicked his feet up on the box’s railing, much to the delight of his companions below who cheered so wildly that the performance had to be stopped for several minutes.⁹⁴

It is easy to look upon this incident with derision, as the author of the anecdote did, scoffing at the lack of manners and decorum on the part of the interloper and his friends, and pointing to it all as a clear example of America’s lack of cultural sophistication during this period. But to do so would be to ignore an important part of what was occurring.

⁹² Butsch, *American Audiences*, 51. Trollope, *Domestic Manners*, 103.

⁹³ Dormon, *Theatre in the Antebellum South*, 242

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 241.

This was not simply the behavior of one “ill-bred ruffian” and his friends, a collection of rubes who simply did not know how to behave at the theatre. It was also clearly an act of conscious defiance against the hierarchical system of social norms from which the concept of “ill-breeding” stems. The other pittites were communally supporting the independent action of one of their own. By kicking his feet up and refusing to leave the box, the fellow in question was thumbing his nose at a system of social hierarchy which sought to deny what he no doubt thought of as his constitutionally guaranteed sense of equality.

Using communal support to protect and bolster personal independence was a central feature of most nativist organizations in the Nineteenth Century. In an era before organized health care, life insurance, and unemployment programs, nativist organizations such as the Independent Order of Red Men, the Tammany Society, and many others served as stop-gaps in the lives of working Americans.⁹⁵ As I mentioned earlier, poverty and destitution were seen as a threats because they endangered their victims’ ability to think and act in an independent fashion; they left them open to coercion from wealthier individuals whose commitment to the proper operation of a healthy republic was highly questionable. By creating intricate systems of communal support, an individual’s ability to act with true independence was ensured.

Columnist John Thornbury recalled another example of communal support that occurred in New York’s Olympic theatre in 1830. In this case, a young boy’s conduct at a performance was deemed unruly by the constable who was working that evening. The constable’s solution was simply to eject the boy from the playhouse. This action,

⁹⁵ Knobel, *America for the Americans*, 33.

however, whipped up the ire of the crowd to the extent that the performance had to be stopped. No amount of pleading on the constable's part could assuage the crowd, and it was not until the constable left and returned with boy in tow that the performance was allowed to continue. Rumor has it that the boy that was brought back into the theatre was not even the same one that had been ejected, but this did not seem to be the point. As Thornbury puts it, "The audience was more concerned with general principles than with particular boys."⁹⁶ The crowd was thus enforcing the right of any of their members to express independent thought and behavior, even if it proved disruptive; independence insured through solidarity was clearly valued above the sense of decorum that was so important to elite-minded patrons.

Ironically, this tendency to protect republican virtues became so prevalent that it occasionally opened the crowd to just the sort of manipulation from which they were seeking to protect themselves. One evening at New York's Bowery theatre in 1834 a backstage argument between Mr. Farren, the stage manager, and Mr. McKinney, a lesser player, left Mr. McKinney in a painfully humiliating position of defeat. Though unable to win the argument with his words and wit, Mr. McKinney exacted his revenge by entering the stage, wherein he "summoned to his aid the patriotism of the pit and the upper boxes... declaring that Mr. Farren had insulted the flag and that he himself [an American] would not work in the theatre so long as that Englishman was manager of the company." Farren may have been hedging considerably as to the actual heritage of

⁹⁶ Thornbury, "Players and Playgoers" 586.

both himself and Mr. McKinney, but the tactic was effective enough, and a rough night for the Bowery theatre ensued.⁹⁷

Yet as loud as these audiences may have been, they did have the ability to be orderly and remarkably attentive when they wanted to. They frequently noticed, appreciated, and commented on even slight variations in the actors' performances from night to night.⁹⁸ They also had an enforceable sense of appropriate and inappropriate behavior as well. As James Dormon points out, constables may have had difficulty dealing with disruptive patrons, but the crowds themselves could be remarkably effective at bringing peer-pressure to bear to quickly quiet a patron whose behavior had been deemed "inappropriate" by a sufficient percentage of the audience.⁹⁹

From these examples it should be evident that the "rowdy" reputation that has with which these spectators have been branded over the decades should be looked upon with great skepticism. Their actions should rightly be seen, not as the uncontrolled behavior of those who should have known better, but as displays of personal independence and communal solidarity that could be summoned and quelled at will according to their own standards of behavior. That they appeared threatening to those elites who favored more traditional modes of decorum should not be surprising, for these audiences were often openly challenging the legitimacy of the antiquated system of social stratification that tended to favor these elites. By advocating for egalitarianism, these nativist spectators were threatening the very thing that many of these elite spectators came to the theatre seeking: evidence of their own social superiority.

⁹⁷ Scrapbook MWEZ, "Clippings on Theatre Buildings" Billy Rose Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, 51-52.

⁹⁸ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 29.

⁹⁹ Dormon, *Theatre in the Antebellum South*, 243.

Nativist and elite-minded spectators were brought together under the same roofs by theatre managers who, throughout the early Nineteenth Century, found it impossible to keep their theatres solvent without courting mixed audiences. As the overall size of the American theatre-going public increased toward the mid-century mark, managers became increasingly able to service smaller, more homogenous segments of this population. But for a brief period, American theatres became sites of social tension, within which nativists and elite-minded spectators defended their respective visions of American culture. Elite-minded patrons, who enjoyed the cultural inertia of the previous generation's cultural habits, did so with their investment dollars, their ability to use the architecture of the theatre to their advantage, and with their sense of reverent decorum; nativists did so with their box-office dollars, their cheers, jeers, and the thunder of their stomping feet. Theatres had long been filled with various social elements, who occasionally clashed with one another, but in the American theatres of the early Nineteenth Century the balance of power between these elements had perhaps never been tenuous. Managers filled their bills with varied fare, often laden heavily with performant-oriented moments of spectacle, in an attempt to satisfy the broadest possible audience within a highly competitive theatrical marketplace. The era's actors, mostly British-born, found themselves forced to negotiate these often turbulent waters. Some succeeded more than others.

Chapter 2: **Variations on English Themes: Dominant Trends in Early American Acting & Culture**

Arthur Hornblow described the early Nineteenth Century as the “golden era” of the American stage, “a period of extraordinary brilliance that has never been equaled since.” In defending this claim Hornblow simply listed prominent figures from the “constant stream of artists of the first rank [who] trod the boards of our theatres.”¹⁰⁰ For Hornblow, the very definition of a “golden era” could be seen in the quality of the era’s acting and the status of its dominant stars. Writing from the perspective of the early twentieth century, Hornblow would have been able to see the spectacular scenic achievements of the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, the grandeur of Big-Time Vaudeville, and the commercial extravagance of the Theatrical Syndicate, and yet still claimed that the early Nineteenth Century was the “Golden Era,” and this because of the acting that exemplified the period.

As Hornblow’s claim implies, the early Nineteenth Century was a period in which the actor was the central focus of the theatre. and it was also the period in which live theatre was America’s most popular form of public entertainment. With so little going on in the way of playwriting, and since most theatres did not have the financial resources to mount spectacles on the scale of venues such as Drury Lane, acting probably became a more significant element somewhat by default. Yet as I will argue in

¹⁰⁰ Arthur Hornblow, *A History of the Theatre in America* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1965) 299. This was Hornblow’s view of the American Theatre in 1919; had he written the same passage thirty years later he might have felt differently, but the comment nonetheless points to the importance of this actor-dominated period in the history of the American stage.

this chapter, it was also an important element for other reasons as well. This was a period in which performance by the physical body was a central element not only in the artwork being created on stage, but in terms of the activities that filled the auditoriums as well. The social performances occurring in the house were of great importance to the patrons of the theatres and, not surprisingly, they tended to appreciate stage performances that reflected and reinforced the values and aesthetic mores that they were embodying themselves. In this context, acting would have naturally received more focused attention than say playwriting or lighting.

To study the acting of early Nineteenth Century American theatre is, in fact, to study the social and behavioral tastes of early Nineteenth Century American society at large. Although the evidence for the acting performances of this period tends to be rather scattered and highly anecdotal, it is nevertheless one of our best windows into understanding the social culture of the period. As we shall see through the course of this chapter, this was a period in which American acting, and American society at large continued to maintain strong cultural ties to the aristocratic culture of England. Despite the patriotic fervor that enveloped the nation throughout much of this era, cutting our apron strings proved far more difficult in the cultural realm than it did in the political.

Siddons, Kemble, and the *Beau Ideal*

As I mentioned in my introduction, the vast majority of the acting that took place on American stages in the early Nineteenth Century could rightly be described as English. Most of the actors, and nearly all of the major stars were born, bred, trained,

and rose to fame in England before coming to America.¹⁰¹ And even those who claimed an American heritage worked almost exclusively in the same style as their European counterparts. For the most part, this meant adhering to the neoclassic precepts most often associated with the work of John Phillip Kemble and his sister, Sarah Siddons. The Grand Tradition of acting that their performances established would serve as the basis of virtually all of the acting styles that would be seen in American theatres during the first half of the Nineteenth Century.

Kemble and Siddons gave performances that reflected and perpetuated notions of elite, refined social decorum. They incorporated notions of elite artistry, borrowed from eighteenth-century historical painting and sculpture, and their performances of social refinement followed them offstage as well. As their fame increased, it brought them into contact with London's elite social circles. They were admired by those spectators whose lifestyles they emulated on stage, and those performances were emulated in turn by many other spectators whose social ambitions perhaps exceeded their circumstances.

John Phillip Kemble was the leading actor and manager of Drury Lane from 1788 until 1802 and of Covent Garden from 1803 until 1817, and as such wielded enormous influence over the theatre of the time. Although frequently criticized for a being cold and unfeeling performer, he was, nevertheless, the most influential leading man and theatrical taste-maker of his time. As such, he made the portrayal of dignity

¹⁰¹ Most historians of this period mention this in one form or another. For recent examples see: Bruce McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820-1870* (Iowa City, IA: Universtiy of Iowa Press, 1992) xiii-xiv, and Simon Williams, "European Actors and the Star System in the American Theatre, 1752-1870," in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, vol 1, eds. Don Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 303-304.

and honor bedrock elements of nearly every character from Coriolanus to melodramatic villains.

But if Kemble was influential, then his sister Sarah Siddons was paradigmatic. The perfect balance of decorum and warmth, and almost universally adored by audiences and critics alike, her name has been held up along side Garrick's as perhaps the greatest actress in the history of the English stage. Although she clearly worked within the same aesthetic and theoretical framework as her brother, Siddons was known for breathing warmth and passion, as well as dignity, into her tragic heroines. Together their work served as the inspiration for generations of actors and actresses, and was the standard against which nearly all American performances would be compared throughout the early Nineteenth Century.

The Kemble/Siddons style of acting was notable for three primary reasons: it marked the return of declamation as a primary means of theatrical expression; it borrowed heavily from the conventions from other mediums, especially painting and sculpture, as a means legitimating theatrical performance and thus making it more appealing to an audience of connoisseurs; and finally it was dedicated to the neoclassic *beau ideal* in all aspects of production.

The Return of Declamation

In the middle decades of the Eighteenth Century, Charles Macklin and David Garrick turned the London theatre on its ear. Coming on the heels of a tradition of acting that had stagnated in the four generations since Thomas Betterton, Macklin and

Garrick served as a revolutionary force that instituted artistic concepts that, while not original in the history of acting, certainly seemed original to their patrons.

Whereas tradition dictated the servile imitation of previous performances in a lineage stretching back to the artistic authority of the original author (nearly a century and a half at this point back to Shakespeare's time), Macklin and Garrick advocated the direct imitation of observable models; of "nature" if you will.¹⁰² Whereas tradition sought to excise performative elements that were deemed ugly, Macklin and Garrick included the ugly as well as the beautiful in their performances. And whereas declamation was the primary element in traditional performances, Macklin and Garrick made mimicry and physical action the dominant elements of their performances.¹⁰³ In short, Macklin and Garrick instigated what could be seen a paradigm shift in the way acting was approached in England.

Of course, as with most revolutions, the break was hardly a clean one. Macklin and Garrick shared the stage with players of all sorts, and for all of Garrick's brilliance, a true successor to his school of acting failed to present itself. John Henderson, one of Garrick's closest disciples did well, and starred along side Kemble for years, but was said to have resembled Garrick himself, more than Garrick's style of acting.¹⁰⁴

Moreover, the forces that would stimulate a return to more conventional acting techniques immediately following Garrick's retirement, started gaining momentum

¹⁰² I use "nature" somewhat cautiously here due to the myriad of different ways in which this term has been used throughout the history of acting. For those who are interested in the diversity of meanings attached to this term, Joseph Roach's *The Player's Passion* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1993) explores its evolution in greater detail.

¹⁰³ Lily B. Campbell, "The Rise of a Theory of Stage Presentation in England during the Eighteenth Century," *PMLA* 32, no.2 (June, 1917), 190.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 195.

even before Garrick turned over the helm of Drury Lane to Richard Brinsley Sheridan in 1776. The rapid return of declamation as the primary mode of theatrical expression presents the clearest indication of this trend.

Thomas Sheridan, a minor actor, and the father of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, was a central figure in the return of declamation to theatrical preeminence. Throughout his career he advocated the importance of declamation and elocution, not only within the theatrical context, but in the education of civilized men in general. In Edinburgh in 1762, Sheridan established an academy that had elocution as the basis of its pedagogy. In 1769, at Foote's Theatre, London, he began a series of "Attic Evening's Entertainment" programs that would be continued by the likes of John Phillip Kemble into the early Nineteenth Century. These entertainments were primarily composed of music and recitation events.¹⁰⁵ In 1776, after his son took over the management of Drury Lane, Thomas Sheridan began serving as Stage Manager for that company. Among other accomplishments in that powerful position, he was responsible for providing Sarah Siddons with her first London engagement. Although her first run in London was brief, theatrically unremarkable, and would not be repeated until 1782, Thomas Sheridan did apparently provide advice and instruction to the young actress, for which she remained grateful throughout her career.¹⁰⁶ As Edwin Duerr remarked, when Kemble and Siddons returned to London for good in 1782, "English acting was thus reclaimed for art and 'ideal beauty' by elocution."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 191-193.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 195.

¹⁰⁷ Edwin Duerr, *The Length and Depth of Acting* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962) 278. Though many of Duerr's assessments of acting in this text are problematic, in the least, this is one point upon which his eloquence seemed well attuned.

The reinstatement of declamation and elocution as primary elements within the theatrical hierarchy was also doubtless expedited by other factors as well. The enormous scale in which both Drury Lane and Covent Garden were reconstructed in the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries has often been cited as having had a profound impact upon the techniques that actors chose to employ, particularly in the vocal realm.¹⁰⁸ Yet declamation and elocution were also becoming more prominent as a result of shifting patterns in social performance. Popular press books on these subjects were highly fashionable during this period. John Walker's book, *Elements of Elocution*, for example, was reprinted a half dozen times in the period from 1781 to 1823.¹⁰⁹

In America, additional social forces were at work that put even greater emphasis on declamation as a prized means of social expression. Historian Sandra Gustafson has argued that the emphasis on rhetoric and oratory in the American educational system was even greater than that of the Europeans.¹¹⁰ Peter A. Davis noted the central role played by educational institutions such as Harvard University in the early history of the American theatre.¹¹¹ The "revitalization of colloquial sermons" that followed in the wake of the Great Awakening and the rise of classical humanism and rhetoric that accompanied the American Revolution also helped to emphasize the value and

¹⁰⁸ Numerous historians have commented and theorized about the impact of the enlarged house sizes of both of these theatres in this period on the acting of the period. Some of these historians include, Edwin Duerr, Joseph Donohue, Jim Davis, and Jane Moody.

¹⁰⁹ Fascinatingly, the complete title of Walker's book is, *Elements of Elocution: in which the principles of reading and speaking are investigated; and such pauses emphasis, and inflexions of voice, as are suitable to every variety sentence, are distinctly pointed out and explained; with directions for strengthening and modulating the voice, so as to render it varied, forcible, and harmonious; to which is added, a complete system of the passions; showing how they affect the countenance, tone of voice, and gesture of the body, exemplified by a copious selection of the most striking passages of Shakespeare.*

¹¹⁰ Sandra M. Gustafson, *Eloquence is Power* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.) xiii, 235.

¹¹¹ Peter A. Davis, "Plays and Playwrights before 1800," in *Cambridge History* (see note 2), 224-225.

importance of declamation within the American context.¹¹² While the “fashionableness” of declamation and elocution were no doubt as influential as were most other English cultural products, as Gustafson notes, the pride that Americans took in their revival of classical republicanism “elevated the spoken word to a position of significance in political life and thought.”¹¹³ Thus it should not be surprising that English actors, who possessed great command of these techniques, were subsequently celebrated on American shores. Americans doubtless saw grand displays of eloquence as a particularly “American” endeavor.

Since this was a performative element that had political as well as cultural implications, it seems likely that a fine display of diction and elocution could have appealed to multiple audiences for multiple reasons. Nativist spectators could have appreciated such a display of articulate expression as an example of a bedrock element of a successful republic, while elite-minded spectators might have appreciated it more as an example of a disciplined and refined lifestyle. In either case, this central element of the Kemble/Siddons Grand Tradition of acting could transcend class-oriented divisions, and as we will see in the case studies that follow, it would form the backbone of nearly every actor’s acting style.

Influences from other Art Forms: Historical Painting

Part of the reason why the theatre’s engagement with external art forms such as declamation and elocution was such a successful tactic was the way that it enabled

¹¹² Gustafson, *Eloquence is Power*, xiv-xv.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

performers to capitalize upon other, already respected, cultural manifestations of elite society. The eighteenth-century English theatre was not one of that nation's most respected art forms. Although it did enjoy direct governmental support in the form of the two Royal Patent Houses, it did not enjoy more substantial support from educational institutions as did other art forms. There was no Royal Academy to train actors as there was for painters.¹¹⁴ It is therefore not terribly surprising that in the late Eighteenth Century actors such as Kemble and Siddons began making direct connections with more socially respected art forms. Historical painting was one such art form.

Among the English aristocracy there was a growing interest in both ancient sculpture and classically-influenced history painting.¹¹⁵ Helping to fuel this interest in classical art was a sort of cult of connoisseurship that became prevalent amongst the elite members of English society throughout the Eighteenth Century.¹¹⁶ Historical painting specifically, was an art form on the rise in a nation whose ever growing empire was no doubt inspiring its citizens to dwell on historical imagery with a sense of pride. Tapping into the conventions of historical painting would have been a valuable way for theatre-artists to benefit from this trend.

Visual art in general has historically been looked upon with much less disdain than the theatre. The English theatre of the Eighteenth Century was certainly a more accepted art form than it had been in many other times and places, but part of that acceptance must surely be credited to the close connections that its artists were making

¹¹⁴ Shearer West, *The Image of the Actor: Verbal and Visual Representation in the Age of Garrick and Kemble*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991) 111.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 106-109.

¹¹⁶ Driving this focus on connoisseurship within Art were the writings of Jonathan Richardson including *The Connoisseur: An Essay on the Whole Art of Criticism as it Relates to Painting* and *A Discourse on the Dignity, Certainty, Pleasure and Advantage of the Science of a Connoisseur*, both from 1719.

with other, already respected, art forms. Yet there were still many for whom the theatre continued to represent a haven for vice and corruption. The histories that cover the American theatre in the colonial and federalist periods virtually revolve around the ongoing resistance against the very existence of theatrical performances.¹¹⁷

Embracing the conventions of art forms such as historical painting provided a compelling argument in the defense of the respectability of theatre in general. It also bolstered the images of actors as individuals, particularly when they carried those conventions with them off stage. Historian George D. Ford commented that, “[Siddons] made a studied effort to insure that her bearing at all times was as queenly and dramatic as the appearance she made on the stage.”¹¹⁸ This collapsing of the actors’ on and off-stage performances was common. By performing proper decorum off stage, actors essentially catered to the optimistic hopes of the public, who wanted their stars be as noble off stage as they were on stage. Such behavior greatly facilitated the theatre’s acceptance as a respected cultural form.¹¹⁹

Aside from the credibility that came from emulating a more respected art form such as historical painting, such imitations also had more pragmatic results. Tapping into the rising popularity of historical painting served as a potent marketing tool as well. Elite English society was becoming one in which connoisseurship was becoming increasingly popular, and the fact that actors such as Kemble and Siddons incorporated

¹¹⁷ Odai Johnson’s fascinating new book, *Absence and Memory in Colonial American Theatre* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), does an admirable job of taking this popular narrative to task, arguing that the nation’s desire for theatre was much more intense than these histories indicate and that the struggle to open or to ban theatres was more balanced (see pp 4-8). I will be discussing his work further in my final chapter. However, as compelling and refreshingly balanced as his argument is, it does not deny that anti-theatrical sentiments were present, even common in some areas.

¹¹⁸ George D. Ford *These Were Actors* (New York: Library Publishers, 1955) 78.

¹¹⁹ There were of course always notable exceptions to this trend. Edmund Kean and G. F. Cook were both seen as somewhat vice-ridden figures, yet nevertheless achieved great respect and fame on stage.

visual quotations from the world of historical painting appealed to the growing body of art lovers in their audiences who relished such opportunities to exercise their connoisseurship of other mediums.¹²⁰ Sarah Siddons once incorporated the exact pose and overall composition from Joshua Reynolds's "Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse," one of her most famous portraits, into one of her stage performances.¹²¹ Such antics may seem a bit contrived from a twenty-first-century viewpoint, but they were, in fact, early precursors to the *tableau vivants* that would become a staple element of the nineteenth-century theatre. The fact that actors were appreciated for the 'painterly' nature of their performances can be seen in the critical responses to them. Kemble's performances were compared favorably to the works of both Michelangelo and Raphael by his contemporaries.¹²²

The attention to the details of historical painting also affected the processes by which actors developed their performances. Unlike the generations from Betterton to Quin, who looked to their direct predecessors for their performance cues, or Macklin and Garrick, who looked to external living examples for theirs, the actors working in the Grand Tradition of acting paid close attention to the visual conventions of neoclassic historical painting during the preparation of their roles. Actors were "exhorted to study painting in order to perfect graceful attitudes."¹²³ Indeed, the taxonomy of the passions became a bedrock element of late eighteenth-century English acting.¹²⁴ Siddons learned the formal conventions of the 'passions' and incorporated those specific poses into her

¹²⁰ West, *Image of the Actor*, 106, 112.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹²² James Boaden, *Memoirs of the Life of John Phillip Kemble* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1969) 2:228-231.

¹²³ West, *Image of the Actor*, 109.

¹²⁴ Roach, *Player's Passion*, 172.

performances, which endeared her to the art connoisseurs in the audience. This attention to the strict conventions of human expression, codified within historical painting, also represented a quasi-scientific effort toward ‘accuracy’ in the depiction of human emotion. Jim Davis noted that actors were not simply lacking in the originality of their performances. On the contrary, by embracing these conventionalized modes of expression they were attempting to be as accurate as possible, within the bounds of accepted decorum that is. Looking to ‘nature’ alone for one’s examples lacked this final feature. The process could become reciprocal as well: Siddons’s performances were considered to be so ‘correct’ by some that her performances were thought of as suitable studies for painters and sculptors.¹²⁵

Relying upon the conventions of historical painting also made the acting techniques derived from them more portable. In order for an actor in Quin or Cibber’s generation to learn their craft properly, they necessarily needed to be in the physical presence of their models and mentors. By using portable examples of ‘proper’ emotional techniques, actors following the example of Kemble and Siddons could take their examples with them, beyond the confines of the London patent houses, into the provinces, and even to American shores.

Using paintings and the texts that supported artistic education meant that even a young actress in Philadelphia could rest assured that she was basing her performances on the same examples as the great Sarah Siddons, 3,500 miles away. Knowing that the set of conventions, upon which her performances were based, was coming from an art

¹²⁵ Jim Davis, “Presence, Personality, and Physicality: Actors & Their Repertoires, 1776-1895,” in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*, ed. Joseph Donohue (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 273-274.

form that enjoyed virtually unassailable social prestige would also have allowed that actress to rest easier, knowing that she had reasons to defend her art against moral assaults. It also meant that she possessed a useful marketing tool that she could use to attract more spectators.

The portability factor would also have been a boon to her audiences as well. As elite English society became more connoisseurship-oriented, the portability of the materials associated with historical painting enabled spectators with little or no direct physical access to the London theatre scene to be informed about what was being defined as 'good' acting.

The increased 'learnability' of the Kemble and Siddons tradition of acting, in concert with the complementary facilitation of the connoisseurship of that acting, doubtless contributed to the rise in popularity that the American theatre enjoyed throughout the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries.

Like diction and elocution, the adherence to the visual conventions of historical painting had the capacity for cross-cultural appeal. Although nativist spectators were probably less likely to personally adopt the movements and mannerisms that they saw depicted on stage, the grandeur associated with the conventions of historical painting were employed by actors such as Edwin Forrest in the service of depicting characters that became nativist heroes. Forrest's depiction of *Metamora* is perhaps the clearest example of this.

The Dominance of the Beau Ideal

David Garrick's fame has transcended that of virtually every other actor in the history of the English stage. His focus on 'nature' as the primary source of his artistic inspiration has, no doubt, been a real boon to him in the eyes of modern historians whose own cultural framework is firmly rooted in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century realism.¹²⁶ Yet, oddly, Garrick's style of acting did not long outlive his own career, and 'naturalism' as a concept would have to wait another century before finally gaining an enduring foothold.

I would argue that part of the reason for this is that a significant part of Garrick's appeal as an actor did not reside in his attention to 'nature' alone. It seems relatively clear that, aside from being an extraordinarily talented mimic, Garrick was also an exceptionally charismatic performer. Defining precisely what one means by charisma is inherently tricky, but what seems clear is that, aside from an attention to the details of the world around him, Garrick also brought a highly theatrical element to his performances, which subsequent followers of his style were unable to replicate.¹²⁷ One does not, after all, tend to spend hard-won money to see on stage what one can see for free in the streets outside. Once Garrick left, however, a thoughtless return to the previous generation's stagnated techniques was not much of an option either. The neoclassic concept of the beau ideal emerged as a viable compromise between these two options.

¹²⁶ Edwin Duerr is a prime example of this trend. See *Length and Depth*, 224-227.

¹²⁷ For a more detailed discussion of Garrick's charismatic side see Joseph Roach, "It," *Theatre Journal* 56, no. 4, (December 2004): 555-568.

