

Sensation, Spectacle, and Reform in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century  
American Theatre

by

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## Abstract

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By the second half of the nineteenth century, the rhetoric of sensation had fully permeated U.S. popular culture, surfacing in advertisements, criticism, and other forms of commentary. Its ubiquity suggests that sensation operated as a kind of capital, negotiated and exchanged in actual and metaphorical economies. Simultaneously, individuals and institutions worked to discipline American subjects through the establishment of social conventions and behavioral norms. In this project, I investigate the rapid perpetuation of both sensationalism and normalization during the mid-nineteenth century by exploring the relationship between spectacle and reform. Specifically, I study how “sensation scenes”—climatic moments in melodramas, usually featuring elaborate scenery and special effects—reflected and sometimes challenged ideological positions associated with temperance, abolition, and women’s suffrage.

Several questions shape my analysis: How were conceptions of race, gender, and class rehearsed and sustained by way of spectacle? Why were reform-minded theatre managers and audiences attracted to sensational aesthetics—or, conversely, why were producers and consumers of melodrama attracted to reform politics? How did the imagery and affect embedded in spectacular displays extend beyond the theatre’s walls?

To address these questions, in the first chapter I map the dynamics of what I call the spectacular instant: a heightened, palpable moment in performance that captivates the

spectator through multiple planes of engagement. I interrogate the manifold meanings of “sensation” itself, involving both the body (corporeal response) and culture (exciting or titillating events). In subsequent chapters, I assess how a particular stage image—the *delirium tremens* in W. H. Smith’s *The Drunkard* (1844), Eliza crossing the ice floes in adaptations of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), and the victim tied to the railroad tracks in Augustin Daly’s *Under the Gaslight* (1867)—worked in tandem with oratorical performance, printed media, and visual and material culture to convey, allay, and even deny stories about the body circulating within diverse publics. Ultimately, I propose that these spectacular instants illuminate the complex ways in which activists leveraged and audiences consumed sensation, and that the visual and visceral mechanisms of spectacle may have been central to the dramaturgy of reform itself.

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## Introduction

It must have been for her a thrilling experience to see her *thoughts bodied upon the stage*, at a time when any dramatic representation must have been to her so vivid.

—Francis H. Underwood, discussing Harriet Beecher Stowe’s attendance at *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*<sup>1</sup>

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the rhetoric of sensation had fully permeated American popular culture, surfacing in advertisements, articles, criticism, and intellectual commentary. Its ubiquity suggests that sensation, as both a concept and an experience, was an ephemeral commodity or capital (to employ Pierre Bourdieu’s term) that was contrived, negotiated, and exchanged in actual and metaphorical economies.<sup>2</sup> Artists and storytellers conjured sensation in remarkably diverse ways. Spectacular melodramas by playwrights such as Dion Boucicault and Augustin Daly, featuring elaborate effects and tableaux that were eventually dubbed “sensation scenes,” enjoyed widespread popularity. Novelists, including Ned Buntline, Mary Denison, and George Lippard, penned sensation fiction that attempted to be both titillating and morally educative. Charismatic orators such as William Wells Brown and John B. Gough mesmerized audiences with stories emphasizing the necessity of abolition and temperance. And P. T. Barnum, perhaps the century’s most famous sensation-maker, strategically transformed special events—such as the arrival of opera singer Jenny Lind in New York City (1850)—into public spectacles for the express purpose of profit.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Florine Thayer McCray, *The Life-Work of the Author of Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1889), 122 (my emphasis).

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

“The sensational” was prized and criticized because of its association with pleasure and fashion. But why, exactly, was sensation so central to mid-nineteenth-century American culture? The word itself derives from the Latin *sensus*: “perception, feeling, faculty of perception, meaning.”<sup>3</sup> The simultaneous presence of both *feeling* and *meaning* at the root of “sensation” inspires a number of questions. How did nineteenth-century sensationalism convey feeling and meaning? Specifically, how did spectacle—traditionally considered the most sensational aspect of nineteenth-century entertainment—participate in that transference? Spectacle has always been a defining characteristic of melodrama, going back to the plays of its French “father,” René-Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt.<sup>4</sup> But in America during the mid 1800s, plays referring to political and social issues, such as temperance, abolition, and women’s suffrage, began to exploit the genre’s sensationalism. How were conceptions of race, gender, and class rehearsed and sustained by way of spectacle? Why were reform-minded theatre managers and audiences attracted to this mode—or, conversely, why were producers and consumers of melodrama attracted to these politics? Finally, how did the imagery and affect embedded in spectacular displays extend beyond the theatre’s walls?

Endeavoring to address these questions, in this dissertation I develop a theory of sensationalism by exploring the relationship between spectacle and reform during the mid-nineteenth century (roughly 1840 to 1870), studying specific performances in New York City and Boston and some of the cultural products they reflected and inspired. I deliberately invoke the manifold meanings of *sensation* itself, involving both the body (corporeal responses to sensory perception) and culture (shocking, exciting, or titillating

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<sup>3</sup> “Sense,” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford University Press, 2009, available at <http://dictionary.oed.com> (accessed 21 March 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Daniel C. Gerould and Marvin Carlson, introduction to *Pixérécourt: Four Melodramas* (New York: Martin E. Segal Theatre Center, 2002), ix-x, at ix.

subjects).<sup>5</sup> Francis H. Underwood's anecdote about Harriet Beecher Stowe's attendance at *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—in which he imagines the “thrilling” sensation she felt upon seeing her “thoughts bodied upon the stage”—serves as the epigraph not only for this introduction, but also for my project as a whole, because it highlights the centrality of embodiment in nineteenth-century theatre, both on stage and in the audience. In my effort to map the complexities of this dynamic, I examine in some depth and detail what I call the *spectacular instant*: a heightened, fleeting, and palpable moment in performance that captivates the spectator through multiple planes of engagement. Specifically, I explore how it harnesses the poetics and politics of the human body, simultaneously represented and inhabited by the actor on stage. Like Carolyn Sorisio, who has studied how bodies were shaped and constructed in U.S. literature during this period, I constantly ask, “Why . . . did this century produce such obsessive tellings and retellings of the body?”<sup>6</sup> I investigate how performance worked in tandem with visual and material culture to convey, allay, and even deny stories about the body that were told and retold to certain audiences (middle-class patrons at museums and lyceums, working-class spectators at theatres, and so forth).

The simultaneous, paradoxical, and rapid perpetuation of both normalization and sensationalism during this time reveals important struggles and tensions in Western culture, some of which were enacted on U.S. stages. Since the modern definition of the

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<sup>5</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines these two senses of “sensation” as follows: “An operation of any of the senses; a psychical affection or state of consciousness consequent on and related to a particular impression received by one of the organs of sense”; and “A condition of excited feeling produced in a community by some occurrence; a strong impression (e.g. of horror, admiration, surprise, etc.) produced in an audience or body of spectators, and manifested by their demeanour.” “Sensation” (1.a and 3.b), *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2009, <http://dictionary.oed.com> (accessed 17 March 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Carolyn Sorisio, *Fleshing out America: Race, Gender, and the Politics of the Body in American Literature, 1833-1879* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 41.

word *normal* (“constituting or conforming to a type or standard; regular, usual, typical; ordinary, conventional”) entered common usage in the 1840s, it seems clear that the cultural urgency to be ordinary—a prescription that, arguably, continues to regulate individuals and whole societies today—is a nineteenth-century invention.<sup>7</sup> As Michel Foucault argues, during this period a silent but powerful disciplinary system, enabled in large part by the birth of the prison, began to dictate social and bodily behaviors in transatlantic cultures. In important respects, these regulatory practices derived their power from notions of the normal: Foucault writes, “The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes*.”<sup>8</sup> I contend that in a society newly dominated by averages and norms, melodrama’s sensationalism (startling stage effects, dexterous or highly skilled actors, moments of intense affectivity) might have been experienced as extraordinary and perhaps even radical.

My interest in spectacle—and especially the body’s involvement in its production and reception, which I believe is embedded in the 1860s phrase “sensation scene” itself—has inspired me to focus on the moments in melodrama that were variously called “situations,” “effects,” and “tableaux”; but other cultural products, such as the charismatic reform lecture or the activist souvenir, employ similar tactics. These events and artifacts differ materially, but they feature communicative strategies that we associate

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<sup>7</sup> “Normal” (2.a), *OED Online* (accessed 17 March 2009); Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), 24. In *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (London: Routledge, 2001), Jon McKenzie offers a fascinating study of how the corporeal disciplinary system described and theorized by Foucault subsequently morphed into a “performance stratum” that both mimics and radically revises strategies of bodily control established during the previous century. In some ways, McKenzie’s provocative work has inspired my own, in that I also seek to explore performance’s role in the process of cultural regulation, albeit during an earlier era.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1975; New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 183 (his emphasis).

most readily with the popular theatre. Therefore, I also explore how sensationalism manifested extra-theatrically. I propose that it was a defining characteristic of not only melodrama, but also American reform activity overall. Although some moralist writings from the period betray deep suspicions of affective and corporeal excess, activists and entrepreneurs created provocative events and objects whose politics ranged from the conservative to the progressive. To sample this political plurality, I offer case studies drawn from theatrical, oratorical, and material media that were implicitly or explicitly tied to three different political movements: temperance, abolition, and women's suffrage. I hope these explorations will enrich current understandings of reform-oriented performance during the mid-nineteenth century, and, more generally, address questions regarding the role and efficacy of sensationalism in U.S. culture.

### **Positioning the Study Historiographically**

My project is strongly influenced by previous scholars who have investigated early American drama and performance as expressions of culture, and I hope to contribute to this ongoing discussion. Over the last several decades, and with increasing frequency, theatre historians have excavated and analyzed theatrical traditions that had been relatively neglected within the academy—ranging from adaptations of Shakespeare and European melodramas to the more controversial forms of minstrelsy and burlesque. This particular trajectory of scholarship begins, arguably, with David Grimsted's *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theatre and Culture, 1800-1850* (1968), a landmark study exploring theatre both as art form and industry during the first half of the century.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968). I limit my discussion here to studies focusing on American theatre and drama because my project intervenes most assertively in that body of scholarship. Other important book-length examinations of Victorian theatre or the melodramatic genre include, for example, Michael R. Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965); Frank Rahill, *The World of Melodrama* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University

Grimsted's approach is interdisciplinary and inclusive: he discusses the career and concerns of William Dunlap, a key figure in the post-Revolutionary theatre; the material realities of the theatre experience (audience participation, scenic innovations, bills of fare); and distinguishing traits of the genre (stock characters, dramatic structure). But periodically in his discussion, Grimsted seems to apologize for the inferior quality of the plays he investigates. Similarly, Walter Meserve, in *An Emerging Entertainment: The Drama of the American People to 1828* (1977) and *Heralds of Promise: The Drama of the American People During the Age of Jackson, 1829-1849* (1986), argues that Americans longed for a great native dramatist but were thwarted in their wish. Meserve essentially concludes that most dramas of the time were devoid of aesthetic merit. As surveys of unfamiliar early American drama, these studies represent important contributions to a new subfield within U.S. theatre scholarship, but subtle prejudices influence their tone and conclusions.<sup>10</sup>

By the 1990s, scholars seemed to sense less of a need to excuse their subject matter, arguing that national and social identity was realized, in part, through cultural production. These explorations pay close attention to notions of "Americanness" expressed in theatre and performance. Three significant monographs from this decade are Bruce A. McConachie's *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820-1870* (1992), Jeffrey D. Mason's *Melodrama and the Myth of America* (1993), and

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Press, 1967); Robert Bechtold Heilman, *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968); Daniel C. Gerould, ed., *Melodrama* (New York: New York Literary Forum, 1980); Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Michael Hays and Anastasia Nikolopoulou, eds., *Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Walter J. Meserve, *An Emerging Entertainment: The Drama of the American People to 1828* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977) and *Heralds of Promise: The Drama of the American People During the Age of Jackson, 1829-1849* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986).

Rosemarie K. Bank's *Theatre Culture in America, 1800-1850* (1997). McConachie and Mason argue that moral reform melodramas echoed the social attitudes of their audiences, and therefore tended to reflect relatively conservative views and ideologies. In a similar vein, Bank uses the idea of "theatre culture"—which she describes as "a larger sense of performance, of theatre outside of playhouses as well as within them"—to construct a "spatial history" illuminating the juxtapositions and tensions within different social spheres. In contrast to Grimsted's and Meserve's earlier works, these studies are informed by Marxist and postmodern theory, thereby promoting a theatre-as-culture point of view.<sup>11</sup>

Still other scholars have examined U.S. theatre during the nineteenth century through the lenses of gender, race, and sexuality. Robert C. Allen's *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (1991) charts transformations in both the content and audiences of American burlesque, and Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993) discusses the "dialectical flickering" of love and disgust inherent in blackface performances catering to the working classes. Faye E. Dudden's *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses & Audiences, 1790-1870* (1995) examines several actresses as case studies revealing the status of women in the theatre industry, which, she argues, experienced a decline by the time burlesque performer Lydia Thompson appeared in *Ixion* in 1868. Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix covers some of the same territory in *Wearing the Breeches: Gender and the Antebellum Stage* (2000), but argues that actresses who performed breeches roles were not completely reduced to sexual objects; on the contrary, they were powerful, and sometimes radical, figures that

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<sup>11</sup> Bruce A. McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820-1870* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992); Jeffrey D. Mason, *Melodrama and the Myth of America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Rosemarie K. Bank, *Theatre Culture in America, 1825-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 2.

triggered anxiety in critics and audiences. Lisa Merrill's study *When Romeo Was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators* (1999) also holds a prominent place in this line of inquiry, because it not only explores the life and career of a celebrated actress, but also queers Cushman through careful readings of her personal letters and diaries. Finally, Gay Gibson Cima in *Early American Women Critics: Performance, Religion, Race* (2006) identifies some of the ways in which women constructed abstract "host bodies" in order to insert and assert themselves in print and performance culture.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, scholarship underscoring the postcolonial character of the United States has shown how early American dramatists, producers, and audiences adapted and defied transatlantic influences during the nation's first decades. Heather S. Nathans's *Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson: Into the Hands of the People* (2003) is one example. By looking at a wide range of archival materials, including bank and land records, Nathans reveals how individuals involved in theatres in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia played leading roles in the effort to define class status and Americanness. Similarly, studies focusing on form and content have shown the close ties between British and U.S. theatre culture. Walter Mahar's *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy in Antebellum American Popular Culture* (1999) traces minstrelsy's origins in opera, demonstrating that this popular entertainment—often described as America's first native art form—was strongly influenced by non-native

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<sup>12</sup> Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Faye E. Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses and Audiences, 1790-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, *Wearing the Breeches: Gender on the Antebellum Stage* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Lisa Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Gay Gibson Cima, *Early American Women Critics: Performance, Religion, Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

sources. An exploration of U.S. temperance drama's roots in English literature and melodrama serves as the foundation of John W. Frick's *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America* (2003). In addition, both Jeffrey H. Richards (*Drama, Theatre, and Identity in the American New Republic*, 2005) and Jason Shaffer (*Performing Patriotism: National Identity in the Colonial and Revolutionary Theater*, 2007) reveal the complex relationship between the U.S. and Europe by examining how theatre in the new republic both resembled and flouted other models.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, the field has developed in innovative ways since the somewhat apologetic works of Grimsted and Meserve. The researchers I have described here, as well as many others I am not able to mention in this brief discussion, have adopted strategies from gender, race, queer, and postcolonial studies to uncover compelling evidence of how the theatre played an integral role in nineteenth-century U.S. culture. They have shown how the establishment and patronage of theatres, the popularity of Shakespeare and melodrama, and the development of minstrelsy and burlesque were all expressions of identity: class identity, sexual identity, racial identity, national identity.

However, the role of sensationalism in early American theatre is a topic that has been relatively neglected in past scholarship, and I hope to help fill this gap. A number of Victorianists, including Michael Booth, Martin Meisel, Michael Diamond, and Lynn Voskuil, have offered important studies of spectacular theatre in England; but most work

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<sup>13</sup> Heather S. Nathans, *Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson: Into the Hands of the People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); John W. Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Jeffrey H. Richards, *Drama, Theatre, and Identity in the American New Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Jason Shaffer, *Performing Patriotism: National Identity in the Colonial and Revolutionary American Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

on U.S. theatre elides questions about spectacle and its function.<sup>14</sup> Grimsted dedicates a chapter to production practices during the first half of the century, but his discussion focuses mainly on the mechanics of stage effects and critics' negative reaction to their heavy use. In contrast to Cima, who illuminates how women employed methods of abstracted embodiment to participate in the public sphere, I imagine the materiality of performance and spectatorship in order to appraise the reciprocity between popular entertainment and extra-theatrical political activity. Monographs examining intersections of spectacle and slavery in the U.S., including those by Joseph Roach, Saidiya V. Hartman, and Daphne A. Brooks, serve as important models for my exploration of abolitionist drama; but performances geared to other social issues, such as temperance and women's suffrage, fall outside the scope of those studies.<sup>15</sup> In this project, I cull examples from multiple performance genres and reform movements in order to identify key similarities and differences in method and message.

### Significance

To describe the significance of this study, I will explore two questions: First, why are discussions of spectacle mostly absent in nineteenth-century American theatre

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<sup>14</sup> Michael R. Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre, 1850-1910* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981); Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Michael Diamond, *Victorian Sensation, or, the Spectacular, the Shocking, and the Scandalous in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Anthem Press, 2003); Lynn M. Voskuil, *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 76-98; Cima, *Early American Women Critics*; Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

historiography? And second, why would a historical study of spectacle, embodiment, and reform illuminate previous scholarship on theatre and performance?

To address the first question, regarding neglect, I turn to Susan Harris Smith's *American Drama: The Bastard Art* (1997), which maps and interrogates views about U.S. drama within the humanities as well as in the academy as a whole. According to Smith, American plays had long been "shelved out of sight" for a variety of reasons, including an ongoing inferiority complex regarding the United States's position within Western culture (especially in relation to Europe) and drama's middling status in the literary hierarchy. Smith admits she is most fascinated by "the phenomenon of exclusion" itself and "the tactics, discourse practices, and maneuvers employed to deal with American drama by those who were busy dominating and defining culture."<sup>16</sup> I pursue a similar objective. As I discussed in the previous section, in recent decades historians have made important contributions to our understanding of nineteenth-century performance; but it is telling that scripted genres—such as melodrama and Shakespearean tragedy and comedy—attracted scholars' attention in the sixties, seventies, and early eighties, whereas popular forms like minstrelsy, burlesque, and freak shows did not become the focus of book-length studies until the late eighties and nineties.<sup>17</sup> It could be that spectacular performance, which relies much more on presence (the live) rather than words (the literary), has been overlooked because it is perceived as decorative or even shallow. After all, as Baz Kershaw has observed, the contempt for spectacle can be traced

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<sup>16</sup> Susan Harris Smith, *American Drama: The Bastard Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); and Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978) are notable exceptions.

all the way back to Aristotle's hierarchical taxonomy of tragedy's six elements in *The Poetics*.<sup>18</sup>

In the process of my research, I have seen repeated instances of this subtle prejudice at work in scholarly discourse. For example, at one point in her book *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s*, Sarah Meer gives the impression that spectacle and reform are incompatible when she writes, "Despite their 'moral' emphasis, [George L.] Aiken and [H. J.] Conway [two early adapters of Stowe's novel] were not averse to incorporating some of the excitements that characterized spectacular melodrama."<sup>19</sup> Whether intentionally or not, in this remark Meer not only questions the playwrights' political intentions through her use of scare quotes, but also suggests that sensationalism inevitably offsets ideological communication. In other words, she characterizes the "excitements" of melodrama as being at odds with Aiken's and Conway's "moral" intentions. In this dissertation, I closely examine the assumptions embedded in discursive statements like this one, assessing whether and how they have hindered our understanding of spectators' experiences and expectations in the theatre.

A general distaste for excess itself may also explain the lack of scholarship on sensationalism in nineteenth-century U.S. theatre.<sup>20</sup> Melodrama, by definition, is

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<sup>18</sup> Baz Kershaw, "Curiosity or Contempt: On Spectacle, the Human, and Activism," *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 4 (December 2003): 591-611, at 599.

<sup>19</sup> Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 115.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Brooks advances a similar hypothesis: "The critical resistance and embarrassment that melodrama may elicit could derive from its refusal of censorship and repression—the accommodations to the reality principle that the critical witness himself then supplies, from his discomfort before a drama in which people confront him with identifications judged too extravagant, too stark, too unmediated to be allowed utterance" (*Melodramatic Imagination*, 41-42).

aesthetically excessive. Jacky Bratton observes, “Melodrama is the play not disguised as literature; theatre allowing its falsity and allure to show; the Devil’s way.”<sup>21</sup> Invocations of the word today tend to be pejorative and suggest overindulgence (as in, “stop being melodramatic”). Nearly two decades ago, McConachie called on theatre historians to “examine closely the power relations implicit in historically generated concepts of difference regarding race, gender, ethnicity, and class and to question the ideological assumptions underlying such innocent-sounding terms as ‘entertainment,’ ‘style,’ ‘dramatic art,’ and ‘culture.’”<sup>22</sup> And yet, spectacle has not attracted serious investigation. The exuberant qualities of melodrama, the traits that Smith says marginalized American drama for so long within the academy, keenly interest me.<sup>23</sup> This is why I treat excess—both the expressive mode and the cultural taboo—as a *theoretical* problem in this project.

As I mentioned earlier, several Victorianists have researched spectacle because it was a defining characteristic of entertainment during this period. (Indeed, I rely heavily

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<sup>21</sup> Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 12.

<sup>22</sup> Bruce A. McConachie, “New Historicism and American Theater History: Toward an Interdisciplinary Paradigm for Scholarship,” in *The Performance of Power: Theatrical Discourse and Politics*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case and Janelle Reinelt (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), 265-71, at 267.

<sup>23</sup> Smith asserts that within the academy, American drama has long been perceived “embarrassedly and fearfully” as “a vital manifestation of cultural provincialism, feminine emotion, and unstable radicalism”; as a result, “the critics approved and continue to uphold only those literary forms which were sanctioned by the propertied, patriarchal culture, a culture that necessarily had to value the *containment and restraint of exuberance or subversiveness*” (*American Drama*, 11, my emphasis). Here, Smith equates the inferior, “low,” native drama of the U.S. with exuberance and subversion: it is excessive, feminine, unpredictable. These qualities are reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin’s conception of the carnivalesque, developed in *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (1965; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), and subsequently theorized by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986). For more on the association between sentimentalism and femininity in nineteenth-century America, see Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Avon Books, 1977).

on this scholarship in my own analysis of spectacle.) However, most are positivist excavations rather than theoretical explorations, focusing on the technological apparatuses and intertextuality of tableaux rather than the social structures and messages they conveyed. Perhaps such a study will be considered redundant, since the U.S. and Britain shared such close cultural ties. But as Kershaw has argued, the intention and effects of spectacle are historically contingent, intricately dependent on the place, time, and powers involved.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, in order to imagine how spectators interpreted particular images and sequences, I endeavor to analyze them in light of their local and temporal context while also trying to account for multiple responses, since no theory of reception can be universal or monolithic.

Now, to address the second question I posed above: how will this historical study of spectacle, embodiment, and reform contribute to past and present scholarship about performance? I suggest that a nuanced understanding of sensationalism and its employment by activists and entrepreneurs can enrich ongoing discussions about performance as a culturally constitutive activity. Theatre scholars continue to interrogate activist performance in terms of form, intention, and efficacy; I am interested in developing these queries both theoretically and historiographically.<sup>25</sup> Of course, questions of efficacy are incredibly difficult to explore, let alone answer with any certainty. Many strains of reception theory, especially under the influence of postmodernism, have underscored the dangers of reductive assumptions regarding performance's impact on audiences. But the fact that these questions are problematic

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<sup>24</sup> Kershaw, "Curiosity or Contempt," 602.

<sup>25</sup> Examples include a special issue of *Theatre Journal* on theatre and activism (vol. 55, no. 4 [December 2003]); the publication of Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); and a seminar co-convened by Sonja Kuflinec and Tamara Underiner, "(How) Does Activist Performance Work?" at the 2007 American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR) conference.

does not negate their importance as subjects of investigation. I am not suggesting that all sensation scenes conveyed political messages, nor do I propose that we can quantify or otherwise measure their impact. Admittedly, my own intervention in this discussion is provisional and hypothetical—but it also strives to be historically specific. Most of my examples come from well-known (some might say canonical) melodramas, because I hope to augment and perhaps complicate previous interpretations of them. But I emphasize that my approach constitutes just one of many possible ways to “flesh out” American spectators’ engagement with and within their culture.

### **Methodology and Case Studies**

How can we recover the ways that audiences read and perceived sensationalized bodies on stage in the distant past? Because embodiment plays a crucial role in spectacular performance, I propose that we can imagine how, and perhaps even why, extravagant displays attracted audiences by paying special attention to the affective energies of the spectacular instant. Placing an “emphasis on *embodied* subjectivity,” to employ Stanton B. Garner’s phrase, I hope to add nuance to our current understanding of the theatrical enterprises of the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup>

Although a semiotic methodology can track the intense visual and aural stimuli that are the most obvious trademarks of sensation scenes, I contend that only a phenomenological analysis can account for the somatic synesthesia that results when a performance verges on the spectacular. My dissection of spectacle in the first chapter

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<sup>26</sup> Stanton B. Garner, *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 3 (his emphasis). Other works that deeply inform my theoretical orientation include Bruce Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theatre as Metaphor* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1982); and Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

serves as a springboard for my later investigations of specific plays and productions. Kershaw, discussing the relationship between spectacle and activism in contemporary performance, asserts that spectacle offers scholars a unique opportunity “to figure what a performance is *doing* to the participants’ sense of the human,” and this is one of my central objectives.<sup>27</sup> Because they emphasize electronic media, postmodern theorists of spectacle, such as Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard, cannot be applied wholesale to nineteenth-century culture—which was definitely but differently mediated—but when appropriate, I turn to them for inspiration as well.<sup>28</sup>

I draw on theories of affect (the conveyance and experience of embodied feeling) in an effort to understand sensation’s impact on nineteenth-century spectators. As Adam Frank observes, “thinking about affect can change what counts as material and what material might do”; and scholars such as Charles Altieri, Lauren Berlant, Brian Massumi, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, among others, have explored the notion of affect and its methodological use in the analysis of literature, art, and performance.<sup>29</sup> For example, Sedgwick and Frank have demonstrated how Silvan Tomkins’s psychological theories, which conceive affects as both universal and innate, can be employed to imagine human

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<sup>27</sup> Kershaw, “Curiosity or Contempt,” 594 (his emphasis).

<sup>28</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967; Detroit: Black & Red, 1977); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (1981; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994). David M. Henkin’s exploration of the mediatized nature of nineteenth-century urban life in *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) has greatly influenced my thinking in this regard as well.