Simply put, the beau ideal involved the representation of nature, but in an orderly, idealized fashion. Alan Downer described it as “Nature to Advantage Dressed.”¹²⁸ The beauty of nature is replicated; the ugliness of nature is rectified, or omitted. In the theatrical context, the beau ideal had a number of advantages. Many of the theatrical manifestations of beauty tend to be highly theatrical. Poetry, visual art, and music all contribute to theatricality. Given the comparative scarcity of beauty in ordinary life during the Eighteenth Century, displays of beauty would have been relatively exotic and hence inherently theatrical. The fact that much of what was then defined as ‘beautiful,’ especially in terms of vocal work and physical deportment, was also deeply entrenched in the ideals of elite social performance also made such ‘beauty’ highly glamorous. The exploration of the lifestyles of the rich and famous spans the entirety of theatre history from Aeschylus and Aristotle to Noel Coward and Evita. What the beau ideal provided for the acting of the period was the theatricality that strict attention to nature lacked. The beau ideal did not represent a turning away from nature so much as a polishing of what one found there into something more theatrically viable.

Much of what I have been discussing in terms of declamation and the conventions of historical painting operate to this end. In his book, *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action*, Sarah Siddons’s son Henry argued that, “the greater part of the rules concerning theatrical declamation have no other object than dignity or

¹²⁸ Alan S. Downer, “Nature to Advantage Dressed: Eighteenth Century Acting,” *PMLA* 58, no.4 (1943): 1002-1037.

beauty.”¹²⁹ One could make similar arguments about the rules governing the composition of historical paintings.

Yet this attention to beauty and dignity was not entirely abstract in its application. Part of why the beau ideal functioned so successfully in the theatre is simply the fact that the vast majority of the plays eighteenth-century English repertoire depicted beautiful, polished, elite characters. In preparing for such roles, actors could incorporate Garrick’s attention to natural models, and look to elite social figures as the models for their characters. Ironically, the constant ‘improvement’ of the natural models resulted in on-stage depictions of elite characters that could be better behaved than their models in the audience.¹³⁰

The fact that actors had external models to look to also provided the added benefit of making this system of acting more teachable. Not only could actors learn through observation and mimicry as Garrick did, but they could also employ the same teachers of elocution and movement that the elites did, thus enabling them to master the physical disciplines that would enable them to both accurately represent elite characters in a theatrically compelling way. An actor practicing the conventionalized emotional expressions depicted books like H. Siddons’s *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action* was essentially performing the equivalent task of a musician practicing his scales: it was an indication, not of an actor’s lack of creativity, but of her dedication to the disciplined skills of the art form.

¹²⁹ Henry Siddons, *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action* (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1968) 28.

¹³⁰ Chapter 1 of this dissertation covers several instances of this sort, so I won’t repeat them here.

The depiction of beauty and dignity could even help overcome other performative deficiencies. By most accounts, John Phillip Kemble was not the spectacular talent that his sister was, and he was certainly no Garrick. Yet he nevertheless became the leading male actor of his day, and he did so by making the performance of elite notions of dignity and social decorum a central part of his theatrical characterizations. One nineteenth-century critic wrote that Kemble's performance as Coriolanus "was an epic painting – not of what Rome was and still less of what Coriolanus was; but of the beau ideal of Rome and Coriolanus which existed in the imagination of Virgil, of Shakespeare and of Mr. Kemble."¹³¹ Kemble's distinguished air as Coriolanus was world renowned, and made that play more popular as a starring vehicle than it had ever been in the preceding two centuries. Kemble also brought the ideals of social decorum to bear on even less heroic roles.

Such dedication to the ideals of elite social decorum, even in morally reprehensible characters, became a pillar of the theatre of the period; any breach of decorum was not only deemed inartistic, but offensive to the delicate sensibilities of audiences that prided themselves on having such sensibilities. This trend was no less visible in America, where the general rudeness of the population at large no doubt made the pride of refinement that much more acute among those who claimed it. In an 1802 review of *The Fair Penitent*, the New York critic took time out from his adoration of Merry's performance as Calista, to chide the manager for his lack of propriety in not trimming the script enough.

¹³¹ *The News*, June 29, 1817, quoted in West, *Image of the Actor*, 69.

We cannot herewith withhold our astonishment that the description of *Lothario's* triumph over *Calista* is not curtailed in its luxuriations. The manager could not have employed the pruning knife on a more proper occasion.

This tragedy was written a century ago, when such glowing and voluptuous descriptions may have suited the licentious manners of the age, but they are not adapted to the taste of the present day, and are certainly offensive to a New-York audience.¹³²

This breach of social decorum, even in such a revered text as *The Fair Penitent*, was clearly unacceptable, at least to this writer. Also intriguing is the eloquence with which the writer states his objections. In employing such lofty prose, the critic was clearly announcing his or her participation in the culture of decorum that was under threat and that that culture was manifested in a localized context: the “New-York audience.” It is not clear if the writer is implying that his sort of thing might be more acceptable in Philadelphia or London, but there is a clear implication that the audience in New York was somehow special and deserving of only the most exacting standards in terms of stage representations of social decorum.

References to such breaches of social decorum were not uncommon in the reviews of the time; even great actors could be chided for such excesses. Sarah Siddons's portrayal of Jane Shore was reputed to include scenes of physical suffering that were “fearfully realistic, too realistic for many in the audience.”¹³³ Scenes of suffering were not uncommon in the sentimental comedies and tragedies that dominated

¹³² Thespis, “The Fair Penitent,” *New York Evening Post*, April 23, 1802.

¹³³ Michael R. Booth, “Sarah Siddons,” in *Three Tragic Actresses* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 23.

the period, indeed Siddons's career was anchored in her pathos-laden portrayals of maternal suffering and filial loyalty, but as with all things neoclassic, the beau ideal dictated that such scenes be made beautiful and dignified, even if this came at the expense of naturalistic accuracy.

In America during the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries, the theatre as an institution was becoming increasingly fashionable. The playhouses themselves served as important symbols of elite culture that were looked to by many with pride. Noah Webster famously observed that "it seems to be the taste of the Virginians to fix their churches as far as possible from town and their playhouses in the center."¹³⁴ Odai Johnson points out that "even in the company's absence, the empty playhouse kept the idea of theatre alive, like the publication of plays created audiences through readership."¹³⁵

For many Americans the theatre itself represented the beau ideal of elite culture, and as such, the avid defense of propriety within its walls may have been an even more urgent task for the Americans than it may have been for the Europeans. Theatre attendance alone was a means of evoking a cultural memory of elite English culture, and it seems clear that many spectators went to evoke and reinforce their memory of that culture, even if that memory was at best a second-hand memory.

The concept of "ghosting" that Marvin Carlson lays out in *The Haunted Stage* helps explain this process. Carlson states that, "ghosting presents the identical thing [the

¹³⁴ Johnson, *Absence and Memory*, 24, 37, 45-55. As this quote implies, attitudes toward the cultural value of theatre varied from region to region, but the rise in importance of the theatre was perceptible across the board.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

spectators] have encountered before, although now in a somewhat different context.”¹³⁶

In the case of the American theatre in the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries, the “identical thing” that the spectators encountered previously would have been the English actors on stage or at least the texts being performed. Of course, for many American spectators, the previous encounter might not have been an actual performance, but merely a description of a performance, or the previous knowledge of the glamour and status associated with play-going. Having a scene of excessive “luxuriences” portrayed before them may have proved too disruptive to spectators who may have attended the theatre seeking the ghosts of elegance and propriety more than the ghost of Lothario.

The collapsing of the social and the artistic into a single concept reflecting the beau ideal had a major impact on the actors themselves, both on stage and off. During the Kemble and Siddons’s era, the performances of leading actors became increasingly individualized, but always did so within the confines of an otherwise highly conventionalized context. Joseph Donohue noted that, “the force of a unique personality, exhibited within the reassuringly familiar confines of the art was what audiences paid their money to see.”¹³⁷ This centrality and cohesiveness of this “unique personality” became a dominant concept both on stage and off. Actors were not only expected to perform the heroic characters of the neoclassic stage with poise and decorum, but they were expected to perform their own lives in a similar manner. When

¹³⁶ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003) 7.

¹³⁷ Joseph Donohue, *Theatre in the Age of Kean* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975) 64.

Sarah Siddons came out of retirement in 1816 William Hazlitt's primary complaint was more social than artistic.

She cannot retire from it twice with dignity; and yet it is to be wished that she should do all things with dignity. Any loss of reputation to her, is a loss to the world.... She was Tragedy personified.¹³⁸

These men and women, who portrayed figures of dignity and eloquence on the stage were often altering their off stage lives to match, as if the performances were instructing the performers. Jim Davis noted that these actors "absorbed their roles into themselves rather than submerged themselves into their roles."¹³⁹

Many actors were successful in this process, not the least of them being Kemble and Siddons. Born into a family of itinerant performers, these two actors represented a very rare example of an eighteenth-century rags-to-riches story. At the height of their careers both moved in elite social circles. George Ford noted that "John Kemble, clad in white stockings and thin pumps, strutted through the drawing rooms of the elite and the rehearsals at the theatre as though he were the guiding spirit of both domains."¹⁴⁰

Michael Booth similarly noted that Siddons's good personal character was a central part of her appeal throughout her career.¹⁴¹

That the merging of social and theatrical performance had such tangible benefits for actors such as Kemble and Siddons must have served as powerful inspiration for the legions of actors and spectators whose social aspirations exceeded their social

¹³⁸ William Hazlitt, *Hazlitt on Theatre*, ed. William Archer and Robert Lowe (New York: Hill and Wang, Inc., 1957) 94.

¹³⁹ Davis, "Presence, Personality and Physicality," 273.

¹⁴⁰ Ford, *These Were Actors*, 78.

¹⁴¹ Booth, "Sarah Siddons," 14.

circumstances. In America, the relationship of cultural authenticity and power was becoming increasingly important and was creating what Sandra Gustafson describes as a “spectacle of sincerity” that was helping to redefine forms of social power that were based in discernable forms of cultural authenticity.¹⁴² A spectator’s appreciation of a dignified performance would thus have been reinforced by the knowledge that the performer’s own personal character reflected that same dignity. The performer’s ‘cultural authenticity’ could thus create a kind of theatrical power. By serving as participants in that same theatrical event, spectators, who were often working just as hard to have their personal lives reflect such dignified performances, were expressing their own ‘cultural authenticity.’

Because concepts of beauty and dignity were tied inextricably to elite notions of social performance, the beau ideal helped to imbue the acting of the period with greater theatricality. In doing so actors were better able to speak to the various desires that brought spectators to their theatres. As we will see in the four examples that follow, adherence to the precepts of the beau ideal, both on the stage and off, could contribute greatly to an actor’s success or failure in the American theatre.

The quality of an actor’s vocal work was frequently the first aspect of a performance that critics would comment upon. Vocal expression, in the form of line readings, was the primary means by which actors could express their intelligence, and their dedication to the enlightenment culture of reason. It was frequently in this aspect of a performance that critics tended to attribute the term “genius” to an actor. It was also here that an actor would express their sense of taste and propriety.

¹⁴² Gustafson, *Eloquence is Power*, xxi.

Kemble and Siddons helped to codify a style of acting that could be taught and learned more effectively. Because it was connected to the changing mores of elite society, it was able to maintain its relevance across generations and helped it to function as a reliable mechanism for drawing and maintaining large audiences of spectators, many of whom went to the theatre seeking not only entertainment, but also exposure to a social and economic world they sought to join. This was probably never more true than in America in the early Nineteenth Century. Kemble and Siddons succeeded because their work served to stabilize and conventionalize the revolutionary havoc that Garrick and Macklin had wreaked upon the English stage a generation earlier. Their example would be taken up by nearly every actor who worked the stages of American theatres, from the most elite to the most popular. The case studies that follow will explore the ways that actors, whose styles were seemingly divergent, found themselves relying heavily upon the same fundamental elements that formed the bedrock of the Kemble & Siddons's Grand Tradition of acting.

Anne Brunton Merry: The Imported American Star

On the 18th of October 1796, the packet-ship *Sansom*, sailed into New York harbor, carrying two actors that would become the first stars of the American stage: Thomas Abthorpe Cooper and Anne Brunton Merry.¹⁴³ Although there is some dispute among historians regarding which actor rightly deserves the title of “first” star of the

¹⁴³ Gredna Ann Doty, *The Career of Mrs. Anne Brunton Merry in the American Theatre* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1971) 49. Although the woman who was born Anne Brunton later performed under her husbands' names as Mrs. Merry, Mrs. Wignell, and Mrs. Warren; for the sake of clarity and simplicity I will refer to her as Mrs. Merry.

American stage,¹⁴⁴ the two of them together represented a formidable force which helped American spectators and critics develop a powerful taste for proven, high-profile foreign talent; a taste that would become a driving force in the direction of American theatre for generations to come.

Both actors were recruited by Thomas Wignell as additions to the company at the Chestnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia, then the young nation's most culturally dynamic city. Philadelphia would from then on become home to Anne Brunton Merry, though not so for Cooper. Although Cooper arrived in America still a young and relatively inexperienced tragic actor, he quickly began to chafe at having to compete with the Chestnut Street Theatre's long time leading man, James Fennell, for major roles and attention. Within a year of arriving, Cooper broke his contract with Wignell, and accepted an offer from the Park Theatre's William Dunlap to join the company in New York.¹⁴⁵

Merry, on the other hand, would flourish in Philadelphia and quickly became the leading symbol of theatrical excellence in America. As such she also became very influential in terms of the relationship between theatre and society. Unfortunately, her career in America was a tragically short one. She died at age 39, after less than twelve years in America. Although often overlooked or given only short notice in histories of

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 87. Cooper is most often given this title, though Gresdna Doty makes some compelling, if legalistic, arguments in favor of Merry being the first to whom the term was applied.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 64. Cooper soon began splitting his time between New York and Philadelphia, a move that has been seen by some historians as the beginning of the system of touring stars that would come to dominate the American theatre. This "system" seems, at least initially, to have been an inadvertent one. According to historian Gresdna Doty, it seems that the young and impetuous Cooper would probably have been just as happy to have made his move to New York a permanent one, but that in joining the company at the Park Theatre he was clearly breeching his contract with Thomas Wignell who had brought him to America in the first place. Wignell contested the move in court and won. Cooper's subsequent return to the Chestnut Street Theatre in 1800 had less to do with his status as a touring star seeking to broaden his market, and more to do with the court order that demanded his return.

the period, during her brief American tenure Merry was, in fact, the crown jewel of the American Theatre. William Dunlap described her as the “sun of the drama around which the great and little planets and their satellites were to revolve.”¹⁴⁶ There are a number of reasons for her success, chief amongst them being her artistic pedigree, her style of performance, and perhaps most of all, her status as an admired social luminary.

In many ways Merry was the perfect embodiment of what many American theatre-goers were seeking from the theatre: she represented the perfect synthesis of narrative, performative, and social idealism. She performed the right roles in the right ways, and embodied the same social ideals off-stage that she performed on-stage. She was a living example of the excellence of the London theatre and of the elite social circles that patronized it. Unlike John Hodgkinson or the Hallams, who were second tier players who worked in America because they could not find adequate success on the stages of London, Mrs. Merry had a first-rate artistic pedigree. She arrived in America as a proven star of the English stage.

The young Anne Brunton’s rise in the British theatre was nothing short of meteoric. When she made her debut on the prestigious stage at Covent Garden in 1785, the sixteen-year-old Anne Brunton’s first theatrical performance had been less than one year previous. William Dunlap noted how this spontaneous success stood in direct contrast to Mrs. Siddons’s rise to fame.

Thus Siddons, the greatest tragedian we have ever seen, had to struggle through difficulties to reach that pinnacle on which she towered for almost half a century

¹⁴⁶ William Dunlap, *A History of the American Theatre from Its Origins to 1832* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005) 291.

unrivalled, while Ann [sic] Brunton, a child in years, soared at once to almost an equal height. Mrs. Siddons had person, power, art, beyond all contemporaries – Mrs. Merry had voice and feeling, that went as direct to the heart of a feeling auditor as the ray of light to its destination.¹⁴⁷

During her seven year reign at Covent Garden, Brunton was often held up, if not as the equal to, then at least as a venerable rival to the reigning queen of the English stage. They played many of the same roles and were constantly compared to one another. Yet even when compared directly, Brunton was continually showered with praise and consistently drew excellent houses and reviews. She was “another Siddons.”¹⁴⁸ The young Anne Brunton would remain “the sweetest and fairest dramatic flower of Covent Garden,”¹⁴⁹ for seven years, until in 1791 she married Robert Merry and subsequently retired from the stage in the face of objections to her profession from Merry’s family.¹⁵⁰

Soon after their marriage, Merry’s husband Robert also found himself unemployed and his prospects significantly hindered by his political loyalties. He had long been a supporter of the revolutionary movement in France, but the eruption of violence across the channel made his position in England difficult, and Anne’s association with Merry made her return to the London stage untenable as well. So it was somewhat out of financial desperation that Anne Brunton Merry accepted Thomas Wignell’s offer to join the company at the Chestnut Street Theatre. She would once again enter as the leading lady, but in a location where she wouldn’t be hampered by opposition to her husband’s political connections.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 178.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 179.

¹⁴⁹ *London Times*, February 28, 1791.

¹⁵⁰ Doty, *Career of... Merry*, 45.

Like so many others, Anne Brunton Merry found in America an opportunity to begin again, free from political persecution. But, unlike all of the other actors who had emigrated to America before her, Merry brought with her an established artistic reputation of the highest caliber. Hodgkinson had found minor success in London and had even played opposite Siddons, but was no star; Cooper had performed briefly at Drury Lane, but was a complete neophyte in comparison.

Some American critics, including Dunlap, had even seen Merry perform in London, and were thus in a position to spread news of her fame and success from London to America. Elite-minded audiences would, no doubt, have been drawn in by and impressed by Merry's impressive credentials. She was an authentic artifact of high English theatrical culture, and as such was a rare commodity in a land so far from the stages of the London patent houses.

Merry's immense talent also completely impressed native audiences who were unfamiliar with her stage credentials (though critics frequently made a point of educating their readers on this point). The gifts that allowed her to rise rapidly to stardom in England quickly made her the favorite actress and the leading draw at the Chestnut Street Theatre and anywhere else she performed. Wherever she performed, her benefit performances generally outsold all of her fellow performers, including Cooper.

The high regard with which Mrs. Merry was held can be seen in the critical notices of the day. The critic for the *New York Evening Post* hailed Cooper's performance in *Richard III* in the following terms:

Cooper's Richard is unquestionably of so superior a cast, that nothing which we have ever seen in him or in any other, if we except Mrs. Merry, can be set in any comparison with it.¹⁵¹

Apparently, Mrs. Merry's New York engagement the previous summer had made quite an impression. Even though she was the resident star of a foreign company who had only played briefly in New York, Cooper's performance still apparently paled in comparison.

One of Merry's trademark features was the fact that she remained engaged and expressive in the periods between her own speeches. One critic noted that, "In the letter scene [of Rowe's *The Fair Penitent*], with Horatio, the surprise apprehension and varied emotions of conscious guilt with which she attends to him, are elegantly marked during her silence as by the most expressive language."¹⁵² The fact that Merry maintained her character and complete engagement with her costar was in itself remarkable in an era in which staging still consisted largely of the actors lining up along the footlights and in which elocution truly represented the bulk of what was considered to be "acting." A play such as Nicholas Rowe's *The Fair Penitent* would have especially benefited from such a technique since even the most intense moments of interpersonal dialogue between actors are still composed of speeches that are five to ten lines long on average. Merry's ability to act so expressively between the lines must have added immeasurably to the development of dramatic tension in these scenes.

¹⁵¹ Thespis, "Richard the Third," *New York Evening Post*, December 22, 1801.

¹⁵² Thespis, "The Fair Penitent," *New York Evening Post*, April 23, 1802.

This habit of “acting between the lines” could be seen as a fine example of Macklin & Garrick’s naturalistic approach to acting at work. Indeed Merry was often referred to as an actress who performed “without trespassing on nature in the remotest degree.”¹⁵³ That the critic speaks of Merry’s “expressive listening” as if it is a comparative novelty, speaks to the fact that, however much it may have been appreciated, Garrick’s naturalistic influence was hardly universal. Yet it was appreciated by the critic, and thus presumably by other spectators as well.

Merry was also consistently praised for the reserve and control with which she performed her parts; her performances were frequently referred to as being ‘chaste.’ In describing Merry’s performance as Calista in *The Fair Penitent* a Philadelphia critic wrote,

“It would be difficult to give an accurate idea of the superior merit of Mrs. Merry in Calista. A more chaste and finished piece of acting could not be seen. She touched every feeling of the heart – Every sentence had effect. If nature is the standard by which we are to judge of acting, she certainly is the first performer we ever saw – the countenance, the action, the tone of voice, all corresponding to produce the most charming effect.”¹⁵⁴

This is a complex and interesting piece of theatre criticism that reveals much of what elite-minded spectators were looking for in a performance. It is interesting to note that the critic describes Merry’s performance as both “chaste and finished.” The idea of a finished performance seems relatively straightforward, especially in relation to a

¹⁵³ Thespis, “Jane Shore,” *New York Evening Post*, May 3, 1802.

¹⁵⁴ Doty, *Career of... Merry*, 52.

seasoned professional such as Merry, but the term ‘chaste’ seems a bit more evocative and deserves a more detailed analysis.

Generally speaking, when used as a descriptor of an acting performance during the period in question, the term ‘chaste’ was used to compliment an actor for the absence of visible artifice in their performance. Bertram Joseph described chaste acting as “the absence of starts and tricks, of carefully premeditated effects.” It was “sheer, solid acting... embodying the imagined character by a concentrated effort in which the body obeyed the mind, and there was no thought of special outward effects.” A chaste actor “never sought by unworthy means to entrap [the] audience.”¹⁵⁵

This relatively secular usage of ‘chaste’ is supported by the Oxford English Dictionary which posits several secularized definitions for the word, defining it as “4- undefiled; 5- decent: free from indecency or offensiveness; and 6- Restrained.” The eighth definition relates specifically to artistic matters: “8- Pure in artistic or literary style; without meretricious ornament.”¹⁵⁶ This final definition was in common usage, especially among critics, beginning as early as Hogarth’s writings in the mid Eighteenth Century, and as late as Yeats’s writings in the late Nineteenth Century.¹⁵⁷

Critics describing her performances as chaste were pointing to the fact that Merry’s performance embodied an advanced level of control that conveyed the impact of theatrical emotions with great efficiency and without having to resort to over-played conventions. This may indicate some degree of creativity on her part and certainly points to her command of her voice and body.

¹⁵⁵ Bertram Joseph, *The Tragic Actor* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1959) 238-9.

¹⁵⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Chaste.”

¹⁵⁷ Utilizing terminology from a more established artistic field, like literature, would also have served to bolster the theatre’s image, just as utilizing the conventions of historical painting did.

Yet as technical as the term ‘chaste’ could be, it seems impossible to believe that the word’s moral connotations could not have also been carried along more or less intact. Using this term evokes a certain aura created by the performance, not just one of technical virtue but of moral virtue. This aura would have been narratively justified in many of her most famous roles, but being described as a ‘chaste’ actress must surely have been an implied compliment to the actress’s personal virtue as well, almost as if to rant and rave upon the stage was a sort of sin that revealed flaws within the actress herself. In a period when the moral virtue of actresses was assumed by many to be suspect, the use of such terms by theatre critics might be seen as a defensive maneuver on behalf of their favored performers, as much as it was descriptive of their performances. Merry personally faced morally-based opposition to her stage career from her husband’s family, despite her fame, accolades, and what appears to have been her own impeccable personal reputation.¹⁵⁸ Complementary descriptors such as ‘chaste’ would no doubt have been welcome for multiple reasons.

Merry’s public reputation must certainly have benefited from the choices which she made when it came to roles as well. As the leading actress of her time she had enormous control over which roles she could play, and she generally chose conservative roles, which typically embodied exactly the sort of social values for which Merry herself was known. Ingénue roles such as Euphrasia (*The Grecian Daughter*), Monimia (*The Orphan*), Juliet, Cordelia, Calista (*The Fair Penitent*), and Belvidera (*Venice Preserv’d*) were the staples of her career. The grander tragic heroines such as Lady Macbeth, Queen Katherine, etc, for which Siddons became so famous, represented only

¹⁵⁸ Doty, *Career of... Merry*, 45.

a minority element in her repertoire. Merry did not even attempt the role of Lady Macbeth for the first time until 1805.¹⁵⁹ Instead, she chose to specialize in characters who continually demonstrated inward strength, but outward submissiveness and devotion to their husbands and fathers. Calista, for which Merry was well known, is an interesting example of a character whose story echoed the struggle of Merry's own life as an actress. Although Merry was not herself a fallen woman like Calista, she was an actress, and in the eyes of many, this made her a fallen woman by default. Yet both Calista and Merry, through their displays of inner strength and their devotion to the conservative patriarchal values which dominated their worlds found redemption.

For an actress such as Merry, who had so much control over which roles she was able to play, to consistently choose roles such as those mentioned above, surely sent a message to her public concerning the values she was seeking to uphold and reinforce. In choosing such roles, Merry also positioned herself in such a way that she could portray her characters naturalistically without violating the neoclassic beau ideal.

Merry's relationship to elite social culture went beyond just her performances. Once she became established as the brightest star of the American Theatre, Merry adopted many of the trappings of elite life, such as arriving at the theatre attended by a coachman in full livery.¹⁶⁰ The nineteenth century historian Charles Durang noted that the green room at the Chestnut Street Theatre, where Merry was a primary fixture, was "a drawing room in every sense of the word; where the presence of Mrs. Merry, Mrs. Whitlock (Siddons's sister), Mrs. Melmoth, Mrs. Wood, and other ladies of cultivated

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 155.

¹⁶⁰ Gredna Doty, "Anne Brunton Merry: First Star," in *Women in American Theatre*, ed. Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins. 3rd ed. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006) 54.

intellect and polished manners, were examples to the younger members of the profession, who felt a restraint and respect before them.”¹⁶¹ She was a respected social matron, and was entertained in the parlors of elite Philadelphia families.¹⁶² Like Siddons before her, she made sure that her private conduct was beyond scrutiny and as full of grace as any of her characters.

By living a fashionably elegant life off stage, Merry reinforced the work that she did on stage as well, thus productively blurring the distinction between the two. One review of her performance in Thomas Southerne’s *The Fatal Marriage* demonstrates this blurring quite effectively.