<sup>29</sup> Adam Frank, “Some Avenues for Feeling,” *Criticism* 46, no. 3 (2004): 511-24, at 511; Charles Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, eds., *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

reactions to stimuli. Collectively, these theorists demonstrate that an attention to affect can illuminate how the body serves as an epicenter of feeling and meaning.

The impermanent, fleeting nature of performance poses a significant methodological challenge to historians interested in studying theatrical events. To embed these performances in their historical and geographic contexts, I rely on close readings of diverse texts (play scripts, orations, newspaper reports, personal papers, and advertisements, among others); but because I am most interested in affective phenomena, I also use images and artifacts to enrich my understanding of nineteenth-century American stage pictures, employing methods from the field of material culture studies. In his essay “Material Culture and Cultural Research,” Thomas J. Schlereth lists several reasons why considerations of artifacts can enhance historical research: objects have temporal tenacity; they exist in three dimensions and therefore are visceral; they sometimes have “wider representativeness” (because objects are archived differently than texts, and also offer evidence of communities that do not leave written works); and they convey “affective meaning” (appealing to multiple senses and generating affect to varying degrees).<sup>30</sup> I believe a sensitivity to human beings’ relationship with objects, as well as to the cultural significance of artifacts in local and national contexts, adds nuance to my readings of bodies, props, and dramatic tableaux.

Although innovations in stage technology during the 1880s and ’90s allowed producers to achieve ever-more spectacular effects, I am most interested in the relationship between sensationalism and reform; therefore, I focus on a three-decade period when issues such as abolition, temperance, and suffrage were all part of the national discourse. Plays that referred to these social “questions” are of particular interest

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas J. Schlereth, “Material Culture and Cultural Research,” in *Material Culture: A Research Guide*, ed. Thomas J. Schlereth (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985), 1-34. See also Jules David Prown, “Style as Evidence,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 15, no. 3 (1980): 197-210.

to me because their central images—the drunkard suffering from the *delirium tremens*, the fugitive slave escaping her pursuers, and the helpless victim tied to the railroad tracks—permeate popular iconography, and were recycled and re-imagined in a wide range of contexts. Moreover, the idea of reform itself will be interrogated throughout this dissertation. As it does today, activism in the nineteenth century varied by degree: for example, the intentions, investments, and desires of a working-class theatregoer attending a performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* probably differed markedly from those of a middle-class patron at an abolitionist lecture. But I would argue that there is as much to be learned from the differences in these hypothetical spectators' intentions, investments, and desires as from their similarities. By examining the social and cultural conditions under which they occurred, I endeavor to identify both explicit and implicit articulations of activism in my case studies.

Finally, I consider extra-theatrical performances that may have influenced productions of melodramas and/or spectators' readings of those productions. Freak shows inform my understanding of sensation scenes because they were popular during the same era and sometimes occurred in close proximity to drama. In addition, given the nationwide interest in public speakers at this time, especially among middle-class audiences, I incorporate selected performances from the lyceum circuit into my analysis. Newspaper accounts of celebrity lecturers include intriguing references to the speakers' bodies and the emotions they aroused in spectators—indicating that orators provided entertainment through the use of physical and aural effects. Because many were activists, leveraging their talent to convey messages of social import, I propose that they can further illuminate the relationship between spectacle and reform during this period.

In the first chapter, I build a critical foundation for my case studies by rehearsing a theory of the spectacular instant and its mobilization of sensation. To this end, I pay special attention to the materiality of human beings' participation in performance: bodies

as the spectacle (solo performers, lecturers, freaks), bodies *in* the spectacle (actors in melodrama), and bodies *at* the spectacle (audience members).<sup>31</sup> As McConachie has noted, “Material bodies are mostly absent in contemporary notions of spectatorship,” and I seek to address that absence by considering the corporeal dynamics of performance generally and nineteenth-century theatre practice specifically.<sup>32</sup> Drawing on concepts of the normal outlined by Foucault as well as scholars working within the frameworks of feminist, queer, and disability studies, I theorize corporeal excess by mapping the mechanisms employed in spectacle and enfreakment.<sup>33</sup>

Each of the remaining chapters focuses on a major American reform movement, with a particular sensation scene serving as a kind of analytic epicenter. The three case studies differ in crucial ways—iconographically, scenographically, and ideologically. Some of my examples are assertive (even strident) in the way they communicate ideas, whereas others are more ambiguous. By highlighting their differences, I question the assumption that “melodrama must satisfy its audience’s expectations rather than present a confrontation with belief and value,” as Mason has argued. Aided by Baudrillard’s concept of “a real without origin or originality,” a phenomenon that occurs through the

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<sup>31</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I deliberately use the epithet “freak” in lieu of a more benign term because, as Rachel Adams observes, “like *queer*, [freak] is a concept that refuses the logic of identity politics, and the irreconcilable problems of inclusion and exclusion that necessarily accompany identitarian categories.” *Sideshow U.S.A: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 10 (her emphasis). For me, the word foregrounds the departures from normalcy that disabled performers embody—or rather, the departures from normalcy that they perform.

<sup>32</sup> Bruce A. McConachie, “Catharsis and the Materiality of Spectatorship,” *Assaph* 14 (1997): 95-100, at 97.

<sup>33</sup> The term “enfreakment,” based on the idea that freaks are culturally constructed rather than born, is a coinage of David Hevey, *The Creatures That Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery* (London: Routledge, 1992).

accrual of time and repetition, I also reflect on how later permutations of sensation scenes belie the idea of a stable, unequivocal progenitor.<sup>34</sup>

The staged alcoholic (or “drunkard”), both in theatres and in lecture halls, is the subject of the second chapter. Unlike many sensation scenes, which relied heavily on scenic effects, an actor’s portrayal of the *delirium tremens* (or DTs) was an exclusively somatic spectacle. Because of the body’s centrality, enactments of the DTs serve as a rich starting point for my exploration of sensationalism, embodiment, and reform on the mid-nineteenth-century American stage. But beyond this theoretical concern, I argue that dipsomania, both as medical disorder and theatrical spectacle, invoked emerging prescriptions of normalcy and self-discipline in the U.S. during the first half of the nineteenth century. In contrast to stage inebriates who amused audiences with drunken antics, the alcoholic suffering from the DTs—like Edward Middleton in *The Drunkard; or, The Fallen Saved* (1844), written by W. H. Smith and an anonymous collaborator—was meant to horrify spectators.<sup>35</sup> In harnessing its grotesque power, dramatists, performers, and activists implicitly reinforced the orderly and efficient body privileged by “respectable” individuals in the urban centers of the East. To illuminate further the affective impact of the drunkard, I also look at public commentary about John B. Gough, a reformed alcoholic and temperance advocate who was one of the century’s most famous orators. I will explore how Gough generated affect in ways similar to and different from actors in temperance melodramas.

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<sup>34</sup> Mason, *Melodrama*, 18; Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1.

<sup>35</sup> For examples and analysis of villainous, comedic, and “harmless” drunks (as opposed to inebriate protagonists) in late-nineteenth-century U.S. drama, see Joan L. Silverman, “‘I’ll Never Touch Another Drop’: Images of Alcoholism and Temperance in American Popular Culture, 1874-1920” (PhD diss., New York University, 1979), 95-142.

The third chapter explores the figure of the fugitive slave in theatrical, iconographic, and discursive contexts. The centerpiece of this chapter is Eliza's crossing of the Ohio River in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly* (1852). The quadron mother, holding tightly to her child, jumps onto a series of moving ice floes in order to flee the bounty hunters who pursue her. Eliza's escape exemplifies how a sensation scene often generates affect by endangering the body at its center.<sup>36</sup> I endeavor to complicate previous readings of *Uncle Tom's* heroine by imagining how she invoked the moral quandaries of the Compromise of 1850, which featured provisions designed to facilitate the return of escaped slaves under the Fugitive Slave Act. To that end, I analyze the fugitive as a slave-turned-subject, who seizes agency in the process of breaking the law. Furthermore, I contend that the Ohio River scene posed a striking counterpoint to other depictions of absconded slaves, especially stereotyped icons in advertisements for runaways. The popularity of Eliza's flight in diverse media (children's books, illustrated sheet music, political cartoons, decorative ceramics) suggests that Stowe's heroine became an activist symbol. At the same time, her complicated racial status and her circulation in domestic space suggest that the politics of the image are, ultimately, ambivalent.

The fourth and final chapter investigates a melodramatic invocation of the women's suffrage movement. Augustin Daly's *Under the Gaslight* (1867) premiered in New York City at a time of heightened suffrage activity in the United States: one year after the founding of the American Equal Rights Association, and one year before the full ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, which extended voting rights to African

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<sup>36</sup> Kershaw notes that the threat of disaster has always been integral to spectacle, "because disaster unexpectedly unleashes extreme powers that rupture a world we would prefer to keep wholly intact, suddenly splitting open normality to expose its utter instability. It achieves this by threatening always to eliminate the human, to reduce us to total insignificance in the grand scheme—or chaos—of things" ("Curiosity or Contempt," 596).

American men but not to women. During the play's legendary railroad sequence, the female protagonist, Laura, rescues Snorkey (a white Civil War veteran) from certain death by using an axe to break out of a locked shed and untying him from the railroad tracks. Significantly, the scene concludes with a prominent reference to women's suffrage, with Snorkey proclaiming, "And these are the women who ain't to have the vote!" Looking closely at the published script, contemporaneous images of women and war veterans, and relevant material artifacts—especially the American axe, the prop Laura uses—I analyze the scene in light of the historical moment when it was first conceived and witnessed. Finally, because this melodramatic scenario transformed within the collective imagination into a more normative image (the woman tied to the tracks and saved by the hero), I meditate on how and why it has morphed over time.

One last note, regarding structure: In an effort to honor the slippery and inexorable nature of the sensation scenes I examine, each chapter ends with a *dénouement* rather than a more customary *conclusion*. I have chosen to employ the former term, despite my mixed feelings about its erudite tenor, for two reasons. First, it highlights the important role played by dramaturgy in my study. Although scholars readily acknowledge that spectacle is a defining trait of melodrama, my project, unlike others, insists that this dramaturgical element warrants close scrutiny because it provides a more nuanced understanding of certain plays. Moreover, I contend that my case studies illuminate some of the ways in which nineteenth-century reform efforts leveraged visual and visceral strategies associated with spectacle. Indeed, I believe that the mechanisms of the spectacular instant were adopted and adapted in myriad contexts, and continue to be habitually employed today. As such, I suggest that the spectacular instant may have been central to *the dramaturgy of reform itself*.

Second, I appreciate the paradox embedded in *dénouement* as a critical term. Etymologically, the word connotes "unknotting" or "unraveling"; and yet, in structural

analysis it refers to the final moments in a play when all loose ends are tied. In some ways, each of my *dénouements* offers a deliberate unknotting of the argument advanced in the chapter, because the spectacles I examine often leave me with more questions than answers. I treat the *dénouement* as an unraveled space in which I share provisional, rather than conclusive, meditations on the broader significance of my discussion. I believe this approach respects and underscores the uprooted, wily, hard-to-capture (hard-to-tie) character of my subjects: scenes seen across media and across time.

In mid-nineteenth-century America, melodramatic sensation scenes were aggressively marketed, consumed, and imitated. As I discuss in this dissertation, sometimes they endorsed or resisted the status quo, even when producers exploited them for profit and spectators sought them for amusement. Daniel C. Gerould has described melodrama as “the first ‘moving’ pictures” that “determined to a large degree how Americans saw their world and imagined their place in it.”<sup>37</sup> I seek to understand how each cacophonous, frenetic, spectacular picture *within* the picture operated not only as an exemplar of crowd-pleasing stagecraft, but also as a spectacular instant—one with the potential to transform humans in the audience through the human at its center.

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<sup>37</sup> Daniel C. Gerould, “The Americanization of Melodrama,” in *American Melodrama*, ed. Daniel C. Gerould (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983), 7-29, at 7.

# 1.

## The Body as/in/at the Spectacle

The melodramatic body is a body seized by meaning.  
—Peter Brooks, “Melodrama, Body, Revolution”<sup>1</sup>

Joseph Daly, in his biography of his brother, the theatre manager and playwright Augustin Daly, reminisces about the mid-nineteenth-century American theatregoing experience by sharing several standout performances he witnessed. As if sifting through a personal collection of playbills, Daly muses,

And how the inky blackness of the bills of the play is illumined by strange meteors that flashed for their brief moment and were gone! Here is the singular Hebrew star, Adah Isaacs Menken . . . who has left some memories of herself as Mazeppa bound to a trained steed. . . . Here the bills show fairyland—Niblo’s Garden with the Ravel pantomimists—and here the Revolutionary drama, a favorite entertainment when our country was young, in which one Yankee easily whipped half a dozen Britishers, and George Washington always appeared with red fire, in a final tableau.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Brooks, “Melodrama, Body, Revolution,” in *Melodrama: Stage Picture Screen*, ed. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 11-24, at 18.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Francis Daly, *The Life of Augustin Daly* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 20.

What is striking about this passage is the way in which Daly *performs* the act of remembering. He reports the image that comes to mind when he looks at a particular bill: specific actors, scenes, and tableaux that emerge from the complex layers of memory. Even more importantly, Daly describes *bodies within spectacles*: the titillating and barely clad Menken on horseback; the Ravel pantomimes populating a fairyland at Niblo's; the singular Yankee triumphing over the unfairly advantaged British; the climactic sensation scene depicting George Washington surrounded by flames. Each of these memories, I argue, constitutes a spectacular instant—a fleeting, sensational moment in a performance that, by virtue of its power and palpability, burns itself into memory and calls forth the spectator's response. Daly's method of recall underscores the importance of the spectacular instant within nineteenth-century theatre culture.

According to Martin Meisel, the *situation*—a distinctly visual, climatic scene depicting a dramatic turn of events within a play—served as the foundation of the new melodramatic dramaturgy that emerged in the early nineteenth century. Situations variously comprised silent tableaux (often called “realizations,” especially when a famous illustration or painting was recreated on stage) or technological triumphs (such as burning buildings, sinking ships, and the like). Meisel shows how specific scenes in Victorian, French, and German melodramas referred to and even cited images originating in other media, each functioning as “a site of a complex interplay of narrative and picture, rather than one member in a three-legged race to a synthesis.”<sup>3</sup> By the 1860s, critics and patrons began to call these elaborate gestures “sensation scenes,” which alluded to the “particularly intense, even overwhelming experience” that they provided.<sup>4</sup> Some featured

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<sup>3</sup> Meisel, *Realizations*, 39-41 and 3.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Gunning, “The Horror of Opacity: The Melodrama of Sensation in the Plays of André de Lorde,” in *Melodrama: Stage Picture Screen*, ed. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 50-61, at 52. Although the phrase

impressive scenery, but others involved nothing more than an actor's performing body. Moreover, a wide variety of non-theatrical entertainments—freak shows, panoramas, lectures, World's Fairs, celebrity arrivals—were also considered “sensational.” Despite their diversity, these assorted practices had qualities or characteristics in common that gave them the “sense of the spectacular.”<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, *how* something is presented and perceived, rather than *what* is presented and perceived, constitutes spectacle. In this chapter, I attempt to complicate common definitions of spectacle by accounting more thoroughly for its corporeal dimensions. Specifically, I propose that understanding it as *visceral* instead of visual could impact its study in productive ways. The sense of the spectacular relies on relations rather than essentials; in other words, the exceptional is sensational. It is defined, in part, by the predetermined norms that are jarred, destabilized, and exceeded in the course of a performance. As culture's most conspicuous target for normalization, the body—simultaneously represented and inhabited by the performer—represents a fruitful site for analysis and interpretation because it reveals the pressures and politics of its historical moment through (re)action, behavior, and triumph. After briefly surveying other scholars' conceptions of spectacle, I will examine how different individuals participate in displays of sensational excess, whether *as* the spectacle (extraordinary bodies at freak shows), *in* the spectacle (actors in melodramatic sensation scenes), or *at* the spectacle (people who witness performance).

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“sensation scene” was not widely used until the 1860s, throughout this dissertation I tend to employ it generically, because it emphasizes spectators' somatic response to spectacular displays.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Beckerman, “Spectacle in the Theatre,” *Theatre Survey* 25, no. 1 (May 1984): 1-13, at 10.

**Norm-Defying Acts: Theorizing the Spectacular Instant**

In *Realizations*, Meisel argues that the most innovative trait of nineteenth-century melodrama was its visual conveyance of narrative, which distinguished the new genre in important ways:

European theaters before the nineteenth century [had] been highly pictorial, in the sense of being perspectively organized and acutely aware of the visual ensemble, including scenery and spectacle. . . . But what is striking and characteristic in the nineteenth-century theater is that its *dramaturgy* was pictorial, not just its *mise en scène*, and that such pictorialism was strongest in what were regarded as its most “dramatic” gestures.

These gestures, Meisel suggests, struck a balance between the real and the ideal in order to indulge the audience’s simultaneous “appetite for reality” and “requirement for signification”: “Specification, individuation, autonomy of detail, and the look and feel of the thing itself pulled one way; while placement in a larger meaningful pattern, appealing to the moral sense and the understanding, pulled another. A story rightly told satisfied both requirements.”<sup>6</sup> Essentially, Meisel contends that nineteenth-century spectacle relied on not only method (an accurate and detailed approach to representation), but also message (mythos, logos, ethos).

Meisel asserts that these stage images worked intertextually with novels, visual art, and popular illustrations circulating beyond the theatre’s walls. He uses a wide range of case studies—ranging from James Robinson Planché’s *The Brigand* (1829), the first important instance of pictorial realization in England, to Henry Irving’s elaborate productions at the Lyceum Theatre (1878-1902)—to demonstrate that spectacular

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<sup>6</sup> Meisel, *Realizations*, 39 (his emphasis) and 12.

tableaux did not operate in isolation. Rather, they worked in tandem with literary and visual culture. But Meisel's main objective in *Realizations* is to illuminate connections rather than reveal phenomenological operations. What are some of spectacle's operations?

Scale is, perhaps, the most obvious one—which, it is important to note, is not the same thing as size. It is a relational concept: in order to describe, analyze, or sense something in terms of scale, an explicit or implicit norm must be in mind. This is one of Bernard Beckerman's key observations in his essay "Spectacle in the Theatre," in which he considers the similarities and differences between stage spectacles (mass pageants, melodramatic tableaux, performances of skill) and "non-dramatic" spectacles (fireworks, parades, processions). According to Beckerman, "the visual terms do not alone make the spectacle"; rather, spectacles are defined relationally, "tak[ing] their measure from human scale and capacity."<sup>7</sup> A heightened sense of scale, even when effected through illusion, is a feature of both dramatic and non-dramatic spectacles: "It is when scale and number exceed human proportion—that is, the proportion which spectators accept as the norm—that they have a sense of the spectacular."<sup>8</sup> Exhibitions of skill, such as the extraordinary exertions of acrobats or the *tours de force* of actors, generate awe because they exceed the abilities of average people and the norms to which they subscribe.

Intensity is another defining quality of spectacle, which, like scale, exists only in relation. Charles Altieri describes intensity as having three dimensions: "dimensions of

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<sup>7</sup> Beckerman, "Spectacle," 10 and 11. Baz Kershaw, acknowledging the relationship between spectacle and human proportion, argues that technological innovations in travel and communication since the mid-nineteenth century have steadily changed our sense of scale, thereby changing our perception of spectacle as well. See Kershaw, "Curiosity or Contempt," especially 595-97; and *Theatre Ecology: Environments and Performance Events* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 206-38.

<sup>8</sup> Beckerman, "Spectacle," 9.

magnitude established by the kind of elements brought together, dimensions of compression established by the forces of resistance engaged by the act, and dimensions of sharpness established by how the act comes to appear distinctive in its particularity.”<sup>9</sup>

Altieri’s threefold definition comprises relational concepts: magnitude, compression, and sharpness. Quite simply, an event or experience is described as *intense* when it exceeds an expected, normal state. Bert O. States, comparing theatre and film, argues that the compression of live performance lends it an intensity that can only happen in the theatre:

Theater is swift (even Chekhov is swift). This swiftness has nothing to do with clock time or the suspense of the plot, but only with the fact that *everything* happens through the actor. This is the swiftness of condensation, of life raised to an intense power of temporal and spatial density.<sup>10</sup>

Discussing melodramatic situations, Meisel observes that some provide “a culminating symbolic summary of represented events,” and others “substitute an arrested situation for action and reaction.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, the situation is a caesura in a sequential plot, whether cumulative (an elaborate, action-oriented scene positioned at the end of an act) or frozen (tableau). The temporal and spatial density States associates with theatre generally is taken to another level during the spectacular instant. Its intensity derives from “the greater pressure of the whole on the particular,” to employ Altieri’s phrase.<sup>12</sup> They invoke a much larger narrative world, an entire moral universe.

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<sup>9</sup> Altieri, *Particulars*, 187.

<sup>10</sup> States, *Great Reckonings*, 153 (his emphasis).

<sup>11</sup> Meisel, *Realizations*, 38.

<sup>12</sup> Offering an example from the theatrical canon, Altieri writes, “Think of the difference between hearing Lear’s ‘never, never, never’ speech the first time one sees the play and hearing it with an awareness of the forces at work in the play as a whole” (*Particulars*, 187).

Excess—a word invoking both superabundance and superfluity—is another of spectacle’s characteristics. Other scholars have analyzed the excess inherent in melodrama, especially Peter Brooks in his landmark study *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. But I focus on another gloss of the word, one that underscores the inherent violence of normalization: excess as aberration. Deviants that define what is typical, breaches that reinforce respectability, and exceptions that disrupt rules are what interest me most. Emotional excess is one of melodrama’s trademark qualities, and the spectacular instant takes this indulgence to the highest level, as Brooks contends: “The emotions and conditions expressed are almost overwhelming in their instinctual purity; they taste too strong.” In his view, melodrama’s tendency toward excessive expression is at once compelling and alienating:

If we can sense its appeal (as well as its evident limitations), it must be because we are attracted to (though perhaps simultaneously repulsed by) the imaginary possibility of a world where we are solicited to say everything, where manners, the fear of self-betrayal, and accommodations to the Other no longer exert a controlling force.<sup>13</sup>

Brooks’s contention underscores the paradoxical attraction and repulsion to spectacle, and also inspires crucial questions. If nineteenth-century melodrama appeals to a repressed desire for excess—a desire “to say everything”—what cultural and historical factors influenced or caused that repression?<sup>14</sup> When did prejudices against excess arise, and what social and intellectual attitudes perpetuate(d) these prejudices?

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<sup>13</sup> Brooks, *Melodramatic Imagination*, 41.

<sup>14</sup> The rise of melodrama and its tendency to “say everything” reflects, in some ways, the culture associated with the Second Great Awakening in the U.S. (roughly 1790-1840), which

The trend toward normalization during the nineteenth century provides some provisional answers to these questions. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault argues that during this period, prisons—designed to contain, control, and hide misbehaving bodies—supplanted the excessive spectacles of public execution from an earlier era. He asserts that the birth of the prison and related institutions coincided with a new system of corporeal discipline that was based on the power of normalization.<sup>15</sup> In accordance with Foucault’s argument, Lennard J. Davis has explored the “remarkable fact” that our modern definition of the word *normal* emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. Davis points out that before that time, the word’s meaning was “perpendicular,” a gloss that was based on the carpenter’s square or “norm.”<sup>16</sup> The word’s etymology reveals that measurement is deeply embedded in the notion of normality.

The concept of the norm fostered and inspired a variety of scientific, practical, and philosophical trends. Evidence of the norm-as-ideal first appears in the practice of phrenology, an important predecessor of psychology initially developed during the eighteenth century that gained increasing popularity in Europe and America through 1850. Phrenologists postulated that a person’s innate character could be measured or read in the bumps of the skull.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, pioneering methodologies like statistics and eugenics (the cataloging of humans according to race) relied on norms and averages to

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invited participants to express themselves performatively in spiritual conversion and religious practice. For more on this phenomenon, see Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); and Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>15</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

<sup>16</sup> Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, John van Wyhe, *Phrenology and the Origins of Victorian Scientific Naturalism* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2004); and Stephen Tomlinson, *Head Masters: Phrenology, Secular Education, and Nineteenth-Century Social Thought* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005).

measure and analyze data.<sup>18</sup> Foucault notes that the quantitative sciences ascended alongside regulatory practices, such as the school examination, that assigned punishments and rewards based on rankings rather than privilege, “thus substituting for the individuality of the memorable man that of the calculable man.”<sup>19</sup> For example, Rodney Hessinger has studied how the University of Pennsylvania successfully maintained order among its male undergraduates during the early 1800s by introducing procedures classifying students in terms of their relative achievements. By emphasizing “horizontal” rather than “vertical” authority structures (essentially, replacing professorial approval with peer approval), the system encouraged young men to practice self-control and self-improvement.<sup>20</sup> Finally, Marxist philosophy—yet another product of the nineteenth century—closely allied itself with the ideal of the norm, as Davis observes:

Marx is unimaginable without a tendency to contemplate average humans and think about their abstract relation to work, wages, and so on. In this sense, Marx is very much in step with the movement of normalizing the body and the individual. In addition, Marxist thought encourages us toward an enforcing of normalcy in the sense that the deviations in society, in terms of the distribution of wealth for example, must be minimized.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 30.

<sup>19</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 193.

<sup>20</sup> Rodney Hessinger, “‘The Most Powerful Instrument of College Discipline’: Student Disorder and the Meritocracy in the Colleges of the Early American Republic,” *History of Education Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 237-62; Rodney Hessinger, *Seduced, Abandoned, and Reborn: Visions of Youth in Middle-Class America, 1780-1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 29.

These novel ways of calculating and quantifying phenomena in the natural and social worlds helped to establish the concept of normalcy as a governing principle of Western culture.

Like scale and intensity, the norm only exists within a system of relations. It is first and foremost a mechanism for comparison, a model against which things may be measured. The norm identifies and reconciles difference by establishing a common denominator for the vast majority of subjects. The theory underlying the norm is that anyone and everyone can conform to it. In contrast, the Platonic ideal is not a mandate, because it is forever impossible to achieve. The ideal is a principle; the norm is a barometer. The triumph of the norm has enormous consequences for corporeality, and indeed, signals a paradigm shift regarding the body's potentials. According to Davis,

The idea of a norm pushes the normal variation of the body through a stricter template guiding the way the body “should” be. . . . The new ideal of ranked order is powered by the imperative of the norm, and then is supplemented by the notion of progress, human perfectibility, and the elimination of deviance, to create a dominating, hegemonic vision of what the human body should be.<sup>22</sup>

To put it another way, the norm commands the subject to curtail and contain his or her own excesses—or else. Because averages champion conventions rather than exceptions, atypical subjects are automatically excluded, stigmatized, and marginalized. When the norm is ascendant, a directive to be ordinary or commonplace replaces the more benign notion that humanity is and always will be inferior to the ideal.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

In a culture that enforces normality, excess is automatically abject. Indeed, judgment and repudiation seem entrenched in the word itself, folded within its overindulgent consonants. Normalcy celebrates efficiency; excess epitomizes waste. Normalcy prescribes moderation; excess seizes abundance. Norms renounce, contain, and extinguish the abnormality that excess represents. To embrace excess, then, is to deny both the value and the power of discipline's operations. (By definition, excess is *undisciplined*.) This is why spectacles of excess—bold, unselfconscious displays; bodies in extremity; demonstrations of extraordinary skill—are inherently radical. In this sense, excess is always already political, too. As I explain below, this is especially apparent in the nineteenth-century freak show.

### **The Body as the Spectacle: The Freak Show**

Freakery grew in popularity in the U.S. during the mid-nineteenth century, sometimes sharing space (both literally and conceptually) with theatrical, oratorical, and ethnographic performances.<sup>23</sup> As Rosemarie Garland Thomson has shown, our contemporary aversion to the freak show is a relatively recent phenomenon. By the turn of the twentieth century, science had successfully transformed cultural attitudes about individuals with mental and physical impairments by transforming disabled bodies into medical specimens, casting them as pathologies instead of curiosities, and relegating

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<sup>23</sup> Although I focus on American freak shows during the 1800s, they did not originate then and were popular elsewhere. Leslie A. Fiedler points out that the display of anomalous bodies for amusement may be traced as far back as the second century C.E. (*Freaks*, 20). For more on freaks in earlier eras and other locales, see, among others, Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978); Marie-Hélène Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Dudley Wilson, *Signs and Portents: Monstrous Births from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 1993); and Paul Semonin, "Monsters in the Marketplace: The Exhibition of Human Oddities in Early Modern England," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 69-81.

them to hospitals.<sup>24</sup> But until then, displays of extraordinary bodies were sought-after entertainments.

The close proximity of freaks and other amusements in early America warrants a serious consideration of their intertextual relationships. The most obvious point of overlap between theatre and freakery is the mid-century museum, exemplified by P. T. Barnum's American Museum in New York City and Moses Kimball's Boston Museum. Museums featured a stunning variety of curiosities, ranging from the theatrical to the archeological.<sup>25</sup> Their superabundant objects and bodies attracted middle-class patrons who wanted to view scientific exhibits, freaks, panoramas, lectures, and melodramas in a single visit. Some marketing materials from the period suggest that human oddities were the museums' principal draw. For example, freaks unequivocally dominate an extant advertisement for Barnum's museum *circa* 1860; it announces that there are "three performances daily" (presumably in Barnum's lecture room, where melodramas were staged), but the words are nearly lost on the periphery, literally and figuratively sidelined by the aberrant bodies depicted in the placard. **(Figure 1.)** Moreover, in scrapbooks that have survived from this era *cartes de visite* of famous freaks share space with photographs of celebrated stage actors, just as they shared space in museums.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 55-80.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 25-68; Andrea Stulman Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 11. See also Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.*, 114-20.



In general, nineteenth-century audiences did not segregate their theatrical consumption by genre in the same manner we do today. Meisel suggests that the complex relationships between images and texts collapsed traditional genre categories within the newly mediatized culture of the nineteenth century; he declares, “The crowning blow to the notion of genre as fixed, immutable, and finite fell in the nineteenth century, whose practice reveals a faith in the infinite variability and particularity of genre.” Similarly, Michael Denning has shown that there was a reciprocal relationship between melodrama and the sensational dime novel, with authors recreating popular plays in literary form and vice versa. In other words, different modes of cultural production promiscuously borrowed from and referred to one another. They were neither independently constituted nor unilaterally perceived.<sup>27</sup>

As a result, I contend that freakery affected nineteenth-century spectators’ ways of seeing in important respects, influencing the manner in which Americans perceived bodies both on stage and off. For one, the excesses embodied by freak show performers lent them the sense of the spectacular. “The inherently performative nature of live specimens veers exhibits of them strongly in the direction of spectacle,” Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observes, “blurring still further the line between morbid curiosity and scientific interest, chamber of horrors and medical exhibition, circus and zoological garden, theater and living ethnographic display, scholarly lecture and dramatic monologue, cultural performance and staged re-creation.”<sup>28</sup> A handful of scholars, including Bluford Adams and Matthew Rehorn, have studied how specific exhibits

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<sup>27</sup> Meisel, *Realizations*, 141; Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London and New York: Verso, 1987), 24-25. For a fascinating case study of the ways in which nineteenth-century sensationalism permeated multiple media, see Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

<sup>28</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 34.

interacted with melodramas presented in the same venue. For example, Reborn has analyzed Barnum's "What Is It?" display (an African American performer presented as a "missing link" between primates and man) alongside Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana*; both were presented simultaneously at the American Museum on the cusp of the Civil War. Such collisions provide important opportunities to reconstruct audiences' readings of particular plays.<sup>29</sup>

However, in my project I am most interested in imagining how freak shows invited patrons to *look differently* at embodiment. Displays of abnormal bodies, I argue, fostered a methodology of viewing that emphasized the human in all kinds of spectacle. To put it another way, because the excesses embodied by freaks mirror the mechanics of spectacle generally, I propose that the representational strategies of the freak show help to illuminate how spectators read and experienced other forms of entertainment.

As many scholars have observed, freaks are not born, but rather made—a process David Hevey terms *enfreakment*. Humans may be born with particular impairments, but they become freaks only when constructed, displayed, and viewed as such. Robert Bogdan argues that entrepreneurs fashioned freaks using two modes of representation: the exotic, which emphasized "the culturally strange, the primitive, the bestial, the exotic" (examples include African Bushmen, Circassian Beauties, Aztec Children, tattooed men and women, and "missing link" exhibits); and the aggrandized, which "emphasized how, with the exception of the particular physical, mental, or behavioral condition, the freak was an upstanding, high-status person with talents of a conventional and socially prestigious nature" (well-dressed giants, dwarves, bearded ladies, conjoined

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<sup>29</sup> Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 116-63; Matthew Reborn, "What Is It? The Frontier, Melodrama, and Boucicault's Amalgamated Drama," *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 19, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 5-33.

twins, living skeletons, and fat ladies). Some freaks employed tactics and strategies from both modes, as did exceptionally skilled performers who took part in the show (acrobats, sword swallows, snake charmers, and so forth).<sup>30</sup>

Unusual bodies fail to meet the dictates of normality, bursting out of the seams and violating the rules. All too often, the disabled body serves as a lightning rod for corporeal anxiety. In the words of Leslie Fielder, “the strangely formed body has represented absolute Otherness in all times and all places since human history began.”<sup>31</sup> Rachel Adams, who has traced the American freak show’s history up to the present day, sees an important relationship between freaks and social prohibitions regarding excess:

If identity formation, whether individual or collective, involves a dual gesture of incorporation and repudiation, freaks remind us of the *unbearable excess* that has been shed to confer entry into the realm of normalcy. The figures of the half man–half woman, the dog-faced boy, or conjoined twins confront us with their refusal of the apparently primal distinctions between man and woman, human and animal, self and other.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, Thomson argues that public exhibitions of freaks underscored the desirability of normality through its spectacularization of the abnormal: “By constituting the freak as an icon of generalized embodied deviance, the exhibitions also simultaneously reinscribed gender, race, sexual aberrance, ethnicity, and disability as inextricable and yet

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<sup>30</sup> Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 105 and 108; Hevey, *Creatures that Time Forgot*, 53.

<sup>31</sup> Leslie A. Fiedler, foreword to *Freakery*, ed. Thomson, xiii–xviii, at xiii. In addition to Bogdan, Davis, and Thomson, see Fiedler, *Freaks*; Elizabeth Grosz, “Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit,” in *Freakery*, ed. Thomson, 55–66; Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997), 223–90; and Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.*

<sup>32</sup> Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.*, 7 (my emphasis).

particular exclusionary systems legitimated by bodily variation—all represented by the single multivalent figure of the freak.”<sup>33</sup> As the stigmatized antithesis of the norm, the freak serves as the *über*-barometer of digression: differences in gender, race, sexuality, and ability are conceived as variations on a white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied ordinary. Indeed, the disabled body *canonizes* the normal body, because both are measured through the same systems of classification.<sup>34</sup>

The viewer’s complicated relationship with a human “on view” helps to explain the curiosity and contempt inspired by spectacle generally. By imagining bodies *as* spectacles, it is possible to interpret the politics they convey on stage. In the epigraph that begins this chapter, Brooks suggests that the body is a highly charged site in melodrama, serving as the communicative epicenter of meaning. We may be able to understand better the corporeal dilemmas of a historical moment by examining how performers and characters deviate from or adhere to norms. In the next section, I apply this concept to bodies *within* spectacles in order to illuminate the paradoxical phenomena produced by the actor/character at the center of a sensation scene.

### **The Body *in* the Spectacle: The Sensation Scene**

A visceral conception of spectacle emphasizes the embodied nature of live performance—the essential fact that living beings enact and witness theatre. In the words of Herbert Blau, theatre is “the ocular site of ‘blooded thought’ . . . what bleeds upon the

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<sup>33</sup> Rosemarie Garland Thomson, introduction to *Freakery*, ed. Thomson, 1-19, at 10. See also Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 5; Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.*, 16.

<sup>34</sup> Davis asserts, “the very concept of normalcy . . . is in fact tied inexorably to the concept of disability, or rather, the concept of disability is a function of the concept of normalcy. Normalcy and disability are part of the same system” (*Enforcing Normalcy*, 2). Simi Linton offers a helpful discussion of how the normal body is canonized within contemporary rhetoric and discourse in *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 8-33.

boards . . . is the inconsolable body in its divisions. The actor out there, literally dying in front of your eyes, reveals the space that is never seen.”<sup>35</sup> Some scholars, especially Philip Auslander, have questioned the way theatre aficionados tend to privilege “liveness.” Auslander postulates that mediation profoundly impacts theatrical events, and that “the live” is always already influenced by “the recorded.” But he also admits that these two types of performance are dissimilar phenomenologically, acknowledging, “live performance engages the senses *differently* than mediatized representations.”<sup>36</sup> In accordance with Auslander’s reasoning, I am interested in examining how the senses are *differently engaged* in the theatre, and specifically, how moments of magnitude foster unique responses. More than any other component of the *mise-en-scène*, it is the actor who generates this distinct mode of engagement. Of course, the dynamics of the performing body have been richly investigated and analyzed, ranging from Susan Glenn’s study of late-nineteenth-century actresses to Rebecca Schneider’s examination of explicit bodies in radical feminist performance.<sup>37</sup> In my own project, I wish to apply a similar rigor to the bodies framed and foregrounded by melodramatic sensation scenes.

In the theatre, the real and the virtual exist concurrently—which, of course, is a form of excess in itself. The actor exists doubly, both as character and person; the action comprises a duplicate reality, “an event in the real world as well as an illusion of an unreal world.”<sup>38</sup> In important respects, these multiple planes or presences are

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<sup>35</sup> Herbert Blau, *The Dubious Spectacle: Extremities of Theater, 1976-2000* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 51.

<sup>36</sup> Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 2-3, 54, and 55 (his emphasis).

<sup>37</sup> Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>38</sup> States, *Great Reckonings*, 154.

symbiotically linked. (Given its biological character, symbiosis, as a theoretical concept, helpfully underscores the viscosity of bodies sharing space.) The actor reminds us of these plural realities when a slippage occurs and, in States's words, "the floor cracks open and we are startled, however pleasantly, by the upsurge of the real into the magic circle where the conventions of theatricality have assured us that the real has been subdued and transcended." This shocking-but-pleasurable sensation emerges when a performance transcends familiar semiotic processes and "overloads the artistic circuit"; the spectator sees everything on stage in a different light, "not as a signifier but as a signified, though phenomenologically speaking these words now pertain to an alien vocabulary since it is exactly signification that has been ingested."<sup>39</sup> During such episodes of overload, the symbiosis achieves immanence, reminding participants of the excesses simultaneously granted and disavowed in the actor-audience contract.

The infiltration of memory into performance—a phenomenon Marvin Carlson calls "ghosting"—deeply influences reception as well. Carlson has examined how a stunning variety of mementos haunt the actor's body, including past roles she has played, details about her off-stage life, and other actors' performances of her role.<sup>40</sup> Memories, rumors, urban legends, and other data accrue over time and are incorporated into what Hans Robert Jauss calls the "horizon of expectations": the cumulative knowledge, experiences, and other data that influence an audience's reading of a work of art.<sup>41</sup> In

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 34 and 37. Jody Enders, offering an alternative view regarding the pleasure of such ruptures, calls them "dreaded moment[s] when theatrical events are not quite representation and not quite reality." *Death by Drama and Other Medieval Urban Legends* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 66.

<sup>40</sup> Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), especially 52-95.

<sup>41</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982). Susan Bennett discusses the many influences on audience's reception of dramatic performance in *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London: Routledge, 1990).

addition, an actor's celebrity status sometimes collapses the distinctions between actor and character; in extreme cases, her quirks and personality conflate with her character's.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, the simple fact that *the performer lives* impacts reception in important ways. Terry Eagleton's idea of the "species-body" illuminates how this aspect of performance operates. Essentially, the species-body is the idea of the body before its personalization. Eagleton writes, "Its impersonality lies in the fact that it belongs to the species before it belongs to me; and there are some aspects of the species-body—death, vulnerability, sickness and the like—that we may well prefer to thrust into oblivion. Even then, there is no very coherent sense in which my body belongs to me. . . . There is no private entrepreneurship when it comes to flesh and blood."<sup>43</sup> The actor-audience contract capitalizes on the notion of the species-body because both parties agree that a person may represent another person—or, to be more specific, a performer may embody someone (a character) who is absent yet present.

Because the actor is a biological being, he is perpetually vulnerable to damage. Always for the actor, the threat of disaster looms: long-lived superstitions about certain utterances and actions, such as saying "Macbeth" or whistling in a performance space, reveal deep anxieties about injury and death within the theatrical community. Our knowledge of the actor's vulnerability is central to the theatre experience, because the performer's willingness to endanger himself underscores what States calls our "creatural bond with the actor." He elaborates, "Our sympathetic involvement with the characters is attended by a secondary, and largely subliminal, line of empathy born of the possibility that the illusion may at any moment be shattered by a mistake or accident. For the most

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<sup>42</sup> Michael L. Quinn, "Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting," *New Theatre Quarterly* 4 (1990): 154-61. See also Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

<sup>43</sup> Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 166.

part this is a low-risk investment, but it is a crucial aspect of the phenomenal quality of stage performance.” The applause at the conclusion of a theatrical event signals the audience’s awareness of the actor’s successful navigation of the perils of the stage.<sup>44</sup>

Admittedly, not all theatre theorists agree with this view. Daphna Ben Chaim, drawing on Artaud’s conception of theatre as a “serious game,” observes that the spectator’s awareness of the play as a pretend event psychologically protects her from disturbing episodes enacted on stage.<sup>45</sup> But here, Ben Chaim is referring to incidents suffered by characters, rather than hazards negotiated by actors. Stage accidents may be frequent or rare at different times and in different contexts, but when they do happen they are intricately woven into theatre practice and histories—and sometimes acquire mythic status, as Jody Enders has shown in *Death by Drama and Other Medieval Urban Legends*. She points out that, to a degree, the relative frequency of theatrical mishaps is irrelevant, because “What matters is that each one of our stories transmits an eminently believable fear about the believable.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, disastrous precedents, whether actual or apocryphal, always ghost performance as it unfolds, tugging at the spectator’s memory and coloring her perception.

When they do happen, theatre accidents are widely discussed and analyzed within different collectives, ranging from smaller communities (social circles of artists or audiences) to larger publics, often facilitated by press coverage.<sup>47</sup> Some mistakes are

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<sup>44</sup> States, *Great Reckonings*, 119.

<sup>45</sup> Daphna Ben Chaim, *Distance in the Theatre: The Aesthetics of Audience Response* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1981), 45.

<sup>46</sup> Enders, *Death by Drama*, 11.

<sup>47</sup> Even today, the actress Idina Menzel inspired widespread discussion when she fell through a trap door and broke a rib during one of her final performances in the Broadway musical *Wicked* (8 January 2005). Articles and news items about the mishap appeared in the *New York Times*, *New York Post*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, and the *Toronto Sun*, among other publications.

generated by sets and scenery; in other cases, the actor causes a dangerous situation and then succumbs to it; still others seem to be terrible twists of fate or “acts of God.” In order to map their differences and similarities, I would like to describe four types of stage accidents here: mechanical mishaps, procedural missteps, physiological failures, and structural disasters.

Mechanical mishaps occur when a scenic element or effect goes awry, whether due to operator error or mere chance. As David Grimsted notes, in the 1800s “failings in presentation ran through the tapestry of dramatic performances like a bright, untidy thread,” because technical problems occurred routinely.<sup>48</sup> Sometimes, actors became the victims of such failings. For example, during the mid-nineteenth century the flaming ballet girl became an icon of horror and erotica due to the many disfigurements and deaths resulting from female dancers’ proximity to the burning footlights. Such occurrences were “reported in graphic detail in local papers and occasionally [became] the topic of titillating literature.”<sup>49</sup> According to Mary Grace Swift, at least a dozen immolations occurred in American theatres between 1850 and 1870; but she suspects that there were many more, and that theatre proprietors had an economic incentive to suppress these stories given that a fear of fire might keep audiences away.<sup>50</sup>

Even if managers underplayed such incidents, they nevertheless found their way into print. At least once, *Gleason’s Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion*—an illustrated publication that proudly marketed its mission “to inculcate the strictest and highest tone

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<sup>48</sup> Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 76.

<sup>49</sup> Alison Piepmeier, *Out in Public: Configurations of Women’s Bodies in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 21.

<sup>50</sup> Mary Grace Swift, “Dancers in Flames,” *Dance Chronicle* 5, no. 1 (1982): 1-10, at 8. For more on the eroticism of the nineteenth-century ballet girl, see John Elsom, *Erotic Theatre* (New York: Taplinger Publishing, 1974); and Tracy C. Davis, “The Actress in Victorian Pornography,” *Theatre Journal* 41, no. 3 (October 1989): 294-315.

of morality”—publicized the death of a female performer who caught fire on stage. An 1852 issue of *Gleason's* features a cover story introducing readers to Niblo's Garden in New York City. In stark contrast to the idealized picture of the theatre that accompanies it, the article mentions a dancer who “approached too near the foot-light. Her thin gauze dress became lighted at once, and before it could be entirely extinguished by the promptness of her companions upon the stage, the poor girl received sufficient injury to cause her death but a few days subsequent.”<sup>51</sup> It is almost as if *Gleason's*, despite its self-declared status as a “Family Paper,” cannot divorce the specter of the flaming ballerina from the story of Niblo's Garden itself.

Such anecdotes circulated in personal correspondence and daily conversation as well. In a letter to Kimball regarding a backdrop the manager wished to commission for the Boston Museum, scene painter Sam Stockwell reports that he recently witnessed a danseuse who “was nearly Burnt alive, but she will recover, being much better today. Imagine the scene[:] she rushed upon the stage in *flames*, the audience nearly jumped at her to put the fire out but every particle of clothing was consumed[,] exposing her to the crowd until covered and carried off. The rest of the spectators rushed out of the House *instantly*.”<sup>52</sup> By inviting Kimball to “imagine the scene,” Stockwell underscores the incident's spectacular character: a naked ballerina, stripped of her costume by the flames, and a stampede of spectators fleeing for their lives.

Dancers were not the only ones who courted physical danger on stage; all kinds of performers, including actors in melodramas, were vulnerable. A *New York Times* article

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<sup>51</sup> Frederick Gleason, “Niblo's Garden,” *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion*, 6 March 1852 (vol. 2, no. 10), 1.

<sup>52</sup> Sam Stockwell to Moses Kimball, 12 October 1852, Moses Kimball Papers, Boston Athenaeum. It is not clear from the correspondence whether Stockwell is describing the immolation mentioned in the March issue of *Gleason's Pictorial* (ibid.) or a different incident.

from 1874, titled “Narrow Escape of Actors,” exhibits the fascination inspired by mechanical mishaps generally. It describes several theatre accidents, including one involving a nearly homicidal error made by a property man in Portland, Oregon. Reportedly, he laced the faux whiskey in a production of *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* with poison by mistake, causing one actor to sicken and exit while his scene partner fell to the stage in a seizure.<sup>53</sup>

Another type of accident, which I call the procedural misstep, has to do with an actor’s lapse in judgment or skill and sometimes carries grave consequences. Such technical errors captivate audiences in unique ways. An extreme example of this type is the fatal mistake made by Angelo Chiarini, an acrobat in the Martinetti circus troupe during the mid-nineteenth century. In 1861, Chiarini fell from a tightrope during a performance in San Francisco and died the following day. One newspaper account detailed the tragedy moment by moment, focusing especially on how the performer’s body signaled the crisis:

As [Chiarini] started, he remarked that he feared he could not succeed. . . . He started slowly, halting every few steps, until arriving within fifteen paces of the Pavilion. On stopping at this point, the rope vibrated beneath his feet. The gymnast moved his pole quickly from side to side. The spectators became alarmed and excited, but he quickly recovered his equilibrium, and moved boldly forward. But just here he remarked, in a low voice, to those nearest him, “I’m gone,” and almost instantaneously fell,

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<sup>53</sup> “Narrow Escape of Actors,” *New York Times*, 21 March 1874, 10.

clinging for a moment to the rope. . . . and he fell to the ground, a mass of bleeding flesh and broken bones.<sup>54</sup>

The report's emphasis on how Chiarini grappled with and finally succumbed to the crisis reveals the critic's (and, presumably, the audience's) intense absorption as the event transpired.

Although procedural missteps are by no means intentional, they result from the performer's voluntary assumption of risk; in such cases, the actor has only himself to blame. In contrast, actors sometimes become victims of physiological failure: incidents involving internal systems of the body over which they have no control. This is when the actor literally dies before our eyes. One of the more famous examples of this type is the fatal hemorrhage suffered by Molière during a performance of *The Imaginary Invalid* in 1673; another is Edmund Kean's collapse on stage in 1833, when he was playing Othello to his son Charles's Iago. In neither case did the actor die instantly, but both events are usually included in historiographic inventories of deaths on stage.<sup>55</sup>

Upon entering a theatre, spectators make themselves vulnerable to damage as well, risking injury from fellow audience members or other unanticipated forces. I consider accidents affecting large numbers of people on both sides of the curtain (theatre fires, collapsing walls or roofs, riots, stampedes, terrorist attacks) to be structural disasters. Large-scale catastrophes in the theatre are relatively rare today, but during the nineteenth century they were always within the realm of possibility. Alan Read points out that the average lifespan of a theatre was only twenty-two years during the 1800s due to

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<sup>54</sup> "Serious Accident," *Daily Alta California (San Francisco)*, 29 November 1861, n.p. Russell Hartley Chronological Clipping Files, 1858-62 (folder: July-Dec. 1861), San Francisco Performing Arts Library and Museum.

<sup>55</sup> René Wren, "Players Who Died Acting," *Theatre Magazine* 30, no. 9 (1919): 166. An earlier but similar chronicle of stage fatalities is William Bates, "Actors Who Have Died on the Stage," *Notes and Queries* 4, no. 278 (1873): 338-40.

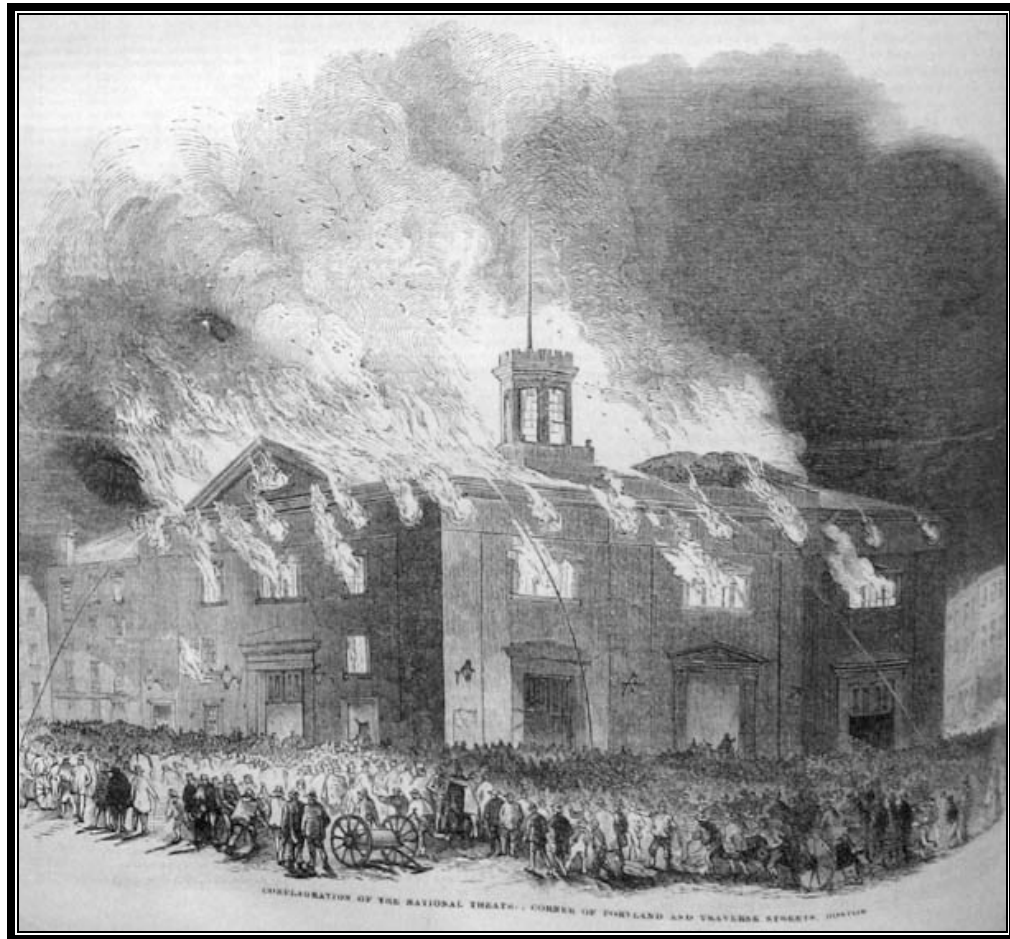
the incendiary nature of theatre practice and architecture; indeed, he asserts that the prevalence of fire deeply influenced the actor-audience contract: “It is the absence of fire from the contemporary theatre which marks it off from the past . . . Now the fire chief is on hand to rectify matters, the omniscient fire chief who is trained to treat the theatre like a hotel. But are the contracts of attendance the same?”<sup>56</sup> Theatre fires were widely publicized and discussed in early America. For example, *Gleason’s Pictorial* offered an elaborate picture of the burning of Boston’s National Theatre in 1852. **(Figure 2.)** The image depicts an enormous crowd watching the spectacle from the street, thereby emphasizing the communal nature of such events. The accompanying article invokes the paradoxical sensations generated by the scene, stating, “It was most intense and beautiful, and lit the entire sky from horizon to horizon.”<sup>57</sup> Although *Gleason’s* describes the incident as a public “calamity,” theatre fires were read in diverse ways; Americans who considered the theatre immoral, for instance, interpreted them as signs of God’s disapproval. In sum, because fires regularly consumed theatres—sometimes resulting in significant losses of life—show business was, quite simply, a dangerous endeavor.