Her first appearance after the marriage displays a taste and elegance of dress well calculated to set off her face and form to the greatest advantage; and when we observe the sadness which still hangs round her heart in the midst of all this splendor, it exhorts a sigh from the most insensible spectator.¹⁶³

This description is intriguing because it describes how the use of an elite fashion sense affected the theatrical impact of this moment. The critic implies here that such a clear display of “taste and elegance” ought to inherently be a cause for celebration, which stands in clear contrast to the pitiful emotions being conveyed by Merry. This ‘ironic’ contrast heightens the impact for those viewers who desperately want to cheer her fashion sense. Given that fashion must so often be performed, not just donned, Merry’s ability to pull off the performance of taste and elegance while simultaneously depicting sorrow, clearly indicates a multiplicity of physical and emotional talents on her part.

¹⁶¹ Charles Durang, “The Philadelphia Stage from the Year 1749 to the Year 1855,” *Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch*, ch. XXXII, December 10, 1854.

¹⁶² Doty, “First Star,” 56.

¹⁶³ Thespis, “Critique No. 25,” *New York Evening Post*, April 28, 1802.

Merry's performances, as events, became an integral part of elite society as well. As the New York critic 'Thespis' stated, "It gives us much real pleasure to observe, that to grace the boxes during the stay of Mrs. Merry, is as much a matter of fashion as of inclination; and we think she cannot feel insensible to the compliment thus paid her."¹⁶⁴ The lasting impression from Merry's tour to New York the previous summer was such that on her first night in New York in the spring of 1802, "The boxes, filled with ladies of the first fashion, exhibited a more brilliant assemblage than was ever known on a holiday night."¹⁶⁵ That the critic points specifically toward the presence of "ladies of the first fashion" is important to note because at this early date in the history of the American stage, the presence of women, especially those of such high rank, was relatively uncommon, and was in itself a noteworthy occurrence, especially if they gathered in any sort of quantity.¹⁶⁶ As the quote implies, outside of holidays, it did not happen very often. At the end of her New York engagement, the critic noted that, "Whilst we express our sincere regret that this lady's engagements with the Philadelphia company precluded any longer continuance with us, we must be permitted to console ourselves with the hope that she has not bidden us a *last* adieu – her presence here will always create a theatrical gala."¹⁶⁷ These three quotes demonstrate how Merry's performances not only absorbed many of the elements of elite social performance, but became part of elite social performance.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Thespis, "Critique No. 22," *New York Evening Post*, April 20, 1802.

¹⁶⁶ Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 66-67.

¹⁶⁷ Thespis, "Critique No. 28," *New York Evening Post*, May 10, 1802.

The key to Merry's unprecedented success in the American theatre was her ability to synthesize her acting style, her personal life, and her performance events into a single entity that embodied the neoclassic beau ideal without blemish or corruption. In this she even superseded the great Sarah Siddons, whose talent was boundless, but whose theatrical instincts could nevertheless occasionally drive her beyond the bounds of decorum.¹⁶⁸

For Merry's spectators this meant that when they attended her performances, everything that they saw from her choice and execution of roles, to the company around them in the theatre, and even to the news that they encountered in relation to Merry's life outside of the theatre, reinforced and justified the beauty and extravagance of the theatre as an integral element of elite social culture.

As the first true star of the American stage, Merry set a precedent for those who would follow that would prove enormously influential. More and more, American spectators would expect their icons to function off the stage just as they did on the stage, and any disruptions to this continuity were often met with powerful resistance, as Edmund Kean would discover in his tour a generation later.

The success of Anne Brunton Merry reaffirms the idea that audiences were at least as interested in the social aspects of play-going as they were the aesthetic aspects. Or perhaps more accurately, that the social and the aesthetic were inextricably woven together. An aberration in any single element of the experience caused a disruption to the whole.

¹⁶⁸ Booth, "Sarah Siddons," 23.

Mary Ann Duff: The Americanization of a Star

Despite being a remarkably similar actress, both in terms of style, choice of roles and public reputation, Mary Ann Duff has fared better in theatrical history than Anne Brunton Merry. Even the recent, and well-respected *Cambridge History of the American Theatre*, largely overlooks Merry's early dominance. In discussing Fanny Kemble's 1832-3 American tour, Simon Williams writes that "[Kemble's] coming to America had been heralded by the media as little short of a divine manifestation. She was not, however, the first woman to achieve stardom in the American Theatre – throughout the 1820s Mary Ann Duff had achieved national celebrity for the physical allure of her performances and for moving audiences by her 'gentle grief.'"¹⁶⁹

Williams's rhetoric here could lead one to believe that Duff was in fact the first, despite the fact that early historians such as William Dunlap clearly indicate otherwise. In his book, *A History of American Acting*, Garff Wilson overlooks Merry entirely, while dedicating a major section to Duff.¹⁷⁰

Gender issues may very well have played a role in the minimizing of Anne Brunton Merry in theatrical histories. Although women were certainly not overlooked in the theatre of the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries (Siddons was by far the biggest star of her era), the ratio of men to women in the theatre was hardly equal. The vast majority of scripts in the active repertoire had many more roles for men than for women. The ongoing popularity of Shakespeare's plays is a fine example of this. There

¹⁶⁹ Williams, "European Actors," 320.

¹⁷⁰ Garff B. Wilson, *A History of American Acting* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980) 43-47.

were simply more opportunities for men to shine. On the historiographical side, preference for male actors as historical subjects may have reflected the fact that most theatre historians in the Twentieth Century were male. The dominance of Thomas Abthorpe Cooper in histories of the period is a good example of this.¹⁷¹

Historical accessibility, and a widespread trend toward the nationalization of culture, however, probably played a greater role in the comparative dominance of performers such as Duff and Cooper over Anne Brunton Merry. Merry, unlike Cooper, died at a relatively young age; her American career lasted little more than a decade, and ended just before the era of the national system of touring stars took off. Cooper, on the other hand left the management of the Park Theatre in 1815 and toured extensively for many years afterward. Aside from the simple fact that Merry's career was shorter than either Cooper or Duff's, the larger cultural changes that occurred in the two decades following Merry's death drastically altered the way a star's persona was developed and promoted and have had major ramifications for subsequent theatre historians.

The 1830's and 1840's saw the beginning of an endless succession of published actor-memoirs that would continue throughout the Nineteenth Century. William Dunlap's 1832 *History of the American Theatre*, was the first of these, and has been very influential to subsequent historians despite its immense size and relatively limited scope.¹⁷² In the half century that followed, dozens of similar volumes by William Wood, Noah Ludlow, Sol Smith, and many others appeared. Ludlow and Smith's works in particular have proved essential to many historians; it is difficult to read any history

¹⁷¹ Cooper, who was little more than an up and coming youngster during Merry's zenith, consistently dominates histories of the period, almost as if he was the only performer of note prior to George F. Cooke's arrival in 1810.

¹⁷² Dunlap, *History of American Theatre*.

of this period without encountering numerous references to their chronicles. These two works in particular may have proved more enduring because of their epic nature. These gentlemen traveled over huge portions of the young nation, and the major stars of the day appear in the pages of these books again and again. At times their memoirs read more like theatrical versions of *The Odyssey* than works of theatrical history. As the leading tragedienne of this period, Duff enjoyed a privileged position in these personal histories.¹⁷³ Even though other younger stars such as Edwin Forrest quickly eclipsed T. A. Cooper's dominance of the American stage, the sheer length of Cooper's career carried him well into this period, and consequently into the pages of these memoirs. Merry does appear in Dunlap's history as well as in Wood's, but she died well before Smith and Ludlow's more popular chronicles even begin.

Another reason why the Ludlow and Smith memoirs have proved so enduring is the fact that they chronicle an America that resembles the one of our popular imagination: rough, unpredictable, and utterly un-European. Dunlap and Wood chronicled the theatre during a period when it was far more Euro-centric. Subsequent historians have consistently demonstrated a real preference for "American" theatre subjects, even if they represented a small minority of what actually occurred in the early Nineteenth Century.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, "American" theatres were often decked out in the finest of imported fabrics and once Anne Brunton Merry arrived in the United States she was claimed as a welcome addition to "the national drama." Although

¹⁷³ Noah Ludlow, *The Dramatic Life as I Found It* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1966) 414. Ludlow considered her depiction of *Belvidera* (*Venice Preserv'd*) to be the best he ever saw by far.

nativist spectators would begin to point to such imported “goods” as indications of the “un-American” nature of some of their fellow citizens, it is important to remember that such nationalized conceptions of culture were just being developed during this period and were by no means universally accepted. Most modern histories of this period tend to favor subjects that adhere to what was once a purely nativist conception of culture. Therefore, the fact that Duff was seen as a more “American” actress may have figured into her historical longevity.

Of course, Mary Ann Duff was no more American than Anne Brunton Merry was. Mary Anne Duff was born Mary Ann Dyke in London in 1794; the then temporarily retired Covent Garden star could have passed the infant Duff on the streets of London in her pram. Later when Duff was about sixteen, she was famously wooed, albeit unsuccessfully, by the poet Thomas Moore. She declined his advances and instead married John R. Duff, a minor actor, in 1810.¹⁷⁴ Almost as soon as the ink dried on the marriage license, the newlyweds were on a ship bound for Boston where John Duff was to join the acting company at the Federal Street Theatre.¹⁷⁵ It is at this point that Mary Ann Duff’s theatrical career begins.

Although Mary and her sister Elizabeth had performed as dancers on the stages of Dublin, Duff had had no acting experience whatsoever when she joined her husband onstage on December 31, 1810, as Juliet to his Romeo. Mary Ann Duff’s success as an actress was slow in coming, and for many years she played very much in the shadow of her husband, whose success in America was significant. Since Mary Ann Duff moved

¹⁷⁴ Soon after, Moore successfully wooed and wed Mary’s younger sister Elizabeth.

¹⁷⁵ Ludlow, *Dramatic Life*, 464.

to America at such a young age and since almost the entirety of her theatrical career occurred on American stages,¹⁷⁶ It is perhaps not surprising that she was looked upon as a decidedly “American” actress; she was home-grown if not home-bred.¹⁷⁷

Despite her English upbringing, many Americans claimed her as their own with great pride, and consistently pointed to her as the finest example of American acting. The elder Booth described her as “The greatest actress in the world.”¹⁷⁸ Ludlow similarly touted her as “undoubtedly the best tragic actress in the United States.”¹⁷⁹ Historian Joseph Ireland proudly pointed out that Edmund Kean, at the height of his prestige “said she was the superior of any actress on the British stage, – an opinion that he frequently reiterated.”¹⁸⁰ Ireland’s use of the iconic Kean as an authority figure is particularly interesting in that it uses the opinion of a foreigner to add authority to the idea that Duff may have very well been the superior to her “British” peers.

Duff’s “American-ness” could also be seen in the way she was contrasted with Kean in Ireland’s history. At one point Ireland mentions that Edmund Kean “requested her to play with less force and intensity, or her acting would throw him into the background.” According to Ireland, Duff replied, “though she honored his rank and position in the profession, her duty to herself and the public would constrain her always to play to the best of her ability.”¹⁸¹ The truth of this interchange is difficult to assess,

¹⁷⁶ Duff did play one brief tour in Britain and even performed at Drury Lane in 1828, but the tour did not go well, and was cut short. See Ludlow, 465.

¹⁷⁷ John S. Kendall makes just this assertion in *The Golden Age of the New Orleans Theatre* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968) 60.

¹⁷⁸ Letter from J. B. Booth to George Holland, 1826, in *Theatre in the United States: A Documentary History*, ed. Barry B. Witham (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 78-79.

¹⁷⁹ Ludlow, *Dramatic Life*, 464.

¹⁸⁰ Joseph N. Ireland, *Mrs. Duff* (New York: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1913) 29.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

but the fact that Ireland chose to record it in print is important in that it marks Duff as “American” in subtle, but important ways.¹⁸²

That Kean makes the request in the first place demonstrates Duff’s equality, or perhaps even superiority, to Kean (depending on how jokingly one assumes that the comments were delivered) in the realm of on-stage performance. In accepting the implied compliment with all due modesty, but by then subsequently declining to “lower her standards,” Duff displays something altogether more important: her unimpeachable character. In standing by her own principles, Duff is demonstrating two important concepts. First, is the idea that her duty to herself must come before her duty to “her betters,” in this case an acknowledged leader within her field of endeavor. In doing so, Duff was portraying just the sort of resistance to public displays of deference for which the populace at large was becoming famous. Duff is clearly implying that she has a moral obligation to her own standards that must come before any loyalty to another performer, particularly a foreign one. Second, Duff demonstrates that her loyalty to “the people” must come immediately after her loyalty to her own morals. This dedication to the individual first, followed closely by a dedication to “the people”, before all other considerations would become an important part of the American ethos. In depicting Duff as a woman who stands up for these ideals in a face-to-face confrontation with the most famous actor of his time, Ireland is marking Duff as undeniably American. By depicting Kean as a moderately corrupt, though affable foreigner, Ireland provides Duff

¹⁸² It is also important to note that Ireland’s biography of Duff was published as part of a multi-volume collection entitled the *American Actor’s Series*, Charlotte Cushman and Edwin Forrest are among the other subjects featured in this collection.

with just the right contrast against which her inherently moral “American-ness” can be clearly seen.

Within this scenario we can see how Mrs. Duff managed to appeal to a multiple audiences who were often seeking different ideals within their performers. For elite-minded spectators, Mrs. Duff is represented by Ireland as an example of decorous excellence; for nativists, she stands as a strong, uncoercible individual whose moral priorities were satisfyingly democratic.

Cultural packaging aside, Mary Ann Duff and Anne Brunton Merry were, in most respects, very similar actresses. They played many of the same roles and were both famous for their portrayals of maternal suffering. Duff played majestic roles such as Lady Macbeth more frequently, but both actresses followed closely to the Grand Tradition of acting in most respects. Where Merry was hailed as Siddons’s equal, Duff was similarly hailed by the American press as the “Siddons of the American Stage.”¹⁸³

Like so many actors of the Grand Tradition, Duff’s skillful elocution was often the first element commented upon by her reviewers. *The [New York] Evening Post*’s theatre critic, praised Duff’s performance as Beverly in *The Gamester* stating, “There is not a beauty in the dialog of this most affecting tragedy that was not distinctly marked by this accomplished actress.”¹⁸⁴ Another critic in 1832, at the height of her fame, declared that “her enunciation is so clear, so full, so ‘organ-like,’ that though she may possibly have an equal, (which we beg to doubt), she certainly has no superior.”¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Review of Mary Ann Duff, 1832, in Witham, *Documentary History* (see note 82), 100.

¹⁸⁴ *Evening Post* (New York), November 28, 1826.

¹⁸⁵ Review, in Witham, *Theatre in the United States*, 101.

Closely linked to her elocution, and equally important within the Kemble/Siddons acting tradition was the “accuracy of phrase” and the “exceedingly judicious distribution of emphasis” with which she performed her roles.¹⁸⁶ In her prime Mrs. Duff was celebrated as much for her intellectual genius as much as anything, and the praises bestowed upon her in this realm bordered on the hyperbolic. In 1826, the *New York Mirror* praised her stating that, “Her mind reflects fresh brightness upon the genius of her sex, and demands, not merely our praise, but our reverence.”¹⁸⁷

Such focus on her vocal and intellectual assets during the prime of her career stands in direct contrast to the notices that she received during her years of slow apprenticeship. During this early period she played major roles such as Juliet, but did so primarily in support of her then more famous husband. In these formative years, her physical assets seemed to continually garner the most praise. William W. Clapp, the nineteenth-century chronicler of the Boston stage related her stage debut as Juliet as a triumph of beauty and little else.

A more beautiful woman had not trod the stage, and so far as the making up and *personal* was concerned, it was admitted that a more gentle *Juliet*, or one possessing so black an eye, had not appeared; but the “spirit” seemed wanting. Her style was indifferent, and her best friends lost all hopes of her ever assuming a position.¹⁸⁸

Such comments were relatively common during this phase of her career. Charles Durang and Noah Ludlow both described her acting during this period as “tame” though

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, vol. III (New York: AMS Press, 1931) 210.

¹⁸⁸ William W. Clapp, *A Record of the Boston Stage* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969) 115-116.

they also extolled her physical virtues.¹⁸⁹ Joseph Ireland noted that she maintained her professional viability in her early years particularly by employing her dance background in dance sequences, pantomimes, and other physically intensive acts. She also managed to please audiences by occasionally playing men's roles. Ireland remarked that her "lovely figure" made her a favorite in breeches roles.¹⁹⁰ While such comments might lead one to believe that Mrs. Duff was destined to be the young nation's first sex-symbol, the comments regarding her physical charms were often instead couched in terms of neoclassic art. Charles Durang claimed that "The tragic muse could not have been more classically represented in any form of the arts." He described her as having a "mild Italian face" which possessed "all the purity of a Raphael conception."¹⁹¹

Within a decade of her debut Mrs. Duff's other talents began to gain traction, and by 1823 her benefit performances were outselling her husband's.¹⁹² In her prime, Mary Ann Duff became the very beau ideal of the tragic actress. Although the power and sensitivity of her performances no doubt endeared her to virtually all of her spectators, the fact that her off-stage persona embodied the highest standards of decorum and modesty made her reputation all but unimpeachable.

The fact that she started her stage career by meekly supporting her husband's career no doubt got her off to a good start in the eyes of socially conservative spectators, and even once she became a star in her own right, critics continually made references to her selfless and to her ongoing dedication to her family. Durang remarked that although her stage career was improving, "her soul was wrapped in her domestic

¹⁸⁹ Durang, "Philadelphia Stage," March 4, 1855. Ludlow, *Dramatic Life*, 464.

¹⁹⁰ Ireland, *Mrs. Duff*, 13 & 18.

¹⁹¹ Durang, "Philadelphia Stage," May 6, 1855.

¹⁹² Ludlow, *Dramatic Life*, 465.

concerns.”¹⁹³ After her husband died in 1831, critics portrayed her career as one of humble self-sacrifice on behalf of her children, for whom she was the sole support.¹⁹⁴ This “sacrifice” was couched in similar terms to the one which Fanny Kemble, who arrived in America about the same time, had purportedly made.¹⁹⁵

Images of Mrs. Duff as an angelic paragon of virtue followed her in her off-stage life as well. While touring in the western states she supposedly stayed on a cholera-stricken steamboat the entire distance from Cincinnati to New Orleans so that she could help nurse the sick passengers back to health, consequently earning a set of resolutions eulogizing her bravery and devotion from the few surviving patients.¹⁹⁶ One of Mrs. Duff’s formal portraits even depicts her as an angelic figure stepping off from a heavenly cloud to tread upon the earth, clothed entirely in a flowing white gown with angelic cherubim clinging to her, as if pleading her not to leave their realm.

Images such as these demonstrate that, like Merry, Mrs. Duff was immensely successful in synthesizing her on and off-stage lives into a cohesive whole that embodied the beau ideal of elite social decorum for women in this period. Unlike Cooke and Kean, Duff shied away somewhat from the fiery fits and starts of the emerging romantic tradition, and instead developed performances that were marked more by what Garff Wilson described as “a quiet sustained force which was powerfully suggestive

¹⁹³ Durang, “Philadelphia Stage,” May 6, 1855.

¹⁹⁴ Review, in Witham, *Theatre in the United States*, 101.

¹⁹⁵ Faye E. Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses and Audiences, 1790-1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994) 30-31. Although she was the niece of the legendary Sarah Siddons, Fanny Kemble claimed to have had no aspirations to the stage herself. Contemporary critics made frequent references to the fact that she took up the mantle only as a means of supporting her father, whose financial circumstances were perpetually dire.

¹⁹⁶ Kendall, *New Orleans Theatre*, 60.

rather than openly exhibitionistic.”¹⁹⁷ In 1827 the *New York Mirror* praised her for her “uniformity of excellence... From beginning to end you see before you only the character she is personating. The unity of her conception, the *oneness*, is remarkable.”¹⁹⁸ Like Siddons before her, Duff managed to strike the perfect balance between dramatic power and social decorum; affecting audiences theatrically while satisfying them socially as well. Noah Ludlow described her balanced acting as “refined, quiet, yet powerful; not boisterous, yet forcible; graceful in all her motions, and dignified, without stiffness.”¹⁹⁹

Like Merry, part of what allowed Duff to achieve this balance was the fact that the core of her repertoire was built around noble characters whose displays of righteous suffering and maternal affectation were narratively justified, thus allowing her to display great emotion while simultaneously displaying appropriate social decorum.²⁰⁰ Choosing roles in this manner allowed Duff to merge naturalistic acting with appropriate displays of elite social decorum. Yet even Duff’s performances carried with them moments of overt theatricality that forced spectators into spontaneous bursts of applause. One review from 1826 clearly demonstrates the power that she could wield over her audiences.

Her husband expired, she shrieked and dropped upon his lifeless corpse. For a moment all was still, but the next moment this admirable actress received as

¹⁹⁷ Wilson, *American Acting*, 46.

¹⁹⁸ *New York Mirror*, May 5, 1827.

¹⁹⁹ Ludlow, *Dramatic Life*, 463-464.

²⁰⁰ Wilson, *American Acting*, 47.

proud a tribute as ever was given to dramatic excellence. The impression made by this representation exceeded anything we have ever witnessed.²⁰¹

Such a spectacular display is usually associated more with actors such as Forrest, but Duff could clearly hold an audience in silent awe as well; no small feat given the generally animated nature of the period's audiences.

Although the highly conservative nature of her acting would seem to ally her more with actors from the previous generation, Mrs. Duff nevertheless managed to thrive in the spectacle-driven world of the star system. She played quite successfully opposite actors such as Kean and Forrest, whose acting styles were so famously different from that of the previous generation. The fact that her work meshed so seamlessly with that of other actors suggests that these differences, which have been the focus of many studies of the period's acting, are somewhat over-stated. As I will demonstrate in my discussion of Forrest's work, nearly all of the acting that was seen on American stages in this period shared the same neoclassic roots. This fact may very well have allowed the always decorous Mrs. Duff to play successfully along side the famously rude Mr. Forrest.

Edwin Forrest: The "First" American Star

Much has already been written about Edwin Forrest. His career has been scrutinized more than almost any other nineteenth-century American actor save Edwin Booth. Thousands of articles were written about him during his lifetime, multiple

²⁰¹ *Evening Post* (New York), November 28, 1826.

biographies, some authorized, most unauthorized, appeared in the decade following his death, and at least three major scholarly studies have been done on his career in the century since. Forrest was often a polarizing figure during his lifetime, and his biographers and the subsequent critical histories of his life have tended to reflect this. Most of the biographies tended to lionize Forrest, while later histories, particularly Montrose Moses's *The Fabulous Forrest*, were more critical. Wading through the massive body of material that is available to scholars on this topic is an immense task and one that is best left to a dedicated book-length project.

For the purposes of this study, I would like to instead focus on one particular aspect of Forrest's career. Most scholars and other less formal writers have continually examined Forrest as a subject of working class hero-worship, the ideal of the self-made man, and as the stage embodiment of Jacksonian masculinity.²⁰² All of these descriptions are largely true and I won't attempt to critique them. But I would argue that Forrest's career was perhaps not as one-sided as many of these descriptors would lead one to think. I would like to examine the ways in which Forrest functioned, like Mrs. Duff, as more of a cross-over figure, appealing to elite spectators at the Park Theatre as well as to the nativist spectators at Hamblin's Bowery Theatre.

Since Forrest's working-class appeal has been well documented and analyzed, I will instead focus my attention here on the ways in which Forrest's performance style embodied clear influences from elite social performance. I will argue how Forrest managed to, in effect, have it both ways, appealing to both elite as well as nativist

²⁰² McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 69-71. Karl M Kippola, *Out of the Forrest and into the Booth: Performance of Masculinity on the American Stage, 1828-1865* (Dissertation, Univ of MD, 2003) 104.

audiences, and thus maximizing his market appeal. Forrest may have publicly espoused clear nativist sentiments, but through smart cross-over marketing and the deft utilization of performant stage elements, he nevertheless appealed to spectators across the social spectrum, attracting the broadest and thus the most lucrative audience possible.

Forrest's unique physicality has been given close scrutiny by a host of critics, but like most actors whose early careers were forged in the furnace of the Kemble/Siddons Grand Tradition, elocution was the bedrock of Forrest's technique and this fact was often noted by critics throughout his career.

Forrest was clearly blessed with some natural gifts when it came to his voice, but he also began formally training it at a very early age. His father, who was by no means a wealthy man, nevertheless arranged for his young son to study elocution with Alexander Wilson, a prominent instructor in his native Philadelphia. The elder Booth was hoping to guide his son toward a career in the ministry, but the training was put to good use none the less.²⁰³ One study even indicates that Forrest may have started his life-long dedication to elocution by purchasing a copy of Walker's *Classical Pronouncing Dictionary* on the suggestion of an elegant gentleman passing by a theatre that he was loitering near.²⁰⁴ Forrest would continue studying elocution throughout his career with other prominent elocutionists such as Lemuel G. White.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Dale Shaw, *Titans of the American Stage* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971) 14.

²⁰⁴ Mary Caroline Crawford, *The Romance of the American Theatre* (New York: Halcyon House, 1940) 181.

²⁰⁵ Kippola, *Forrest... Booth*, 119. See also: Roach, "The Emergence of the American Actor," in *Cambridge History* (see note 2), 353.

Forrest's dedicated work in this most neoclassical of acting techniques did not go unnoticed by his critics. On the occasion of his true professional debut at the Walnut Street Theatre in 1820 one critic remarked,

Of the part of Norval, we must say that we were much surprised at the excellence of his elocution, his self-possession in speech and gesture, and a voice that, without straining, was of such volume and fine tenor as to carry every tone and articulation to the remotest corner of the theatre.²⁰⁶

Forrest was an open proponent of good elocution and greatly admired the work of other performers such as the famous French actress Mademoiselle Georges, particularly "the rich, full, stirring and well modulated tones of her voice."²⁰⁷

Forrest even made his meticulous vocal work a central part of roles such as *Metamora*, which is usually pointed to as the ultimate embodiment of his physicalized acting style. One contemporary critic wrote that in the role of *Metamora*,

Forrest's voice was tremendous in its sustained crescendo swell and crashing force of utterance... like the angry sea; as it reached its boiling, seething climax, in which the serpent hiss of hate was heard, at intervals amidst louder, deeper, hoarser tones, it was like the falls of Niagra.²⁰⁸

Here, Forrest's use of vocal technique seems to have been used less for creating examples of neoclassic beauty and seems to have become more of a performant element that was awe-inspiring in its own right. Yet the power and control that allowed Forrest to achieve effects such as these were made possible by decades of traditional, formal

²⁰⁶ Review of Edwin Forrest's Debut, 1820, in Witham, *Documentary History*, 95.