I suggest that the risks associated with performing and witnessing in the theatre deeply informed nineteenth-century spectators’ horizon of expectations. Evidence of this fear may be found in published texts from the period as well as mementos assembled within the home. For example, a scrapbook dating from the 1870s in Stanford University’s Special Collections provides evidence of how stage accidents played a role

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<sup>56</sup> Alan Read, *Theatre and Everyday Life: An Ethics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1995), 216. See also Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 77-78.

<sup>57</sup> Frederick Gleason, “Burning of the National Theatre,” *Gleason’s Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion* 2, no. 19: 296.



**Figure 2.**

“Conflagration of the National Theatre.” *Gleason’s Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion* 2, no. 19 (1852): 296. Courtesy of the Boston Athenaeum.

in a patron's memories of the theatre. As would be expected in a scrapbook tracking an (unidentified) individual's theatre experiences, it features a number of playbills and newspaper reviews of New York City productions, sometimes with notes and personal impressions scrawled in the margins. But materials related to theatre accidents, fires, and deaths punctuate the pages as well. It chronicles the devastating destruction by fire of the Brooklyn Theatre in December 1876, in which more than 300 people died. The theatregoer painstakingly documented the disaster and its aftermath by culling articles from multiple newspapers.<sup>58</sup> The scrapbook also includes clippings related to two deadly incidents in 1865: a color illustration and article about the burning of Barnum's American Museum, and a series of articles about the assassination of Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theatre.<sup>59</sup>

The potential for mechanical mishaps, procedural missteps, physiological failures, and structural disasters meant that spectators put themselves at risk by watching actors at risk. I have created this taxonomy in order to show how the threat of injury and death haunted the nineteenth-century theatre experience generally.<sup>60</sup> I acknowledge that an audience's perception of danger is not always a given and varies according to context.

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<sup>58</sup> The Brooklyn Theatre disaster receives a lengthy mention in the biography of Augustin Daly written by his brother Joseph—suggesting that this incident specifically, and the threat of fire generally, haunted the collective memory (*Life of Augustin Daly*, 223-24).

<sup>59</sup> Box 7, scrapbook 8, vol. 2, Samuel Stark Scrapbook Collection, 1860-1950, Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University. Unfortunately, the provenance of this scrapbook is uncertain, so it is not clear where the owner lived. However, a significant proportion of the playbills are from New York City theatres, suggesting that he or she participated in that city's theatre culture for a significant period of time.

<sup>60</sup> Michael Booth suggests that the scale and complexity of sensation scenes distracted the audience and diminished the attention paid to actors (*Victorian Spectacular Theatre*, 27). Although this is a possibility, I believe it is not the case when the actor/character's safety seems to be at stake, because at such times a spectator's awareness shifts urgently from the actor-as-character toward the actor-as-human. These tensions are most likely to reach a fever pitch, I suggest, during a spectacular instant.

When a scene seems to be going well, or the elements involved (scenery, choreography, and so forth) appear to be innocuous, spectators are less concerned about the performers' safety as well as their own. However, I propose that heightened moments like sensation scenes—when various scenic elements and machinery threaten the actor—are uniquely capable of arousing and intensifying our sense of his or her vulnerability.

Actors' flirtations with danger indelibly shaped the dramaturgy of nineteenth-century sensation scenes. In *Melodrama and Modernity*, Ben Singer explores ten-twenty-three melodramas popular at the turn of the twentieth century, noting that the potential for accidents and injury were part of the thrill. To support this assertion, Singer relates a story told by the producer A. H. Woods, who once staged a dramatic rescue involving a burning building. Woods explains that at first, audiences did not respond to the elaborate reproduction of the fire; but when the producers added an effect that drew attention to the actors' safety wires (which were deliberately designed to look tenuous), the audience finally responded. Singer concludes, "The thrill only became truly a thrill when the producers were able to convince the audience there was in fact some real danger . . . The effect was sensational not because it reproduced a convincing diegesis but, in a certain sense, precisely because it did not."<sup>61</sup> Baz Kershaw, describing a moment in the film *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928) when Buster Keaton narrowly misses being hit by a falling wall, makes a similar point when he writes, "The utter vulnerability on display is heightened because the distance between Keaton and his character collapses with the wall. . . . In more general terms, human mortality immortalizes itself in the moment of

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<sup>61</sup> Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 186. Singer's source for A. H. Woods's story is "Producing Spine-Thrillers," *Literary Digest* 45, no. 6 (10 August 1912): 222-23.

spectacle, and the spectator sees this paradoxical process as it is happening.”<sup>62</sup> In short, the exhibition of vulnerability is what makes spectacle so appealing for audiences.

Essentially, I am arguing that the body in extremity is the reason why spectacle is spectacle; or to put it another way, *the body in extremity is what makes the scene spectacular*. The dazzle of visual effects, the cacophony of crisis, and the chaos of movement all contribute to the scale and intensity of the spectacular instant; but impressive stage technology is not enough. A situation, to be unequivocally sensational, requires a virtual/actual body experiencing fictional/factual peril. The burning building in Dion Boucicault’s *The Poor of New York*, the raging river in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and the rushing train in Augustin Daly’s *Under the Gaslight* engage our interest; but Badger’s charred body dragged from the inferno, Eliza’s teetering on the ice floes, and Snorkey saved from the railroad tracks in the nick of time are what thrill our senses. Davis contends that the frequent appearance of disabled bodies in film (he cites *Rainman*, *My Left Foot*, *Elephant Man*, *Children of a Lesser God*, and *Mask*, among many other examples) betrays a widespread fascination with extraordinary bodies that, he believes, also explains cinema’s heavy reliance sex and violence: “While it is fashionable for liberals to decry the violent content in films, and conservatives to decry the sexual, it might be more accurate for them to think of films as vehicles for the delivery of images of the body in extreme circumstances.”<sup>63</sup> The apparent obsession with bodies in extremity in both melodrama and film may be further evidence of the close ties between the two genres.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Kershaw, “Curiosity or Contempt,” 599.

<sup>63</sup> Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 153.

<sup>64</sup> Numerous studies examine the historical and aesthetic relationship between melodrama and film. See, for example, Christine Gledhill, *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film* (London: BFI Publications, 1987); Robert Lang, *American Film Melodrama: Griffith, Vidor, Minnelli* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Jacky

Comparing live performance and cinema, Kershaw suggests that the former cannot generate tension to the same degree as the latter, because the aesthetic techniques unique to film heighten the viewer's sense of danger by bridging the gap between actor and spectator. Discussing nineteenth-century theatre specifically, he asserts that the proscenium stage, which forced spectacle behind a frame, restricted its power to thrill. Allegedly, this act of enclosure, paired with the practice of darkening the auditorium, helped to transform the spectator from an active, unpredictable participant into a docile, invisible voyeur.<sup>65</sup>

I would counter, however, that the visceral nature of performance narrows the gap even more effectively than film does. An ephemeral event that transpires in real time, theatre is unpredictable, irrevocable, and prone to accidents and mistakes. Spectators are always aware of the actor's vulnerability because the performance is live, unedited, and occurring before their eyes. Jill Dolan has argued that these aspects give performance a unique potential for activism: "The actor's willing vulnerability perhaps enables our own and prompts us toward compassion and greater understanding. Such sentiments can spur emotion, and being moved emotionally is a necessary precursor to political movement."<sup>66</sup> In the next section, I assess the intuitive operations of audience response in an effort to illuminate this point.

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Bratton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill, eds., *Melodrama: Stage Picture Screen* (London: British Film Institute, 1994); Nick Browne, ed., *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*.

<sup>65</sup> Kershaw, "Curiosity or Contempt," 603. Lawrence W. Levine examines this transformation in American spectatorship over the course of the nineteenth century in *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>66</sup> Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 41.

**The Body *at* the Spectacle: The Audience**

The *spec* in spectacle suggests that visibility is its defining feature: it is something we see, something we watch. Presumably, the visual elements of excessive displays assault the *spectator* more than other types of sensory input. Since we may watch from afar, acts of seeing are often associated with remove. Unlike a tasting, smelling, and/or touching body, which cannot perceive its subject without close proximity, the seeing and/or hearing body may remain relatively passive. The problem of spectator passivity has concerned a variety of practitioners and theorists (Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht, among others) who harbor misgivings about disengaged modes of spectatorship. The deconstructionist de-emphasis of sight in Augusto Boal's conception of the *spectator*, for example, underscores the assumption that dramatic performance is first and foremost an ocular experience, and that realism's hypnotic hypervisuality inoculates the audience's desire for social and political action.<sup>67</sup> Brechtian theories and dramaturgies assume that a "distanced" spectator has the most potential to think critically about what he sees and, perhaps, take action in the world outside the theatre's walls. But as Bruce McConachie observes, "By itself, the idea of the distanced spectator provides no magic key to unlocking the problem of audience response and political action."<sup>68</sup> To a degree, critiques of mimetic practice made by radical theatre-makers and their scholarly affiliates have hindered discussion about spectacle's operations and power.

In contrast, I suggest that if we move beyond a purely ocular conception of spectacle, we might achieve a more nuanced understanding of sensationalism and its impact, because spectacle's systems of relation—scale, intensity, excess—engage the

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<sup>67</sup> Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. McBride and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (New York: Urizen Books, 1979).

<sup>68</sup> McConachie, "Catharsis and the Materiality of Spectatorship," 96.

viewer through senses other than sight. As Stanton B. Garner writes, “The embodied *I* of theatrical spectatorship is grounded, one might say, in an embodied *eye*”; so I want to attend to the somatic experience of reception, especially during the spectacular instant.<sup>69</sup> Specifically, I propose that the spectacular instant has a unique efficacy because of its rigorous stimulation of the senses. The emergence of the phrase “sensation scene” in the 1860s and its heavy use in theatrical advertising suggest that patrons actively sought the bodily sensations (literally, the thrills and chills) that melodrama offered. Tom Gunning asserts, “The new theatrical use of the term targets the spectator as the key in this modernization of melodrama, focusing on the effect of the scene, its powerful assault on the senses of the audience.”<sup>70</sup> I believe these affective moments have something in common with Dolan’s “utopian performative”—a heightened state of being, awareness, and collectivity.<sup>71</sup> To test this hypothesis, I would like to imagine how this state (one that is usually, but not always, pleasurable) registers and manifests in the body. People are more than mere biological beings, of course; they are always situated locally, culturally, and historically. But by thinking about the body-as-object—its materiality and physical processes—I suggest we can understand better the body-as-culture.

John Tambornino’s assessment of the recent “corporeal turn” in philosophic and political thought can serve as a springboard for a reception theory that considers spectators’ bodies in space and time. Essentially, Tambornino contends that because the body serves as the foundation of being, feeling, and cognition, we need methodologies that account for its experiences. He writes, “The knowing subject—situated, myopic,

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<sup>69</sup> Garner, *Bodied Spaces*, 4 (his emphasis).

<sup>70</sup> Gunning, “Horror of Opacity,” 52.

<sup>71</sup> Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*. See also Marvin Carlson, “The Eternal Instant: Some Thoughts on Theatre and Religion,” *Assaph* 14 (1997): 33-44.

affective, and short-lived—is crucially embodied. Its body influences its acquisition of knowledge, and . . . acquiring knowledge influences its body, which complicates things greatly.” He strongly emphasizes, however, that the body responds to the world ambivalently. Its perceptions, sensations, and reactions are always multi-layered and paradoxical, “not fully understood by us and yet . . . involved in our thinking and acting.” Culture, working through the subject, works to resolve these conflicts—indeed, it demands that they be resolved.<sup>72</sup>

In a discussion of normality and social conventions, Tambornino offers some interesting ideas regarding excess.<sup>73</sup> Like Adams, who suggests that freaks embody the “unbearable excess” we abandon in our pursuit to be ordinary, Tambornino describes identity formation as a decision-making process in which I separate what “I” am from what “I” am not: “Given its abundance and complexity, the body *exceeds* identity, possessing attributes and capacities that are subordinated, occluded, or viewed as less essential to us. Identity is more selective and narrow, consisting of those aspects of the self that are foregrounded, willfully and confidently presented as ‘I.’” He further suggests that cultural attitudes and values impose themselves on the excessive body, questioning and molding its contours.<sup>74</sup> I would add that cultural production (including theatrical performance) participates in these processes of self-making by offering alternative models of embodiment.

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<sup>72</sup> John Tambornino, *The Corporeal Turn: Passion, Necessity, Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 78 and 41.

<sup>73</sup> Tambornino principally uses the word “morality” in his discussion, but his characterization of the term—an accepted set of conventions that help to establish norms, usually through the excision of excess—is akin to the way I use “normality” and “normalcy” in this project. He writes, “Morality often involves distinguishing nature from mere convention, that which is universal and permanent from that which is merely local and provisional, and those matters on which we expect convergence from those on which we allow divergence” (ibid., 123).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 83 (his emphasis) and 85.

Scholars participating in this “corporeal turn” in theory have suggested that discussions of the sensing body must include an inventory of *affect*: a contested term that has been employed in disparate ways. Historians typically describe nineteenth-century culture as sentimental or “affective,” so a consideration of affect would seem not only appropriate but also crucial within that context. Brian Massumi, Charles Altieri, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank have discussed affect’s connection to the body, its role in perception, and its relationship to emotion. I do not necessarily espouse one theory over the others, although I see different strengths in each. Rather, I would like to engage all of them because, collectively, they reveal an important dimension of spectator response.

We know from our own experiences of our bodies that they are always moving. Our hearts beat, our lungs breathe, and countless other biological processes transpire independently of consciousness or thought. Using this material framework, Brian Massumi argues that affect is, essentially, an intensity that is both unequivocally involuntary and utterly corporeal. In other words: unlike emotion, which is circumscribed by culture, affect is autonomous. When aroused, it is sensed and then analyzed by the thinking subject, at which point he or she identifies the feeling as sensation and/or emotion. He asserts, “Formed, qualified, situated perceptions and cognitions fulfilling functions of actual connection or blockage are the capture and closure of affect. Emotion is the most intense (most contracted) expression of that *capture*—and of the fact that something has always and again escaped.”<sup>75</sup> At once virtual and material, affect, in Massumi’s view, facilitates a sheerness of experience that when perceived and analyzed can be translated into thought, action, or movement.

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<sup>75</sup> Massumi, *Parables*, 35 (his emphasis).

In marked contrast, Charles Altieri equates affects (deliberately plural in his theory) with emotional states. Affects, he argues, come in four types: moods, emotions, passions, and feelings. Atmospheric in character, moods gently and generally color experience and serve as a kind of backdrop for our engagement with the world. Emotions are more explicit, in that the subject, upon experiencing an emotion, sees herself within a larger story or narrative; therefore, perceptions of cause-and-effect play an integral role. Passions, on the other hand, are emotions at their most extreme, and associated with high-stakes situations. Finally, feelings—which Altieri describes as “elemental affective states characterized by an imaginative engagement in the immediate processes of sensation”—result when a subject perceives and then interprets bodily sensations.<sup>76</sup> Although these affective quadrants allow for different degrees of response, Altieri conflates affect and emotion in ways that do not necessarily distinguish them from reactions informed by cultural norms. Altieri’s “mood” has most in common with Massumi’s “affect,” but the two conceptions differ in one crucial respect: the latter varies in intensity depending on the circumstances, whereas the former is relatively stable and mild.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank strike a balance between these two models by way of Silvan Tomkins, a psychologist who contends that several innate affects drive the motivational system.<sup>77</sup> Tomkins challenges the assumption that bodily drives (breathing, thirst, hunger, and so forth) are the engines of all human action, arguing instead that affects inform these routines at an even deeper level. To put it

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<sup>76</sup> Altieri, *Particulars*, 2.

<sup>77</sup> Sedgwick and Frank, eds., *Shame and Its Sisters*. Tomkins’s nine affects are as follows: interest → excitement; enjoyment → joy; surprise → startle; distress → anguish; fear → terror; anger → rage; shame → humiliation; “dismell” [contempt] → disgust.

another way, our “needs,” in and of themselves, do not drive us—rather, the affective system’s *interpretation* of needs prompts action and reaction:

the affect mechanism [is] a separate but amplifying co-assembly [to the drive system]. . . . the panic of one who experiences the suffocation of interruption of his vital air supply has nothing to do with the anoxic drive signal per se [since slow suffocation does not produce panic]. A human being could be, and often is, terrified about anything under the sun. It was a short step to see that excitement had nothing per se to do with sexuality or with hunger, and that the apparent urgency of the drive system was borrowed from its co-assembly with appropriate affects as necessary amplifiers.<sup>78</sup>

By emphasizing affects in lieu of drives, Tomkins presents an intriguing alternative to Freudian interpretations of human behavior.

I would like to underscore three ideas that seem to stand out in these discussions and inform my own understanding of the body at the spectacle. First, affect is a vibrant, sensational, palpable response to stimuli. Second, the motivational character of affect lends it a unique kind of urgency and efficacy. Third, emotion succeeds rather than precedes affect, because it is felt and interpreted through a multifaceted lens of personal, social, and cultural values. I contend that these conceptions of affect, emotion, and their interdependence illuminate how and why spectators report feelings of palpability and collectivity in the theatre. Furthermore, by identifying the ways in which social ideology

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<sup>78</sup> Silvan S. Tomkins, “The Quest for Primary Motives: Biography and Autobiography of an Idea,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 41, no. 2 (1981): 306-29, at 309. Also quoted in Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 20-21.

influences “emotion,” we can construct possible readings of performance by taking into account the cultural conventions that circulated during a particular historical moment.

In addition, if we concede that human beings have an affective system in common, then affect’s role in generating a palpable sense of community becomes clearer. Dolan argues that during such moments of collectivity, “audiences feel themselves allied with each other, and with a broader, more capacious sense of a public, in which social discourse articulates the possible, rather than the insurmountable obstacles to human potential.” She suggests that in the theatre, these instances sometimes reveal “affective visions” of better worlds rooted in feeling rather than programs of action.<sup>79</sup> States, writing from a phenomenological point of view, has also touched upon this idea:

Theater is the one place where society collects in order to look in upon itself as a third-personal other. Beneath all of the possible explanations of theater’s usefulness as an image of man, there is this basic consubstantiality of form between its subject and its process. Theater . . . is a means of looking objectively at the subjective life of the race as something prepared for the community out of the substance of its own body.<sup>80</sup>

Altieri argues that this phenomenon explains why spectators report feeling *moved* (changed, affected, transformed) as a result of an aesthetic or artistic experience: “We find ourselves invited to try out various attitudes toward valuing what we encounter, and, more important, we find some of those provisional identifications eliciting our own

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<sup>79</sup> Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 2, 6, and 19.

<sup>80</sup> States, *Great Reckonings*, 37.

passionate investments and clarifying paths they might take beyond the work of art. That is what brings the aesthetic into the existential.”<sup>81</sup>

Of course, affect’s impact depends on the context. When a spectator feels and then examines her somatic response to performance, she does so using multiple lenses—the situation, the moment, and the culture of which she is a part—then transforms the feeling into recognizable values that sustain, challenge, or complicate those with which she previously identified. Plus, affect is not always efficacious: we often judge, repress, reject, or subvert what we feel. Indeed, Tomkins credits the affective system for “the extraordinary competence and freedom of the human organism.” But affect also boasts a unique potential for efficacy within the motivational system, as he argues.<sup>82</sup>

In the following chapters, I explore how affect is mobilized through spectacle for conservative, radical, or even ambiguous ends. To explain this point, I will briefly introduce a portrayal of the body that serves as the center of the next chapter: the *delirium tremens* scene in nineteenth-century temperance melodrama. The trembling, tortured, excessive drunkard suffering from the DTs bears a striking similarity to other grotesque icons, such as the person possessed by a demon or an epileptic suffering from a seizure. And yet, this corporeal representation invites different interpretations depending on how, when, and where the spectator perceives it. Umberto Eco, drawing on C. S. Peirce, underscores this idea in his theory of ostension: when the alcoholic is prostrate on the sidewalk, he’s a drunk; when the Salvation Army puts him on a platform, he’s a message.<sup>83</sup> If we see an actor seizing in a temperance play, we recognize the event as the

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<sup>81</sup> Altieri, *Particulars*, 24.

<sup>82</sup> Sedgwick and Frank, eds., *Shame and Its Sisters*, 38.

<sup>83</sup> Umberto Eco, “Semiotics of Theatrical Performance,” *The Drama Review* 21, no. 1 (March 1977): 107-17.

DTs and read it as an admonishment of profligate drinking. In contrast, the pathologized (disabled) body invites compassion rather than condemnation. However, both readings are historically contingent: the nineteenth-century freak show encouraged the spectator to look squarely at abnormal bodies and be entertained, whereas today's cultural norms require the onlooker to react sympathetically and look away.

In sum, I argue that the spectacular instant harbors a unique potential to generate affect and collectivity. Its intense, cumulative qualities demand the viewer's attention and call forth his affective response. Tom Gunning, discussing the gruesome Grand Guignol dramas of André de Lorde in late-nineteenth-century France, seems to disagree with this contention, asserting that sensational displays elicit somatic reactions that inhibit understanding: "The sensation drama addresses itself directly to the body and senses. It is physical and emotional sensation rather than moral cognition that counts."<sup>84</sup> However, I suggest that the autonomy of affect gives the spectacular instant a unique potential to articulate ideas and values—whether conservative, progressive, or somewhere in between.

### **Dénouement: The Pitfalls and Potentials of Biologism**

A theory that assumes some truths reside in the body is not without problems. All too frequently in American culture, people are unfairly classified in terms of physical difference. During much of the 1800s, science and other allegedly objective approaches to the study of human beings helped to perpetuate racism, sexism, homophobia, and similar exclusionary practices.<sup>85</sup> Class distinctions were also biologized during this

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<sup>84</sup> Gunning, "Horror of Opacity," 52.

<sup>85</sup> Carolyn Sorisio, among others, has explored how nineteenth-century scientific discourse constructed female and mixed-race bodies as sites of sexual inadequacy and/or danger (*Fleshing Out America*).

period. As Lawrence W. Levine points out, the terms “highbrow” and “lowbrow” derived from phrenology, which associated refinement with high (white, male) foreheads and commonness with low (presumably, African and/or Irish) foreheads.<sup>86</sup> Unfortunately, physiological conceptions of the body continue to influence theories of differentiation. Even today, the search for genetic predictors of sexual orientation evidences the enduring desire to find biological explanations for unbearable excess.

But when broached with caution and care, the material realities of human bodies can fruitfully inform our engagement with theory and history. Although postmodern thought tends to preclude considerations of biology, Sedgwick and Frank point out that this forecloses on important opportunities:

We have no interest whatever in minimizing the continuing history of racist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise abusive biologisms, or the urgency of the exposures of them, that have made the gravamen of so many contemporary projects of critique. At the same time, we fear, with the installation of an *automatic* anti-biologism as the unshifting central tenet of “theory,” the loss of conceptual access to an entire thought realm.

Ultimately, they argue that the discrediting of affect is as reductive a practice as the naturalization of Otherness, which postmodernism worked so rigorously to debunk.<sup>87</sup>

Responding to this call, in this dissertation I imagine how performance works on the spectator: how an actor, inhabiting both a real and a virtual body, triggers the creatural bond that exists between him and his audience. Throughout this chapter I have attempted to show how the body as/in/at the spectacle serves as an epicenter of sensation,

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<sup>86</sup> Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 221-22.

<sup>87</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 108-14. Quotation on 108 (their emphasis).

affect, and meaning. This theory of reception frames my understanding of sensation scenes as reflections, appropriations, and rejections of cultural ideology.

Scaring the Deviance Out of You:  
The *Delirium Tremens* in Antebellum Temperance Entertainment

The possessor of It keeps a precarious balance between . . . mutually exclusive alternatives, suspended at the tipping point like a tightrope dancer on one foot; and the empathic tension of waiting for the apparently inevitable fall makes for breathless spectatorship.

—Joseph Roach, *It*<sup>1</sup>

Time would fail to enumerate the many habits that, acquired and indulged, mar the beauty and destroy the symmetry of the true man.

—John B. Gough, *Platform Echoes*<sup>2</sup>

As intersections of activism and performance, nineteenth-century moral reform melodramas—featuring explicit or implicit references to temperance, abolition, suffrage, and other issues—comprise an important subgenre. In them, sensationalism meets advocacy; entertainment and politics collide. But this chapter, like subsequent ones, does not center on a moral reform drama *per se* but rather a spectacular instant: a sensational, affective representation that recycles, reiterates, and re-imagines ideas in circulation. The *delirium tremens* scene in temperance melodrama, during which the protagonist experiences an intense psychotic episode, is a case in point. The DTs (sometimes called *mania a potu* by early American physicians) was described and enacted in a wide variety of venues, ranging from theatres to lecture halls to medical literature. Of course,

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<sup>1</sup> Roach, *It*, 8.

<sup>2</sup> John B. Gough, *Platform Echoes: Or, Living Truths for Head and Heart*, with an introduction by Rev. Lyman Abbott (Hartford, CT: A. D. Worthington, 1886), 83-84.

reformers employed other images to advance the cause, especially dystopian visions of the drunkard's family and home, and temperance plays use these tropes to great effect. But due to its spectacular character, the *delirium tremens* also became an obligatory element of temperance melodrama's dramaturgical formula. Therefore, I examine it and its cultural permutations in more detail than previous scholars have elected to do.

I choose the DTs as my first case study for two reasons. Because this theatrical representation relied exclusively on the actor and his body, I believe it offers a unique opportunity to understand the corporeal dynamism of the spectacular instant. But beyond this theoretical concern, I argue that dipsomania, both as actual disorder and theatrical spectacle, strongly reflected prescriptions of normality and self-discipline that emerged in the U.S. during the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> In harnessing its grotesque power, dramatists, performers, and activists implicitly reinforced the orderly and efficient body privileged by "respectable" individuals in the urban centers of the East.