²⁰⁷ Crawford, *Romance*, 190.

²⁰⁸ Shaw, *Titans*, 31.

training. This training gave Forrest a great deal of flexibility in the depiction of his major characters, and was clearly an indispensable part of what gave his performances their power. The Nineteenth Century journalist Charles T. Congdon wrote that,

His voice is full, round and sonorous, and capable of expressing all the tones by which the passions and emotions of the heart and mind are shown to the world. It can hurl defiance at the tyrant and wrong-doer, plead in tones of tenderness for the weak and erring, and pour into the ear of beauty those dulcet strains which make earth a paradise and bring back Eden times to a cold, heartless world.²⁰⁹

Such an evaluation of Forrest's vocal technique represents almost a perfect summation of the theatrical goals of neoclassic elocution.

Elocution would remain the anchor of Forrest's acting through to the end of his career as well. Despite crippling gout and the effects of a lifetime of hard-living, which left his famous physique nearly crippled, and certainly incapable of inspiring the visual awe of previous decades, Forrest continued to garner acclaim for his acting, particularly in the role of King Lear. One review from the *Syracuse Daily Standard*, on the occasion of his final national tour demonstrates just how taken spectators still were with his skillful vocal work.

His elocution is a master-piece [sic] of perfection. His majestic presence and wonderful voice are unimpaired by the lapse of time. His style combines the

²⁰⁹ Charles T. Congdon, *Reminiscences of a Journalist* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1880) 190.

most perfect finish with a natural simplicity that pleases alike the rudest as well as the most cultivated taste.²¹⁰

Here in 1872, at the peak of Edwin's Booth's career, Forrest was still drawing full houses of mixed audiences. Despite the loss of his uniquely powerful physique that has so fascinated historians, Forrest's solid grounding in neoclassic acting techniques such as formal elocution allowed him to continue appealing to spectators across class lines throughout the entirety of his career.

Although many of Forrest's critics chided him for his general "rudeness" and the brawniness of his acting, one could nevertheless see the influence of the neoclassic art and the beau ideal in the performances of this paragon of romanticism. Upon his return from Europe, the critic for the *New York Mirror* remarked that the "marvels of sculpture and painting seen abroad" had apparently helped Forrest to temper the fury of his performances somewhat. "He has perceived that great passions are not always portrayed by violent gesture, and that the hurricane of feeling is within, and is exposed by deeds, not entirely by emphasis."²¹¹

Forrest's depiction of *Metamora*, as romantic as it was, was also a fine example of a role that embodied the neoclassic concept of the beau ideal. Forrest's depiction of the Wampanoag chief was influenced heavily by his lifetime obsession with Native American culture. His interest in the subject was piqued through conversations with future president William Henry Harrison, whom he met during his early career in Ohio, and following his dismissal from Caldwell's theatre in New Orleans in 1824, Forrest

²¹⁰ James Rees, *The Life of Edwin Forrest* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson & Brothers, 1874) 398.

²¹¹ Odell, *Annals*, vol. IV, 112.

spent some two months living with a Choctaw tribe, observing and absorbing their lifestyle and rituals.²¹² Yet Forrest's final portrayal of Metamora was not a precise copy of one particular individual from one particular tribe (although Push-ma-ta-ha of the Choctaw was clearly an important figure for him), but was very much a prime example of the idealized "noble savage." Evoking this image as successfully as he did helped add a sense of dignity and honor to what is otherwise a somewhat contrived script, and contributed to the tragedy of its ending.²¹³ Choosing to portray what was, at that time, a figure of hostility to most Americans was a bold choice, but in elevating this character to such an idealized level Forrest was also playing to the audience's sense of honor and dignity. As historian Dale Shaw noted, "Forrest understood that in ennobling the enemy, he ennobled Americans, whose bravery was being tested."²¹⁴

Edwin Forrest's personal interpretation of *Richard III*, provides another clear example of the influence of the beau ideal in his work. Richard was known as one of his weakest roles, and yet the play was so popular during this era that he continued to play the role, albeit rather infrequently, throughout his career.²¹⁵ This was one role in which his famous physique and infamous vanity may have proved to be his Achilles heel. Whereas Edmund Kean, whose portrayal of Richard was one of the cornerstones of his success, was a relatively small fellow, this lack of stature was in keeping with Richard's self-consciousness over his physical deficiencies. Forrest, on the other hand, was a mountain of a man, and he apparently made no attempt to hide this fact in this role.

²¹² Shaw, *Titans*, 23 & 26.

²¹³ The irony of such a sympathetic portrayal of Native Americans, who were clearly marked as enemy combatants in many parts of the United States during this period, is addressed most completely by Bruce McConachie in *Melodramatic Formations*, 97-110.

²¹⁴ Shaw, *Titans*, 31

²¹⁵ Lawrence Barrett, *Edwin Forrest* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1969) 134.

In one engraving that depicts Forrest in *Richard III*, the iconic humped back is completely absent, and aside from being stooped ever so slightly he appears to be as handsome and dashing as ever. If anything, Richard seems more active than impaired; the slight stoop could just as easily be interpreted as Richard preparing to engage an unseen Richmond in battle. Meanwhile Forrest's handsome visage and curling locks of thick black hair seem to evoke virility more than physically embodied corruption. Long time friend James Rees described Forrest's take on Richard in his biography of the actor.

...he gave us Richard as he contended was the proper view of the character, as towering and lofty, equally impetuous and commanding; haughty, violent and subtle; bold and treacherous; confident in his strength as well as in his cunning; raised by high birth and higher by his genius and his crimes; a royal usurper, a princely hypocrite.²¹⁶

This is an interpretation that focuses upon Richard's nobility and charisma, while downplaying his usually prominent physical deformity. Here Forrest clearly chose to display an 'improved,' less unsightly version of Richard, and while it is entirely possible that Forrest's decision to portray Richard in this ennobled fashion may have been driven as much by vanity as by a strict dedication to neoclassic ideals, it could also be noted that social vanity would not have been an alien element within the social ideals of elite neoclassic society.

In many ways, Forrest's approach to acting echoed Garrick's observation-based naturalism as well. By far, the most famous example of Forrest's incorporation of

²¹⁶ Rees, *Life of Edwin Forrest*, 252.

observation into his acting was the two months that he spent with the Choctaw Indians, “wearing their clothes, learning their lore and customs, performing their rituals and dances, singing their songs, and studying their gestures and speeches.”²¹⁷ Yet there were other examples as well. While working for James Caldwell in New Orleans, Forrest found himself relegated to secondary roles, mostly old men. Yet he took the opportunity “to study the peculiarities of age in feature gait and voice.”²¹⁸ On another, possibly fictional occasion, Forrest was said to have taken a moment, directly after having clambered aboard a ship to escape a pursuing shark, to make mental notes about the feelings that he was then experiencing for later reference.²¹⁹

Forrest also frequently studied the insane as a means of developing more nuanced portrayals of character such as Lear.²²⁰ Given that John Rush, son of Dr. Benjamin Rush, the father of American psychiatry, was one of his primary subjects, one has to assume that Forrest’s observations were at least somewhat influenced by emerging concepts of methodical, scientific psychiatry. Forrest’s dedication to such study paid off for him in his later years, as Lear became one of his most celebrated roles. One critic near the end of Forrest’s life claimed, “The Lear of his mellow age is grander than the Gladiator of his early prime.”²²¹ Lear became so vital to Forrest as an actor that he once balked at a compliment that he had “played” the role well that

²¹⁷ Roach, “Emergence of the American Actor,” 354.

²¹⁸ Shaw, *Titans*, 183.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 24 & 40.

²²¹ Rees, *Life of Edwin Forrest*, 391.

evening. Forrest famously replied, “*Play Lear!* What do you mean, sir? I do not *play* Lear! I *play* Hamlet, Richard, Shylock, Virginius, but by God, sir, I *am* Lear!”²²²

Even a meeting with the ex-president Andrew Jackson provided Forrest with fodder for observation. “It was upon the memory of this experience, which proved the electric capacity of feeble old age to be suddenly charged and to emit lightnings and thunders, that Forrest modeled the great explosions of his Richelieu.”²²³

Forrest’s dedication to the sort of homework that one normally associates with the Twentieth Century, post-Stanislavski, schools of acting technique was uncommon in the least for the period, and indicated the depth of Forrest’s dedication to acting as a profession that was grounded in technique and artistry, not just in charisma, though that clearly played a role as well.

Critics and historians from Walt Whitman onward have frequently commented on the fact that those actors who attempted to imitate Forrest found little if any success. At least one history of Forrest suggests that Forrest’s “vigor and passion” may have compensated for “the simplicity of his portrayals.”²²⁴ But I would suggest that Forrest’s deep grounding in solid neoclassic acting technique, and his extensive behavioral research may have simply exceeded that of his imitators. Arriving as he did during a period when the theatre was evolving from a largely aural medium to a largely visual one, it is tempting for historians to try to pigeon-hole him as a predominantly physical actor, but the complexity of Forrest’s work defies this sort of categorization.²²⁵ Even

²²² Hornblow, *Theatre in America*, vol. 2, 36.

²²³ Crawford, *Romance*, 196.

²²⁴ Walt Whitman, “The Gladiator – Mr. Forrest – Acting,” *The Brooklyn Eagle*, December 26, 1846; Crawford, *Romance*, 189; Kippola, *Forrest... Booth*, 128.

²²⁵ Dudden, *Women in American Theatre*, 5.

conservative Victorian critics of his style found it difficult to simply write off Forrest's style. In 1863 the editor of *Harper's Magazine* tried to articulate this difficulty.

We may crack jokes at it. We may call it the muscular school; the brawny art; the biceps aesthetics; the tragic calves; the bovine drama; rant, roar, and rigmarole; but what then? *Metamora* folds his might arms and plants his mighty legs, and with his mighty voice sneers at us "Look there!" until the very ground thrills and trembles beneath our feet. For there is the great, the eager, the delighted crowd. He has found his *pou sto*. And he moves his world nightly.²²⁶

Although this critic goes on to criticize such acting as "a boundless exaggeration of all the traditional conventions of the stage," he seems to find little power in his own criticism when faced with the event itself. It would seem as if the performant appeal of Forrest's technical virtuosity allowed him to rise above the shifting sands of cultural fashion.²²⁷

Part of what may have kept Forrest accessible to many elite spectators was his ongoing dedication to Shakespearean roles as the backbone of his repertoire. While the prize plays *Metamora*, *The Gladiator*, and *Jack Cade* were performed more often than anything else in his repertoire, Forrest's Shakespearean roles were always close at hand. When the London critics failed to adore him for his portrayal of Spartacus upon his debut at Drury Lane in 1836, he quickly switched over his programs to *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Othello*. For these performances he received much more favorable notices.²²⁸

At home, *Othello* served as Forrest's initial springboard to stardom. After playing Iago

²²⁶ "The Editor's Easy Chair," *Harper's Magazine*, vol. 28 (December, 1863) 132-133.

²²⁷ Similar descriptions seemed to follow Forrest throughout his final American tour in 1871-1872. See Rees, *Life of Forrest*, 390.

²²⁸ Crawford, *Romance*, 193.

to Edmund Kean's *Othello*, the English star famously complimented the newcomer's unique take on the role stating, "everybody who speaks the part hereafter must do it just so." Kean even went on to herald the young actor's accomplishment at a public dinner in Philadelphia.²²⁹ Forrest's portrayal of the title role in *Othello* also helped him to secure his first true starring engagement at Charles Gilfert's then still fashionable Bowery Theatre in 1826. The *New York Mirror* heralded his portrayal of the tragic Moor as second only to Kean's.²³⁰ From that point on, *Othello* would be one of Forrest's most often performed roles.

Although roles like *Metamora* and *Jack Cade* are now studied more for their melodramatic potential than for their tragic achievements, they were originally conceived as truly lofty subjects. Forrest's contests sought plays that were written in the form of neoclassical tragedies, and he introduced them to his public in the most elite and honorific manner possible. The first performance of *Metamora*, for instance, was given on December 15th, 1829 as Forrest's benefit performance at the Park Theatre for the fall season. In anticipation of this event, the *New York Evening Post*, not a particularly chatty publication in terms of theatre coverage, included a brief note drawing the public's attention to this major event.

Our columns are so much crowded that we have scarcely room for a word more than is already in type; yet we cannot omit to call the attention of our readers to the advertisement of the theatre for this evening. The *Indian Prize Tragedy* is to be represented for the first time. The house will no doubt be crowded to excess,

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 185

²³⁰ Odell, *Annals*, vol. III, 198.

as much anxiety exists among the public to witness both the new drama and Mr. Forrest's personation of the Indian Chief.²³¹

Although plays such as *Metamora* will never go down as major landmarks of dramatic literature, the fact that Forrest chose to introduce this new play to his public as his benefit performance at New York's most elite theatrical venue demonstrated his desire for the play to be seen as the equal of any of the Shakespearean tragedies.

Forrest's ability to utilize different venues, both elite and popular, allowed him to maximize his profit-making abilities as well. Some historians have claimed that Forrest largely turned his back on elite audiences following the Astor Place riot of 1849, but there seem to have been frequent exceptions to this.²³² Forrest, in fact, played to elite audiences throughout his 50 year career.

Forrest's first true star turn came on the stage of the newly built Bowery Theatre in New York. Although many scholars have noted that Forrest was a perpetual favorite at Thomas Hamblin's notoriously working-class Bowery Theatre, it is important to remember that before Hamblin took over the management in 1830, the Bowery Theatre stood along side the Park Theatre as one of the city's elite venues. Joseph Ireland described the newly-constructed theatre in lofty, poetic tones.

A very elegant structure was completed, having externally the similitude of white marble, with a spacious portico and lofty columns supporting an entablature and pediment. The size, both of stage and auditorium, was greater than any theatre in the country, the latter being able to seat about three thousand

²³¹ "Metamora," *The Evening Post*, New York, December 15, 1829.

²³² McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 92; Kippola, *Forrest/Booth*, 130, 252-253.

persons, and in point of decoration it was unsurpassed. It was fondly hoped by its proprietors that it would prove to be the favored dramatic temple of New York.²³³

George Odell similarly noted that at the time the theatre was built, the neighborhood then known as the Bowery “still had some of the bosky effect that originally gave it its charming name; many rich and fashionable inhabitants lived in those eastern precincts now for so many years given over to a population chiefly foreign.” The subscribers and other supporters of that original Bowery Theatre were among the city’s best known citizens.²³⁴ It was at this older, more elite-oriented Bowery Theatre that the young Edwin Forrest quickly rose to fame while being lauded by “cultivated auditors and intelligent critics.”²³⁵

Once Hamblin became the first theatrical manager to famously find profit in “ignoring theatrical traditions and social niceties,” Forrest did become a common feature of his bills.²³⁶ Yet when Forrest briefly returned to the United States in 1836 following his two-year tour of continental Europe, he gave only twelve performances before leaving for his first tour to England. None of those performances were held at Hamblin’s Bowery Theatre. Instead, Forrest chose to give six performances each at Philadelphia and New York’s most elite theatres: the Walnut Street Playhouse, and the Park Theatre. Both engagements broke records at each of these houses. At the Park Theatre, box seats were reputedly auctioned off for a staggering twenty-five dollars

²³³ Joseph N. Ireland, *Records of the New York Stage from 1750 to 1860*, vol. 1 (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1966) 521.

²³⁴ Odell, *Annals*, vol. III, 255.

²³⁵ Crawford, *Romance*, 186.

²³⁶ Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre*, 56.

each.²³⁷ The *Evening Post* reported that “It is estimated that more people left the Park Theatre last evening, unable to obtain seats to witness Forrest’s performance of *The Gladiator*, than were accommodated within its walls.”²³⁸ Forrest’s six performances in New York brought in between \$1,400 and \$1800 each night. Since Forrest had been contracted at a set fee of \$500 per night, this left the management of the Park swimming in the largest profits in the history of the American stage.²³⁹ In Philadelphia, the neighborhood surrounding the Walnut Street Playhouse was similarly thronged with patrons who were unable to gain admittance, and there too the box-office receipts broke all existing records.²⁴⁰

Even after the Astor Place Riot forever linked his name with nativist audiences, Forrest continued to perform in elite venues. Although partially retired during the 1860’s, when Forrest did perform in New York, he typically did so at Niblo’s Garden, the theatre that replaced the Park Theatre as the city’s premier venue.²⁴¹ During this period, Niblo’s Garden also hosted Edwin Booth and the rest of the period’s elite corps of actors. Forrest was even scheduled to perform *Jack Cade* for President Lincoln while he was performing in Washington D. C. in 1865. The President chose not to attend at the last minute, but this was temporarily for the best as John Wilkes Booth was

²³⁷ Crawford, *Romance*, 192.

²³⁸ *Evening Post* (New York), September 13, 1836.

²³⁹ *Evening Post* (New York), September 15, 1836.

²⁴⁰ Barrett, *Edwin Forrest*, 51-52.

²⁴¹ Shaw, *Titans*, 42; Hornblow, *Theatre in America*, 99; Barrett, *Edwin Forrest*, 100. For details on Niblo’s Garden as an elite venue see Mary C. Henderson, *The City and the Theatre: New York Playhouses from Bowling Green to Times Square* (Clifton, NJ: James T. White & Company, 1973) 74, and Odell, *Annals*, vol. VII, 322.

apparently aware of his intention to attend and had planned with some accomplices to abduct Lincoln at the theatre.²⁴²

Forrest's epic final tour in 1871 and 1872 featured performances in the grandest theatres of the day and attracted legions of elite-minded spectators. Forrest's opening night performance in Cleveland in February of 1872 attracted "one of the most fashionable houses of the season." In Boston the following April he performed before "audiences composed of the brightest intelligence of Boston."²⁴³

Despite Forrest's continual proclamations of his allegiance for the American working class, it seems relatively clear that more than anything, Forrest chose his engagements and venues based on his ability to profit financially from them. Following his defeat in his highly public divorce trial, Forrest famously rebounded by performing a record-breaking 69-night engagement at New York's Broadway Theatre. There he bathed in the adulation of nativist spectators who raised a banner declaring "This is the People's Verdict." Forrest welcomed the praise and claimed it as all the vindication that he required.²⁴⁴ Yet is also important to note that Forrest's record-breaking engagement was held at the Broadway Theatre, which at 4,500 seats, was the largest theatre in New York. Benefiting from the publicity surrounding the trial, the Broadway enjoyed packed houses, and Forrest enjoyed the largest paychecks of his career.

Forrest's pursuit of profit led him to pursue whatever contractual terms benefited him the most. Sol Smith remarked that while Forrest was unwilling to work for him for anything less than a clear half of the nightly receipts, he did work for set

²⁴² Shaw, *Titans*, 42.

²⁴³ Rees, *Life of Edwin Forrest*, 397-399.

²⁴⁴ McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 69-70; Crawford, *Romance*, 203.

fees in other, less affluent markets. When he played in Louisville he pocketed precisely \$200 per night, even though on some occasions this exceeded the nightly receipts. The local manager was left to supply the difference.²⁴⁵ On another occasion, after having been refused a contract to perform in Charleston, Forrest traveled down the coast from New York for the express purpose of changing the man's mind. He told an acquaintance that he assumed that his physical presence might influence the manager's decision.²⁴⁶

Contradictions to Forrest's working-class sentiments pervaded his personal life as well. While in England he circulated in elite social circles and his choice of brides was a woman whose family had pretensions to bourgeois gentility. Upon their return to the United States, his new wife was embraced by Philadelphia society where she "made a deep and lasting impression, by reason of her native delicacy of mind and the refinement of her manners, on the friends to whom he presented her."²⁴⁷ This act of "marrying up" could be seen as a complication of Forrest's professed indifference toward symbols of social status, though it also may have simply been a rash decision that contributed to the eventual destruction of his marriage.²⁴⁸

Forrest may have trumpeted the pride and the struggles of the working-class, but he himself lived like nobility. His primary residence throughout the last third of his life was "Fonthill Castle," a sprawling estate on the banks of the Hudson river. At one point he even paid \$10,000 to have a statue of himself made as Coriolanus. This is an interesting choice since Coriolanus was not one of his more celebrated roles. Yet the

²⁴⁵ Sol Smith, *Theatrical Management in the West and South for Thirty Years* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968) 207.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Crawford, *Romance*, 193-194.

²⁴⁸ McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 71-72.

image of the character's classical Roman dignity, made so famous through the performances of John Phillip Kemble, may have been a more important factor in this choice.²⁴⁹

In the end, Forrest will probably always be celebrated as "America's First Native Tragedian" and as the highly public embodiment of the power and splendor of the Jacksonian Revolution. And yet, I think that it seems equally clear that the degree of success that Forrest was able to achieve in his life was fueled as much by his solid grounding in the techniques of elite neoclassic culture, as by his tragic calves. He was a man that neatly embodied the contradictions inherent in America's emerging capitalist democracy, and without those contradictions he may not have enjoyed nearly as much success as he did.

John Randolph Scott: A Fallen American Star

Today John Randolph Scott is considered a comparatively minor figure in the history of the American Theatre. A close protégé of Forrest, at his peak he was one of the top stars that toured during the peak of the star system. At one point he even contested Forrest for the title of the nation's leading tragedian.²⁵⁰ His name appears regularly in the chronicles of Ludlow, Smith, Murdoch, and the like, but he wasn't a "first" and has consequently been overlooked by many historians. Occasional anecdotes

²⁴⁹ Kippola, *Forrest... Booth*, 107.

²⁵⁰ Durang, "Philadelphia Stage," April 6, 1856.

and newspaper reviews provide a few more details about his career, but otherwise he is largely considered to be a highly forgettable figure.

It is in this forgetfulness, however, that we can learn something about the theatre and culture of this period. Interestingly, Scott has not just been overlooked by modern historians, he descended into virtual obscurity within his own lifetime. John R. Scott was a major player for a time, and was playing the game of touring star well, but he eventually found himself at odds with the elite cultural machine that was still the backbone of the American theatre, and was consequently sentenced to almost complete anonymity. Actors come in and out of favor all the time, yet Scott's particular decline is interesting due to the fact that he was a leading star for so long.

Scott's initial rise in the profession was in keeping with the careers of many of his contemporaries. Though he was apparently given somewhat to ranting, in the era of Kean and Forrest's supremacy this flaw was perhaps less glaring than it might have been otherwise. Aside from this, Scott possessed a number of natural gifts. Early in his career, one Philadelphia critic described him as an actor in possession of "a fine eye and features capable of considerable expression."²⁵¹ Although Scott's "regular figure" may have lacked the inherent theatricality of Forrest's famous physique, Scott's range of successful roles was more extensive than Forrest's, and Philadelphia chronicler Charles Durang claimed that "in many respects he was the superior of that artist."²⁵²

Scott did not suffer from the lack of historical exposure that Merry did either. Like Duff he crisscrossed the nation during the height of the Star System, and his name

²⁵¹ "Arch Street Theatre," *The Philadelphia Daily Chronicle*, November 30, 1831.

²⁵² Durang, "Philadelphia Stage," April 6, 1856.

appears regularly in all of the major chronicles of the era. Even more significantly, Scott frequently co-starred with Forrest. They were major fixtures together at the Arch Street Theatre in Philadelphia where Scott would often play Iago to Forrest's Othello, Pythias to Forrest's Damon, and so on.²⁵³ Their names were often paralleled, and even spoken in the same sentence in terms of their training and apprenticeships.²⁵⁴ Scott's close proximity to Forrest, both physically and stylistically should have kept him within the sights of subsequent historians, but this has not been the case.

I believe that the primary reason for Scott's descent into obscurity results from the choices that he made later in his career, choices that did not endear him to either the cultural elites of his time or to historians since. Scott's major sin was that, unlike Forrest who played in elite venues through the end of his career, Scott largely stopped working in elite venues and instead took roles in lower-class melodrama houses.

Charles Durang, the early chronicler of the Philadelphia stage, took this as an indication of a real flaw within Scott's character. He wrote that, "Through wanton and gross carelessness he latterly rested for star engagements in minor theatres, representing the most trashy heroes of the melodrama repertoire... and sometimes he would make engagements as an able auxiliary to leading stars to strengthen casts, when he should have been thus a meteor himself." The tone of Durang's criticism has a moralizing edge to it and he goes on to claim that Scott's "appeals were then to depraved taste, to secure his benefits and general favor... and thus did he insensibly deteriorate into all the loose corruptions and inelegant mannerisms of the melo-dramatic performer."²⁵⁵

²⁵³ Durang, "Philadelphia Stage," October 21, 1860.

²⁵⁴ *Evening Post* (New York), November 5, 1831.

²⁵⁵ Charles Durang, "John Randolph Scott," *Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch*, July 10, 1856.

That Durang includes “loose corruptions” and “inelegant mannerisms” in the same sentence, articulating them as two aspects of the same artistic crime, is fascinating in that it demonstrates so clearly the conflation of elite social performance and moral virtue. Though Durang is pointing toward the technical defects in Scott’s performances, other connotations are carried along intact as well. Just as with Merry’s “chaste” performances, the moral overtones of this rhetoric seem similarly inescapable.

Whether Scott’s decline drove him toward alcoholism, or whether the alcoholism played a significant role in his professional decline is unclear, but in either case they apparently went hand in hand. The abuse of alcohol most certainly carried a certain moral stigma, especially in nineteenth-century America, and that stigma might have contributed to Scott’s decline in the eyes of his contemporaries. Yet it seems less clear why this would have affected subsequent historians. Edmund Kean and George F. Cooke were both famously alcoholic, but this seems to have been a feature that has only added to their tragic mystique.

In the end I would argue that it was Scott’s social sins, more so than his moral or artistic sins, which ultimately led to his anonymity. It is relatively easy for us to celebrate Forrest’s working-class appeal, because he never let it completely define who he was; he maintained consistently positive reviews from elite-minded critics and graced the stages of America’s preeminent playhouses through the end of his career. But by working exclusively within the growing bounds of America’s working-class theatres in the latter part of his career, Scott was effectively turning his back on the social significance that theatre-going held within elite society. By following the money (even though he may not have had many other options), Scott disconnected himself

from interaction with elite society. We cannot concretely determine a continuous line of cause and effect between Scott's disappearance from elite-minded cultural venues and his virtual disappearance from theatre history, but they seem related, and given the numerous similarities between Scott and other stars such as Forrest, one has to wonder whether this is why Forrest has inspired so many volumes, while Scott barely rates a footnote. The nativist valorization of the common man became the basis of the American populist ethos, but it seems that without the simultaneous approval of elite-minded society it is difficult to inspire long-term attention.

In most respects, the acting that was practiced on American stages in the early Nineteenth Century represented a kind of compromise between Garrick's naturalistic work and the grandeur of the Kemble/Siddons Grand Tradition, as an embodiment of the neoclassic beau ideal. Whether or not this acting should rightly be considered "American" is debatable, but what is clear is that the American theatre-going public was fiercely proud of what they saw in their theatres, and they cherished it, though often for different reasons. For elite-minded spectators, the American theatre was whatever they saw when they paid their admission fee to the local theatre. If that ticket was for a performance by a touring English star, then that was part of the American theatre. For them, the relatively arbitrary links between political and cultural origins mattered far less than the social distinction that came with the conspicuous consumption of luxury goods and the subsequent status that such consumption provided them within their own local contexts. Attending the performance of a touring English star was nothing more

than an opportunity to define oneself as a person capable of affording and appreciating such a recognizably luxurious commodity. For nativist spectators, clear embodiments of what they were defining as American cultural traits were appreciated above all. As the century approached its midpoint, the elision of cultural practices with nationalized political identity would become a favored tactic of nativist spectators, and would provide them with a vocabulary for criticizing the cultural practices of their elite-minded brothers and sisters.

Theatre managers on the other hand, most of whom were English themselves, sought nothing more than to appeal to both segments of the population, seeking instead the greatest box-office receipts possible. Throughout the early decades of the Nineteenth Century, these managers would become increasingly proficient in the commoditization and marketing of their wares to these competing and often contentious groups of spectators.

Chapter 3:

The Impact and Evolution of the Star System

Although constantly maligned by critics and historians throughout the last two centuries as a profit-driven disease that did little more than degrade the American theatre, the star system served as an important transitional mechanism that helped to establish new and varied audiences for the American theatre, launched the careers of America's first generation of dominant stars, and helped culturally homogenize the increasingly diverse American population, particularly in its most affluent and empowered circles.

Whether one sees it as good or evil, the advent of the star system marked a significant turning point in the history of American acting. Specifically it led to an increased emphasis to the novel and the spectacular. This focus on performant elements helped to redefine what the theatre was to different people, and in many cases, helped to bring new audiences to the theatre. At the same time it helped many young American actors, who were able to cash in on this craving for novelty and spectacle, to finally emerge from the long shadows of their English brothers and sisters.

In many ways the star system was a natural reflection of the cultural and economic forces that were shaping American society in the early years of the Nineteenth Century. In its essence this system was nothing more than an attempt by actors and managers to increase profits by making top drawing performers available to widely dispersed audiences. But the ensuing scramble of spectators for stars and stars

for spectators pushed economic priorities too far ahead of artistic ones, and the star system ultimately proved unsustainable over the long-term.

A Necessary Change

Initially, the star system had little significant impact upon the acting techniques used by the era's performers. Instead it represented a shift in economic tactics by theatre managers who were attempting to cash in more effectively on existing artistic products. Historians credit the advent of the star system in America to different points in American theatre history, all with different reasons, all of which are contestable.²⁵⁶ Yet it was not until the 1810 tour of George F. Cooke, as organized by the Park Theatre's Stephen Price, that the touring of big stars became truly systematic.

Unlike T. A. Cooper, Anne Brunton Merry, and John Hodgkinson, who had each performed in many of the major American cities in the preceding decades, Cooke's visit to America was envisioned from the outset as a tour, involving eleven separate engagements in five cities: New York, Boston, Providence, Philadelphia, and Baltimore.²⁵⁷ This tour was immensely successful, in spite of Cooke's personal tribulations, and had it not been for the onset of the war in 1812, Price would surely have immediately organized similar tours. Price did eventually do exactly that, and with the unprecedented profitability of Edmund Kean's 1820 tour, the monetary incentive of

²⁵⁶ In *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, vol 1, eds. Don Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) see McDermott, 195-196; Williams, 309-310; and McConachie, 147-148. Also see Garff Wilson, *Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973) 60.

²⁵⁷ Douglas McDermott, "Structure and Management in the American Theatre," in *Cambridge History* (see note 1), 196.

the star system, combined with the organizational skills and connections established by Price, made the impending hegemony of the star system all but inevitable.

Major stars such as Merry and Cooper had brought with them the charisma, cultural caché, and aesthetic qualities that made starring engagements profitable, and managers such as Thomas Wignell and William Dunlap exploited these qualities whenever possible, but these actors functioned more like semi-permanent members of multiple stock companies rather than as the independent stars that would become the paradigm in the following decades.²⁵⁸ Merry's 1801 engagement at the Park Theatre in New York, for example, occurred in the summer while the Chestnut Street Theatre was dark.²⁵⁹ This engagement took nothing away from the Philadelphia company, but benefited the New York company and Merry significantly. This practice of relocating part or all of a company to a different city during the "off season" was a common practice as far back as the Old American Company. But when Price began organizing systematic touring schedules for individual performers within the context of the established theatrical season, he was making a significant break from established business practices. This break was a necessary one. Prior to Price's management, the Park Theatre had been in a continual state of financial chaos, due in part to organizational challenges that left the theatre perpetually teetering on the brink of bankruptcy.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁸ William B. Wood, *Personal Recollections of The Stage* (Philadelphia: Henry Carey Baird, 1855) 446.

²⁵⁹ Gresdna Ann Doty, *The Career of Mrs. Anne Brunton Merry in the American Theatre* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1971) 87-90.

²⁶⁰ Heather Nathans, *Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 145-146.

Bringing in extra revenue was becoming increasingly necessary for most theatres in the United States in the first two decades of the Nineteenth Century. Although theatre was growing in popularity in the United States, staying solvent was always a continual struggle. By 1800, major cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Boston featured multiple theatres, and each new theatre that was built was typically larger and more lavish than those that preceded it.²⁶¹ In many cases, the competition between theatres was too much, and to keep their seats filled, most theatre managers reduced their ticket prices, in an attempt to attract more spectators.²⁶² Bringing a touring star in for a limited engagement meant that not only could managers finally fill these ever-larger auditoriums, but they could do so at *increased* ticket prices.²⁶³ The star did absorb a fair chunk of the revenue, but it was nevertheless a real boon to the theatre's treasury.

Initially, major stars that were willing to tour in the United States were few and far between, so when they did come over, their arrival was truly a special occasion.²⁶⁴ Their very rarity was, in fact, part of their appeal, justified the higher ticket prices, and helped keep the houses full. But as managers became hungrier and hungrier for such fare, the situation began to change, and rather than reaping increased profits from an existing artistic product, the economic forces that drove the star system would begin to exert pressures that would change what was happening artistically.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 111 & 139; Mary C. Henderson, "Scenography, Stagecraft, and Architecture in the American Theatre," in *Cambridge History* (see note 2), 392-395.

²⁶² Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 33 & 45.

²⁶³ Jack Poggi, *Theatre in America: The Impact of Economic Forces* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968) 4.

²⁶⁴ Wood, *Personal Recollections*, 446-447.

The Downside Emerges

Many of the early challenges that managers faced stemmed from the amount of control that the star system wrested from their grasp. Although managers could book a star many months in advance, they had little control over which scripts would be presented once that star arrived, and in many cases stock companies were handed unfamiliar scripts the day before, and occasionally even the day of the performance. William Wood, the long-time manager of Philadelphia's Chestnut Street Playhouse, noted that such demands were quite common, "It has not been unfrequently the case of late that an actor has been expected to learn from three to five hundred lines (sometimes much more) within twenty-four hours, during which he must also appear in the play for the evening." Wood wryly noted that, "It was by no means an uncommon thing... to hear an actor inquire of another during the performance, 'What is this play about?'"²⁶⁵ Stars that toured with their own secondary players would have been better rehearsed for the major scenes, but given the paucity of historical references to this system of star touring, it might be safe to assume that it was a minority practice.²⁶⁶ More often, ensembles were plagued by rehearsal periods that were cursory at best. With so many actors struggling simply to remember the lines, the development of nuanced performances would have been nearly impossible for any performer other than the star.

The lack of managerial control over script choice also made the proper casting of roles an increasingly difficult task, and forced managers to make poor choices.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 441-442.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 440; Poggi, *Theatre in America*, 6.

Finding appropriate actors for each role on such short notice simply was simply not possible.²⁶⁷ As I mentioned earlier, some touring stars toured with supporting players as a means of combating this problem, but while this solved part of the problem from an aesthetic perspective, it caused further problems from a managerial one. Such an approach displaced a significant portion of the theatre's leading performers, and as star touring became more and more common, this displacement began to threaten the livelihood of those very actors who were usually thought of as a company's anchors.²⁶⁸

It would seem counter-intuitive for a system that was essentially controlled by the starring actors themselves to erode the quality of the acting, but this seems to nevertheless have been the case. By the 1820's, it was the stars who controlled much of the American theatre.²⁶⁹ And unfortunately, they often did so in a decidedly selfish fashion. In his memoirs, William Wood noted how the stars were even known to disrupt what little rehearsal the company was given, "sitting at the prompter's table, either writing or affecting to write letters of vast importance, or gossiping with some visitor, to the utter destruction of silence and discipline."²⁷⁰

The biggest problem that the stars posed, however was simply their sheer numbers. At least initially, the demand within the American market for starring personalities vastly outsized the ability of the era's few true stars to fill it. Into this breach stepped the willing, led by a small army of English actors. The true floodgates were opened when the Theatres Act of 1843 eliminated the protective patent that Drury

²⁶⁷ Wood, *Personal Recollections*, 444.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 440.

²⁶⁹ Douglas McDermott, "The Theatre and its Audience," *The American Stage: Social and Economic Issues from the Colonial Period to the Present*, ed. Ron Engle & Tice L. Miller (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 10.

²⁷⁰ Wood, *Personal Recollections*, 442-443.

Lane and Covent Garden had enjoyed for nearly two centuries. The American theatre, which had been dominated from its inception by British talent, found itself positively inundated by “stars,” many claiming to have been “prominent” actors at one of the two former patent houses.²⁷¹ That these actors still found audiences in America is a prime example of the powerful craving for the products of elite English culture that existed among many American spectators.²⁷²

This deluge of starring actors caused severe financial problems for theatre managers. Although the star system represented a shift in some of the economic tactics related to the theatre, others did not change as quickly. The practice of providing a starring actor with a clear benefit performance at the completion of a season or engagement was a longstanding and beloved tradition within the English speaking theatre that gave actors a much needed opportunity to earn extra money and gave spectators an opportunity to demonstrate their devotion to their favorite performers. But under traditional practices, benefits were accorded only to the most senior members of a resident company and to major traveling stars, which meant that only a small handful of benefit performances were given each year.²⁷³ Maintaining a relatively small ratio of benefit performances, for which the theatre’s management typically earned nothing, and normal performances allowed managers to stay reasonably solvent. Yet as American audiences came to expect an unbroken succession of touring performers, the number of starring engagements booked by local managers increased, and so too did the number of

²⁷¹ Ibid., 447.

²⁷² Jurgen C. Wolter, *The Dawning of American Drama: American Dramatic Criticism, 1746-1915* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994) 14.

²⁷³ Wood, *Personal Recollections*, 450.

benefit performances.²⁷⁴ This, combined with the developing trend toward an increasing number of short-term starring engagements significantly reduced the managers' opportunities to bring in the income that they needed to keep their companies afloat. The stars themselves were not always helpful either. Some were known to put in less than stellar performances during the main portion of the run, while simultaneously encouraging friends and others to focus their attendance on the benefits.²⁷⁵

Other poor managerial choices came in terms of the physical productions that were mounted to showcase starring performers. Many used the arrival of a major star as an opportunity to splurge on lavish properties and scenic elements. Some found the need to appoint their stages with the same jewelry, decorations, and furniture that would have been found in the houses of the wealthiest of citizens, rather than being content to use suitable imitations.²⁷⁶

This dedication to making the theatrical experience as indistinguishable from the off-stage elite reality that it was representing was a further indication of the trend toward the complete synthesis of the stage performance with the social performance aspect of theatre going. Given that spectators were increasingly seeking for their starring performers to live lives off stage that echoed the social standards of those that they represented onstage, it seems only fitting that managers would increasingly seek to surround them with similar physical manifestations of that lifestyle.

Such lavish expenditures naturally meant that other areas of the company would suffer from a proportional lack of funding. The subsequent shortfalls, combined with

²⁷⁴ Poggi, *Theatre in America*, 5.

²⁷⁵ Wood, *Personal Recollections*, 451.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 459

the pervasive lack of appropriate preparation time meant that the scenery for other shows often suffered. Audiences found themselves faced with the unique visual scenes such as Virginius being arraigned before a drop depicting London, and other similarly inappropriate pairings.²⁷⁷ The real victims of these economic tribulations, however, were the other actors in the resident companies.

As managers began struggling to keep their companies solvent, there was little that they could do to reduce hard costs such as rent or building maintenance, but cast salaries were frequently cut as a means of balancing the books.²⁷⁸ This tactic was commonplace long before the star system took over in America. On several different occasions between 1799 and 1804, the company of the Chestnut Street theatre was put on drastically reduced salaries or even on a profit-sharing program as a means of helping the theatre to survive its economic doldrums.²⁷⁹ This was a difficult burden to place upon the cast, but as most companies during the era immediately preceding the star system were close-knit families of performers, the actors typically bore these burdens in a communitarian fashion.

Under the pressures of the star-system, however, this situation was markedly different. Once theatre managers became thoroughly focused on external problems such as touring stars and spectators, the other members of the theatre company became secondary concerns, and their loyalty to their theatre companies was understandably undermined.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 445.

²⁷⁸ Poggi, *American Drama*, 5.

²⁷⁹ Doty, *Career of... Merry*, 72 & 115.

In an era in which virtually the only people who were finding profit in the theatre were the stars themselves, it is not surprising that many of the minor performers, who were being so put upon by the economic pressures of the star system, tried whenever possible to launch starring careers of their own. Many set out before having fully developed the skills and the reputation that were such a critical part of one's success as a touring star. This created a sort of domino effect in which, "the dramatic corps or body was a corps or body no longer, but was disintegrated, and all its members converted into stars."²⁸⁰

Clearly such a phenomenon would have had eroded the overall quality of the performances that were given. Furthermore, it worked against the very precepts upon which the star system was founded. Rather than being rare and exotic examples of the highest level of theatrical achievement, stars were becoming almost as common as the companies that they played with.

Those who stayed to complete their apprenticeships faced significant challenges as well. Playing with a different star each night surely would have made it more difficult for a company to gel together artistically. Leading actors and actresses of the previous generation, such as Mrs. Merry, served actively as mentors to the developing young performers that worked under her. This would not have been possible if Merry had only spent a week or so with dozens of different companies, rather than many years with only one. Aside from the demoralizing impact of reduced wages, having the program constantly dictated by outsiders also proved frustrating to local ensembles, and created ill-will toward the itinerant stars. This was particularly true when the star was

²⁸⁰ Wood, *Personal Recollections*, 447.

not of the caliber that was claimed by the theatre's publicity machine. Such ill-will could not have had a positive effect upon the performances.

Just reaching the point where one could really be successful as a star was also becoming more and more difficult. The ensembles that trained young actors were getting weaker and weaker, and opportunities to develop one's skills in important roles were increasingly rare. The lack of rehearsals also made it difficult for young actors to rise in the profession; perpetually performing under rehearsed roles crippled their ability to build the following that allowed them to be defined as new stars, worthy of joining the circuit. This was especially troubling to native performers whose entire careers were available for public scrutiny.

Because audiences were becoming increasingly jaded by the relentless puffing of third-rate stars by the press, it also became more and more difficult for truly talented youths to garner the praise and publicity that previous generations had enjoyed from the press; audiences simply stopped paying any attention to anything written up in local presses, assuming that it was little more than a paid advertisement.²⁸¹ Thus the star system opened a gap that young up-and-coming native performers would have to find some way to cross in order to become stars themselves.

Faced with the increasingly difficult task of becoming a star, and the mounting difficulties associated with surviving as a member of a local ensemble, the situation for young American actors was becoming increasingly hopeless.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 454.

Opportunities for Emerging American Actors

The paucity of major stars and the overwhelming demand for them, however, would turn out to be something of an opportunity for a handful of American hopefuls. Although the icons of the English stage such as Edmund Kean were always featured attractions, their American tours were few and far between, while the demand for those performances was constant and growing. Among the more numerous ranks of second-tier performers who sought to cash in on this demand were a small number of native performers.

Aside from their impressive artistic resumes, the major touring stars that launched the star system had other features in common; features that were easier for managers to replicate. While the complex combination of creativity, formal training, taste, and intelligence that defined “good acting” in this period was difficult to replicate, individual aspects of these performances were easier come by; novelty and spectacle were chief amongst these features. These elements allowed managers to provide some of the performant impact associated with a major star’s performance without having to actually locate a major star.

Although some of the period’s major touring stars, like Fanny Kemble and Mary Ann Duff, were not known primarily for their emotional fireworks, a great many of the stars that dominated the era were. That the star system was launched on the performances of stars like Cooke and Kean, and achieved longevity through the careers of Forrest and Macready, points to the importance of spectacle in this system of production. Each of these performers were known for their own particularly spectacular style of acting, and that spectacle often came to embody performant theatricality in its

most crystalline form. Spectators came to see the spectacle of Kean and Forrest *the actors* rather than Othello and Metamora *the characters*. This drawing power frequently came despite the actor's other flaws. The famous critic George Henry Lewes reinforced Coleridge's oft quoted statement that 'seeing Kean act was reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning' by adding his own analysis of Kean's peculiar acting rhythms.

...so brilliant and so startling were the sudden illuminations, and so murky the dull intervals... He stirred the general heart with such a rush of mighty power, impressed himself so vividly by accent, look, and gesture, that it was as in vain to protest against his defects as it was for French critics to insist upon Shakespeare's want of *bienséance* and *bon goût*... But no audience could be unmoved; all defects were overlooked or disregarded, because it was impossible to watch Kean as Othello, Shylock, Richard, or Sir Giles Overreach without being strangely shaken by the terror, and the pathos, and the passion of a stormy spirit uttering itself in tones of irresistible power.²⁸²

Here Lewes points out just how important spectacle was to Kean's success; his ability to summon emotional fireworks and vary them suddenly was almost the basis of his success.²⁸³ Cooke's acting style was similarly been described as spontaneous and volatile,²⁸⁴ and Forrest's acting style was famously revolutionized following his contact with Kean in 1826²⁸⁵

²⁸² George Henry Lewes, *Actors and the Art of Acting* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1875) 2-3.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁸⁴ Williams, "European Actors," 312-315.

²⁸⁵ Garff B. Wilson, *A History of American Acting* (Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 1966) 21-22; James Rees, *The Life of Edwin Forrest* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson & Brothers, 1874) 89-990.

This style of acting was particularly successful under the star system for other reasons as well. First, it was not dependent upon a strong supporting cast to achieve its advertised effects. Second, it helped to develop niche audiences that would go on to support America's first generation of stars. Finally it facilitated the sort of advertising that could bring in a broad base of spectators.

Because the star's explosive moments of emotional fireworks were so often the centerpiece of their performance style, the star's reliance upon quality performances from the rest of the cast was minimized. This is a significant contrast from the performances of someone like Anne Brunton Merry. Her habit of "expressive listening" was most certainly dependent upon quality performances from her fellow players. Without which, such moments would surely not have been theatrically compelling. That Merry and Cooper were never more successful than when they played together is a further indication of the mutual reliance of such actors.²⁸⁶

Actors such as Kean and Forrest, on the other hand, were not known as actors who depended upon, or consistently worked with specific co-stars. As the leading American tragedian of the day, Forrest played profitably opposite Mary Ann Duff when their touring routes happened to intersect, but there seems to be little to indicate that they ever systematically toured together.²⁸⁷ The fact that Forrest played opposite Kean when he was, at best an up-and-coming actor is a further indication of how self-reliant these stars were. Kean's famous appeal to Mary Ann Duff to stop performing so capably would even indicate that, in some cases, the star's spectacular displays of

²⁸⁶ Wood, *Personal Recollections*, 446

²⁸⁷ John S. Kendall, *The Golden Age of the New Orleans Theatre* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968) 157.

emotional fireworks may even have played more successfully alongside the work of lesser players, benefiting from the contrast.

The shift toward performant-heavy productions that relied on the extensive use of novelty and spectacle was perhaps the most significant way in which the economic demands of the star system exerted aesthetic changes upon the theatre. When George F. Cooke and Edmund Kean came to America, native spectators had never seen their like; they were a novel attraction. While America was becoming an increasingly lucrative, and thus attractive place for English actors to tour, there were only so many of them, and as I mentioned earlier, not nearly enough of them to fulfill the American market's demand.²⁸⁸ Theatre managers responded to this by seeking out other forms of performant theatricality in an attempt to mimic part of the appeal of these leading actors and thus cash in on this demand.

Thus while Edmund Kean might have been famous for his emotional fireworks in general, minor actors such as C. W. "Drunkard" Clarke and E. W. Wynkoop were able to make names for themselves based almost entirely upon their ability to perform the leading role in one play: *The Drunkard*. In this instance Clarke and Wynkoop were able to perfect moments of performant spectacle, such as the famous delirium tremens scene, to the point that they could make those moments the primary reason for their box-office draw. Wynkoop even performed this scene out of context as part of minstrel shows.²⁸⁹ This form of hyper-specialized acting was not necessarily just the domain of the hacks of the working class theatres either. *The Drunkard* represents an interesting case in

²⁸⁸ Simon Williams, "European Actors and the Star System in the American Theatre, 1752-1870," in *Cambridge History* (see note 2), 309.

²⁸⁹ Richard Moody, *Dramas from the American Theatre, 1762-1909* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1966) 279-280.

which the successful portrayal of the horror of the delirium tremens scene was an integral part of the play's temperance message. The playwright W. H. Smith also personally performed the role of Edward Middleton. As a reformed alcoholic he was able to bring a great deal of realism to his performances. As James M. Cherry notes,

The audience that saw Smith perform the play knowingly watched a man who had experienced the DTs personally. There is little doubt that the realism attributed to Smith's performance is rooted in the audience's outside knowledge of his condition. The performance of the play compelled audience members to consider the real-life consequences of alcoholism as Smith/Edward writhed in all-too-truthful agony before them. The fact that characters on the stage were able to reform, both in the narrative and in real life, underlined the very reality of the temperance narrative itself.²⁹⁰

Undoubtedly, some spectators attended more for the performant spectacle of the acting than for the play's referential message, but the play's message gave the production a middle class appeal that widened its market and made it one of the century's most successful theatrical products. Such cross-cultural appeal would become a dominant feature of the latter phases of the star system era.

Some stars even managed to develop niche audiences out of individuals who were not previously part of the traditional theatre-going populace. Forrest was famous for attracting working-class spectators who were drawn to his physique and to his demonstrations of physical prowess, but he was not the only one. James H. Hackett

²⁹⁰ James M. Cherry, *Melodrama, Parody, and the Transformation of an American Genre* (Dissertation, City University of New York, 2005) 152.

toured successfully as Colonel Nimrod Wildfire in J. Kirke Paulding's *The Lion of the West* for over twenty years with great success.

Though largely forgotten since, actors like Hackett, T. D. Rice, Joseph Jefferson III, George L. Fox, and many others, helped to establish native audiences that would continue to flourish well beyond their own performances.²⁹¹ By narrowly defining their individual appeal, sometimes down to a single major role, these actors were able to carve out careers even while living in the long shadows of the touring stars from Drury Lane and Covent Garden. Part of the advantage of touring was that one only had to draw well for a few nights before moving on. Major stars like Macready or Forrest might be able to continue filling houses for several weeks or even months as they worked their way through their relatively extensive repertoires, but an actor such as Hackett could put together a profitable season simply by playing shorter engagements in more venues.

Specialization was also a real boon to managers from an advertising standpoint. It would have been quite simple to effectively advertise the arrival of a star like Edmund Kean: "The Greatest Tragedian of the English Stage," yet these other lesser stars used the novelty of their specialty acts in much the same way. Thomas Dartmouth Rice was heralded as "The Original Jim Crow;" James H. Hackett's twenty-year-long stint as Colonel Nimrod Wildfire even cashed in on the memories of viewers who had previously seen him in their youth. Such acts were appealing and easily definable, in

²⁹¹ Joseph Roach, "The Emergence of the American Actor," in *Cambridge History* (see note 1), 346, 359-360, 363, 365-367.

part because of their novelty, but such performances were almost always highly spectacular as well.

Even the success of Edwin Forrest can be partly attributed to the era's unceasing demand for novelty, spectacle, and performers with significant cross-cultural appeal. Forrest's status as the *first* native-born tragedian was well advertised, and his patronage of native playwrights and dependence on their works as the cornerstones of his repertoire, only served to reinforce this image. The ultimate success of this visibility can even be seen in the writings of subsequent theatre historians. For, although there were other native-born actors who had worked with varying degrees of success within the world of high tragedy, Forrest was the first one to actually cash in on the title.²⁹² Indeed Forrest, along with Royall Tyler, are probably the two most celebrated "firsts" in American theatrical history, partially because they were the first to be professionally successful in their fields. There were, certainly other factors that contributed to Forrest's success, but novelty and the commercial success that stemmed from his cross-cultural appeal were certainly an important elements in the equation.

The rise of the star system also coincided with the rise of melodrama, a dramatic form that was heavily dependent on novelty and spectacle, as well as on depictions of localized culture. Many actors such as Hackett and even Forrest used specific melodramas as vehicles that helped them to clearly define themselves as native performers and hence successfully commoditize themselves for the American market. Unlike someone like Macready whose portrayal of Othello would continually suffer

²⁹² Nathans, *Early American Theatre*, 115-119. Native-born Willaim Charles White had a brief period of success in Boston in the 1790's but is almost universally absent from histories of the period.

from comparisons to that of Kean, Hackett's portrayal of Col. Wildfire was his alone and was almost as much a part of his public persona as his own name was.

Although melodrama would later become the ultimate symbol for many of everything that was wrong with the nineteenth-century American popular stage, it entered the American theatrical market through the same portal as did the touring English stars: New York's prestigious Park Theatre. And for more than a generation, this theatrical form would function as important means by which managers could attract multiple audience segments.