In other words, I explore the "mania" in dipsomania; the drunkard as maniac. Medical texts from the period suggest that physicians and asylum administrators considered the DTs to be, essentially, a temporary episode of insanity. As such, it represented a disturbing and horrifying departure from the norm. To understand how spectators perceived and understood this disorder during the 1840s, I analyze selected texts by Benjamin Rush, Pliny Earle, and Edward Jarvis, who conceive and describe the *delirium tremens* as a brief and eminently curable illness. These writings reveal how early American physicians theorized alcohol-induced maladies. I then examine how insanity is an ominous, omnipresent threat in *The Drunkard; or, The Fallen Saved*, a temperance

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<sup>3</sup> As I describe in the previous chapter, Michel Foucault's theories about bodily and behavioral discipline during the nineteenth century deeply inform my analysis, as does the work of Rachel Adams, Lennard J. Davis, Leslie A. Fiedler, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, and others who have discussed the ways in which disabled bodies canonize the normal body.

melodrama written by the actor and reformed inebriate W. H. Smith and an anonymous collaborator (probably Rev. John Pierpont).<sup>4</sup> First produced by Moses Kimball at the Boston Museum in 1844, it became, in Bruce A. McConachie's words, "the model for most subsequent dramas of dipsomania" and inspired many imitations.<sup>5</sup> As such, it is uniquely eligible as a case study of antebellum temperance entertainment. Insanity materializes most sensationally during the *delirium tremens* scene in Act IV, but it also plagues Agnes, the designated "maniac" in the cast of characters. She wanders aimlessly and incoherently throughout the play before recovering her wits in the end. Despite Agnes's prominence in the story, theatre historians who have studied *The Drunkard* generally overlook her presence and actions, focusing instead on the protagonist's impact on his wife and children. I maintain that this collective oversight has hindered a full and nuanced understanding of the play and perhaps temperance melodrama as a genre.

I reiterate, however, that my investigation centers not on *The Drunkard*, but rather the drunkard: the aberrant male inebriate who, in many ways, constitutes a spectacle in himself. To that end, I examine the meteoric career of John B. Gough, a temperance lecturer who (like Smith) was a former alcoholic, and whose notoriety derived, in part, from his dramatic depictions of the DTs. Despite his enormous popularity during his lifetime, Gough has received relatively little attention from theatre historians.<sup>6</sup> His

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<sup>4</sup> For more on Pierpont's possible involvement in *The Drunkard*, see Frick, *Theatre, Culture, and Temperance Reform*, 116-18; and Amy E. Hughes, "Answering the Amusement Question: Antebellum Temperance Drama and the Christian Endorsement of Leisure," *New England Theatre Journal* 15 (2004): 1-19.

<sup>5</sup> McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 178.

<sup>6</sup> As John W. Crowley has noted, the few extant biographies of Gough, written during the period 1892 to 1930, were intended for mass or young audiences and "are, in effect, hagiographies" ["Slaves to the Bottle: Gough's Autobiography and Douglass's Narrative," in *The Serpent in the Cup: Temperance in American Literature*, ed. David S. Reynolds and Debra J. Rosenthal (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 115-35, at 135 n. 38]. Graham Warder has made important headway in the effort to recover Gough by devoting two chapters to the lecturer in his unpublished dissertation, "Selling Sobriety: How Temperance Reshaped

phenomenal rise to fame occurred in the Boston region immediately prior to and alongside of *The Drunkard*, which indicates that Smith's drama did not emerge from a vacuum but rather reflected and interacted with Gough's solo performances. I explain some of the ways that the public mythology of Gough and his lectures resonate in America's most successful temperance drama.

I conclude by offering some thoughts about how the *delirium tremens* sequence potentially illuminates a longstanding question in temperance historiography: was the reform movement conservative or progressive, traditionalist or visionary, disciplinary or sympathetic? To explore this question, I draw on a theory advanced by psychologist Jonathan Haidt regarding the "moral foundations" of decision-making, which I believe offers a reading of temperance activism that is more careful and complex than the conservative/progressive binary can afford.

### **Historiography and *The Drunkard*: A Focus on the Family**

Historians of the U.S. temperance movement offer a variety of explanations for its emergence during the nineteenth century, including the greater availability of alcohol, especially hard liquors (or "ardent spirits"); the pressures of urbanization resulting from the growth of cities; changes in labor practices, such as the shift from an apprenticeship-based work environment to a more industrial model; and the religious spirit and optimism fueled by the Second Great Awakening, which emphasized the perfectibility of man as well as the nation.<sup>7</sup> Such changes fostered anxieties about social order and discipline, standards of respectability, and the stability of the traditional family unit.

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Culture in Antebellum America" (PhD diss., University of Massachusetts-Amherst, 2000), 108-220.

<sup>7</sup> The literature on temperance reform is substantial, especially regarding prohibitionist activity after the Civil War and during the early twentieth century. Since I am interested in early renditions of the *delirium tremens* on stage, particularly during the 1840s, for the purposes of this

These assertions have deeply informed theatre historiography, with most scholarship on temperance melodrama concentrating on the ways in which it depicts home and hearth. In one of the earliest studies, Michael Booth acknowledges that “the wretchedness of the drunkard” reinforced “the morality of temperance sentiments”; but he ultimately asserts that the “suffering of his wife and children” illustrates the moral most strongly. In a subsequent article, Judith N. McArthur focuses on the victimization of women and children in three pre-Civil War dramas, including *The Drunkard*. McConachie argues that in moral reform melodramas “families are the victims”; he highlights how bourgeois values inform the characters, settings, and themes of *The Drunkard* by focusing on the drunkard’s wife and the material manifestations of the family’s decline. In the most comprehensive exploration of the genre published to date, John W. Frick asserts that “fear for the integrity of the nuclear family was especially prominent on reformers’ lists of concerns” and addresses that issue first and foremost in his analysis of themes embedded in temperance drama.<sup>8</sup>

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study I concentrate on temperance activism during the antebellum period. Representative scholarship focusing (in whole or in part) on these early efforts include Joseph R. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963); W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Ian R. Tyrrell, *Sobering Up: From Temperance to Prohibition in Antebellum America, 1800-1860* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979); Mark Edward Lender and James Kirby Martin, *Drinking in America: A History* (New York: Free Press, 1982); Jack S. Blocker, Jr., *American Temperance Movements: Cycles of Reform* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989); Leonard U. Blumberg and William L. Pittman, *Beware the First Drink! The Washington Temperance Movement and Alcoholics Anonymous* (Seattle: Glen Abbey Books, 1991); and Steven Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers: America’s Pre-Civil War Reformers* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> Michael R. Booth, “The Drunkard’s Progress: Nineteenth-Century Temperance Drama,” *Dalhousie Review* 44 (1964): 205-12, at 211; Judith N. McArthur, “Demon Rum on the Boards: Temperance Melodrama and the Tradition of Antebellum Reform,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 9 (Winter 1989): 517-40, especially 533-39; McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 184; Frick, *Theatre, Culture, and Temperance Reform*, 68-71. See also Geoffrey S. Proehl, *Coming Home Again: American Family Drama and the Figure of the Prodigal* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), 58.

The family is, indeed, a lightning rod for anxiety in *The Drunkard*. The worsening financial circumstances of the protagonist, Edward Middleton, are indicated visually through sets and costumes. His wife Mary is forced to engage in menial labor when her husband leaves her and their daughter, a predicament that leads one character to declare, “O, she is low, degraded! She sank so far as to take in washing, to feed herself and child.”<sup>9</sup> This state of affairs also makes Mary vulnerable to bodily violation. When she moves to Boston to search for her wayward husband, the villain of the drama, Lawyer Cribbs, visits her and attempts to take Middleton’s place. He tries to convince her that her husband has been unfaithful, but Mary refuses to believe Cribbs, accusing him of slander. He retorts angrily, “Nay, then, proud beauty, you shall know my power—’tis late, you are unfriended, helpless, and thus: (*He seizes her, child screams*)”—at which point, William (Middleton’s friend and sidekick) enters, just in time to rescue her (37). But despite these trials and tribulations, including a suicide attempt by the protagonist, the fallen Middleton is eventually saved and returns home. The play’s final tableau conveys that all is right in the world: the reformed drunkard, wife, and child pray, sing, and engage in household activities together (50).

Family-oriented iconography proliferated in temperance culture, appearing in illustrations, lithographs, and ephemera. The family’s prevalence in these products suggests that activists routinely employed domestic imagery to advance their cause. Using strategies of juxtaposition, they encouraged citizens to visualize the spectacle of indulgence as well as the benefits of abstinence. *The Bottle* (1847) by British graphic artist George Cruikshank is perhaps the most recognizable nineteenth-century depiction of the inebriate’s decline and its effect on the family. *The Bottle* operates through

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<sup>9</sup> W. H. Smith, *The Drunkard; or, The Fallen Saved!* (1844; Boston: Jones’s Publishing House, 1847), 33. Subsequent page references to the play will be indicated parenthetically.

comparison and contrast: the first frame, picturing a tranquil and solvent middle-class home, functions as a barometer against which later scenes of depravity are measured: as the husband and wife's drinking habit worsens, the well-appointed room is raided and rendered bare by creditors.

Prior to *The Bottle*, N. Currier—the New York City lithography firm that eventually transformed into Currier & Ives, a leading distributor of prints for the popular market—issued *The Drunkard's Progress: From the First Glass to the Grave* (1846).<sup>10</sup> **(Figure 3.)** In it, representations of a young man in different stages of intoxication occupy each step of a triangle-shaped staircase. Beneath it, a forlorn woman and child (presumably, the family that the drunkard has abandoned) walk away from a dilapidated house toward an unknown destination. The lithograph's title deliberately invokes *The Rake's Progress* (1732-33), a series of eight paintings by William Hogarth detailing a young man's escalating debauchery. But in contrast to the episodic, theatrical dramaturgy of both Hogarth's *Progress* and Cruikshank's *Bottle*, the Currier print is more allegorical.

Illuminated temperance pledge cards, such as the one issued by Rev. Theobald Mathew's Total Abstinence Society (TAS) during the early 1840s, allowed consumers literally to put the spectacle in their pockets.<sup>11</sup> **(Figure 4.)** Signed by both recipient and administrator, pledge cards engaged their audiences on many levels. They were souvenirs of oath taking and the eminent person who facilitated the act (in this case, the Irish

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<sup>10</sup> For more on the mass-market influence of this American printer, which proudly provided "Colored Engravings for the People," see Harry T. Peters, *Currier and Ives: Printmakers to the American People* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1942); Bryan F. Le Beau, *Currier & Ives: America Imagined* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001); and Peter C. Marzio, "Lithography as a Democratic Art: A Reappraisal," *Leonardo* 4, no. 1 (Winter 1971): 37-48.

<sup>11</sup> Although now housed in the New-York Historical Society's collection, this particular card was probably distributed and signed in Ireland. It is dated 19 January 1845, and Father Mathew's first visit to the United States occurred in 1849.



**Figure 3.**  
*The Drunkard's Progress: From the First Glass to the Grave.* N. Currier, 1846.  
Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, LC-USZC4-1629.



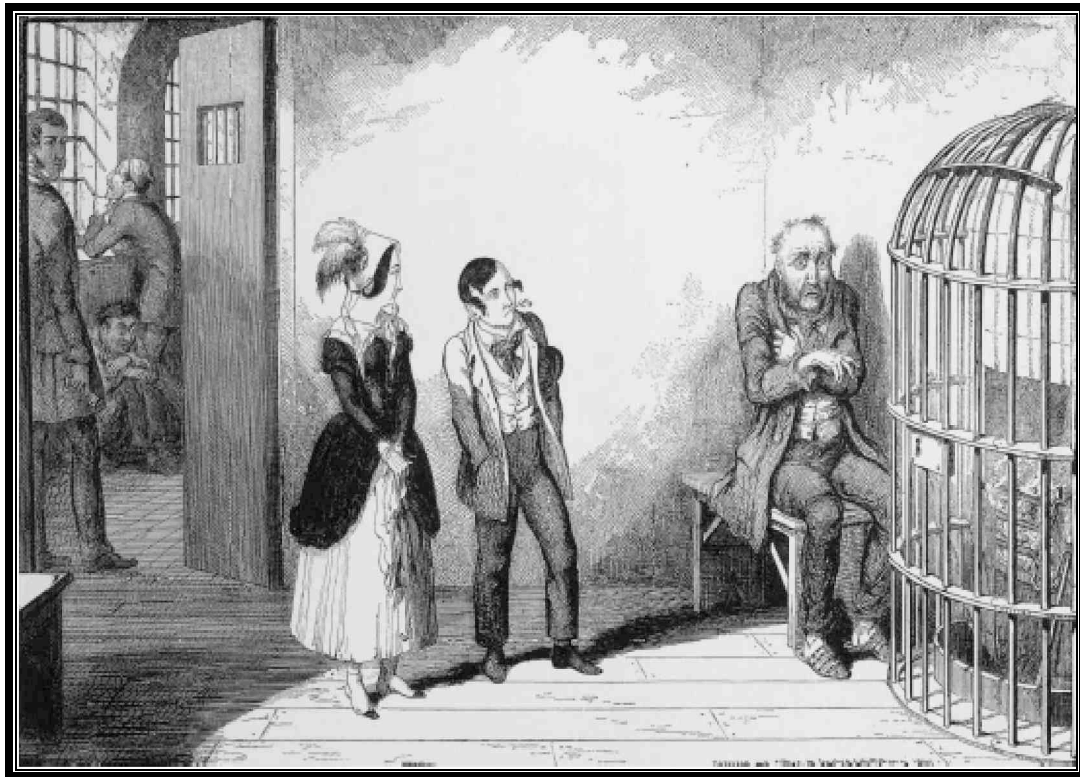
**Figure 4.**

Temperance pledge card for the Total Abstinence Society, dated January 19, 1845.  
Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

minister Father Mathew, an internationally famous temperance activist). They also served as material remnants of an ephemeral but distinctly embodied commitment. The bottom left corner of the TAS pledge card depicts “Intemperance”: an enraged drunkard holds a woman by the hair and threatens to hit her with a mallet, while a child begs him to stop. An assembly of symbolic icons—including a skull, a noose, a predatory bird, and a bottle coddled by a serpent—hover above the scene. In the opposite corner, “Temperance” illustrates a normalized version of the same family: the man and woman sit calmly in the same (now well-appointed) room, accompanied by two attractively dressed children and a contented cat. The card’s before-and-after scenarios remind the holder to adhere to the pledge and keep disorder and penury at bay.

Because women and children populate these representations, Booth, McArthur, Frick, and other theatre historians have offered important insights about their middle-class ideologies as well as their problematic gender politics. However, in my effort to supplement and perhaps complicate their work, I suggest that the inebriate’s depravity is most strongly signified by mental illness and institutionalization. After all, the final tableau of Cruikshank’s graphic melodrama depicts the protagonist suffering a permanent state of mania in what seems to be an insane asylum. **(Figure 5.)** Therefore, I would like to focus on this particular aspect of the drunkard’s spectacular decline: the insanity induced by alcohol.

Representations of dipsomania figure prominently in melodramas like *The Drunkard*, and this has not gone unnoticed by theatre historians. Frick terms the DTs sequence “temperance melodrama’s obligatory sensation scene,” remarking that its “theatrical potential . . . proved irresistible to playwrights who sought spectacular effects that would frighten the intemperate into abstinence.” Frick is not the first to describe the DTs scene in this way; for instance, in a 1964 article Booth includes the DTs in his sketch of temperance drama’s dramaturgical formula. Similarly, Richard Moody, in a brief



**Figure 5.**

“The bottle has done its work—it has destroyed the infant and the mother, it has brought the son and the daughter to vice and to the streets, and has left the father a hopeless maniac.” George Cruikshank, *The Bottle*, plate VIII, 1847. Reproduced in George Cruikshank, *The Bottle in Eight Plates* (London: National Temperance Publication Depot, 1881).

introduction to *The Drunkard* in a 1966 drama anthology, underscores the popularity of the DTs scene and claims, “occasionally this shattering episode was given a solo exhibition.” (He cites a performance by Budworth’s Minstrels, which featured an actor performing “a delirium scene,” as evidence of this trend.) More recently, McArthur has described the *delirium tremens* as “standard” in temperance melodrama. Mason asserts it was one of *The Drunkard*’s “principal attractions.” And McConachie discusses it as an example of the Gothic horror sometimes employed in moral reform plays.<sup>12</sup>

These comments about the DTs sequence may merely comprise a historiographic paper trail, with one scholar picking up the idea from his or her predecessors, leading to a collective impression that the *delirium tremens* was “standard” or “obligatory.” But playbills, advertisements, and actors’ memoirs also suggest that the scene fascinated nineteenth-century audiences. The preface to the museum’s 1847 acting edition of *The Drunkard* asserts,

Mr. [W. H.] Smith’s personation of Edward, evidently the result of accurate and laborious study, and deep knowledge of human frailty, was at times terribly real, particularly the scene of delirium tremens, which, though far short of the horrors of that dreadful malady, and appeared to those unacquainted with the disease to be overstepping the bounds of nature, was true to the letter, and universally acknowledged to be the most naturally effective acting ever seen in this city.

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<sup>12</sup> Frick, *Theatre, Culture, and Temperance Reform*, 64 and 66; Booth, “The Drunkard’s Progress,” 207; Richard Moody, *Dramas from the American Theatre, 1762-1966* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1966), 279-80; McArthur, “Demon Rum on the Boards,” 536; Mason, *Melodrama*, 83; McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 191-92. Similarly, in her unpublished dissertation on late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century temperance culture, Joan L. Silverman observes that in temperance dramaturgy “the hero’s drinking intensifies after marriage and parenthood, culminating in delirium tremens” (“I’ll Never Touch Another Drop,” 37).

According to the preface, “it was no uncommon thing to see scores of men and women in the auditory weeping like children”—suggesting that the spectators’ reactions testified to *The Drunkard*’s affective impact as both melodrama and morality tale.<sup>13</sup> Despite such endorsements, however, temperance drama eventually came to be viewed as a quaint and moralistic product of its time. For example, in their 1938 biography of the nineteenth-century actor Harry Watkins, Maud and Otis Skinner describe *The Drunkard* as “one of those relics of other days filled with obvious moral lessons on the evils of drink, banal sentimentalism, crass comedy, melodrama, defiant heroism, villains, sob stuff, and *delirium tremens*, which moved audiences of the time to tears and thrills.”<sup>14</sup> And yet, the authors implicitly acknowledge here that, at the height of its popularity, the DTs sequence was widely considered to be a powerful spectacle.

### Theories of Inebriation and Insanity in the Antebellum Era

As Joel Bernard notes, medicine served as the “cornerstone” of nineteenth-century temperance ideology, and physicians took a keen interest in the relationship between habitual drinking, physical health, and antisocial behavior.<sup>15</sup> To date, scholarship on temperance melodrama has overlooked how medical discourse may have influenced widespread perceptions of the *delirium tremens*. During theatrical renderings of the DTs, the actor moved and shrieked violently, signifying mental psychosis through physical and vocal cues. To understand audiences’ fascination with such scenes, as well as their

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<sup>13</sup> Smith, *The Drunkard*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Otis Skinner and Maud Skinner, *One Man in His Time: The Adventures of H. Watkins, Strolling Player, 1845-63, from His Journal* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1938), 70.

<sup>15</sup> Joel Bernard, “From Fasting to Abstinence: The Origins of the American Temperance Movement,” in *Drinking: Behavior and Belief in Modern History*, ed. Susanna Barrows and Robin Room (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 337-53, at 345.

function within temperance dramaturgy, we must take into account contemporaneous theories about the disorder's causes and cures.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, a marked rise in the number of institutions for the deviant and mentally ill occurred alongside growing concerns about alcohol consumption. In 1820, there were fewer than ten asylums in the U.S.; by 1860, one or more asylums could be found in nearly every state.<sup>16</sup> Conceived as a kind of temporary insanity—a spectacular instance of deviance—the DTs seems to have played a role in social constructions of normalcy and aberration. Sociologist Roger Bastide has argued that madness is a structural concept, defined and manufactured by the larger culture. Insanity, he asserts, “does not in fact exist as a natural entity, but only as a relationship. . . . a person is mad only in relation to a given society; social consensus defines the fluctuating boundary between the rational and the irrational.”<sup>17</sup> Bastide's analysis suggests that the rapid increase in American insane asylums not only reflected revised definitions of deviance but also new views regarding the best way to handle aberrant individuals.<sup>18</sup> Inebriates suffering from the *delirium tremens* were often sent to

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<sup>16</sup> Gerald N. Grob, introduction to Edward Jarvis, *Insanity and Idiocy in Massachusetts: Report of the Commission on Lunacy* (1855; reprint, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 1-71, at 9. This rapid expansion did not go unnoticed even in its time: in his 1848 report on the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum in New York, Pliny Earle discusses the rapid increase in asylums, attributing it to “the attention of the community, in various parts of the country, [which] became awakened to the wants of that suffering class, and the efforts of many individuals [who] were actively directed to measures for their relief.” *History, Description and Statistics of the Bloomingdale Asylum for the Insane* (New York: Egbert, Hovey & King, 1848), 19-20.

<sup>17</sup> Roger Bastide, *The Sociology of Mental Disorder*, trans. Jean McNeil (1965; New York: David McKay, 1972), 195.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Norman Dain, *Concepts of Insanity in the United States, 1789-1865* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1964); Mary Ann Jimenez, *Changing Faces of Madness: Early American Attitudes and Treatment of the Insane* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1987); David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic*, rev. edition (1971; Piscataway, NJ: Aldine Transaction, 2002); and Andrew T. Scull, “Madness and Segregative Control: The Rise of the Insane Asylum,” *Social Problems* 24, no. 3 (February 1977): 337-51.

asylums for treatment, despite the disorder's relatively short duration. This happened to such an extent that an 1848 report on the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum in New York devoted an entire chapter to the DTs.<sup>19</sup> Although a detailed account of the medicalization of the *delirium tremens* is beyond the scope of this chapter, I will chart some of the key ideas advanced by nineteenth-century medical practitioners who described alcohol-induced derangement. Because the prospect of institutionalization emerges at several points in *The Drunkard*, I pay special attention to theories generated within the context of U.S. insane asylums.

Concerns about alcohol's impact on the mind, morals, and body were pioneered in America by the physician Benjamin Rush, whose landmark essay, *An Inquiry into the Effects of Ardent Spirits on the Human Body and Mind* (1784), connected intemperance with ill health, criminal behavior, and madness. Rush received his medical education at the University of Edinburgh, one of Europe's premier centers for the empirical advancement of medical practice and theory. Because it outlined the physical and moral impact of drinking, Rush's *Inquiry* constituted, according to Mark Edward Lender and James Kirby Martin, "a radical challenge to previous thinking; it assaulted the old dictum that alcohol was a positive good" or a necessity for health and healing.<sup>20</sup> Due in part to Rush's publicity efforts, the *Inquiry* was widely read; by 1850, nearly 200,000 copies had been printed.<sup>21</sup> Because of the text's longevity, many scholars agree that Rush's *Inquiry* strongly informed the fundamental ideals of the U.S. temperance movement.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Earle, *History*, 39-51.

<sup>20</sup> Lender and Martin, *Drinking in America*, 37.

<sup>21</sup> Rorabaugh, *Alcoholic Republic*, 41.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Rorabaugh, *Alcoholic Republic*, 40-46; Tyrrell, *Sobering Up*, 17; Lender and Martin, *Drinking in America*, 36-40; Blocker, *American Temperance Movements*, 7-8; Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers*, 72; and Thomas R. Pegram, *Battling Demon Rum: The Struggle for a Dry America, 1800-1933* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998), 13-15. In their history of

However, temperance historians generally overlook the fact that Rush also “made the first and most elaborate attempt [in the U.S.] to link the somatic and ethical dimensions of insanity,” as Mary Ann Jimenez notes.<sup>23</sup> Later editions of the *Inquiry* included “A Moral and Physical Thermometer” charting the “diseases” and “punishments” inflicted by different types of alcohol. **(Figure 6.)** In the 1790 version of the diagram, the habitual consumption of hard liquor results in “vices” such as idleness, fighting, lying, murder, and suicide as well as physical impairments like epilepsy, madness, palsy, and apoplexy. The “punishments” in the third column include several destinations: alms house, work house, whipping post, jail, and gallows. Rush’s barometer can be seen as an early example of how temperance advocates invoked notions of normality and self-discipline in their rhetoric; it also suggests that the threat of institutionalization or incarceration played a prominent role in that rhetoric.

Rush continued to explore the connections between mental illness and intemperance in his later writings. In *Medical Inquiries and Observations upon the Diseases of the Mind* (1812), he reiterates his contention that ardent spirits often cause a “partial derangement” of the “moral faculties.” He describes the drunkard’s madness as being both temporary and recurrent: “Successive paroxysms of madness, with perfect intervals between them, occur most frequently in habitual drunkards.” He further asserts, “The *remedies* for this disease have hitherto been religious and moral, and they have sometimes cured it. They would probably have been more successful, had they been

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the first inebriate asylum established in the U.S. (an institutional model originally advocated by Rush), John W. Crowley and William L. White assert, “The American temperance movement can rightly be said to have begun with the publication of [Rush’s] *Inquiry*.” *Drunkard’s Refuge: The Lessons of the New York State Inebriate Asylum* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 3. For more on Rush’s influence, see Katherine H. Nelson, “The Temperance Physicians: Developing Concepts of Addiction” (PhD diss., American University, 2006), 48-58.

<sup>23</sup> Jimenez, *Changing Faces of Madness*, 72.

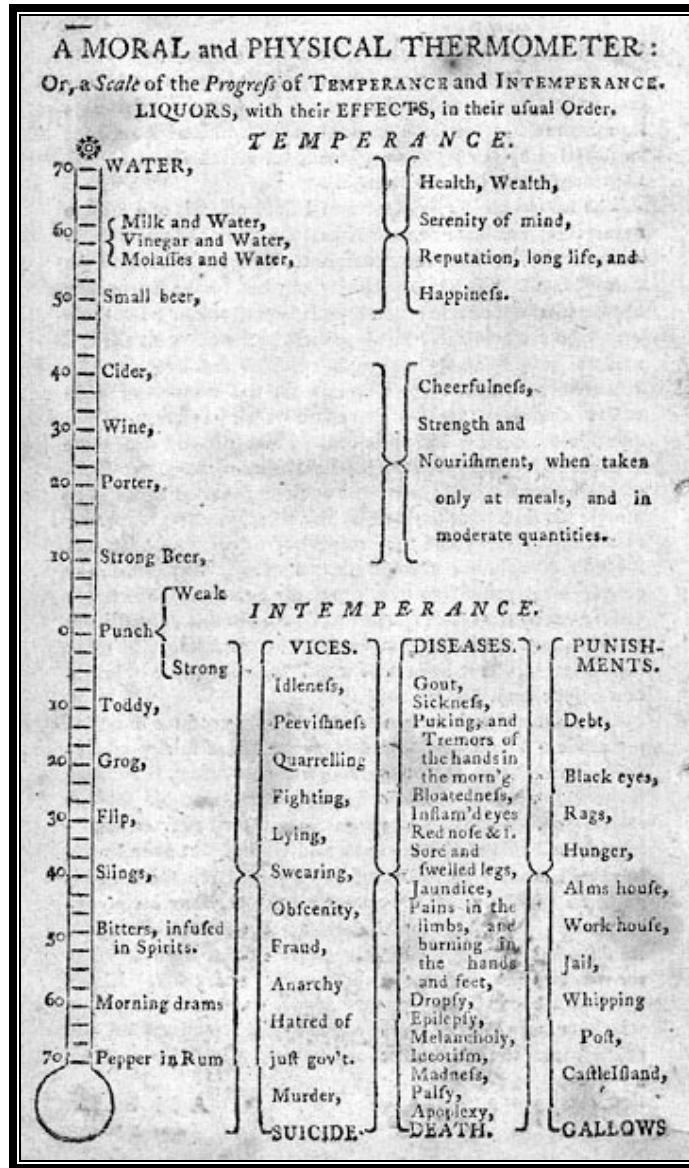


Figure 6.