William Dunlap's numerous translations of melodramas by William Kotzebue, for example, provided the foundation of melodrama in America, yet initially these works were not necessarily seen as a separate theatrical genre, and were certainly not the exclusive domain of the hacks and hams of the American theatre. Upon its New York debut, Kotzebue's *The Stranger* was hailed by the critic of *The Commercial Advertiser* as the best comedy since *School for Scandal*. Of the performance's leading actress, Mrs. Barrett, the critic noted, "Her powers seemed happily adapted to the character of Mrs. Haller; and for elegance of manner, dignity of deportment, and true pathos, there are few in Europe or America who can surpass this first specimen of Mrs. Barrett's abilities."²⁹³ Clearly such a warm and high-toned review demonstrates how critics had not yet learned how to be properly snobbish when reviewing melodramas.

Although many melodramas flowed out of the popular boulevard theatres of Paris in the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth centuries, in the English speaking world they were often produced at elite venues like Covent Garden, Drury Lane, and the

²⁹³ "Kotzebue's *The Stranger*," *The Commercial Advertiser*, December 11, 1798.

Park Theatre, where they were often put up as featured attractions, not just as afterpieces.²⁹⁴ Kotzebue's *The Stranger* was also translated by Benjamin Thompson and was performed at Drury Lane at nearly the same time that Dunlap's translation appeared in New York. Although historians such as Joseph Donohue have demonstrated that the English patent houses were steadily becoming more dependent on novelty and spectacle in the waning decades of the Eighteenth Century, they were nevertheless treasured symbols of elite entertainment within English culture, and were therefore models for emulation by managers like Dunlap.²⁹⁵

Many of the plays that we now think of as melodramas were not necessarily even written with that genre in mind, and their writers clearly had nothing but the highest tragic aspirations. John A. Stone's *Metamora* and Robert M. Bird's *The Gladiator* present prime examples of this phenomenon. Both were written very much in the mode of neoclassic tragedies, and both were cornerstones in Edwin Forrest's tragic repertoire. Yet Bruce McConachie rightly includes them along with Robert T. Conrad's *Jack Cade*, another Forrest vehicle, in *Melodramatic Formations*, his study of melodramatic playwriting and performance in the early Nineteenth Century. As McConachie notes, "Although similar to romantic tragedies, these vehicles manifest a structural reliance on villainy and Providence that aligns them with the conventions of melodrama."²⁹⁶ Forrest's "prize plays," which he essentially commissioned for his own use, were such an important part of his repertoire that he would often trot them out

²⁹⁴ Joseph Donohue, *Theatre in the Age of Kean* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975) 105-126.

²⁹⁵ Joseph Donohue, "The Theatre from 1660 to 1800," in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*, vol 2, ed. Joseph Donohue (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 45-47.

²⁹⁶ Bruce McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820-1870* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1992) 91.

during a starring engagement if audiences did not seem receptive enough to his Shakespearean portrayals.²⁹⁷

Stone's *Metamora* will most likely not go down as one of America's great tragedies, and yet it was clearly one of Forrest's most successful roles, and it frequently outsold all of the other pieces in his repertoire.²⁹⁸ That the production was a sensation, in spite of the script's weaknesses, points toward the real key to the production's success: Forrest. The role of *Metamora* gave Forrest his best opportunity to cash in on his "native" appeal. The conflict between the Native Americans and the English in the play conveniently paralleled the conflicts between native-born American and English actors in the United States in the early Nineteenth century; actors like Forrest were perpetual underdogs. *Metamora* gave audiences an opportunity to cheer for one of their own, not only in narrative terms, but in terms of the performer as well. It was also well known that Forrest employed his extensive personal contact with Native American tribes in order to portray his Wampanoag chief "accurately." As I discussed in Chapter 1, the image of Native American nobility was a powerful and popular concept with nativist fraternal organizations throughout this period. As one of the few performers who incorporated this sort of imagery as a key element of his performance life, Forrest represented a novel attraction indeed.

The star system encouraged the development of spectacle in other areas as well. The spectacular acting was supported directly by scripts in which spectacle played a greater part than in previous generations. Although Colley Cibber's version of *Richard*

²⁹⁷ Kendall, *New Orleans Theatre*, 157.

²⁹⁸ Moody, *Dramas*, 201-202.

III had been favored over Shakespeare's original version since the early Eighteenth Century, it may never have been more favored than it was in the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries. Cibber's *Richard III* was, in fact the most produced play in America in the early Federalist period, and it became an even more prominent star vehicle after Edmund Kean made it a cornerstone of his repertoire. Even Forrest, whose famous physique was deeply at odds with the role of Richard played the role regularly.

Cibber's *Richard III* had a number of advantages as a star vehicle. The fact that the script had been in wide circulation for a century meant that local ensembles were sure to be familiar with the text, and it had far fewer characters than Shakespeare's original, which lessened the demands of casting the show. It also featured Richard in a much more central and melodramatic fashion. Act 1, much of which was lifted from Shakespeare's *Henry VI Part 3*, allowed the actor playing Richard to get off to a properly bloody start. While in Shakespeare's version, most of the mayhem in the play is orchestrated by Richard, but carried out by his subordinates, in Cibber's version Richard starts the play off by dispatching King Henry personally, and gloating over the bleeding corpse.

What, will the aspiring blood of Lancaster
Sink in the ground? -- I thought it would have mounted.
See how my Sword weeps for the poor King's death;
---O, may such purple tears be always shed
From those that wish the Downfall of our House.
If any spark of Life be yet remaining,
Down, down to Hell! and say, I sent thee thither (stabs him again).

That Shakespeare wrote these lines is of little consequence. *Henry VI Part 3* was definitely not a popular play at the time, and the inclusion of these lines in Cibber's adaptation of *Richard III* gave starring actors the opportunity to get their evening's performance off to a spectacularly bloody start.

Not all actors succeeded as Richard, however. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Forrest's portrayal of the tyrant was one of the most maligned of his career. *Metamora*, on the other hand, was a play that cashed in on exactly those traits that made Forrest's portrayal of Richard so problematic. Forrest's portrayal of the Wampanoag chief was one in which physical charisma played as much or more of a role than verbal eloquence. In Stone's play, *Metamora* is generally a man of few words, who is often seen before he is heard. He is, however, decidedly a man of action who subdues his enemies and protects the heroines through the adept use of physical violence. This is a play in which spectacle plays a great role, with burning ships, physical pursuits and battle sequences propelling much of the action. It is also most certainly a play that illustrates what Jane Moody has described as the "recurring melodramatic trope in which moral jeopardy is presented in terms of physical peril."²⁹⁹ That this play was never a successful vehicle for other actors in the way that it was for Forrest further points to the importance of Forrest's own brand of physical spectacle as an important key to the play's success.

The spectacular nature of both Cibber's *Richard III* and Stone's *Metamora* can be seen even more clearly in contrast to a play such as Nicholas Rowe's *The Fair Penitent*, which was a cornerstone of the careers of both Anne Brunton Merry and Sarah

²⁹⁹ Jane Moody, "The Theatrical Revolution, 1776-1843," in *British Theatre* (see note 39), 211.

Siddons, which all but disappeared from American stages under the star system. Rowe's sentimental tragedy is a story of villainy, sacrifice, and redemption, as is *Metamora*, yet it completely lacks the scenes of physical violence and peril that are so central to Stone's play. Even Rowe's style of writing seems to preclude the sort of emotional fireworks for which Kean and Forrest were so well known. The fact that most of the characters in Rowe's play converse with one another in formalized speeches that are 5-6 lines long on average, reduces the kind of emotional momentum that Stone builds into some of his more confrontational scenes. It should not be terribly surprising that Merry was praised for her "active listening" in her performance of *The Fair Penitent*; she certainly had a lot of lines to listen to.

Novelty and spectacle became significant enough that in at least one instance it was not the star that was shared between institutions but the scenery instead. In 1829 Thomas Hamblin of the Bowery Theatre arranged to send along the physical production for the *Walpole Spectacle* to the Chestnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia, in return for roughly half of the gross box office revenues. This was more than many stars were able to command. Hamblin further indicated that John R. Scott, the show's star in its New York incarnation, would not be traveling with the scenery because "he would not come to play that alone."³⁰⁰

Spectacles were not of course a new element within the American theatre. According to William Dunlap, in 1797, the Chestnut Street Theatre's Thomas Wignell "finding that fire and smoke pleased the public, determined to give them a volcano."³⁰¹

³⁰⁰ Thomas Hamblin to F. C. Wemyss, letter, March 18, 1829, Harvard Theatre Collection.

³⁰¹ William Dunlap, *A History of the American Theatre from Its Origins to 1832* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005) 196.

But the fact that Francis Wemyss was arranging to import a spectacle from New York, minus its star, at the cost of half of his gross receipts indicates the lengths that managers were beginning to go to in order to make such spectacles available to their audiences. It is indicative of the way that the economic side of the star system was beginning to exert its power at the expense of aesthetic concerns. The quality of the acting was often one of the first elements to suffer.

The Star System as an Agent of Cultural Homogenization

Despite the fact that some spectators and many managers loudly bemoaned the aesthetic destruction that the star system was wreaking upon the American theatre, audiences continued to be attracted to the star performances. That the crowds kept coming for the better part of a generation indicates that there must have been something in these flawed performances that continually attracted the spectators.

The desire to participate in elite forms of social culture was undoubtedly one of the most significant motivating factors for elite-minded spectators. The prestige gained from attending a performance by a well known, and highly acclaimed touring star was draw enough in itself, and was not necessarily dependent upon aesthetic perfection in the performance. As the critic for the *New York Evening Post* noted early in the century, Mrs. Merry's very presence in New York "created a gala event" in and of itself.³⁰² How much more energy must tours by the likes of Edmund Kean or William Charles Macready have generated? Even if the secondary cast members were a bit under-rehearsed, the audiences would surely have been star-struck simply by the

³⁰² Thespis, "Critique No. 22," *New York Evening Post*, April 20, 1802.

presence of a performer of this magnitude. For some, the bragging rights alone of having personally witnessed such a performer would have been worth the elevated ticket prices.

Having performers were becoming more mobile also meant that the rapidly expanding American republic could begin to develop a sense of a communal culture. By the 1830's and 1840's major stars were not just making the rounds of the major cities of the northeast, they were touring to every major population center in the country, from New York and Boston, to New Orleans, St. Louis, Sioux City, and Atlanta, with stops in many smaller cities along the routes that connected the larger ones.³⁰³ Any city that lay along a commercial road or a navigable river saw these performers.

The development of the nation's transportation infrastructure was, in fact, a central component of the star system's expansion. When Merry and Cooper arrived in America in 1796, they took a ship from New York to Philadelphia partly because the road connecting the two cities was still so primitive. Over the next few decades, however, the United States government took a great deal of interest in the development of the young nation's roads, rivers, and canals.³⁰⁴ Transportation projects like the improvement of the Maysville Road through Kentucky, for example, influenced national political positions and fueled the nation's desire to control other far off

³⁰³ The extent of these touring outposts can be seen in virtually any text on the subject from the period. Noah Ludlow's *The Dramatic Life as I Found It* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1966) and Sol Smith's *Theatrical Management in the West and South for Thirty Years* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968) are amongst the most often cited.

³⁰⁴ Stuart Bruchey, *The Wealth of the Nation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). Chapter 3 of this volume covers the expanding infrastructure of the young nation.

territories such as New Orleans.³⁰⁵ In many ways, the development of the national transportation infrastructure was one of the most important tasks that the government tackled in its infancy. Although the theatre was probably the last industry that the United States government was concerned with in the development of these projects, it was nevertheless an industry that changed radically as a result of them.

This improved infrastructure meant that population centers in ever more distant areas of the nation could be connected to the national economic system and so thrive. Resources and products could be exchanged with the major shipping ports, and thus to the rest of the industrializing world. And with the success of this increased level of economic connection followed a desire for a similar level of cultural connection.

One of the primary reasons for the construction of major theatres in the cities that were blossoming during this period was status. When James H. Caldwell built his first theatre in Cincinnati, one of many that he built throughout the expanding territories, its 800 seats could hold nearly 10% of the infant city's population. A theatre nearly four times that size would be built to replace it within a generation.³⁰⁶ While the theatres in small cities such as Cincinnati initially had little competition, the scale of these theatres generally reflected the hubris of the community more than the availability of a stable market to fill them. A glut of theatre seats was a perpetual problem during this period. That such large and often ornate theatres could be built at all, was only made possible through the contributions of wealthy citizens, which Caldwell invariably relied upon to finance these building projects. That he was able to build theatres all over

³⁰⁵ Crain Thompson Friend, *Along the Maysville Road* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2005) 2-3.

³⁰⁶ Henderson, "Scenography, Stagecraft, and Architecture," 404

the area from Kentucky to Louisiana in the early Nineteenth Century is indicative of how much desire there was, even in the far reaches of the then American frontier, for these symbols of elite culture.³⁰⁷

Caldwell's construction campaign closely mirrored David Douglass's spree of theatre construction in the 1760's and 1770's. Douglass's projects were similarly financed by soliciting subscriptions and other contributions from local social elites. Most of them seem to have been all too happy to help create institutions where they could display their eminence and enjoy the leisure that their wealth and status provided them.³⁰⁸ That Douglass's theatres were often built squarely in the center of the cities that they served, similarly indicates that these theatres were a point of pride for those empowered individuals who approved of zoning and other civic planning matters.³⁰⁹ Both Douglass and Caldwell built the first permanent theatres in many of the nation's emerging population centers, and that construction was intimately tied to elite patronage, as much as to entrepreneurial opportunity.

As the nation's theatres became larger, more elegant, and more numerous, they often teetered on the brink of bankruptcy. They could be filled to capacity when Kean, Forrest, or Macready came to town, but fought to stay solvent most of the rest of the time. Yet the very presence of such a structure in the center of one's city was a mark of status, a symbol of that city's sophistication and dedication to the same cultural ideals

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 414-415.

³⁰⁸ Odai Johnson, *Absence and Memory in Colonial American Theatre* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006) 18-20, 31.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 25.

as the captains of capitalistic imperial commerce in New York or London.³¹⁰ The opportunity to attend an event such as the performance of a major star at one's local theatre seems to have been important enough for many spectators, that they were willing to help pay for the construction of the building and perhaps cheerfully endure the annoyance of under-rehearsed secondary casts.

In supporting these theatres, American spectators were participating in a form of cultural unification. The United States had not been populated primarily by Englishmen since the middle of the Eighteenth Century, and the diversity of its imported population only increased with the massive waves of immigrants that began arriving in the New World in the Nineteenth Century. Yet the vast majority of these immigrants were poor, and for better or for worse, the star system continued to reflect the culture of money and power: English culture. There seem of have been a number of factors that contributed to this.

Socio-economic inertia was certainly a contributing factor. Many of those who had been the landed British aristocracy before the war remained relatively wealthy after the war. Thus, despite the economic instability that plagued the early Nineteenth Century, the core of America's theatre-going population probably changed much more slowly than the population as a whole.

Another reason for the star system's Anglo-centric bent may have been managerial inertia: the fact that so many of the men and women who managed American theatres were themselves English. Aside from what would have likely been a

³¹⁰ Ibid., Chapter 3 of Johnson's book examines this desire in fascinating detail. Although Johnson's study is restricted to the colonial period, much of his argument applies to the western theatres of the early Nineteenth Century as well.

natural cultural affinity for the cultural products of their native country, the personal connections that most managers used as their primary means of booking talent would surely have led them back to the homeland. This was a tendency that they were occasionally criticized for.³¹¹ The best example of this was Stephen Price, who took over the management of Drury Lane after his first tenure at the Park Theatre. From London he continued to funnel English talent to America through his old company. After leaving Drury Lane, he returned again to the Park Theatre with his network of London connections stronger than ever.³¹²

The third, and perhaps least explored reason for the star system's anglo-centric bent was its relationship to the hegemonic influence of English imperialism. The real social power that spectators derived from their attendance at a performance of Edmund Kean or William Charles Macready stemmed from the fact that these actors were not merely sublime artists, but also the physical embodiments of Imperial culture. In the early Nineteenth Century, England and France vied for international dominance, but with the fall of Napoleon in 1815, England stood unchallenged as the globe's unchallenged super power. As I will explore in greater detail in the next chapter, to attend the performance of an actor such as Kean or Macready, from the perspective of social prestige, was to symbolically connect oneself to the elite circles of power of the world's most powerful nation. This desire for a cultural connection to imperial power helps to explain why even those spectators who were neither wealthy nor ethnically English were still attracted to the star-system's largely anglo-centric fare.

³¹¹ Wolter, *American Drama*, 14.

³¹² Williams, "European Actors," 309-310.

In attempting to emulate this elite cultural world, and thus mark oneself as similarly empowered, America's up and coming middle class citizens, whatever their own cultural heritage, were therefore becoming more and more anglicized through their participation in cultural phenomena such as the star system. In this way, the star system served as a homogenizing agent for the young expanding nation. Immigrants of diverse origins may have been spreading out over the growing expanse of the United States, but the star system served as an active agent that would ensure that they would not remain diverse for long, especially as they rose up through the ranks of the wealthy and empowered. Nativist citizens often sought to resist this process, branding such activity as un-American, but as we shall see in the chapter that follows, they were largely unsuccessful in stemming the tide.

The Crash

Despite the allure of elite culture, the star system eventually began failing to provide what it promised. The very forces that were driving the economic engine of the star system were driving it toward its inevitable demise. As the American theatrical market continued to expand, the competition for first-rate talent became tighter and tighter. Some theatres were able to work with their neighbors in booking stars; The St. Charles Theatre in New Orleans and the St. Emanuel Theatre in Mobile enjoyed such a sharing arrangement in the 1830's.³¹³ But most theatres had to rely on other means of meeting this increasing demand.

³¹³ Smith, *Theatrical Management*, 153.

Melodrama was as always a reliable source of novelty and was consequently sought after. Some melodrama scripts even began to develop a following that functioned somewhat independent of the actors in them. *The Drunkard* is again an important example of one such melodrama. In an era in which temperance was one of the largest grass-roots national movements, it should not be terribly surprising that such a play might develop a life of its own. In its initial incarnation at the Boston Museum, it enjoyed a run that lasted for over for 100 performances, an unheard of number for the period, and one that would presage the addiction to long runs that would soon supplant the star system as the economic engine for the commercial theatre in America.³¹⁴ *The Drunkard's* popularity helped spawn the careers of C. E. Clarke and E. W. Wynkoop, but had an inertia of its own that went far beyond any individual performer's career.

Other forms of entertainment also started competing with the touring stars for the public's attention. Hippodramas, minstrel shows, acrobatic exhibitions, ballet companies, opera singers, negro spiritualists, lecturers, and a host of other forms of entertainment only added to the competition that was already pushing theatre managers toward the breaking point.³¹⁵

As I discussed earlier, specialization was one of the most effective tactics that stars employed in order to commoditize themselves more effectively in the theatrical market. The varied repertoires performed by stars like Merry, Cooke, and Kean were soon replaced by actors that specialized in only one or two types of characters such as

³¹⁴ Barnard Hewitt, *Theatre U.S.A.* (New York: McGraw-Hill Company, 1959) 160.

³¹⁵ Wolter, *American Drama*, 17. Wood, *Personal Recollections*, 456.

Yankees, Tomboys, African-Americans, Stage Irish, Bowery B'hoys, and Frontiersmen.³¹⁶

Many of these specialties were supported by scripts that were tailored specifically to the talents of the stars who utilized them. Although Frank Chanfrau was not the only actor to portray Bowery B'hoys characters, he was in many ways the original, and many of the early plays, like *A Glance at New York*, that featured these characters were written specifically for him. Even existing plays were tailored carefully to suit the needs of star performers.

Such specialization, combined with a growing interest in longer runs of fewer plays, meant that the variety of plays available to the public was actually decreasing, especially in comparison to the era of true repertory theatre that preceded the star system. Whereas Merry and Cooper performed in comedies, tragedies, melodramas, and whatever else was on the slate for the night, even the most famous of touring stars tended to offer only one form of drama. John E. Owens, a Yankee specialist, only performed in comic plays, and the leading tragedians from England generally stuck to tragic roles.³¹⁷ For the week that a specialty star was in town, spectators would only have been able to see that actor in a handful of similar roles, or, as the vogue for long runs began to develop, the same role each night.

This lack of variety caused spectators to become increasingly jaded and difficult to attract, especially given all of their other entertainment options. Perhaps Walt Whitman summed up the public's frustration best.

³¹⁶ McDermott, "Theatre and its Audience," 10.

³¹⁷ Wood, *Personal Recollections*, 455.

Some actor or actress flits about the country, playing a week here and a week there, bringing as his or her greatest recommendation, that of novelty – and very often indeed having no other. – In all the intervals between the appearance of these much trumpeted people, the theatre is quite deserted, though the plays and playing are often far better than during some star engagement. We have seen a fine old English drama, with Miss Cushman and her sister – Mrs. Vernon, Placide, Fisher, and several others whose betters in their departments could hardly be found – we have seen such a beautiful piece, well put upon the stage, and played to a forlorn looking audience, thinly scattered here and there through pit and box – while the very next week crowds would crush each other to get a sight of some flippant well-puffed star, of no real merit, and playing a character written (for the play consists of nothing but one, in such cases) by nobody knows whom – probably an ephemeral manufacturer of literature, with as little talent as his employer.³¹⁸

In the end the star system began to crumble from within. Managers who did find success, or who at least pretended to be more successful than they were faced increased rents from landlords who were seeking their share of what so many saw as a lucrative business. And as William Wood wrote, “when the manager is thus ruined, the stars must follow him, and the very star system itself is broken up, not by an immediate restoration of the stock companies, but primarily by the entire prostration of the drama itself.”³¹⁹

Even the press itself began to turn against the theatre as genuine critics, frustrated at the

³¹⁸ Walt Whitman, “Miserable State of the Stage” *The Brooklyn Eagle*, February 8, 1847. [In: *The American Theatre as Seen by Its Critics: 1752-1934*, ed. Montrose J. Moses & John Mason Brown (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1967) pp.70-72.

³¹⁹ Wood, *Personal Recollections*, 451.

declining quality of the acting and of the drama in general, began to resign their journals and theatre columns.³²⁰ Many spectators who had been seeking examples of refinement from their stars, even more so than works of theatrical genius, were also becoming disappointed as “stars,” whose previous career triumphs had risen no higher than secondary players at minor theatres in England, could not even exhibit the manners or the education which so many American spectators had come to expect from their actors.³²¹ In short, the very economic forces that defined the star system ultimately bankrupted the theatre of much of the cultural fuel that had been driving it, and led to its demise.

As the star system began to deteriorate, ensemble acting began to enjoy something of a resurgence. In New York, William Mitchell developed a tight, permanent ensemble of actors at the Olympic theatre. This was a family-oriented theatre whose actors were not the elite of their generation, but who nevertheless enjoyed an impressive degree of stability for the period, and who produced respectable performances that allowed the theatre to build a solid following from spectators who had had their limit of empty spectacle.³²² Burton and Wallack also managed to establish stable ensembles in New York, while similar ensembles emerged under the leadership of Louisa Drew and others in Philadelphia.³²³

Some saw these efforts as the long awaited return to the stock repertory system, and in some ways they were, especially in terms of acting. The next generation of

³²⁰ Wolter, *American Drama*, 17.

³²¹ Wood, *Personal Recollections*, 455.

³²² Paul Preston, “The Olympean Gods and Goddesses,” *New York Clipper*, n.d.: clipping in the Harvard Theatre Collection.

³²³ Wood, *Personal Recollections*, 437.

actors, led by Edwin Booth, would move away somewhat from the spectacle and fireworks of Cooke, Kean, and Forrest and would develop a more reserved, more thoughtful style of acting that was in many ways reminiscent of the Kemble/Siddons Grand Tradition. For the elitist segment of the American audience, this was a welcome return to the norms of a more civilized age.³²⁴ Less refined entertainments such as minstrelsy would continue to thrive during the middle decades of the Nineteenth Century, but so too would more refined theatres; America was now becoming large enough to support both forms independent of one another.

The most powerful successor to the star system, however, would be the combination company. In many ways this new twist on the star system managed to solve many of the star system's flaws by reestablishing the continuity of the acting company. Outside of the few repertory stock companies that were remaining, almost no actor could expect to work with the same ensemble for years on end as they had two generations before, but at least they were not subjected to the futility of trying to reassemble a new company on a weekly basis.

The combination company system allowed managers to simply become booking agents, and as the entire theatre industry began to gravitate more and more toward New York, the booking of acts for a season became easier and easier. Managers no longer had to run mad trying to cast shows at the last minute or adapt unsuitable scenery in a haphazard fashion, because the shows arrived at their theatres already complete, and any town with a railway station and sufficient funds could book almost any company.

³²⁴ Ibid., 460.

Thus, the process of cultural unification that had started under the star system, would continue operating through the booking of combination companies.

Conclusion

In the end, the real benefit of the star system for the American theatre was three-fold. For those who felt a great affinity for the products of English culture, it was an opportunity to participate in that culture without having to own a townhouse in London, or even Philadelphia. At the same time, it also served as a mechanism by which Americans came to know their own stars, even the minor ones like James H. Hackett. Finally, for a culturally de-centralized nation, it served as a means of attaining common points of reference. The fact that most of those reference points were foreign-born makes this no less significant, it merely points to the fact that, as a nation, we were not nearly as independent from our European cultural roots as perhaps we would like to think we should have been by then. Our very attraction to those foreign cultural icons points to a deep sense of cultural anxiety and a dedication to the social manifestations of power that stood strangely at odds with American political ideology. As the mid-century point approached, this paradox would only become more apparent.

Chapter 4:

The Genteel Counterrevolution: The Rise of America's Imperial Middle Class

On the whole, the first half of the Nineteenth Century represented a period of indecisiveness within the American theatre, and within the national culture at large. Despite the egalitarian ethos for which this period is famous, many Americans still clung tightly to the cultural trappings of hierarchical, aristocratic culture that was becoming more and more accessible due to the influx of wealth from America's increasing participation in the international economy of imperial capitalism. The Jacksonian era saw great strides made toward a more populist society, and for a time it seemed as if the populist approach had some real legs to stand on. But by the time the century reached its mid-point, America was quickly coming to a decision in terms of its cultural identity, and increasingly it was choosing an elitist route. Both popular and elite forms of culture would remain active and vibrant throughout this period, but elite-minded culture would manage to capture the high ground, eventually becoming entrenched in the emerging educational system and enjoying governmental and occasionally even militaristic support. This support was perhaps never so clearly visible than in the governmental response to the Astor Place Riot. The rise of elite-minded culture to this place of prominence had everything to do with the simultaneous rise of America's imperial middle class.