“A Moral and Physical Thermometer: Or, a Scale of the Progress of Temperance and Intemperance.” Benjamin Rush, *An Inquiry into the Effects of Spirituous Liquors on the Human Body and Mind* (Boston: Thomas and Andrews, 1790), 12.

Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

combined with such as are of a physical nature.” This understanding of alcohol abuse inspired Rush to propose a new kind of institution, the “sober house,” designed specifically for drunkards. In such a model, inebriates would be treated as “objects of public humanity and charity. . . . They are indeed more hurtful to society, than most of the deranged patients of a common hospital would be, if they were set at liberty.”<sup>24</sup>

Although the sober house did not materialize until the mid-nineteenth century (the New York State Inebriate Asylum, which began operating in the 1860s, is one example), his proposal may reflect an emergent mandate to sequester drunkards from the general public. In Rush’s estimation, segregation was necessary not only for the rehabilitation of intemperate men, but also for the good of the populace.

Another landmark in the study of alcohol occurred in 1813, when T. M. D. Sutton, a Britton, published a pamphlet in which he coined the term *delirium tremens*—a phrase inspired by “the marked tremor of the hands caused by excessive drinking or as a result of sensitivity to alcohol in certain people.”<sup>25</sup> Now, the disorder had a name. This allowed scientific observers to distinguish alcohol-induced hallucinations from other kinds of mental disturbances. The diagnostic term was quickly adopted by medical practitioners and entered popular culture through newspaper accounts, temperance narratives, and moral reform melodrama.

Eventually, alcohol abuse became one of the most frequently cited reasons for sending individuals to lunatic asylums, second only to masturbation. According to Jimenez, medical practitioners described drunkenness as a kind of sensational excess—a

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<sup>24</sup> Benjamin Rush, *Medical Inquiries and Observations Upon the Diseases of the Mind* (Philadelphia: Kimber & Richardson, 1812), 358, 164, and 266-67 (his emphasis).

<sup>25</sup> Dimitrios Adamis et al., “A Brief Review of the History of Delirium as a Mental Disorder,” *History of Psychiatry* 18, no. 4 (2007): 459-69, at 465.

manifestation of an individual's inability to adhere to social expectations.<sup>26</sup> Cultural attitudes regarding self-control deeply informed the temperance movement and, as Ian R. Tyrrell notes, "helped to popularize the idea of self-improvement and strengthened the bourgeois ethic of frugality, sobriety, and industry in American society."<sup>27</sup> By the 1840s, temperance activists began to insist that drunkards could transform their lives if only they would take control of themselves through the total abstinence pledge.<sup>28</sup>

A representative text outlining nineteenth-century views of mental illness—especially the differences between *delirium tremens* and other forms of insanity—is the *History, Description and Statistics of the Bloomingdale Asylum for the Insane* (1848) by Pliny Earle, who is now described as "one of the most famous alienists of the nineteenth century."<sup>29</sup> Writing shortly after his appointment as head physician, Earle charts the asylum's history and offers a statistical analysis of patients admitted there from 1821 to 1844. He describes the asylum's use of "moral treatment," a method that mandated an

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<sup>26</sup> Jimenez, *Changing Faces of Madness*, 88. Jimenez's analysis of documents and reports from the State Lunatic Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts, during the period 1837-1855 reveals that intemperance was the most common reason cited by family and friends who brought patients to the asylum (169 n. 65).

<sup>27</sup> Tyrrell, *Sobering Up*, 317. Frick advances a similar argument: "According to reformers and entrepreneurs alike, social progress demanded the adoption of an entirely new nexus of values—one that stressed self-mastery, industry, thrift, self-denial and sobriety—as well as the eradication of traditional attitudes and behavior patterns that might be construed as obstacles to change" (*Theatre, Culture, and Temperance Reform*, 30). For more discussion regarding the emphasis of social norms within the temperance movement, see Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade*, 61-86.

<sup>28</sup> Tyrrell suggests that this attitude was particularly prevalent among the Washingtonians, who considered drunkenness to be a personal or moral failing rather than an inevitable effect of nurture or nature (*Sobering Up*, 170).

<sup>29</sup> Grob, introduction to Jarvis, *Insanity and Idiocy in Massachusetts*, 66.

atmosphere of equilibrium and normality within the institutional setting.<sup>30</sup> In this phrase, “moral” seems to have two meanings. First, it invokes the idea of compassionate care as opposed to punitive treatment. The increase in insane asylums was due, in part, to growing concerns regarding the catch-all nature of prisons, which indiscriminately housed both the criminally deviant (law breakers) and the socially deviant (the insane). Institutions like Bloomingdale were designed to offer “asylum” to individuals whose abnormal behavior seemed involuntary rather than deliberate. Reflecting this desire, Earle writes in his *History*, “The Governors of the institution have adopted, and faithfully pursued, that system of moral regimen essential to the best interests of the insane, by avoiding, as far as possible, the aspect of a prison.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, the asylum was consciously designed to differ from prisons, both architecturally and operationally.

“Moral treatment” possibly invoked the ideals and ardor of moral reform, too. As Robert H. Abzug and Steven Mintz have argued, activists—inspired by religious, millennialist views regarding the perfectibility of man and nation—engaged in an extraordinary variety of political activities during the nineteenth century. In Mintz’s words, this period of time saw “the emergence of a cultural obsession with self-control, a preoccupation with suppressing animal instincts, disciplining the passions, controlling sensual appetites, distancing individuals from their bodily processes, and restraining impulsive behavior.”<sup>32</sup> Although philanthropic in character, moral reform movements endeavored to eradicate aberrant behavior by promoting middle-class social norms.

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<sup>30</sup> For more on the advent of “moral treatment,” which became the dominant therapeutic approach in lunatic asylums during the 1820s and ’30s, see Jimenez, *Changing Faces of Madness*, 111-23; and Rothman, *Discovery of the Asylum*, 130-54.

<sup>31</sup> Earle, *History*, 24.

<sup>32</sup> Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers*, 11.

Similarly, moral treatment programs in insane asylums recreated middle-class life and routines in order to cure patients. In one chapter, Earle describes how Bloomingdale implemented this method. He writes,

The primary object is to treat the patients, so far as their condition will possibly admit, as if they were still in the enjoyment of their mental faculties. . . . The courtesies of civilized and social life are not to be forgotten, . . . operating, to no inconsiderable extent, as a means of effecting restoration to mental health.<sup>33</sup>

Earle details how patients engaged in light manual labor, religious worship, physical recreation, instructional lectures, schooling, and a plethora of amusements, ranging from bowling to backgammon to music and dancing. By mimicking the rituals of respectable society, inmates were supposed to re-learn how to enact them.<sup>34</sup>

The *delirium tremens* is a central topic of discussion in Earle's *History*. In order to distinguish it from "insanity proper" (as he terms it), Earle devotes an entire chapter to the DTs. His description of the disorder is incredibly vivid—even theatrical. Like a melodrama punctuated by an elaborate sensation scene, the relatively dry and clinical prose in his *History* explodes into a profusion of adjectives, imagery, and metaphors when he explicates dipsomania. It is possible, therefore, that his description represents a

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<sup>33</sup> Earle, *History*, 26-35. Quotation on 26.

<sup>34</sup> Karen Halttunen points out that fiction and literature depicting asylums during this period employ many of the sensational devices associated with Gothic horror, in part because institutions for the mentally ill often failed to live up to their promise of benevolent moral treatment. "Gothic Mystery and the Birth of the Asylum: The Cultural Construction of Deviance in Early Nineteenth-Century America," in *Moral Problems in American Life: New Perspectives on Cultural History*, ed. Karen Halttunen and Lewis Perry (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 41-57.

point of overlap between clinical discourse and performance culture. As such, it warrants quoting at length:

The quivering tongue, the disordered stomach, the torpid liver, the rapid pulse, the contracted pupil, the inability to sleep, the irregularity of nervous power, the impotent functions of the brain and the consequent insubordination of the system to its control—these physical symptoms, though much, are but little when compared with the mental phenomena resulting from them. . . . [These] are more salient, and hence make a stronger impression on the beholder. They are the visions which are continually conjured up by a wayward, excited, and ungovernable imagination, more varied in their forms and characters than are the designs of the boldest artist, more diverse and unstable than the ever-changing pictures of a phantasmagoria.

The walls of his apartment, mere mortar and whitewash to the view of other people, present to the patient pictures of every possible variety in character and composition. Animals of various kinds throng into his room, crouch before him with threatening gestures and grimaces the most frightful, creep beneath his bed, or crawl upon it with torturing menaces. Enemies in human form spring up to bind, to drag to prison, to the tribunal of justice, to the rack or to the place of execution, or, perchance to shoot or to slay with the sword; and, finally, the phantoms of the ideal world, specters with gorgon heads and bodies more hideous than those of the satyr or the fabled tenants of the lower regions, glower upon him with their eyes of fire, gnash their teeth in fiendish

defiance, at length seize upon him, and he struggles with them in the full faith that he has encountered the devil incarnate.<sup>35</sup>

Earle's account incorporates many of the symptoms famously embodied by performers who reenacted the DTs on various stages, including W. H. Smith, Harry Watkins, and John B. Gough.

Earle insists that the *delirium tremens* differs from other kinds of mental imbalance for two reasons: first, it is of relatively short duration; and second, DTs patients exhibit normal behavior once their symptoms subside, and therefore are entitled to a kind of autonomy that cannot be offered to the "properly insane." According to Earle, the vast majority of DTs patients at Bloomingdale recovered, although twenty died while institutionalized. Of the twenty deaths, he notes that three were the result of suicide.<sup>36</sup> He concludes the chapter by stating that drunkards should be treated in an institution dedicated exclusively to their recovery. His proposal seems to mirror a wider cultural trend to sequester the poor, the criminal, and the mentally ill more effectively.<sup>37</sup>

Earle's statistical analysis of *delirium tremens* cases at Bloomingdale reveals intriguing information about how gender and class figured into the treatment of drunkards. Of the 594 patients admitted from 1821 to 1844, 511 were male, indicating that the disorder was much more prevalent in men—or, at least, that men were much more likely to be sent to there. These statistics seem to reflect the dominant images associated with temperance reform: the drunkard is a man, usually a husband and/or

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<sup>35</sup> Earle, *History*, 49-50.

<sup>36</sup> Earle's careful observation of this fact might reflect a widespread perception that drunkenness sometimes led to suicide. N. Currier's lithograph *The Drunkard's Progress* ends in suicide (Figure 3); and Middleton, the protagonist in Smith's *The Drunkard*, is about to drink poison when Arden Rencelaw saves him and convinces him to reform (40).

<sup>37</sup> Earle, *History*, 39, 45-46, and 50-51. Whether deliberately or not, Earle invokes here the idea of the "sober house" pioneered by Rush in 1812.

father, whose vice causes him to victimize the helpless women and children in his life. Although female drunkards did exist, they were rarely represented in popular culture.<sup>38</sup> In addition, Earle's statistics suggest that the bulk of Bloomingdale's DTs patients hailed from the middle and upper classes. The patient's profession was recorded for roughly half of the cases; Earle observes that a slim majority were reportedly "merchants, traders, professional men, persons of leisure and young men without employment." He is careful to note that men from such classes were more likely to "resort to this institution when thus diseased. The great majority of persons whose pecuniary resources are limited are taken to places where the expenses are less."<sup>39</sup> Therefore, it seems that asylums like Bloomingdale and their innovative programs of moral treatment catered to respectable families with financial resources. Rather than recovering at home—or, worse, sent to a prison or poorhouse—middle-class and well-off drunkards could seek refuge in the insane asylum. Earle's assertion suggests that a significant proportion of the population who suffered from *delirium tremens* were treated in inferior institutions featuring a heterogeneous clientele.

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<sup>38</sup> One notable exception is *Confessions of a Female Inebriate, or, Intemperance in High Life* (Boston: William Henshaw, 1842), an anonymous, Washingtonian-style temperance narrative written from the perspective of a woman. However, according to John W. Crowley, the temperance activist Isaac F. Shepard probably wrote it. The *Confession* is anthologized in Crowley, ed., *Drunkard's Progress: Narratives of Addiction, Despair, and Recovery* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 69-79. For more on the gender dynamics of drunkards and their victims, see, for example, Mary Ann Clawson, *Constructing Brotherhood: Class, Gender, and Fraternalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Karen Sánchez-Eppler, "Temperance in the Bed of a Child: Incest and Social Order in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1995): 1-33; and Ric N. Caric, "The Man with the Poker Enters the Room: Delirium Tremens and Popular Culture in Philadelphia, 1828-1850," *Pennsylvania History* 74, no. 4 (2007): 452-91.

<sup>39</sup> Earle, *History*, 43. This assertion is supported by Caric's study of Philadelphia Alms House records; he notes that the vast majority of documented DTs patients hailed from the working classes, even though rumors and stories circulating in popular culture tended to feature middle- and upper-class characters ("The Man with the Poker").

Several years later, Edward Jarvis—a prominent statistician who was also a temperance advocate—underscored the connection between intemperance and insanity, as well as the prevalence of drunkenness among the impoverished, in *Insanity and Idiocy in Massachusetts: Report of the Commission on Lunacy* (1855). As I discussed in the previous chapter, the nineteenth-century trend to categorize and catalogue all kinds of data supported newly emergent ideas regarding normalcy in America. Jarvis, in many respects, participated in this paradigm shift through his innovative use of statistics: a scientific approach to medicine pioneered by French physicians, which Jarvis first employed while working on the U.S. Census of 1840. He wrote extensively about his census findings in subsequent years.<sup>40</sup>

Like Earle's slightly earlier *History*, Jarvis's *Report* pays close attention to the connections between aberrant behavior and insanity, reflecting what Robert A. Gross has termed "the fusion of morals and numbers" that permeated the physician's work.<sup>41</sup> Jarvis argues that intemperance "disturbs and exhausts the brain, and affects its power of correct and ready action; and hence the mind becomes wayward, its operations uncertain and unfitted for the business of life." He further asserts that mental derangement inevitably leads to "ill success and poverty" followed by "disorders of the nervous system and insanity, which, according to hospital records, find their most common origin in the exciting and exhausting effects of alcohol, especially among the poor." Like the Temperance Thermometer developed by Rush, Jarvis charts the drunkard's trajectory from occasional errors in judgment to abject poverty to absolute insanity.<sup>42</sup> Although he

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<sup>40</sup> Grob, introduction to Jarvis, *Insanity and Idiocy in Massachusetts*, 45-51.

<sup>41</sup> Robert A. Gross, "Preserving Culture: Edward Jarvis and the Memory of Concord," in *Traditions and Reminiscences of Concord, Massachusetts, 1779-1878*, ed. Sarah Chapin (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), xv-xliv, at xxvi.

<sup>42</sup> Jarvis, *Insanity and Idiocy in Massachusetts*, 55.

discusses patients' family histories—gesturing toward a hereditary theory of mental illness—Jarvis strongly emphasizes self-discipline as the foundation of sound mental health. This model, which privileged behavioral causes rather than biological ones, dominated most nineteenth-century discourse about insanity.<sup>43</sup> As Gerald N. Grob points out, Jarvis's views seem deeply informed by mainstream norms and middle-class values; his education at Harvard University at a time when reformist Unitarian liberalism dominated that institution may be one reason why self-improvement features so prominently in his writings.<sup>44</sup>

I want to emphasize, despite the brevity of my summary here, that these theories by Rush, Earle, and Jarvis all exhibit an important moral dimension: respectable, middle-class behavior serves as the barometer by which the authors measure deviance. Rush, one of the earliest advocates of temperance in the U.S., argues that excessive behaviors like immoderate drinking will lead to ruin; his illustrated Temperance Thermometer asserts that habitual alcohol consumption results in incarceration and death. In his *History*, Earle builds on this claim by detailing the extraordinary number of *delirium tremens* cases at the Bloomingdale Asylum. Through careful statistical analysis, Jarvis demonstrates that drunkenness is the leading cause of madness in Massachusetts, thereby confirming the link between immoral behavior and insanity. Although I admit that not all Americans would have been acquainted with these particular texts, the public became familiar with the ideas postulated by these physicians through popular discourse: news reports, graphic representations, activist rhetoric, and performance.

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<sup>43</sup> William Sims Bainbridge, "Religious Insanity in America: The Official Nineteenth-Century Theory," *Sociological Analysis* 45, no. 3 (1984): 223-39.

<sup>44</sup> Grob, introduction to Jarvis, *Insanity and Idiocy in Massachusetts*, 42; Gross, "Preserving Culture," xxiii-iv.

**Spectacular Indiscipline in *The Drunkard***

Just when insane asylums and similar institutions were segregating drunkards from the general population, the *delirium tremens* increasingly appeared in entertainment culture. Theatre and other amusements reinforced the notion that when an individual did not adhere to social norms, madness could result. W. H. Smith's *The Drunkard; or, The Fallen Saved* provides an intriguing case study of how temperance melodrama expressed these relatively conservative values. Middleton endures a journey that seems structured, in many ways, like a medieval morality tale. His name suggests he is a kind of middle-class Everyman, and other aspects of the text, including the subtitle, convey notions of salvation and transformation. Middleton's fall consists of a drastic change in his financial circumstances due to his drinking habit, which is effected in part through the devious machinations of the villainous Lawyer Cribbs. But his decline also involves morals and mind. In the fourth act, he suffers from the *delirium tremens* and even attempts suicide. This rock-bottom moment constitutes the most spectacular and, in my view, ideologically dense sequence in the play.

The prospect of institutionalization—whether in a prison, a poor house, or an insane asylum—haunts the drama from the outset. In the first act, Cribbs remarks that Mrs. Wilson (the mother of the play's heroine, Mary) “has a claim upon the Alms House” if she cannot remain in the cottage on the Middleton estate, which has been her home for many years. The idea of her mother being warehoused with paupers is so horrible to Mary that it elicits a corporeal reaction from her; a stage direction indicates that she “shudders” upon hearing Cribbs's statement (10). Later, Cribbs complains that Agnes—a young woman driven mad by the premature death of her fiancé—should be institutionalized.<sup>45</sup> He grumbles, “Why don't the Alms House keep such brats at home?”

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<sup>45</sup> As the play progresses, Agnes's story is revealed: she went mad when her fiancé died of the *delirium tremens*, a death caused in part by Cribbs's machinations. The villain confesses in

(17) Later, Cribbs invokes the insane asylum specifically during an exchange with Mrs. Spindle, a somewhat befuddled old maid. During her first speech in the play, Mrs. Spindle admits, “I buy all the affecting novels, and all the terrible romances, and read them till my heart has become soft as maiden wax” (13). During the early nineteenth century, novel reading was sometimes cited as a cause of mental illness in women.<sup>46</sup> In the second act, when Cribbs has a frustrating exchange with Spindle, he declares, “Get your friends to send you to the Insane Hospital, and place you among the incurables, as the most fusty, idiotic old maid that ever knit stockings” (22). Ironically, Cribbs is the only person in the play who actually experiences the horrors of institutionalization, when late in the drama he is mistaken for Middleton and put in jail.

In addition to these allusions, insanity is literally embodied by Agnes, the sister of William (Middleton’s friend, confidant, and sidekick). Agnes is called “my poor, little, half-witted sister” by William and “crazy” by Cribbs (17). In many ways, Agnes invokes another theatrical madwoman, Ophelia in *Hamlet*. Lawrence W. Levine argues that Shakespeare’s plays served as a kind of shared vocabulary for nineteenth-century audiences, so it is unlikely that the similarity between Agnes and *Hamlet*’s deranged heroine is coincidental.<sup>47</sup> Or, to put it another way, during this period the portrayal of madness on American and British stages was deeply informed by long-standing theatrical conventions rooted in Shakespearean drama. When Agnes encounters Cribbs during her first appearance in the play, she is unable to hold a coherent conversation with him; instead, she sings random verses sprinkled with natural metaphors:

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a soliloquy, “for my own purposes I ruined [him], I triumphed over him—he fell—died in a drunken fit, and she [Agnes] went crazy” (17).

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Isaac Ray, *Mental Hygiene* (1863; reprint, with an introduction by Frank J. Curran, New York: Hafner Publishing, 1968), 243-44.

<sup>47</sup> Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 11-81.

*Enter AGNES deranged, L. H.*

*Agnes. (Singing.)*

“Brake and fern and Cyprus dell,  
Where the slippery adder crawls.  
Where the grassy waters well,  
By the old moss-covered walls.” (17)

At another point during the scene, Agnes mimics Ophelia by scattering flowers across the stage (18).

Interestingly, at the end of the scene Agnes departs from the Ophelia model and invokes instead the hallucinatory terror of the *delirium tremens*. After William rescues her from the angry Cribbs, he instructs Agnes to stay put until he comes back. When William exits, she sings another verse before offering a short, stilted soliloquy that concludes with an episode of sheer panic:

I will sit on this rock till I hear the bells that are far off, for  
then,—I think of his words, who says he did not love me. It was a  
good character he wanted of the parson. A girl out of place, is  
like an old man out of his grave. (*Bells chime piano.*) They won't  
ask me to their merry makings, now, though I washed my best  
calico in the brook. (*Sings.*)

“Walk up young man, there's a lady here,  
With jewels in her hair.”

(*Suddenly clasps her hands and screams.*) Water, water! hear  
him, oh, hear him cry for water; quick, quick! he'll turn cold  
again! his lips are blue; water, water! *Exit frantically.* (19)

Although it is not entirely clear what horrible vision causes Agnes to scream, she seems to be reliving her fiancé's death from the DTs. Here, she reprises her past reaction to his

final moments—the traumatic episode that literally drove her mad. By reenacting her part in the spectacle of his death, she offers a preview of Middleton’s delusions in Act IV.

At the play’s conclusion, Agnes serves a dramaturgical function when she experiences a miraculous recovery and effects the villain’s comeuppance. But her most important purpose is to represent the omnipresent prospect of madness, clearly indicated by her designation as “A Maniac” in the cast of characters. She represents the archetypal person-out-of-place, whose lack of clarity and inhibition leads to disruptive behavior. As she herself states prior to her panic attack, “A girl out of place, is like an old man out of his grave.” Her broken mind causes her to wander the countryside, well beyond the boundaries of her proper space (the home). In addition, her presence inspires the people around her, especially Cribbs, to invoke the threat of institutionalization. For these reasons, I argue that Middleton’s breakdown in Act IV is not an isolated spectacle; rather, it is simply the most spectacular realization of madness in the play—a madness that is embodied by Agnes from the outset. Her mutterings, screams, and confusions operate in partnership with Middleton’s DTs episode to render visible the specter of insanity that, by 1844, asylums had effectively hidden from view.

Most scholars who have written about *The Drunkard* have omitted Agnes in their discussions, aside from brief mentions in plot synopses, as if she were a minor character unworthy of attention. However, it seems that Agnes lingered in the minds of spectators. For example, John Bouvé Clapp singles her out in a 1903 *Boston Evening Transcript* article about the drama’s premiere at the Boston Museum: “Agnes Dowton, the poor insane girl, has a mad scene that never fails, in the hands of a capable actress, to arouse the sympathy and pity of the spectators.”<sup>48</sup> Moreover, casting records kept by the Boston

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<sup>48</sup> John Bouvé Clapp, “The First Dramatic Success,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, 16 May 1903, n.p., Boston Museum Subject File, Charles E. Mason, Jr. Print Room, Boston Athenaeum.

Museum's stage managers indicate that the second-ranked actress in the company usually portrayed Agnes. In the 1849 revival of *The Drunkard* at the Boston Museum, Mrs. J. W. Thoman—né Elizabeth Anderson, a descendent of the first Joseph Jefferson—played the role. According to one newspaper account, Thoman (a soubrette) could “adapt herself to parts of a more serious kind without the least display of extravagance,” and William Winter reports that she “became a favorite in Boston.”<sup>49</sup> Audiences appreciated her fine singing voice, which may be another reason why she was cast in the part.<sup>50</sup> Thoman's repertoire included Nerissa, Regan, Lady Anne, and the Nurse in *Romeo & Juliet*. Meanwhile, Louisa Gann performed the leading female roles at the theatre, including Mary in the 1849 production of *The Drunkard*.<sup>51</sup>

Agnes's importance is evident in the concluding tableau of *The Drunkard*, which displays the Middleton family in domestic tranquility. The final stage direction reads,

*EDWARD plays on a flute symphony to “Home, sweet home.”*  
*. . . The burthen is then taken up by chorus of villagers behind.*

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<sup>49</sup> Unidentified clipping, “Personalities: Tho” Clippings File, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University; William Winter, *The Jeffersons* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1881), 95. Playbills from the premiere production of *The Drunkard* in 1844 indicate that “Miss E. Coad” originated the role of Agnes (Boston Museum Playbills File, Harvard Theatre Collection). This might be Emily Coad, an actress and singer who debuted at the Chestnut Theatre in Philadelphia and eventually enjoyed a solid career in California during the Gold Rush era (“Drop-Curtain Monographs,” *New York Times*, 3 July 1887, 16). The 1844 premiere of *The Drunkard* also featured Mrs. G. C. Germon (né Jane Anderson and a sister of Elizabeth Anderson/Mrs. J. W. Thoman) as Mary. As I discuss in the next chapter, Germon went on to originate Eliza Harris in the earliest presentations of George C. Aiken's version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) at the Troy Museum (Troy, New York) and National Theatre (New York City).

<sup>50</sup> John Bouvé Clapp, “The First Star,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, 9 May 1903, n.p., Boston Museum Subject File, Charles E. Mason, Jr. Print Room, Boston Athenaeum.

<sup>51</sup> Boston Museum Cast Lists, vol. 1 (1845-1857), Harvard Theatre Collection. In playbills and cast lists from the early 1850s, Gann goes by her married name, Mrs. Wulf Fries. Incidentally, Gann originated Eliza in H. J. Conway's adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at the museum in 1852.

. . . *The melody is repeated quicker, and all retire with the exception of EDWARD, MARY, JULIA, WILLIAM, & AGNES, singing, and becoming gradually diminuendo. Air repeated slowly. JULIA kneels to EDWARD, who is at table, R. H. seated in prayer. EDWARD'S hand on bible, and pointing up. MARY standing leaning upon his chair. WILLIAM and AGNES, L. centre. Music till curtain falls. Picture. (50)*

Although McConachie, Mason, and Frick all discuss this scene, they focus on Middleton, Mary, and Julia; they do not note that Agnes and William are also present.<sup>52</sup> In other words, Agnes is hidden in plain sight. This omission signals, I think, a noteworthy gap in our understanding of *The Drunkard* and its historical moment. Her presence in the tableau is significant because it helps to underscore the idea that wayward individuals can be restored to society. Agnes's recovery, like Middleton's, reassures spectators that redemption is possible. As Bastide argues, every illness works in partnership with its cure: "The dynamics of mental disorder operate within a system where both the deviant and society are in collaboration. . . . it is not only the appearance of the illness which is part of the system, but also its disappearance."<sup>53</sup> Agnes's inclusion in the last scene suggests that every American, despite lapses in proper behavior and respectability, could rehabilitate herself and join the ranks of ordinary citizens once more.

Middleton's proclivities for pleasure and lightheartedness are highlighted from the outset, but his fate is portrayed as open-ended. In a conversation among Cribbs, Mary, and Mrs. Wilson in the first scene of *The Drunkard*, Cribbs describes Middleton as "a

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<sup>52</sup> McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 184-85; Mason, *Melodrama*, 84-85; Frick, *Theatre, Culture, and Temperance Reform*, 123.

<sup>53</sup> Bastide, *Sociology of Mental Disorder*, 207.

gay young man” who is “fond of the world, given somewhat to excess, no doubt.” He is twenty-three when the play begins, and his age is cited as a reason why he is “giddy, wild and reckless” and a “dissipated collegian.” Mrs. Wilson replies, “I understand you—very much unlike his father I would say,” referring to Middleton’s respected and generous parent, who dies before the play begins. In other words, Middleton is a man on the cusp of success or failure: a push in one direction might decide the outcome (8 and 9).

When he begins drinking regularly several years after his marriage to Mary and the birth of their daughter Julia, his decline manifests visually both in costume and in body. In the third scene of Act II, which is set in a tavern, the stage directions indicate that his dress is “rather shabby” (23). His appearance gets even shabbier after a drunken fight with fellow patrons at a bar-room, during which he begins bleeding from his forehead (25). In the next scene, Cribbs, who helped instigate the quarrel in the tavern, predicts, “He has tasted [alcohol], and will not stop now short of madness or oblivion” (26). Later, as the drunkard contemplates returning home to his wife and daughter, his physical state suggests he is on the verge of *delirium tremens*:

Oh how my poor brain burns! my hand trembles! my knees shake  
beneath me! I cannot, will not appear before them thus; a little, a  
very little [drink] will revive and strengthen me. No one sees;  
William must be there ere now, for my hiding place. Oh! the arch  
cunning of the drunkard! (*Goes to tree R. H., and from the  
hollow draws forth a bottle; looks round, and drinks. Cribbs  
behind exulting.*) So, so! it relieves! it strengthens! oh, glorious  
liquor! Why did I rail against thee? Ha, ha! (26-27)

After this, he returns home, only to learn that Mary’s mother has died because his drinking has impoverished the family. Blaming himself, he enters into a frenzied state, and when Mary, Julia, and William try to bar him from leaving, he calls out, “Unloose

me; leave me; why fasten me down on fire? madness is my strength: my brain is liquid flame!” (30)

These comments pave the way for the play’s crowning spectacular instant: Middleton’s DTs episode in the first scene of Act IV, which is set outdoors near a tavern on Hawley Street in Boston. The stage directions indicate that the disorderly drunkard is lying on the ground “without hat or coat, clothes torn, eyes sunk and haggard, appearance terrible, &c.” (38) When he wakes, he calls for brandy and rum, and laments, “Pain! dreadful pain! Heavens, how I tremble. Brandy! brandy? [*sinks down in agony.*]” (38) The landlord of a nearby tavern enters and Middleton strangles him when he denies the drunkard’s appeals for brandy. Fortunately, William enters and stops Middleton from committing murder.

After the landlord exits, the drunkard’s insanity ensues. The Harvard Theatre Collection houses the manuscript side that Smith probably used when performing Middleton at the Boston Museum in 1844. In the manuscript, the DTs sequence differs slightly from the 1847 published edition, in that the side indicates greater fragmentation and confusion. Smith’s manuscript reads as follows:

[MIDDLETON:] (*delirium*) Here friend—take it off. Will you?  
 —there—that serpent coiling round my leg—there—pull—  
 pull—ah! How strong they are—there—don’t kill it—give it  
 liquor—poison it slowly with rum—it shall be punish’d  
 justly—Toads and Serpents—drown’d with brandy—excellent  
 punishment—justice! justice!

[WILLIAM: He does] not know me.

[MIDDLETON:] Hush! Gently—gently—while she’s asleep I’ll  
 kiss—she would reject me did she know it—there—hush! God  
 bless my Mary, Bless her and my child—hush—if the Globe

turns round once more, we shall slide from its surface into infinite nothingness—or eternity—ha! Ha! Great idea that—a boiling sea of wine—fired by the torch of fiends. ha! ha!<sup>54</sup>

At this point, William slips off to get help, and the hallucinations end. Middleton regains his senses and, recognizing that he has descended into utter depravity, produces a vial of poison. Before he can consume it, Rencelaw—an upstanding and wealthy member of the community who is a reformed drunkard himself—arrives, seizes the poison, and cajoles, “Nay, friend, take not your life, but mend it” (40). After Rencelaw redeems Middleton, the pieces are in place for the hero’s eventual recovery and redemption.

It is important to note that the sensationalism of the *delirium tremens* sequence derived from the audience’s belief that such scenes occurred in the real world.<sup>55</sup> Intensely physical and strikingly visual, an actual drunkard suffering from the DTs constituted an example of the body *as* spectacle. Unlike other sensation scenes, this one relied heavily on the actor’s expertise. As a result, several performers became well known for their portrayal of Middleton in *The Drunkard*. Admittedly, none attained the legendary status of Joseph Jefferson for Rip Van Winkle, Henry Irving for Matthias, or James O’Neill for Edmond Dantès. But some leveraged their talent for enacting the DTs as a way to advance their careers.

Harry Watkins, for example, became so well known for his rendition of Middleton’s delirium that he often chose the play, and sometimes just the scene, for benefit performances. George F. Reynolds, in his review of Otis and Maud Skinner’s *One*

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<sup>54</sup> William Henry Sedley Smith, Manuscript Side for Edward Middleton, 1844, Series III, Item 64, William Henry Sedley Smith Collection, Harvard Theatre Collection.

<sup>55</sup> It may also be that the *delirium tremens*—both in life and on stage—constitutes a sentimental response to economic crisis. See Joseph Fichtelberg, *Critical Fictions: Sentiment and the American Market, 1780-1870* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003); and Caric, “The Man with the Poker.”

*Man in His Time* (which features large excerpts from Watkins's diary), observes that Middleton seems to have been the actor's "greatest success."<sup>56</sup> Watkins's diary is best known to theatre historians by way of the Skinners' biography.<sup>57</sup> However, I was able to consult the original manuscript at the Harvard Theatre Collection, to which the Skinner family donated its papers. To my knowledge, scholars have not examined the original diary in order to assess Watkins's performances in *The Drunkard*.

In the journal, he describes at length his first experience playing Middleton. By the end of the second act, he reports, "*I had the audience with me.*" He continues,

I was discovered lying in the streets, a ragged drunken miserable wretch—with the *delirium tremens*—the scene progressed—*the audience still with me*—applauded every speech—until, through my ravings I fell upon the stage in convulsions—*then*—they *shouted*—at the fall of the curtain I was called out—received *nine cheers*—made a speech—and went off. Congratulations poured in upon me from every side—*friends and enemies*—it was pronounced a great piece of acting.

The Middleton role landed Watkins an engagement at the Arch Street Theatre in Philadelphia in November 1849, and the manager, William Burton, allowed the actor to repeat his performance for several nights. Writing of his first night as Middleton at the Arch Street, he states, "My success equalled [*sic*] all I could have wished for, as at the end of the piece I was loudly called for, and upon my appearance before the curtain was

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<sup>56</sup> George F. Reynolds, review of *One Man in His Time: The Adventures of H. Watkins, Strolling Player* by Maud and Otis Skinner, *American Literature* 10, no. 2 (May 1938): 246-48, at 246.

<sup>57</sup> For example, see McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 78-79 and 271 n. 18.

greeted with three cheers. I made a short speech, and upon retiring, three more cheers were given me. I must labor hard to keep up the impression I made.”

Watkins also relays an interesting story describing two spectators’ experiences of his performance. In the anecdote, he seems to express a hope (perhaps even an expectation) that his expertise with the DTs scene might have a unique social efficacy:

During my delirium tremens scene in the “Drunkard,” a lady in the boxes fell from her seat, fainting, and had to be conveyed home—her husband came to me afterwards to tell me that I ought not play that part again. I have since understood that he was not the most sober of men—may the incidents of this night prove a warning.

Here, Watkins emphasizes how the DTs scene on stage generated an equally sensational scene in the audience. He conceives his performance as the catalyst for a series of events offstage: a woman’s spectacular reaction in the house, followed by her husband’s confrontation with the actor, potentially followed (in Watkins’s imagination) by the man’s recognition of his errant ways. In any case, the actor enjoyed continued success in the role. For instance, he played Middleton during his New York debut in 1850 at the National Theatre, writing afterwards, “I brought them down in the ‘delirium tremens,’ and everyone said that I made a hit.”<sup>58</sup>

The *delirium tremens* scene relied exclusively on a performer’s ability to enact it convincingly. Because actors like Watkins went to great physical lengths to accurately render the spectacle, it sometimes took a bodily toll. The day after his debut as

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<sup>58</sup> From entries dated 16 April 1849, 24 November 1849, 7 December 1849, and 14 June 1850 in Harry Watkins, *Diary*, vol. 4, Skinner Family Papers, Harvard Theatre Collection. In somewhat edited form, these entries may be consulted in Skinner and Skinner, *One Man in His Time*, 70, 82, and 89.

Middleton, Watkins wrote in his journal, “My body is very sore from the effect of the delirium tremens scene of ‘The Drunkard.’” After his fifth straight performance in the play at the Arch Street Theatre, he lamented, “I wish they would discontinue it[,] my body is sore enough.”<sup>59</sup> McConachie has noted “the extreme physicality of the acting conventions” associated with the scene, asserting that “managers tried to cast the role with men who were in top physical condition.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, the DTs sequence had an impact on the actor’s corporeal instrument, constituting yet another slippage between the virtual and the real.

Also, it seems that some theatre producers, recognizing the audience’s interest in the fine line dividing character and actor, attempted to capitalize on it. As Michael L. Quinn asserts, “The personal, individual qualities of the performer always resist, to some degree, the transformation of the actor into the stage figure,” and spectators at temperance melodramas may have been attracted to this phenomenological tension.<sup>61</sup> In some productions, real-life sobriety was an essential prerequisite. McConachie notes that P. T. Barnum advertised his 1848 production of *The Drunkard* in Philadelphia as featuring an entire company of pledged teetotalers.<sup>62</sup> But as Geoffrey S. Proehl observes, when a reformed alcoholic played Middleton, spectators probably read his portrayal of the DTs as “dramatized biography.”<sup>63</sup> In these cases, the former self ghosted the staged self; the actor performed *as* the spectacle rather than merely *in* the spectacle.

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<sup>59</sup> Quotations from entries dated 17 April and 6 December 1849, in Harry Watkins, *Diary*, vol. 4. See also Skinner and Skinner, *One Man in His Time*, 71 and 82, which is quoted in McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 192.

<sup>60</sup> McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 191 and 92.

<sup>61</sup> Quinn, “Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting,” 155.

<sup>62</sup> McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 176.

<sup>63</sup> Proehl, *Coming Home Again*, 57.

Rumors and stories often circulated about the drinking habits of actors; this prejudice is evident, for example, in Joseph Daly's biography of his brother Augustin Daly. He describes the theatre industry of his youth—before managers like Kimball, Barnum, and Daly helped to make the experience more respectable for middle-class audiences—as “the day of the ‘talented drunkard.’” In his recollection, “The player too often was more convivial than ambitious. After the performance he resorted to taverns and coffee-houses (all well known and respectable enough) and entertained the patrons of the theatre (all well known and respected too), and there until the early hours he discussed the glories of the stage [over] many tobies of strong ale.” Daly makes this observation in order to underscore the positive changes his brother made to the theatre industry during the late-nineteenth century, so his description likely veers toward hyperbole. But as Jacky Bratton asserts, the distortion of facts in the act of storytelling is sometimes as illuminating as the facts themselves. In this case, Daly's description of the “talented drunkard” reveals a cultural assumption regarding actors' appetite for drink.<sup>64</sup>

A “talented drunkard” penned *The Drunkard*, in fact. Smith was addicted to alcohol and struggled with this habit while working as Kimball's stage manager at the Boston Museum. One of his journals, which is now part of the Boston Public Library's rare books collection, reveals that he experienced several relapses in the early 1850s. On his forty-fourth birthday in 1852, Smith wrote, “At 11PM, with trembling fingers, but a most ~~sincere~~ profound repentance, I, with *God's help! Most sincere and firm Resolve*, from this day, I will *never taste anything that can intoxicate*. If after my death these lines should meet the Eye of any true hearted man inclined to drink, may he ponder on them and *profit*.” Despite this fervent pledge, he continued to wrestle with his addiction. For

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<sup>64</sup> Daly, *Life of Augustin Daly*, 14-15; Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History*, 95. As I discuss in the next section, the temperance lecturer John B. Gough often cited his brief acting career as evidence of the depths to which he had sunk while a drinking man.

example, during a particularly bad episode in the spring of 1853, Kimball took the intoxicated Smith to the Cambridge Street Jail—apparently because he believed that to be “the safest and best plan” for his stage manager’s recovery.<sup>65</sup>

Smith’s drinking problem seems to have been public knowledge. Watkins writes in his diary,

Mr. W. H. Smith, an old actor, and who at that time was a hard drinking man—signed the pledge of total abstinence—this play [*The Drunkard*] was written for him—in fact he wrote the greater portion of his own part, himself—he made a great hit in the performance of it—the people looked upon it as a faithful portraiture of himself—it was but playing his own life. He was *the part*—under these circumstances, when I was cast for the part, I felt inadequate to the task assigned me.<sup>66</sup>

The actor indicates here that he perceived the role as being deeply informed by Smith’s personal struggle with alcohol. Perhaps this is why Watkins, a longtime teetotaler, claimed he felt “inadequate to the task” of portraying Middleton. For Smith, the protagonist of his play constituted a rupture between the real and unreal. Through performance, he realized and reprised both a sordid past and an unstable present.

It is important to note, however, that this phenomenological dynamic occurred in contexts outside of the theatre as well. Specifically, I propose that spectators who

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<sup>65</sup> William Henry Sedley Smith, *Diary, 1852-1854*, Rare Books Department, Boston Public Library. Other entries in which Smith describes his struggle with alcohol include 21–26 October 1852; and 25–25 November, 10–18 February, and 25–26 March 1853. For more on Smith’s diary, particularly in regards to how it may contribute to our understanding of H. J. Conway’s version *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (first presented at the Boston Museum in November 1852), see Edward Kahn, “Creator of Compromise: William Henry Sedley Smith and the Boston Museum’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” *Theatre Survey* 41, no. 2 (November 2000): 71-82.

<sup>66</sup> Entry dated 16 April 1849 in Harry Watkins, *Diary*, vol. 4.

witnessed the affect-mobilizing stories of temperance lecturers similarly reveled in the slippage between performer and character. As I discuss in the next section, such speakers mythologized and materialized the drunkard—as character, cultural fetish, and social problem. During the antebellum period and beyond, the stories they told, as well as stories *about them* that circulated in print culture, contributed greatly to perceptions of inebriates within the American imagination.

### **The Spectacle(s) of John B. Gough**

Audience-pleasing renditions of the DTs appeared not only in theatres, but also in lecture halls, where activists and reformed drunkards relayed sensational stories about the effects of drink. In their discussions of temperance melodrama, both Frick and Mason assert that Washingtonian “experience speeches” probably fostered an appetite for plays like *The Drunkard*.<sup>67</sup> However, I propose that *The Drunkard* owes a considerable debt to the experience speech not only in terms of dramaturgy, as Frick and Mason contend, but also in terms of embodiment. As a result, the relationship between these two performance genres warrants additional investigation. For instance, John B. Gough, whose career began and flourished in New England during the early 1840s, may have served as inspiration for Kimball and Smith’s production of *The Drunkard* at the Boston Museum in 1844. Furthermore, Gough’s notoriety may help to explain the play’s popularity among Boston audiences. Periodicals from the time reveal that Gough’s devoted audiences considered his spectacles to be not only *effective* but also *affective*. In many respects, the orator constituted a spectacle in and of himself—especially when, in 1845, he allegedly suffered a relapse in New York City that generated a firestorm of commentary in the

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<sup>67</sup> Frick, *Theatre, Culture, and Temperance Reform*, 32-35, 66, and 121-23; Mason, *Melodrama*, 65-66 and 70.

press. Both dimensions of the Gough phenomenon—the anecdotal and the actual, the public and the private—help to illuminate why the *delirium tremens* played a prominent role in antebellum entertainment culture.

Established by a small group of Maryland artisans in May 1840, the Washington Temperance Society of Baltimore quickly caught the imagination of the nation. Although most of their chapters disbanded or transformed into fraternal lodges within a decade, the Washingtonians had an indelible impact on the antebellum temperance movement.<sup>68</sup> For one, they targeted working-class individuals and actual drunkards. According to Tyrrell, “The older evangelicals had lacked personal experience of drink and sought converts chiefly among the already sober; the new group of reformers focused the attention of the temperance movement on the drinkers themselves.” In addition, the Washingtonians popularized the notion of total abstinence to a greater degree than any other temperance society had been able or willing to do. Earlier organizations, such as the Massachusetts Society for the Suppression of Intemperance (founded in 1813) and the American Temperance Society (established in 1826), urged restraint rather than abstention from alcohol. In the 1830s, a philosophical shift occurred within the reform effort when it moved away from the original definition of “temperance” (moderate drinking) and toward “teetotalism” (absolute avoidance). Although at first not all reformers embraced this ethic, it gradually gained traction across the board.<sup>69</sup>

In this respect, *The Drunkard* seems to be very much a product of its time, because a preference for teetotalism is strongly evident. In the second act, Stevens, a farmer in the rural community in which the play is set, expresses concern that

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<sup>68</sup> Tyrrell, *Sobering Up*, 159, 60, and 73. For more on the Washingtonians and their fast decline, see Lender and Martin, *Drinking in America*, 75-79; Blocker, *American Temperance Movements*, 39-51; and Pegram, *Battling Demon Rum*, 24-31.

<sup>69</sup> Tyrrell, *Sobering Up*, 135-58.

Middleton's casual drinking may transform into a persistent habit: "I don't say that he does take too much liquor—but there's a great many that has began that way" (23). Here, Stevens articulates the fundamental philosophy of the total abstinence pledge, which held that moderate consumption inevitably led to excessive consumption. Sure enough, Middleton develops the habit, and it eventually brings financial ruin to him and his family. Also, late in the fourth act, Mrs. Spindle alludes to the new vogue for teetotalism in a conversation with Cribbs. Beforehand, William pulls a prank by telling her that Cribbs was at a fashionable party the evening before (when, in reality, he was in prison due to a watchman's mistaking him for the rabble-raising Middleton). During her comic exchange with the villain, at one point she asks Cribbs, "Do the 'stocracy go the hull temperance principle, and give their visitors nothing but ice water?" (43) But the concept of teetotalism is highlighted most dramatically after Middleton's bout with the DTs, when the respectable and upstanding Arden Rencelaw saves the protagonist from suicide, administers the pledge, and puts him on the path of redemption.<sup>70</sup>

By 1843, Washingtonian strategies of reclamation and mutual support had spread to such a degree that the society claimed more than a million converts. According to Thomas R. Pegram, its efficacy "owed much to its willingness to provide a popular culture of temperance for working-class people."<sup>71</sup> Because organizers recognized that drinking was a social practice, they sponsored a wide variety of alternatives to the tavern. Dances, picnics, minstrel shows, concerts, and other amusements numbered among their offerings.

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<sup>70</sup> In true Washingtonian style, Rencelaw confesses that he suffered from habitual drinking for twenty years before being redeemed, describing himself as a temperance advocate devoted to saving the fallen: "I am one of those, whose life and labors are passed in rescuing their fellow men from the abyss into which you have fallen. I administer the pledge of sobriety to those who would once more become an ornament to society. And a blessing to themselves, and to those around them. . . . come with me, we will restore you to society" (41).

<sup>71</sup> Pegram, *Battling Demon Rum*, 29.

But another signature accomplishment was their approach to temperance meetings, which heavily emphasized performance.<sup>72</sup> During the early nineteenth century, most temperance orators were pillars of sobriety, hailing from the clergy or the New England elite. In a radical departure from this model, the Washingtonians harnessed the affective power of confession. Instead of relating facts and figures about the prevalence of intemperance, its impact on society, and the ways in which drinking compromised one's health—topics that constituted the bread and butter of temperance texts by clerics and physicians—experience speakers told dramatic stories that, in many ways, mirrored both the dramaturgical structure and heightened emotionalism of melodrama. Recounting the horrors, trials, and tribulations of their personal histories, experience speakers urged their fellow men and women to beware of drink and join the cause.

The inherent paradox of these speeches' before/after dynamic gave them the sense of the spectacular. As Tyrrell observes, "The contrast between past degradation and present respectable condition which the reformed man presented on the stage carried tremendous dramatic force. The stark alternatives—poverty then, respectability now—were embodied in the person of the reformed man."<sup>73</sup> During the first years of the Washingtonian movement, some speakers, such as John Hawkins, traveled all over the country recruiting converts to the temperance cause using this persuasive and passionate mode of oratory.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Heather S. Nathans observes that this emphasis on performance can be traced back to the Great Awakening, which invited and embraced the performative contributions of individuals from all classes. *Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage, 1787-1861: Lifting the Veil of Black* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 17.

<sup>73</sup> Tyrrell, *Sobering Up*, 164.

<sup>74</sup> W. H. Daniels, *The Temperance Reform and Its Great Reformers* (New York: Nelson & Phillips, 1878), 99-108.

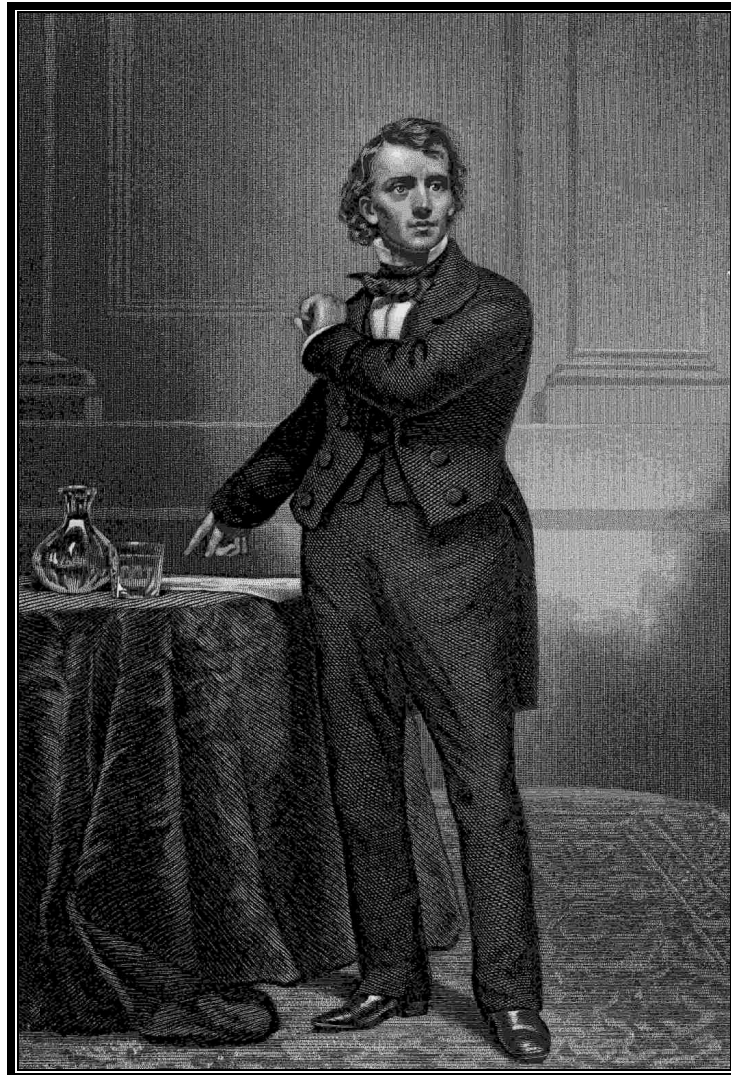
The Washingtonian project fostered a culture of witnessing and participating that led audiences to embrace Gough eagerly. When he began lecturing in 1842, he was only twenty-five years old, and many commentators described feeling shocked and surprised by his youth. Some asserted that Gough's age and lack of education contributed to the speaker's efficacy with young working men because the speaker invoked their common experience and vernacular. In addition, when detailing Gough's effectiveness as a speaker, many writers mentioned his status as a reformed drunkard. The authenticity of his body (once gripped by rum) and gruesome anecdotes (drawn from his own life) made his orations all the more persuasive. As I discussed above, Smith was also a recovering inebriate, and his past operated in much the same way when he performed in *The Drunkard*.

Gough seems to have been the kind of "abnormally interesting person" that Joseph Roach describes in *It*.<sup>75</sup> (**Figure 7.**) Many spectators struggled to pinpoint what made Gough so compelling, and often admitted they could never quite capture his magic. For example, a writer in the *New York Sun* once stated, "It is impossible to convey any thing like an adequate idea of the powers possessed by him, or to tell what there is about him so fascinating."<sup>76</sup> Trying to describe Gough's capacity to move an audience, critics frequently compared him to famous actors. Whether intentionally or not, such comparisons alluded to a somewhat embarrassing biographical detail in the orator's past: before taking the pledge of sobriety, he worked for a time as an actor, including a short

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<sup>75</sup> Although the Washingtonians frequently criticized Gough after he achieved notoriety, Lyman Abbott, in his biographical introduction to an 1886 collection of Gough's stories and lectures, states, "If the Washingtonian movement had done the world no other service, the world would owe it a large debt for giving us John B. Gough" (Gough, *Platform Echoes*, 35).

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Daniel Dorchester, *The Liquor Problem in All Ages* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1884; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1981), 275.