The collapse of the star system had been predominantly an internal one; the stars demanded too much, managers promised too much, and everyone else simply got

caught in the crossfire. Although many spectators were understandably frustrated and jaded by this experience, there was, nevertheless, a clear external demand to keep the American theatre afloat. But new, more sustainable modes of operation had to be adopted. As historians such as Lawrence Levine and David Grimsted have discussed, the American theatre in fact developed multiple systems based largely around the increasing segmentation of the theatrical market.³²⁵ Most popularly oriented theatres would remain strictly profit oriented, marketing broad spectacles and other cross-cultural performances that appealed to large-scale demographics. Elite-minded patrons helped to establish theatres presented highbrow fare and often relied on the generosity of wealthy patrons rather than profits for their survival. Such venues functioned more as cultural refuges for those with elite cultural sensibilities rather than as profit-producing machines. Some actors such as Edwin Forrest managed to find work in both of these realms, but for the most part these two modes of operation would only diverge further as the century progressed.

Emulation and the Rise of the Imperial Middle Class

Although the middle class had been an integral part of the American economic landscape throughout much of the Eighteenth Century, their influence in the cultural realm during that period was negligible. However, the explosion of industrialization in

³²⁵ Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988). Levine's entire book chronicles precisely this diversification. David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theatre and Culture, 1800- 1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968) 74-75.

the early Nineteenth Century allowed them to grow both in numbers and influence to the point that they eventually came to a position of greater dominance.

Over the course of the early Nineteenth Century, America's middle class gradually took over as the core of the American audience as well. They filled the pits, parterres, and even many of the boxes of newly established elite venues, and also contributed to the coffers of the populist theatres that marketed minstrel shows, circuses, hippodramas, and other spectacles.

One of the great ironies of this transition, however, is that middle-class patrons seemed to be perpetually either passing or slumming at theatres that seemed to be aimed at patrons of other classes.³²⁶ In many ways, the period that followed the collapse of the star system marked a return to a theatre-going experience that is usually more associated with the colonial and federalist periods. Elite-minded patrons during this period sought to reestablish the theatre primarily as a cultural experience rather than as a capitalistic venture. The successful synthesis of cultural pride and profit had proved to be elusive for early theatre managers such as William Dunlap. Later generations of managers benefited from the market segmentation made possible by the overall expansion of the national audience, but were nevertheless forced to confront the fact that their existence would depend upon subscriptions and other donations from their wealthiest patrons rather than box-office receipts alone. Reliance on the generosity of elite patrons was hardly a new concept in the history of the theatre, but this was elitism with a difference. In striking contrast to the colonial period when most of the spectators

³²⁶ Faye E. Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses and Audiences, 1790-1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994) 120.

that managers relied upon were members of the landed gentry, the bedrock audience during the middle decades of the Nineteenth Century were members of America's emerging middle class.

Increasingly, once middle-class Americans reached the point where they could control their own self-definition, they often chose to indulge in the cultural trappings of aristocratic life, although they often did not frame their activities in exactly that light. Historian Richard Bushman describes such aristocratic passing as "emulation," but makes a clear distinction between emulation and imitation.

The impulse was not to copy but to partake – of power and the glory, strength, and beauty that were believed to inhere in those who stood at the peak of society and government.³²⁷

This distinction is an important one because it implies a different relationship to power in comparison to previous generations. Most emulators were not seeking to become aristocratic elites; such a goal was shunned by the very etiquette books that served as cultural roadmaps to the emerging middle class, and was financially unattainable in any case. Instead they were seeking to "dignify their own existence with a portion of the glory that radiated from the highest and best circles."³²⁸ Middle class emulators sought to blur distinctions between their own lives and the lives of those who they were emulating without entirely erasing those distinctions.

Such emulation represents the willful participation in a non-governmental culture of power and influence that reached beyond the nation's physical borders, and

³²⁷ Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992) 406.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 406.

well beyond the cultural ideologies that were embodied in the Constitution. Historians such as Bushman have pointed backward to the empowered eighteenth-century gentry as a primary source of the power of genteel emulation. “The reasons for gentility’s influence are clear: plain people needed a vocabulary of honor and glory and were compelled to find one where they could.” Bushman similarly notes “the continuity of genteel culture from one century to the next eliminated the need for new forms of material culture.”³²⁹ While this seems to be at least partially true, I would argue that the real power behind emulation lay not in its ability to echo the eighteenth-century aristocratic order, which in any case had become discredited and vilified in the minds of most Americans, but in its connection to the larger nineteenth-century system of globalized imperial capitalism. The United States may have adopted a comparatively radical political system, but it nevertheless maintained close economic relationships with the great imperial nations of the Nineteenth Century, not the least of which being the period’s most powerful monarchy: Great Britain.

Despite ongoing conflicts ranging from debt repudiation to all-out warfare, America and Great Britain remained firmly in contact with one another both culturally and economically. This is perhaps no more apparent than in the theatre where the vast majority of theatrical products available in America were of English origin. America’s output of “original” products was significantly smaller, but most native stars such as Forrest, Cushman, and Hackett were similarly “exported” to England from time to time, though with varying levels of success. The cultural connections between the two nations can be seen in most areas of cultural commerce. Many of the novels sold in America,

³²⁹ Ibid., 412, 208.

for example, were pirated British imports that allowed American publishers to make huge profits on the appeal of foreign literature.³³⁰

Yet such cultural exchanges refused to adhere to specific nationalist agendas. As Jeffrey Richards has noted, “when Americans thought of or participated in the theatre, they entered into a cultural space that was transatlantic and without fixed national borders, even though the content may have appeared nationalistic and local.”³³¹ I would argue that this international cultural space was supported by systems of power that were not based so much in political ideology as it was in economics. The culture of the British aristocracy remained a worthy subject for emulation by Americans, not because of its roots in inherited titles, but because its lifestyle was fueled by global imperialism. Imperialism was an international phenomenon, which the British aristocracy sat at the pinnacle of, but within which the American middle class was equally immersed.

There were a number of catalysts that spurred the rapid development of the American middle class, but the influence of industrialization pervaded all of them. Although domestic manufacturing grew steadily in America throughout the late Eighteenth Century, (indeed many of the more restrictive acts on the part of the British government sought to slow that growth) it was the war of 1812 which really set the wheels of industrialization in full motion. With the nation effectively cut off from its global trade partners it had little choice but to develop its own manufacturing sector, and in the period from 1820 to 1840 the portion of the populace that was involved in the manufacturing sector increased by 127 percent. The number of agrarian workers, by

³³⁰ Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 371.

³³¹ Jeffrey H. Richards, *Drama, Theatre, and Identity in the American New Republic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 4.

comparison, grew by only 79 percent.³³² By the 1840s, with the nation's economy enjoying a full-throttle rebound from the panic of 1837, the American middle class had relocated itself from the nation's economic fringe to the center of its power and culture matrix.³³³ The combination of industrialized manufacturing and international trade brought the American economy more and more into contact with the imperial economies of Europe. The individuals who acted as the primary points of contact within this system were the merchants and new industrialists, the vast majority of whom were middle class.³³⁴ The American middle class was developing an international network of connections to a non-governmental system of power that was still controlled at its pinnacle by the great European aristocracies.

That those middle-class Americans who were immersed in this system chose to emulate the cultural affectations of those whose economic power they were similarly trying to emulate should not be surprising. This sort of cultural emulation knew no physical boundaries. Wherever such economic growth occurred, the emulation of the aristocratic culture of gentility followed.³³⁵ Even while overtly rejecting the idea of British culture as a nationalist concept, many still chose to retain those cultural elements that they took to be the best features of that life.³³⁶

While the middle class clearly drew power from this emulation, there were important differences in the ways in which they put this power to work. One of the

³³² Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Age of Jackson* (Old Saybrook, CT: Konecky & Konecky, 1971) 8-9.

³³³ Sellers, *Market Revolution*, 391.

³³⁴ Once the industrialization began to consolidate into the vertically-integrated monopolies for which the late Nineteenth Century was famous, profits would begin to accumulate into fewer and fewer hands, but in the early Nineteenth Century, the wealth reaped from industrialization was still spread a bit more evenly throughout the middle class.

³³⁵ Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 225.

³³⁶ Dale T. Knobel, *America for the Americans: The Nativist Movement in the United States* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996) 4.

primary differences between the upper and middle classes in their use of genteel culture was their relationship to the political power structure. For the upper class in the Eighteenth Century, and for the British aristocracy of the Nineteenth Century, the social performance of gentility was part of what marked them as worthy of being entrusted with their political positions of power. In much the same way that a modern police officer's uniform, badge, and demeanor mark that person as a formal representative of governmental power, worthy of respect and attention, an eighteenth-century gentleman's cape, carriage, speech, and box at the theatre marked him as an individual in whom power had been and should be vested.

Most middle-class citizens felt little of the responsibility for public service that most members of the eighteenth-century American gentry assumed based on their social position alone. Yet they nevertheless benefited from the social connotations of genteel living; it still functioned semiotically in marking oneself as empowered. Respectability and propriety rather than eminence and public dignity became their primary goals, but it served their purposes nonetheless.³³⁷ For the American middle class, this emulation may not have marked them definitively as social rulers, but it did distinguish them from the body of citizens who were clearly still marked as the *subjects* of rule by their lack of personal refinement.³³⁸

The emulation of gentility created other forms of power as well. One important example of this was the commoditization, manufacture, and sale of refined cultural products. To a certain extent, the English aristocracy had always been up for sale,

³³⁷ Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 208

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 420.

though the price was so high as to place it out of reach of most citizens. In fact, by the Eighteenth Century, only a minority of the families within the English aristocracy could legitimately trace their families back through the hereditary male line to a feudal grant.³³⁹ The rest relied on royal recognition of their family's property holdings as the source of their social position, and land could be purchased if one had the means. The expansion of imperial commerce and the attendant wars often provided those means.

In America, with royal recognition eliminated as a requisite for elite social status, ambitious Americans could focus instead on the smaller material artifacts of the genteel lifestyle, and the mass production of such items made them increasingly available and affordable to rising middle class citizens concerned with emulation. This desire seemed to grow unabated even in the midst of the Jacksonian era, the populist excesses of which only seemed to heighten the attraction of gentility for many people.³⁴⁰

The intensity of this desire for emulation created entrepreneurial opportunities for those who could meet this growing demand. For example, the ceramics magnate Wedgwood made his fortune by creating pieces of supreme elegance that he either gave away to members of the English aristocracy or sold to them at a loss. With the ensuing aristocratic endorsement, however, he managed to sell huge quantities of lesser quality ceramic products to middle class consumers who purchased them as much for their cultural cache as for their beauty, often at prices that were significantly higher than those of Wedgwood's competitors. But, to those who bought a Wedgwood vase, it

³³⁹ John F. Kasson, *Rudeness & Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990) 19.

³⁴⁰ Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 417.

represented something far more than a simple commodity. As Bushman notes, “Bearing all the associations sedulously cultivated by Wedgwood, the vase installed a tiny fragment of aristocratic culture in the owner’s parlor. The owner acquired power by purchase.” Genteel culture was no longer an inheritance “it could be acquired by purchase.”³⁴¹ During the colonial period, carpets, hardwood furniture, ceramics, and textiles were all products seen almost exclusively in the homes of the wealthy American gentry, but by the middle of the Nineteenth Century these “flecks” of gentility could be seen in nearly every home, though the density obviously varied.³⁴²

The star system was the theatrical manifestation of this phenomenon. Stephen Price’s model of touring allowed performances by elite actors to be commoditized and distributed to larger audiences than ever before. Middle-class patrons used such performances as opportunities for emulation that, because of their public nature, were perhaps even more significant than private purchases of furniture and ceramics which could only be seen by a small circle of known associates. As I mentioned in Chapter 1 an up-and-coming local merchant might treat his wife to a special occasion by purchasing box tickets at the local theatre. Unlike the colonial gentry who might book a box for an entire season, such an event would necessarily have been a rare occurrence for such a merchant, but for that evening he and his wife would have the opportunity to emulate the lifestyle of the box’s traditionally wealthier denizens, who were in turn emulating the lifestyle of their counterparts at Drury Lane and Covent Garden. The presence on stage of an international star such as Edmund Kean or William Charles

³⁴¹ Ibid., 408-410.

³⁴² Ibid., 230-234, xii.

Macready would obviously have made this experience of emulation that much more significant.

The increasing elision of upper class and middle class cultures was facilitated in America by the growth of the American middle class, which was fueled partially from above, particularly in the generations immediately following the Revolutionary War. Displaced politically, the families that had previously composed the American gentry had to find ways to adapt to a world where their inherited (or bestowed) titles no longer guaranteed them important and lucrative positions in their communities. While many families who were still loyal to the crown simply fled the country, a few managed to transition into positions of power within the new government, and many others simply applied their education and their networks of international connections to the development of new sources of income. In doing so, many of these families would essentially disappear into what would become America's rising middle class. Though their involvement within business would become more bourgeois and hands-on than it was during the colonial period, their aristocratic cultural tastes and standards followed them more or less intact.³⁴³

That the culture of "the enemy" managed to survive the post-revolutionary nationalistic fervor has often proved puzzling to many historians. Yet the sociological environment of early nineteenth-century America was enormously diverse, and the re-infiltration of genteel culture often came in ways that were less obvious than we might assume.

³⁴³ Ibid., 210, 232-233.

America was hardly the first nation to go through a sustained period of wealth accumulation, but the manner in which it occurred was relatively unique. Powerful monarchies such as Spain and England drew huge amounts of wealth from their imperial endeavors, but that treasure typically arrived back in the homeland by passing through a small number of hands, usually those who either owned the ships or the shipping companies that provided the transportation. Those few merchants who were not already members of the aristocracy were soon enveloped into it once their purses became fat enough.

The backbone of America's economic expansion in the early Nineteenth Century, on the other hand, was the development of relatively small manufacturing enterprises. These created smaller pockets of wealth that were spread out over a larger portion of the country. Some factories appeared in response to local needs for furniture and other domestic goods, utilizing local resources and labor.³⁴⁴ Others, like the textile mills of the northeast, relied on resources like cotton that were produced in other regions of the country. At each point in the supply line, small pockets of wealth could accumulate, and when they did, genteel emulation typically followed. Since this process, at least initially, operated on a relatively small scale, the benefits were shared by a much larger number of mostly middle class citizens. The turbulent nature of the period's economy also served to keep this phenomenon a largely middle class one by creating instability, which made it more difficult for wealth to accumulate across generations.³⁴⁵

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 230.

³⁴⁵ Knobel, *America for the Americans*, 43.

This diffusion of wealth among a larger portion of the populace and across the breadth of the nation meant that the process of emulation was similarly diffuse. Commitment to genteel emulation was often intermittent, tied as much to personal preference, in some cases, as to social significance. But little by little, as the material products of genteel life became cheaper and more widely available, the commitment to those products began to intensify, seemingly everywhere at once.³⁴⁶ Since many of these products were being manufactured domestically, even the workers became implicitly involved in the refinement phenomena; it supplied their wages. Although it developed almost imperceptibly, and in a highly unorganized fashion, this process represented a cultural counter-revolution. Its culmination would see a new class holding the reigns of power and a hegemonic cultural system in place that reintroduced many of the same cultural hierarchies that were spurned by the Revolutionary generation and which, in many ways, were the antithesis of the democratic ideal. As the middle class continued to grow, both in size and in terms of refinement, America found itself in an increasingly paradoxical situation, which Bushman describes as “the perplexing contradiction of a democratic government presiding over the spread of an aristocratic culture.”³⁴⁷

“Improvement,” “Progress,” and the Movement Toward Social Anonymity

Although the refinement process is often thought of as a highly individualistic pursuit, it functioned on a larger scale as well. As genteel emulation began to gain

³⁴⁶ Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 227-228.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 411.

momentum, its cultural influence started to become more evident in the broader social realm. One place where this influence was particularly evident was in the often amorphous landscape of mid-nineteenth-century urban America.

As the populations of American cities mushroomed as a result of influxes of immigrants and workers who left agrarian lives for urban factories, many found themselves adrift in a sea of strangers. This newfound anonymity created opportunities for many to reinvent themselves, but it also created enormous anxiety in terms of identity.³⁴⁸ In a world of strangers, one could no longer rely upon an established personal reputation alone as a means of establishing an identity. Cultural definitions became necessarily more dependent upon dress, bearing, and one's observable conduct. This situation put a premium on "short-hand sources of knowledge." Anything that could mark a person as different became of primary importance. Ethnic, racial, and religious stereotyping became primary tools for creating hierarchical structure out of urban chaos.³⁴⁹ But these stereotypes could only define certain segments of the population; other measures were required to make sense of the rest.

Etiquette manuals, which allowed codified standards of behavior to be transported across oceans and across generations, provided additional layers of order and security in this chaotic environment. With a standard of behavior literally in hand, one could feel more secure in judging the worth of others against its precepts. Part of the power derived from the emulation of gentility was that it gave its adherents the power to confirm identity, both their own and that of others.³⁵⁰ The fact that these social

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 404.

³⁴⁹ Knobel, *America for the Americans*, 41.

³⁵⁰ Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 404-405.

hierarchies of identity echoed those of the imperial powers of Europe only gave them greater weight. Although aristocracy had been repudiated as a form of *political* control in America, the *cultural* aspects of upper-class life remained intensely alluring to many Americans; not only was it the culture of luxury and power, it was also the culture of civilization and progress. And as this culture was filtered through widely disseminated etiquette books, its cultural heritage became abstracted and thus easier to ignore.

By couching the emulation of genteel culture in ideological terminology such as “civilization,” “progress,” and progress’s individualized equivalent “improvement,” the movement was able to acquire a veneer of universalism that made its relationship to class dynamics easier to hide. From an economic standpoint, America had a great stake in the twin concepts of civilization and progress. The national economy benefited enormously from the imperial expansion of the nation across the Appalachians and westward across the continent. Civilization and progress justified the displacement and widespread slaughter of the Native American tribes that had previously inhabited those lands. The imperial need for land and resources to fuel the nation’s growing capitalist economy was portrayed as the “natural” course of civilization’s upward progress. Since nearly all of America’s European descendants, regardless of class, were clear beneficiaries of this process, it would have been difficult to critique it as a class-based endeavor.

By depicting genteel emulation as a mode of personal “improvement,” the rising middle class was able to link their efforts to the larger social ideal of “progress.” Richard Bushman has noted that this connection added hierarchical connotations to what is often assumed to be a largely egalitarian concept.

The potent word “improvement” implied, on the one hand, the development of the self through acquisition of knowledge and, on the other, elevation through the ranks of society to respect and honor.³⁵¹

Since the experience of this improvement though emulation was a process-oriented one, one was never “done” improving. It was thus easy to focus attention on the individual and the struggle, while forgetting to question improvements undeniably aristocratic destination.

Since the middle class developed, one person at a time, diffused over a relatively large period and area, it was easy for many to remain focused on the importance of individual initiative. This was, after all, one of the primary ideals of American democracy. The idea of a man rising from poor-immigrant stock to wealth and security, through hard work and successful participation in the capitalistic economy, gave this upward movement a mythic democratic aura. What was being overlooked more and more, however, was the fact that the direction in which these individuals were moving, particularly from a cultural standpoint, was an aristocratic one, facilitated at every turn, by capitalistic imperialism.

William Dunlap’s *A History of the American Theatre*, which was first published in 1832 in the midst of this fervor for improvement presents a prime example of this. It leads off with a grand and seemingly universal declaration.

If the fine arts, as we believe, are effective instruments for promoting the best interests of man – if the pleasure of the virtuous, as Plato tells us, is their aim and the test of their success – if their great sphere and scope is that *beau ideal*

³⁵¹ Ibid., 219.

which lifts us above the groveling, the vile, and the sensual – it is the duty of every good citizen to encourage their cultivation in the country of his birth or residence, and to cherish the memories of those, whatever their motive, who introduce them.³⁵²

By employing powerful terms such as “duty” and “citizen,” Dunlap wrapped his endeavor in a veneer of patriotism and universalism. Who would not want to promote “the best interests of man?” By invoking the name of Plato (an interesting choice considering Plato’s famous critique of the theatre), Dunlap relocated his argument in the often universalizing realm of philosophy. And at no point did he make cultural allusions to either England, nor to the upper classes. The careful omission of these elements, by this former manager of one of the nation’s greatest gateways for the theatrical culture of the English aristocracy, speaks volumes.

Etiquette books from the period made similar claims to universality. Many played down their connections to the aristocratic courts of Europe, claiming instead to be representative of a set of universal standards that did no less than define the nature of civilized existence.³⁵³ This process of cultural obfuscation was only made easier by the publishing laws of the day, which offered no copyright protection to foreign texts. American publishers amassed huge fortunes through the publication of pirated British novels and other texts.³⁵⁴ Etiquette manuals were among the most popular tomes, many of which were only lightly adapted from the court-based originals.

³⁵² William Dunlap, *A History of the American Theatre from Its Origins to 1832* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005) 5.

³⁵³ Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 414.

³⁵⁴ Sellers, *Market Revolution*, 371.

While the apex of the cultural pyramid for the imperial monarchies of Europe was the court, in America that place was filled by an amorphous entity that was always invoked by the words “polite society.” “Polite society” was continually pointed to as the arbitrating body in all cultural matters, and in America, that group always seemed to be a bit abstract and usually located somewhere else. For those in small towns, the vision of this idealized society might be located in Philadelphia or Boston, while those in the major cities continually looked to London and Paris. Disciples of genteel culture lived in fear of disapproval from those occasional examples of polite society that they encountered in their own travels, either real or hypothetical, and the ensuing lack of self-confidence only inspired greater dedication to improvement through personal refinement.³⁵⁵

The fact that “polite society” often existed only in the abstract for many Americans made it easier to think of the cultural values that it represented as universal rather than as deeply entrenched in aristocratic culture. As Gayatri Spivak has argued, part of the power of imperial culture has been its ability to conceal its own heritage, presenting itself as if it had “no geo-political determinations.”³⁵⁶ As John Kasson has pointed out, this process of concealment masked the situation’s high ideological stakes. Assuming a common standard of behavior that was marketed as classless, “often served in unacknowledged ways as checks against a fully democratic order and in support of special interests, institutions of privilege, and structures of domination.”³⁵⁷

³⁵⁵ Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 291.

³⁵⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *The Post Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995) 24.

³⁵⁷ Kasson, *Rudeness & Civility*, 3, 6.

Whereas in the American colonial period and in the imperial aristocracies of nineteenth-century Europe, “polite society” was a recognizable entity, with representatives present in most stable communities, for nineteenth-century middle-class Americans, “polite society” was hopelessly tied to a colonial dichotomy of center and periphery in which the center was nearly invisible. The result was what Bushman describes as a “truncated culture whose zenith and ultimate realization lay outside [the nation’s] borders.”³⁵⁸ With the clarity of the aristocratic class structure removed, the American middle class found itself in a position of perpetual anxiety. Since no one bore the mark of stabilized power, everyone was perpetually operating at the mercy of public scrutiny, and adjusting to this phenomenon became one of the central adjustments that had to be made in nineteenth-century urban life.³⁵⁹

One middle-class reaction to this phenomenon was the development of a clear division between public and private life. Whereas middle-class homes were becoming more elegant and lavishly furnished, public behavior put much more focus on a sort of respectable anonymity. Especially following the Jackson administration, there seemed to be almost a fear of charisma and personality.³⁶⁰ This was perhaps no more apparent than in the modes of dress that were adopted during the period. As Kasson describes,

The ideal for both men and women was to be completely inconspicuous in public... Respectable men did not go out with polished boots, but were

³⁵⁸ Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 413.

³⁵⁹ Kasson, *Rudeness & Civility*, 112.

³⁶⁰ Karl M Kippola, *Out of the Forrest and into the Booth: Performance of Masculinity on the American Stage, 1828-1865* (Dissertation, Univ of MD, 2003) 63.

impeccably clean and neat, collars and cuffs flawlessly white and clothes well brushed. Nothing out of place, but nothing flamboyant either.”³⁶¹

This was a period in which black became the color, not just of mourning, but of respectability. Even Jackson himself, one of the most vibrant personalities of the age delivered his inaugural address wearing a plain black suit and a black cravat.³⁶²

In adopting this system of public display, the American middle class was not simply evolving into the first ruling class in history to seek public anonymity. Instead, this strategy displayed its adherents as objects that could not be easily defined using the simplistic short-hand methods of the time. To resist such classification was itself a demonstration of power.

With the emulation of gentility came a dedication, not only to the material artifacts of genteel culture, but to the ideologies of mental culture as well; an inherent part of the refinement process for many was the development of the intellect. The development of stereotyped printing plates and cloth covers for books created an explosion in publishing, driving down prices and opening the doors of mental culture to the growing number of literate Americans.³⁶³ Such mental self-improvement went hand-in-hand with the rest of the wider matrix of refinement, and allowed individuals to move from place to place, even from rural towns to major cities, secure in the knowledge that their social “quality” would be recognized and honored by those with whom they came into contact.³⁶⁴

³⁶¹ Kasson, *Rudeness & Civility*, 117-118.

³⁶² Schlesinger, *Age of Jackson*, 6.

³⁶³ Sellers, *Market Revolution*, 369-370.

³⁶⁴ Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 221.

The growing popularity of Edwin Booth during this period represents one of the most public displays of this dedication to mental culture. Booth's decidedly cerebral approach to his characters was well documented, and has often been put into direct contrast with Forrest's physicality, as if the two actors represented opposing poles in terms of acting. I would argue that most of these comparisons tend to sacrifice any sense of perspective or complexity for the sake of satisfying contrast. The fact that so many people have commented on the mental aspects of Booth's performances is, however, clearly indicative of the culture's increased sensitivity to mental culture.

The Solidification of America's "Invisible" Class Structure

The end effect of this cultural movement was the development of a new class structure within American society. Though often ignored on a day-to-day basis, class division boiled over under extreme circumstances, not the least example of which being the Astor Place Riot of 1849. Unlike the vertical bonds of patriarchal deference that typified the colonial social structure, American society in the mid-Nineteenth Century became stratified into broadly defined horizontal layers, though the divisions between the layers were often difficult to pinpoint.

This lack of clarity is due in part to the fact that the middle class often appeared to be larger than it really was. As I mentioned earlier, many families that had made up the colonial gentry were essentially absorbed into to the upper reaches of the emerging middle class, and the instability of the American economy made it difficult for anyone

to remain in a position of extreme wealth long enough to establish clearly defined hereditary lines.

The bottom end of the spectrum was even less clearly defined. Due to industrialization, the material embodiments of genteel culture became cheap enough that they began appearing in the homes of even subsistence-level working families. Added to this were the increasingly hegemonic standards of personal conduct that were slowly creeping even into the lives of the poorest families. With the cultural distinctions between the classes disappearing, it was become more and more difficult to clearly identify who belonged to which strata. Without a clearly demarcated ruling class, it became much more difficult for the increasingly oppressed working class to target their frustration, or to develop the communal solidarity that could fuel effective resistance. “How could working people sustain a belief that they were a separate class when on every side they were told otherwise?”³⁶⁵

The difficulty of escaping the growing hegemony of the middle-class culture of genteel emulation led to a redefinition of what it meant to be lower class. The focus on the complex operations of “polite society” was so intense that some etiquette books made no mention of the lower orders at all. The rules governing public interaction assumed that all of the participants were fellow members of “polite society.” The rest of the population was completely ignored as if it simply did not exist.³⁶⁶ Instead, anyone who failed to exhibit the appropriate behaviors and attitudes of the civilized middle class were portrayed, not as a separate-but-lowlrier group who were thus worthy of being

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 434.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 290.

ruled, but as failed members of the middle class worthy of being scorned. The era's intense focus on personal responsibility and improvement created a culture of shame in which a lack of refinement was taken as evidence of laziness and a lack of moral character. Instead of creating social distinctions that were based on income levels or vocational categories, personal characteristics served to distinguish the lower and middle classes; "Sensual excess, want of intelligence, and moral debasement, distinguished the former – knowledge, intellectual superiority, and refined, social, and domestic affectations, the latter."³⁶⁷ Thus morality was becoming redefined in social terms; to be moral necessitated adherence to the hegemonic order of secular values embodied by the refined middle class.³⁶⁸ This culture of personal shame used the ideals of progress and civility as a means of deflecting the pressures of class back onto the individuals least capable of resisting them.³⁶⁹ Given this level of social pressure, it is hardly surprising that the ideals of public conduct often amounted to a hard-won form of anonymity.

Although the cultural lines that divided the middle and lower classes had become amorphous, the economic divisions between the two classes were becoming more and more extreme. Capitalistic industrialization created enormous opportunities for entrepreneurs, but as mechanized efficiency increased, workers' wages steadily began to decline. The precepts of capitalism dictated that the decreased skills needed to work in factories, combined with the glut of available workers supplied by immigration and urbanization, should drive wages down. That this phenomenon was looked upon by

³⁶⁷ Schlesinger, *Age of Jackson*, 14.

³⁶⁸ Jurgen C. Wolter, *The Dawning of American Drama: American Dramatic Criticism, 1746-1915* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994) 11.

³⁶⁹ Kasson, *Rudeness & Civility*, 6.

many as a “natural” part of the capitalistic system did little to help workers whose wages were slipping below the level of basic subsistence. By 1830 over 80 percent of the persons consigned to prisons in the New England and Middle states, areas that composed the core of the American industrial complex, were debtors, most owing less than twenty dollars.³⁷⁰ Debt imprisonment was eventually abolished under the Jacksonian administration, but even then it was a dearly won victory that took four years to achieve. On the whole, the Jacksonian administration failed to make significant headway on most labor-oriented issues. Despite its populist ethos, it oversaw a period of laissez-faire economic policy that increasingly allowed the industrializing areas of the northeast to treat the southern and western states as colonies to be exploited for their resources and cheap labor.³⁷¹

The economic exploitation that industrialized capitalism effected was visible in the theatre as well. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the stock performers of resident companies were often forced to bear the brunt of the “market forces” of the star system, which were tearing companies apart. But exploitation, in subtler forms was evident between the companies and their audiences as well.

Thomas Hamblin has gone down in the annals of American theatre history as the manager of the Bowery Theatre, the period’s most famous working class/nativist playhouse. Hamblin made and lost several fortunes by bucking the refinement trend, ignoring social niceties, and seeking instead to pack the seats of his theatre by whatever

³⁷⁰ Schlesinger, *Age of Jackson*, 132, 134.

³⁷¹ Edward Pessen, *Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1969) 2.

means he could.³⁷² And urbanization of the American working class gave Hamblin a unique opportunity to exploit a relatively untapped audience.

But despite Hamblin's iconic status as a working-man's theatre manager, his own convictions seemed to revolve less around the defense of nativist ideals, and more around the steady acquisition of wealth. Hamblin went to great lengths to champion "native talent," and helped launch the careers of several minor American stars. But he always did so under terms that favored him. When he introduced the hitherto unknown Josephine Clifton as the new starring actress of the Bowery stage, she received no salary. Hamblin paid only her expenses and reserved exclusive rights to her performances for a period of three years. When she toured to other theatres, Hamblin absorbed the proceeds, often charging far more than he paid other stars to play at his own theatre.³⁷³ Hamblin's dedication to the development of native talent allowed him to cash in on the nativist attitudes of his primary audience while avoiding the exorbitant salaries that were being demanded by the era's more legitimate stars. As a relatively successful actor himself, he was even known to step into the breach whenever touring stars refused his conditions.³⁷⁴

Hamblin's system of capitalistic theatre would become the model for the populist theatre that would gain momentum following the demise of the star system. Popular entertainments such as minstrel shows and lavish spectacles such as *The Black Crook* would be run primarily on a for-profit basis. Their populist appeal rendered them profitable, but was generally not the end goal of these productions. Cultural ideologies

³⁷² Dudden, *Women in American Theatre*, 56.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 65.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

such as nativism entered into these productions primarily as a means of attracting patrons. The development of this mode of professional theatricality was indicative of the growing sophistication among theatrical entrepreneurs in terms of their understanding and successful exploitation of market segmentation.³⁷⁵ Unlike the elite theatres of the period whose very existence was fueled by cultural desire, theatres such as Hamblin's Bowery were fueled only by a desire for profit.

Given the growing hegemony of middle class culture, the oppressive anonymity of the urban environments, and the exploitative excesses of capitalistic industrialization, the fact that nativism and fraternal nativist organizations blossomed during this period is anything but surprising. For a brief period following the revolution, even social elites overtly celebrated their patriotism and began working toward the formation of a cultural identity that could be as independent as America's political identity. But as the middle class began to expand in the early Nineteenth Century and began to embrace elements of the aristocratic cultures of imperial giants such as England, the development of an independent national culture began to slow, and the counter-revolution of "genteel consumerism" began to supplant it.³⁷⁶

The rise of nativism as a widespread cultural phenomenon developed proportionately with these changes and was ultimately inseparable from them. Nativist organizations served as important safety nets for members and helped to provide many of the social guarantees and services that were becoming increasingly scarce in the industrialized workplace.³⁷⁷ But as a social movement, nativism failed to make

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 107.

³⁷⁶ Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 410.

³⁷⁷ Knobel, *America for the Americans*, 33.

significant headway in the face of genteel consumerism. As a form of national consciousness it operated much as Franz Fanon describes in “On National Culture.”

National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people, instead of being the immediate and most obvious result of the mobilization of the people, will be in any case only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been.³⁷⁸

In Fanon’s depiction, failure seems almost inevitable, and indeed, according to Dale Knobel, nativism seemed to actually thrive on defeat, or at least the appearance of defeat.³⁷⁹ As I discussed in the first chapter, nativism was fueled less by xenophobic anxiety and more by a sense of domestic failure.

Nativistic performances such as Forrest’s depiction of *Metamora* and other doomed heroes provide clear examples of this. While his performances allowed Forrest’s audiences to bask in a temporary sense of moral superiority, the fatalism of the ending was surely not lost upon its spectators. The very elision of nativist and Native American identities that fueled roles like this cleverly encapsulated the paradoxical nature of the working-class cultural dilemma. As Phillip Deloria notes,

Savage Indians served Americans as oppositional figures against whom one might imagine a civilized national Self. Coded as freedom, however, wild Indianness proved equally attractive, setting up a... dialectic of simultaneous desire and repulsion.³⁸⁰

³⁷⁸ Franz Fanon, “On National Culture,” in *Post Colonial Studies Reader* (see note 33), 156.

³⁷⁹ Knobel, *America for the Americans*, 50.

³⁸⁰ Phillip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998) 3.

Working class Americans were similarly caught between the steady march of civilization, in which they proudly participated, and the precepts of imperial economics and culture, which drove down their wages and criticized their social struggles in shameful and humiliating terms.

Implied Deference and the Astor Place Riot

Genteel culture, which was at its core aristocratic and deeply hierarchical, made a steady return to prominence in American culture, but along the way it had to adapt to the altered landscape. Deference, the outward displays of respect for one's social betters, was a particularly delicate subject in post-revolutionary America. As the most salient and personal marker of the aristocratic political system, it was, not surprisingly, one of the first to be eliminated. The very clarity of its purpose made it easy to identify and change, and within a generation or two, the absence of displays of deference became one of the first things that foreign travelers noticed upon their arrival. Fanny Kemble was shocked by the lack of deference shown to her by the servants and shopkeepers with whom she interacted.

All this is bad: it has its origin in a vulgar misapprehension, which confounds ill breeding with independence, and leads people to fancy that they elevate themselves above their condition by discharging its duties and obligations discourteously.³⁸¹

³⁸¹ Fanny Kemble, *Fanny Kemble's Journals*, ed. Catherine Clinton (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) 48-49.

For an Englishwoman raised in a highly class-conscious culture, overt displays of deference were the very cement that held the vertically-oriented patriarchal order together, and their absence must have seemed quite disorienting.

Yet on the other hand, Kemble also found that America's more mannered citizens to be disorienting as well. After a performance in Philadelphia in 1832 she confided to her journal how difficult it was to perform for such a quiet and attentive audience. The lack of spontaneous applause to which she was accustomed interfered with her usual mode of performance.

Excitement is reciprocal between the performer and the audience; he creates it in them, and receives it back again from them, and in the last scene in Fazio, half the effect that I produce is derived from the applause which I receive, the very noise and tumult of which tends to heighten the nervous energy which the scene itself begets. I know my aunt Siddons has frequently said the same thing.³⁸²

The “disruptive” *lack* of spontaneous interruption that Kemble found so disorienting is a clear example of what I would describe as implied deference. In England, Kemble's status as an actress placed her well below many of her spectators in terms of social hierarchy. Because of this, their bursts of spontaneous applause, or disapproval for that matter, represented a display of the power that their positions warranted. But in the American context, Fanny Kemble arrived as representative of the elite aristocratic culture that middle class Americans were emulating. Rather than parroting the invasive behavior of their English counterparts, American spectators displayed their respect for genteel culture through a display of disciplined silence. Overt displays of deference

³⁸² Kemble, *Journals*, 51.

would never have been acceptable in the American context, but a display of silence operated on the same principle and was enacted to similar ends. The fact that Miss Kemble was not entirely in favor of this display was of little consequence, the dutiful attention that the spectators gave to her performance was a means of confirming to one another the cultural significance of her presence at their theatre.

Implied deference took many forms during this period and often proved difficult to resist. To a certain extent, the culture of shame described above was predicated on the idea of implied deference. The humiliation that was supposed to accompany one's failure to live up to the expectations of society (surely not everyone felt ashamed of their "crude" lifestyles) was based in a vision of personal dehortation that was constantly deferring to the tastes of others. Etiquette books generally omitted rules relating to the formal displays of deference that would have been commonplace in the Eighteenth Century, but a more abstracted regard for one's superiors still found a place on their pages.³⁸³ As nebulous as the idea of implied deference could be, however, there were moments when organized resistance to its pressures arose; the Astor Place Riot was a prominent example.

Most histories that cover the bloody night of May 10th, 1849 tend to couch the incident in nationalistic terms, with the long standing antipathy between Edwin Forrest and William Charles Macready functioning as the symbolic embodiment of a conflict between the cultures of two nations. In some ways it is difficult not to tell the story of the incident without reiterating this pattern. If nothing else the conflict between the two famous actors was a well documented one that played out in the newspapers of the time,

³⁸³ Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 290.

and those documents are still some of the most accessible sources for historians working on this topic. Large scale accounts of the riots, such as the one published by H. M. Ranney in 1849, similarly follow the paper trail left by these two actors.³⁸⁴

Yet its core, the Astor Place Riot had little to do with Forrest and Macready, and still less to do with a conflict between English culture and American culture. What truly fueled the carnage of that fatal night was the class-based tension that was similarly fueling other strikes and uprisings around the nation during the same period. This conflict had everything to do with a working class resistance to the emerging middle-class culture of implied deference, and the eventual enforcement by military means of that deference.

In truth, neither Forrest, nor Macready were particularly well chosen representatives for the factions that adopted them as symbolic of their causes. Forrest was a perpetual tangle of contradictions. He was an overt champion of the working class who strove to create a home for indigent actors, but he made such onerous demands of many of the companies with which he served that he was personally driving many actors toward a need for such a home. He championed the Jacksonian ethos, yet wooed and wed a woman from a genteel English family. Forrest's habit of playing the same role as Macready at nearby competing theatres made for great publicity and gave his public ample opportunities to hone their allegiance for him, but it seems clear that Forrest saw this primarily as an opportunity to turn a profit. After first testing this concept in Philadelphia in 1843, he proceeded to follow Macready around the country,

³⁸⁴ H. M. Ranney, *Account of the Terrific and Fatal Riot at the New York Astor Place Opera House*, (New York: H. M. Ranney, 1849).

mirroring his repertoire and reaping huge salaries.³⁸⁵ Macready, on the other hand, was an overt fan of America's democratic experiment and, prior to his final American tour, had intended to retire there.³⁸⁶ It was only the abuse that he began receiving as a result of the constant comparisons with Forrest, and their simultaneous billings that dissuaded him from his admiration for the country.

Yet in a nation where the lines that divided one class from another were often virtually impossible to pinpoint, Forrest and Macready became useful banners for delineating one side of the conflict from the other. The fact that these actors became the standard bearers for nationalized ideals of culture was similarly arbitrary and perhaps even more misleading.

If one examines the records from the period, nearly all of the rhetoric relating to the cultural embodiment of national ideals came from the nativist side of the conflict. It was chiefly the "supporters of Forrest" who vilified Macready and those spectators who supported him as culturally "English." The Ranney account of the conflict described a "feeling against England and Englishmen, handed down to us from the Revolution, and kept fresh by the insults and abuse of British writers on American manners."³⁸⁷ While there is undoubtedly some truth in this description, it seems on the whole to be an entirely inadequate explanation for the scale of the antipathy that spilled over on that May night. English actors pervaded the American theatre, and the idea that Macready would be targeted by those who suffered at the pen of Trollope and her contemporaries is problematic since her criticisms were hardly limited to the working classes, who in

³⁸⁵ Nigel Cliff, *The Shakespeare Riots* (New York: Random House, 2007) 140.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 174.

³⁸⁷ Ranney, *Terrific and Fatal Riot*, 15.

any case were probably less concerned with “manners” than their wealthy targets in the Opera House.

The branding of Macready and his supporters as embodiments of English culture was largely a propaganda tactic by those who were themselves seeking to define American culture in nativist terms that were couched in the foundational ideologies of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. By labeling the denizens of the Astor Place Opera House as culturally “English” they were able to vilify them as corruptors of the more ideologically defensible “American” culture that they were themselves seeking to define. Yet what these terms were essentially seeking to clarify was the often-nebulous divide between the imperial middle class and the nativistic working class cultures that were beginning to solidify in this period.

Rather than being an outgrowth of the Forrest/Macready rivalry, the Astor Place Riot represented a particularly violent moment in the growing conflict between America’s classes. Other incidents resulting from class conflict punctuated much of the Nineteenth Century, but Astor Place was one of the more visible examples, and demonstrated the degree to which emulated gentility had accumulated power by the mid-century mark.

As a public venue where social performance was often as important as stage performance, the theatre had become a battleground where the nation’s cultural factions vied for dominance. With the segmentation of the theatre market into elite and working-class houses, opportunities for demonstrating this dominance were lessened. This was a

real boon to theatre managers since such demonstrations often resulted in damaged property and a subsequent reduction of profits.³⁸⁸

The separation of audiences was also much to the liking of those spectators who attended the theatre as much for the refined cultural experience as for the performance. In a sense, establishing theatres that catered exclusively to genteel-minded patrons created an atmosphere of implied deference due simply to the forced absence of disruptive spectators.

For the “rowdy” nativists, however, whose antics in the mixed theatres of the early Nineteenth Century have become legendary, this separation represented a lost opportunity to assert their democratic spirit and to interfere with the establishment of an aura of implied deference, which was one of the few forms of social power that they had available to them. And so with class conflict largely removed from the political scene and increasingly minimized in the cultural scene, it is not surprising the plaza outside the Astor Place Opera House became the scene of a pitched battle in which thousands of nativist men (there were apparently very few women involved) tried unsuccessfully to defend their vision of a just cultural order against the cultural tide of a rising middle class that sought to minimize and belittle their cultural choices.³⁸⁹ In many ways it was the nativists’ last stand.

The Astor Place Opera House was hardly the first theatre to be built as a haven of high culture. The Park Theatre and Boston’s Federal Street Theatres were both created

³⁸⁸ Dudden, *Women in American Theatre*, 108.

³⁸⁹ Wolter, *American Drama*, 13.

with elite-minded patrons foremost in mind.³⁹⁰ But the Astor Place Opera House was more aggressive in maintaining the exclusivity of its audience than previous elite theatres. Particularly significant was its adoption of a strict dress code upon its opening in 1847, requiring patrons to be clean-shaven and attired in full evening dress including “fresh waistcoats and kid gloves.”³⁹¹ This dress code was a clear reflection of the cultural tastes of the elite-minded patrons who represented the theatre's primary target audience. Throughout the early Nineteenth Century, theatres had used the economic tool of ticket price to separate their audiences along class lines within and between theatres. By instituting a dress code, however, the Astor Place theatre was adding another, more substantial, economic barrier to its entrance doors. Not only were patrons expected to find the funds to cover the ticket, but the dress code required the acquisition of clothing that would not have been easily within the reach on anyone who was not a part of the rising middle class. Furthermore, those who did manage to attend, were essentially required to surrender all visual indications of their class at the door, and for the course of the evening would be forced to participate in the emulation of genteel culture. As the dress code reflected the highest standard of formal attire, it functioned as an attempt to enforce an atmosphere of implied deference within its walls.

Not surprisingly, the Opera House’s dress requirement proved to be a particularly sore point with many of the rioters, and references to kid gloves and white vests figured prominently in the accounts of the riot.³⁹² Although as a marker of implied deference

³⁹⁰ Heather Nathans, *Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson: Into the Hands of the People* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 72, 137-140..

³⁹¹ Cliff, *Shakespeare Riots*, xiv.

³⁹² Bruce McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820-1870* (Iowa City, IA: Universtiy of Iowa Press, 1992) 148; Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 64.

the dress code was less visible than colonial displays of deference, it was far more overt than the disciplined silence that Fanny Kemble found so disorienting. That added visibility gave the rioters an unusually tangible artifact of class definition upon which to focus their frustrations.

When the Astor Place Opera House hosted the most celebrated actor of the English-speaking stage, it naturally became a lightning rod for frustrations over class division. The anti-British rhetoric was little more than a rallying cry; the real target of the mob's rage was not Macready, but the "codfish aristocracy" that made up his audience at the Opera House.³⁹³ The mob was not reacting so much to the excesses of British culture as they were demonstrating their resistance to an often amorphous class structure that was exploiting their labor. The overt display of genteel emulation by the Astor Place audiences merely gave them a rare opportunity to pinpoint, define, and resist this oppression.³⁹⁴ The citizens who defended Macready, and who petitioned him to stay to complete his engagement, never made any indications of their loyalty to English culture, they simply sought the best examples of culture that their recently acquired funds could provide. For those citizens, it seems clear that importing a great actor from England made no more of a political statement than importing brandy from France or pepper from the Philippines. In an imperial system that operated on a global scale, goods quickly became disassociated from their lands of origin. It was the nativists who were conflating cultural choices with political allegiances, and in many ways they were rather successful.

³⁹³ Although the term "codfish aristocracy" has very specific roots that did not apply to the entirety of the Opera House's elite audience, the term was used in a more general way by the rioters. See Cliff, *Shakespeare Riots*, 187.

³⁹⁴ Knobel, *America for the Americans*, 55.

Virtually none of those comparatively wealthy citizens who patronized the Astor Place Opera House would have qualified as aristocracy in the European sense, although the very wealthiest among them might have come close to being able purchase titles. Instead, most of these citizens represented the wealthiest portion of America's new ruling middle class. Following the pre-riot disturbance at the Opera House on the night of Macready's debut three days earlier, they too saw the conflict as a critical moment in which a standard of law and order needed to be established, one which would protect their cultural interests. As Philip Hone noted in his journal following the first disturbance on May 7th, "the respectable part of our citizens will never consent to be put down by a mob raised to serve the purpose of such a fellow as Forrest."³⁹⁵ As usual, and in shocking contrast to the rhetoric of the opposition, no direct references to class or national origin were made, and individualized behavior was vilified as a threat to "the respectable part" of the citizenry.

In the short view, the aftermath of the Astor Place Riot seemed to be a mixed blessing. More than twenty people were tragically killed and many times that number wounded by the volleys of musket-fire. The civic reaction to this tragedy was suitably heated, and only a very small handful of the rioters, and the riot's organizers were convicted in the trials that followed the riot. Moreover, a number of the articles published during the period laid the blame for the riot evenly among all segments of the society. Newspapers were critiqued for publishing sensational articles that fueled public frustration, and wealthy citizens were criticized for the carelessness with which they

³⁹⁵ Quoted in Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 65.

displayed their luxuries.³⁹⁶ The months that immediately followed the riot seemed to evidence a growing sense of the social injustice that was becoming more and more a part of American life.

In the long-view, however, the event was a complete victory for America's middle class and its emulation of genteel culture. The day following the riot saw another huge group of people gathered in City Hall Park to protest the killings and to listen to heated speeches of retribution. However, when the mob proceeded to march up to Astor Place, they were confronted by an shocking display of militaristic prowess that included even artillery. This show of force was effective in protecting the Astor Place Opera House, and by proxy, the middle class culture of respectability and implied deference.

This display of government-sanctioned power effectively ended the long series of theatre riots that peppered the early Nineteenth Century, and with it the audience's traditional right of sovereignty.³⁹⁷ Instead of being "lowly" performers who worked at the pleasure of socially superior spectators, actors such as Fanny Kemble and William Charles Macready served as representatives of an elite culture, which middle class Americans were themselves looking upward to respectfully. The process of redefining the role of audiences at public events would continue to evolve over several generations, but its direction would remain relatively constant. The formal protection of middle-class culture that began with military intervention at Astor Place would continue through education, to emerge as a hegemonic cultural system that would exert its dominance when needed, while simultaneously veiling its hierarchical nature as much

³⁹⁶ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 65-66. It is interesting to note, however, that the wealthiest citizens were not being criticized for *being* wealthy (a class-based critique), only for the way that they *displayed* their wealth (a behavioral critique).

³⁹⁷ Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 74.

as possible.

In Conclusion

The first half of the Nineteenth Century was witness to a remarkable struggle within the American theatre and within American culture in general. The post-revolutionary fervor for democratic egalitarianism created a cultural shift towards a populist ideal such as the world had never witnessed. But the aristocratic culture that defined the top of the cultural hierarchy during the colonial period never completely left. Its traces could be seen in varying degrees in the performances of every major performer of the period from Anne Brunton Merry to Edwin Forrest. British dramatic texts never waned in their popularity, and as Jeffrey Richards has noted, they operated in complex ways that defied clear nationalistic taxonomies.³⁹⁸ The complex performance dynamics of Edwin Forrest's most celebrated roles, such as *Metamora* and *Lear*, stand as perhaps the best embodiments of the inseparability of the British and American theatrical traditions. Various spectators found different things to love and to hate about the performances that they saw, and the complexity of these varied, yet simultaneous, receptions is part of what makes this period of American theatre history so fascinating as a subject of inquiry.

As the American economy began to develop, however, the nation became more and more entrenched in the global system of imperial capitalism from which it had fought so hard to free itself only a few generations earlier. The rising middle class's

³⁹⁸ Richards, *Drama, Theatre, and Identity*, 11.

adoption of genteel culture, typified at its apex by the imperial British aristocracy, should be seen, not as a regression toward the cultural habits of the colonial era, but as the cultural manifestation of America's increasing involvement in the global economy of imperialism. That the middle class managed to reintroduce so many aspects of aristocratic culture, while simultaneously blurring the very cultural lines which those cultural markers were intended to define, is one of the most fascinating aspects of its rise. The lack of clear distinctions between the classes in America might be part of the reason it managed to avoid much of the violence relating to class conflict that rocked so many other nations during this period. As David Grimsted wrote,

There was something ludicrous, perhaps something comforting, in the fact that, a year after the barricades had been erected in Europe and while a serious strike was going on in upstate New York, tragedy and class warfare should center in a dispute between playactors. Class conflict it was, but in an area where even the extensive loss of life could make it seem hardly more than a senseless, tasteless opera bouffe. The expression of the conflict, as well as its setting, was peculiarly theatrical.³⁹⁹

By wedding the emulation of aristocratic culture with the increasingly hegemonic precepts of capitalism, the American middle class developed a system of genteel consumerism that, unlike true aristocracy, allowed cultural participation by virtually anyone in the social spectrum. Yet economic exploitation proved to be an equally elemental part of the middle class cultural model. Unlike the colonial gentry, the Nineteenth Century middle class felt few of the vertical bonds of responsibility that had

³⁹⁹ Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 74.

acted as means of maintaining social stability. As the working class became increasingly incapable of subsisting on the era's falling wages, and as the middle class cultural model of self improvement and genteel emulation continued to isolate and humiliate them for their situation, events such as the Astor Place Riot became all but unavoidable.

Yet even when faced with tangible examples of the inequality that was developing in the ranks of American society, the official repositories of civic power, in the form of the police and the military, stepped in visibly on the side of the already prospering middle class. In the words of Richard Bushman, "When it came to society, only the polite were created equal."⁴⁰⁰

In many ways, the protection of affluent middle-class interests following the Astor Place Riot marked a completion point for the genteel counter-revolution and the end of the era in which the American Theatre could truly be looked to as a microcosm of the larger society. Though never as clearly organized or as overtly celebrated as the American Revolution, its result was no less decisive. Like Yorktown, Astor Place marked the end of the era of violent conflict. This was perhaps nowhere more visible than in the auditoriums of the American theatre, which saw an era of diversity and audience sovereignty disappear virtually overnight. Nativist resistance to the middle class culture of genteel consumerism would continue in less spectacular ways, but never with the energy or fervor that was seen in the early Nineteenth Century.

⁴⁰⁰ Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 425.

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