**Figure 7.**

John B. Gough. Engraving by J. J. Cade from a painting by Sir Daniel Macnee (ca. 1855).  
Frontispiece, John B. Gough, *Platform Echoes: Or, Living Truths for Head and Heart*  
(Hartford, CT: A. D. Worthington, 1886).

stint at the National Theatre in New York City. Whenever Gough mentioned this in his lectures, he usually did so in order to illustrate the depths to which he had sunk as a drunkard. Despite this self-deprecating routine, he successfully negotiated the fine line between actor and lecturer throughout his career.<sup>77</sup>

Unlike other lecturers who traveled throughout New England, Gough was a spectacle in and of himself—an oddity, an anomaly, a freak—on the temperance circuit. According to Roach, paradox and contradiction lie at the heart of the mysterious charisma frequently exhibited by celebrities.<sup>78</sup> Gough embodied the paradoxes of *It* (“strength *and* vulnerability, innocence *and* experience, and singularity *and* typicality among them”) in myriad ways.<sup>79</sup> Even as an inexperienced lecturer in his mid twenties, he exhibited a powerful voice and an uncanny ability to imitate characters—strengths that contrasted with his youthful vulnerability. Furthermore, middle-class audiences viewed Gough as somewhat of an innocent due to his lack of polish and education (he never finished school, coming from an impoverished family). And yet, he also had a wealth of “experience” as a reformed drunkard, which not only inspired his lectures but also made

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<sup>77</sup> This paradox is evident in T. Allston Brown, *A History of the New York Stage* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1903), 1:255-56. Brown interrupts his narrative of theatrical facts and anecdotes with a paragraph about Gough: “During the season of 1835–36, John B. Gough appeared here [National Theatre] under the name of Gilbert. His stage career was a brief one, for he soon afterwards returned to his first trade of book-binding. He reappeared in 1837 as a low comedian at Providence, R. I., and he afterwards acted at the Old Lion Theatre, Boston. He traveled with a diorama and sang comic songs, and ultimately became famous as a temperance lecturer. He died at Frankford, Pa., Feb. 15, 1887.” The appearance of Gough in Brown’s narrative reveals that America’s most famous solo performer was difficult to classify. Interestingly, Brown does not feel the need to explain who Gough is (the adjectives “lecturer” or “orator” are missing here)—implying that even in 1903, Gough was still a familiar name.

<sup>78</sup> In this sense, Roach’s theory has much in common with Baz Kershaw’s conception of spectacle. For example, Kershaw writes, “[spectacle] deals with the human in inhuman ways. . . . it multiplies power through excessive waste; it plays on the visceral mainly through the visual; it can attract and repel in the same instant” (“Curiosity or Contempt,” 594).

<sup>79</sup> Roach, *It*, 8.

him an authority on the subject. Finally, Gough was both singular and typical because he differed markedly from the clerics and physicians who frequented the lecture circuit. His popularity was inextricably tied to his banal typicality: he represented the working-class man, the everyday Joe, and above all, the archetypal drunkard.

Such contradictions can be detected in the plethora of newspaper clippings that Gough collected in his personal scrapbooks, which are now housed by the American Antiquarian Society.<sup>80</sup> They suggest that his performances and his person inspired a kind of popular mythology that coalesced in the years immediately prior to the premiere of *The Drunkard*. Gough's appeal as a performer seemed to center on two talents: his power of imitation, and his ability to generate breathless moments of affective collectivity within an audience. His pleasing voice, his elaborate gestures and postures, and, above

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<sup>80</sup> John B. Gough, John B. Gough Papers (hereafter *JBGP*), folio vols. 1-19, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA. The AAS groups the materials in this collection by size as well as content; Gough's scrapbooks are classified as "folio volumes" and the smaller bound manuscripts, such as his journals, are catalogued as "volumes." Given the limited scope of my project, I consulted the first three folios of the scrapbook collection, spanning the years 1842–1845, 1845–1848, and 1849–1850. Unfortunately, the articles in them are inconsistently identified. Because Gough seems to have placed the clippings in chronological order, I offer approximate dates by taking into account their context in the scrapbook as well as information about Gough's whereabouts in his lecture journal (*JBG Journal*, 1843–1858, *JBGP*, octavo vol. 6), in which he tracked the date, location, expenses incurred, compensation received, and number of pledge signatures collected at each engagement.

Gough's scrapbooks warrant some general discussion. As indicated by Crowley (see note 6), most scholars examining the entertainment culture of temperance reform have overlooked Gough's personal papers at the AAS (with the important exception of Warder, "Selling Sobriety"). The articles are cut from diverse publications, so it is possible that friends, associates, and admirers assisted in this project by saving and passing on clippings to Gough. He seems to have been interested in anything and everything written about him, ranging from brief mentions of two or three sentences long, to extensive articles with elaborate descriptions of lectures he gave. It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine what is missing or if the scrapbooks subtly favor good press over bad press; but they do include numerous instances of negative coverage, especially in the wake of his brief disappearance in New York City in September 1845 (a widely publicized scandal). This seems to indicate that Gough wanted to make his archive as complete as possible. It also suggests that he understood the important role the press played in the construction of his public persona and reputation, and therefore in his livelihood. Corrections and comments handwritten by Gough in the scrapbooks, although few in number, offer intriguing insights about his concerns regarding the press's portrayal of him.

all, his mutability of character are frequently discussed in newspapers. A *Gloucester Telegraph* reporter asserts, “His imitative representations of different voices, manners, and actions, were admirable. . . . The stage actor’s varied accomplishments were never nearer the pulpit: and never were their evident comedial [*sic*] attractions exhibited or exerted in a better cause.” A writer for the *Commercial Advertiser* compares Gough to the finest actors of the theatre: “I have listened to [some] of the greatest tragic actors of the time when theatres were in fashion; but none of them in the highest wrought scenes of Shakspeare [*sic*] could ever move my feelings as they were moved by that son of Nature in his simple lectures in favor of temperance.”<sup>81</sup>

Apparently, a unique ability to conjure visual images was another of Gough’s talents. He performed, in essence, one-man sensation scenes—creating tableaux that variously amused, saddened, and horrified his spectators. Accounts of his orations frequently mention the pictorial vivacity of his stories. A reporter for the *New York Tribune*, describing a lecture at the Carmine Street Church in December 1844, writes that Gough’s scenes were “brought before the mind, as though they were Daguerreotyped upon the wall.” The *Princeton Whig*, in an article titled “Mr. Gough—His Style of Speaking,” attempts to describe the orator’s gifts by comparing him to Charles Dickens:

Mr. Gough certainly possesses a rich fund of humor, and has a great command of details, always at his service; but we are disposed to think that his chief power lies in his *graphic delineations of thrilling scenes*. In this respect he resembles Dickens. His description of the poor shivering child in the streets—of the sister supporting the head of her degraded brother

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<sup>81</sup> “John B. Gough,” *Gloucester Telegraph*, n.d. (ca. March 1844); “Temperance,” *Commercial Advertiser*, n.d. (ca. late 1844).

and weeping over him—and of the heartbroken girl who confronted the inhuman monster who persisted in selling rum to her father—and many, very many other scenes which we could recall, and which all his hearers will long remember—were worthy of the pen which described the trial of “Fagin” and the murder of “Nancy.”

These descriptions of Gough’s spectacular performances account for another trope that emerges in press coverage: the notion that one had to be in Gough’s presence to understand fully his power. “No report, however able, could impart a just and vivid idea of the real thing,” the *Daily Mail* of Boston declares. “You must have the man himself before you; you must hear the peculiarly winning, animating, soul-moving, mirth-provoking tones of his voice.” Similarly, the *Worcester County Cataract* insists, “His address shall not be marred by any futile attempt of ours to report it.” And a writer in the *Flushing Journal* laments, “It needs a more competent hand than mine to give anything like a sketch of the speaker’s fire and power . . . One must be *present*, as in a battle or a ship-wreck, to be able to form a just idea and estimation of such things.”<sup>82</sup>

Perhaps more than any other topic, critics discuss Gough’s unique ability to inspire an intense, communal, affective response in the audience. A critic writing in the *Cataract* of Worcester, Massachusetts, allegedly observed a “vast amount of ‘animal magnetism’ condensed in the heart and the brain of this highly gifted, and mesmeric teetotaler.” A writer for the *Columbia Washingtonian* makes a similar claim: “He possesses in an eminent degree, that electric, or magnetic power, by which he instantly fixes, and

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<sup>82</sup> “Mr. Gough at the Carmine St. Church,” *New-York Tribune*, n.d. (ca. December 1844); *Princeton Whig*, n.d. (ca. April 1845), original emphasis; “Great Mass Temperance Meeting at Faneuil Hall—Mr. Gough, the Distinguished Washingtonian,” *Boston Daily Mail (MA)*, n.d.; “Upper Town Hall, Oct. 30, 1843,” *Worcester County Cataract (MA)*, n.d. (ca. October 31, 1843); *Flushing Journal (NY)*, n.d. (ca. April 1845), original emphasis.

holds fast the undivided attention of his auditors. . . . It seems to be no part of his design to move the feelings of his audience, yet he evidently sways them at his will.” The *White Mountain Torrent*, describing Gough’s visit to the New Hampshire State Prison in February 1843, reports that at the conclusion of his lecture, all ninety prisoners in the audience rose their hands to take the temperance pledge “instantly and together, as if moved by one will, the tears at the same time gushing from every eye.” The *Crystal Fount* describes a meeting at which “a thrill of intense admiration seemed to pass through the audience. . . . seldom have we seen an audience so completely carried away. At one time there would scarcely be a dry eye in the house, and the very next moment, with tears on every cheek, a roar of laughter would come from every lip.” These accounts emphasize the affective and, above all, *corporeal* dimensions of spectatorship at Gough’s lectures: the audience breathes, sighs, laughs, and cries as one.<sup>83</sup>

One of Gough’s journals reveals just how much of a phenomenon he had become in the months leading up to the premiere of *The Drunkard* at the Boston Museum. In an entry dated September 16, 1843, Gough indicates that he gave a lecture for the “first time in Boston”; this explanatory note (a relatively rare occurrence in the journal) suggests that he considered the debut to be a landmark. In his published autobiography Gough indicates that this was, indeed, a momentous event for him: “I felt rather apprehensive in view of speaking in Boston, for I had heard it spoken of as the modern Athens, and knew that as to intelligence it stood very high amongst the cities of the Union.”<sup>84</sup> Subsequent

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<sup>83</sup> “Mr. John B. Gough at Home,” *Worcester County Cataract (MA)*, 29 July 1844; “Mr. Gough at Hudson,” *Columbia Washingtonian*, n.d. (ca. July 1844); “Great Meeting in the Prison,” *White Mountain Torrent (Concord, NH)*, n.d. (ca. February 1844); “Great Meeting!” *Crystal Fount (New York, NY)*, n.d. (ca. May 1844). See also “Temperance Meeting at the Tabernacle,” *New York Sun*, n.d. (ca. July 1844).

<sup>84</sup> John B. Gough, *An Autobiography* (Boston: J. B. Gough, Gould, Kendall & Lincoln, 1848), 88.

entries in Gough's journal reveal that this was but the first of many appearances in Boston. In the time between September 1843 and the premiere of Smith's play in February 1844, Gough gave more than 40 lectures in that city, including engagements at Faneuil Hall, the Boston Tabernacle, the Odeon, the Melodeon, and the Tremont Temple, among other venues. During the initial run of *The Drunkard*, Gough continued to lecture regularly in Boston.<sup>85</sup>

Interestingly, the account book he kept during this period seems to indicate that he made a special visit to the Boston Museum to see *The Drunkard* at the height of the production's popularity. An entry for Saturday, March 16, 1844, indicates that Gough purchased "Tickets to Museum 50¢ Candy 50¢ Omnibus Tickets 1.00." According to an advertisement in Boston's *Evening Transcript*, that afternoon Kimball offered a special matinee of the play "for the convenience of families and strangers, commencing at 3 o'clock"; the ad boasts that it "will be played as perfect and with the same effect as in the evening." Admission was twenty-five cents. This seems to have been the first of what would be many matinees at the museum targeting women, families, and other individuals for whom an evening performance was either inconvenient or morally problematic. According to McConachie, matinees of this type became a staple not only of Kimball's museum in Boston, but also P. T. Barnum's in New York. If this entry in Gough's account book is, indeed, for two tickets to the Boston Museum on that day, it suggests he was aware of the museum's great hit and wanted to see it for himself—especially when given the opportunity to attend a special matinee performance.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Gough, JBG Journal, 6-14.

<sup>86</sup> Advertisement for *The Drunkard*, by W. H. Smith, Boston Museum, *Evening Transcript*, 16 March 1844, 3; John B. Gough, Account Book (Roxbury, MA) 1843-1844, *JBG*, octavo vol. 9; McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 164. An advertisement in the *Transcript* the previous day indicates that *The Drunkard* matinee was being offered "at the request of numerous families."

Admittedly, evidence connecting the advent of both Gough and *The Drunkard* is somewhat circumstantial. Due to the extemporaneous nature of Gough's lectures, it is impossible to demonstrate a connection between the two through a literary or textual analysis. (The orator's sensational effect derived, in part, from his talent for speaking without a script.) However, newspaper accounts frequently mention that one of Gough's most effective bits was "his vivid portraiture of the horrors of the delirium tremens," which the *Princeton Whig* declared to be "the masterpiece of the whole performance. . . . [and] the whole assembly stood aghast." Another testimony regarding Gough's renditions of the DTs similarly emphasizes the sensational, bodily nature of the spectators' response: "He made the flesh to creep with horror, as he described, with startling distinctness, the horrible terror, the dreadful, the terrible inflictions, of that intensely terrifying disease, the *delirium tremens*—the last stage of the drunkard's terrible career." Since Gough was often lauded for his gift of imitation—investing, according to the *Pilot* in Boston, "his whole soul into his representations of character, and [becoming], for the time being, a genuine actor"—it is probable that during these moments, the lecturer created a one-man scene that had something in common with the *delirium tremens* sequence in *The Drunkard*.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, Gough's description (and/or rendition) of the DTs, which became one of his most popular routines, may have inspired Smith to include such a scene for himself in *The Drunkard*.

Although compiled forty years after the historical moment on which I am focusing, a collection of Gough's oratorical texts, *Platform Echoes; Or, Living Truths for the Head and Heart*, provides additional evidence about the prominent role that the *delirium tremens* played in his lectures and legend. For example, the illustrated title page

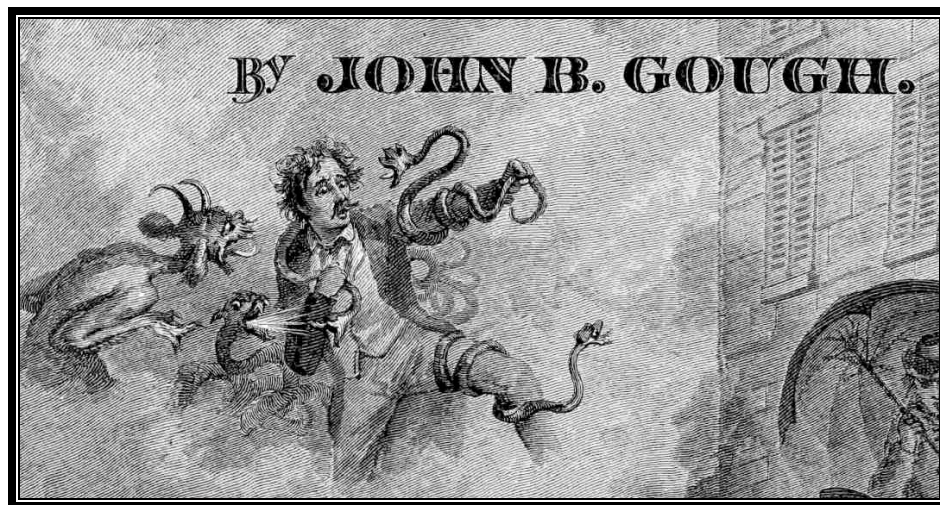
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<sup>87</sup> "Mr. Gough—His Style of Speaking," *Princeton Whig* (op. cit.); unidentified clipping (probably *National Intelligencer*), n.d. (ca. March 1845); *Pilot*, 28 September 1850.

of the 1886 edition, depicting “the beginning, middle, and end of a drunkard’s career,” features just four images. Representing the “middle,” located immediately beneath Gough’s name on the title page, is a man battling snakes and demons during a bout of the DTs. **(Figure 8.)** This suggests that the DTs was, indeed, a spectacle strongly associated with Gough.

At one point in the book, Gough details drink’s terrible toll on the body and declares, “Did you ever see a man in *delirium tremens*, biting his tongue until his mouth was filled with blood, the foam on his lips, the big drops upon his brow? . . . it is the *delirium tremens*, *mania a potu*—a trembling madness, the most terrible disease that can fasten its fangs on man. *Delirium tremens* is a species of insanity.” Here, Gough casts the listener (or reader, or spectator) in the role of witness, conjuring the image of the drunkard before him and invoking the spectacle of derangement. Soon after this passage, Gough changes tactics slightly, casting the listener *as* the drunkard rather than mere onlooker:

Suppose at night an animal frightful in expression and proportions was to enter your room with heavy tread, what would you do? If it were a reality, you would spring at it, you would fight with it, and gather fresh courage from every resounding blow. You are fighting a tangible thing. . . . Your weapon passes through the horrid thing . . . You grasp at it, and clutch nothing; still there is a mocking look on its frightful face. . . . You are not simply frightened, but transfixed with horror. The skin lifts from the scalp to the ankles; your hair stands on end, for you know



**Figure 8.**

F. O. C. Darley, "The Middle—the horrors of delirium tremens." Detail from illustrated title page, John B. Gough, *Platform Echoes: Or, Living Truths for Head and Heart* (Hartford, CT: A. D. Worthington, 1886).

there is nothing to fight. . . . That is the horror of *delirium tremens*.<sup>88</sup>

The use of second-person address in this passage suggests that in his lectures, Gough encouraged his spectators to imagine *embodying* the inebriate. If so, it would help to explain why critics report sensing a collective, affective, corporeal response in the audience when Gough described the horrors of the DTs. First, the orator invited spectators to bear witness to the undisciplined drunkard's body, and then conjured them *as* that body.

The inherent contradiction in experience speeches, and a reason both supporters and critics considered them to be sensational, is that speakers portrayed themselves as normal, productive men forever haunted by former, dissipating selves. Through his powers of imitation, mimicry, and heart, Gough rendered his spectral self more visibly and palpably than any other temperance orator had been able to do. In addition, the Washingtonian project, and Gough's, demanded an official declaration of sobriety that in many respects was a promise to embody American middle-class values. At gatherings, events, and lectures, reformers urged audience members to come forward, sign the pledge, and vow never again to consume alcohol of any kind. The pledge placed enormous value on the individual's involvement, requiring him to participate actively in his own rehabilitation.<sup>89</sup> The experience speech derived its power, in part, from this promise. The speaker's present performance (his persuasive and affective speech) capitalized on his past vow (or performative utterance) to abstain from alcohol.

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<sup>88</sup> Gough, *Platform Echoes*, facing frontispiece, list of illustrations (vii), and 154-56.

<sup>89</sup> Even today, total abstinence remains the recommended course for recovering alcoholics. Most obviously, it is the central principle guiding Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), an organization that has important things in common with the Washingtonian project of the 1840s. However, AA's emphasis on anonymity poses a stark contrast with nineteenth-century temperance activities, such as signing the pledge, that were extremely public in nature.

Therefore, Gough's offstage life—especially his ability to prove the pledge's efficacy by way of his personal conduct—constituted a critical component of his persona. His reputation hinged on his daily adherence to middle-class norms (financial solvency, diligent dedication, and moral conduct), despite his nightly conjuring of the old ghost.

Therefore, when Gough relapsed into drunkenness on two occasions in the 1840s, the ghost materialized in a sensational way. Instead of creating spectacles in the lecture hall, he became one himself. His first relapse occurred in 1843, five months after he signed the pledge and began his career as a temperance lecturer. In his autobiography, Gough confirms this setback and states that it was a “fact notorious at the time,” widely discussed within his home community of Worcester, Massachusetts. Fatigued by a rigorous speaking schedule, he explains that he traveled to Boston one evening, fell in with some old friends at the theatre, and when one of them offered him a glass of alcohol, he did not refuse. This single glass roused his “powerful and now successful enemy”—his appetite for drink—and he resumed the habit for a short time. However, Gough eventually sought help from his temperance associates and signed the pledge again. He further states that his friends persuaded him to continue giving addresses despite his temporary relapse. “I was almost broken-hearted, and felt as if I were insane,” he writes, “but . . . cheered by the considerate kindness of my friends, I determined, God helping me, to be more than ever an uncompromising foe to alcohol.” Essentially, Gough frames this unfortunate experience in a positive light, because his admirers and acquaintances rallied around him and encouraged him to continue his good work. When he began lecturing again, he publicly admitted to his violation and was met with overwhelming sympathy. Incorporating his mistake into his life story, he moved on.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Gough, *An Autobiography*, 75-86. Quotations at 76 and 81.

However, the next time Gough fell from grace, he was not quite so fortunate. In September 1845, during a lecture tour in New York City, he disappeared for a week and was eventually discovered in a house of ill repute on Walker Street, in the company of prostitutes and suffering from the effects of *delirium tremens*. By this time, Gough had obtained celebrity status, with the details of his addresses and whereabouts reported regularly in the newspapers of most major Eastern cities. Immediately, a debunking of Goughian mythology played out in a stunning variety of periodicals, with sensational publications like the *Police Gazette* and *Herald* of New York City leading the ruthless charge. But, unlike his relapse in 1843, this time Gough did not accept the responsibility or the blame. He wrote and distributed a statement claiming that a stranger, who invited him to engage in conversation over a glass of soda water, somehow drugged or poisoned him. The proffered concoction, Gough claimed, whetted his appetite for drink and caused an uncontrolled spiral that ended in a brothel.<sup>91</sup>

The voluminous press coverage about the affair in Gough's scrapbooks suggests that the public followed the story with great interest. When deconstructing the event, several newspapers underscored its theatricality, describing it in terms of spectacle and sensation. Such rhetoric calls attention to how a temperance speaker's "performance" in life deeply informed his credibility as an orator. One paper notes, "The singular disappearance, and as singular re-appearance, of this distinguished and eloquent Temperance Lecturer creates more and more of a sensation." Along these lines, the *Herald* declares, "It is, in fact, a singular spectacle—a moral phenomenon, worthy of exciting admiration, and of leading to enquiry." The *Christian World* faults the "injudicious kindness of his later friends [who] kept him forever in the field. . . . They

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<sup>91</sup> John B. Gough, "Statement of John B. Gough," 22 September 1845, *JBGP*, folio vol. 2, 9.

forgot that when but a boy he was of the *dramatis personae* of our ‘Lion Theatre.’ They unconsciously made life for him a *spectacle*, in which he was to bear the only, the single part. I do not wonder that he fell.” The *Police Gazette* repeatedly argues that the incident was simply the most visible sign of Gough’s hypocrisy: “Take one backward glance upon his whole career, and the mind reels back sickened and disgusted with the spectacle.” Embedded in the *Gazette*’s statement are the many accusations leveled against Gough during his fast and furious rise to fame—allegations, for example, that he had personally enriched himself through the philanthropic machinery of the temperance cause.<sup>92</sup>

Gough’s alleged “humbugging” of the public (as the *Gazette* asserted on at least one occasion) serves as the moral touchstone of many critics’ arguments. The *Herald* blames not Gough alone, but also temperance reformers who collectively comprised “a moral ulcer on the community” by trying “to prove that a rogue is not a rogue—that a deceiver is not a deceiver—that a drunkard is not a drunkard.” The anonymous author of a scathing pamphlet published the following year concedes that Gough should not be criticized for his desire to consume ardent spirits, since “The appetite for drink is one that, once thoroughly acquired, is rarely, if ever wholly conquered”; rather, the pamphlet asserts, Gough’s denials and lies constitute his real crime.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> This and subsequent quotations in this section are from otherwise unidentified clippings (ca. late 1845) in *JBGP*, folio vol. 2 (emphasis in original). The *Christian World*, a short-lived Unitarian weekly based in Boston, was published and edited by Rev. George G. Channing, a brother of the celebrated Rev. William Ellery Channing (1780-1842). Below this clipping in his scrapbook, Gough pasted a small slip of paper with the following verse, handwritten in pencil: “Should the great Channing from his grave arise / and on his brother’s twaddle cast his eyes / How would he blush to think his honored name / Was borne by one who’s neither sense, nor shame.”

<sup>93</sup> “Gough’s Case—Moral Obliquity,” *New York Herald*, n.d. (circa December 1845); *Goffiana; A Review of the Life and Writings of John B. Gough* (Boston: Ruggles, 1846), 38 and 39.

While detractors brutally attacked his character and motives, other commentators participated in the debunking of Gough by urging the public to offer him compassion. They insisted that the event posed the opportunity to extend sympathy and forgiveness to the humiliated orator and, thereby, to drunkards everywhere, whom he implicitly represented. In the process, though, they tacitly questioned the veracity of his story. For example, the *Pittsfield Washingtonian* declared, “We trust that this melancholy event will be . . . a warning to all, to be ever on their guard against the temptations of the adversary.” Other writers maintained that if Gough was a victim of deception, he should not be blamed, because he did not consciously violate his pledge but rather was tricked into doing so.<sup>94</sup>

Public discourse in the wake of Gough’s supposed relapse reveals how the sensational drunkard, in both oratory and melodrama, derived its capital from the slippage between storied/past and actual/present failure. It suggests that the audience’s attraction to experience speakers hinged on their omnipresent potential to falter, stumbling from normalcy into disorder. As Roach argues, an audience’s fascination with a celebrity relies in part on his or her vulnerability, which “makes for breathless spectatorship.”<sup>95</sup> For the temperance celebrity, disaster perpetually looms, one step—or one drink—away. Such a balancing act may be seen as a sensation scene in miniature, playing out on the body as if it were a stage.

When Gough enacted his apparently inevitable fall, it only seemed to add to his fame. In his journal during this tumultuous period, Gough indicates feeling “sick” for several weeks after his scandalous discovery on Walker Street, during which time he

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<sup>94</sup> Quotations are from otherwise unidentified clippings on pages 8 and 6 (respectively) of Gough, *JBGP*, folio vol. 2.

<sup>95</sup> Roach, *It*, 8.

rested and recovered at home. Despite the controversy, questioning, and ridicule he endured, he held out hope for not only a physical recovery, but also a public one: “I am encouraged by my friends and do not fear what [my enemies] can do to me as long as I feel that I am right.”<sup>96</sup> As it turned out, his friends’ encouragement was warranted. In December of that year, Gough began speaking again. For the most part, his audiences welcomed him with open arms, and he enjoyed a celebrated career that spanned four decades.

### **Dénouement: Advocating Discipline by Way of Sensationalism**

As I argued in the previous chapter, the spectacular instant usually features an out-of-the-ordinary body, a person doing or experiencing something unusual. But in striking contrast to the other sensation scenes I examine in this dissertation, which feature a character at her most impressive and heroic moment (Eliza successfully crossing the treacherous ice floes in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; Laura putting herself into the path of a rushing train in *Under the Gaslight*), the *delirium tremens* sequence consists of a writhing and hallucinating body suffering from alcohol withdrawal. Interestingly, it appeared at a time when inebriates constituted a high proportion of the population in U.S. insane asylums. Nineteenth-century Americans considered the incoherent, fanatic, violent DTs to be a temporary episode of insanity, one that might become permanent if not addressed swiftly and seriously.

Its disorderly excess may strike us as unseemly, out of place, in moral reform melodrama—a genre strongly associated with museum theatres, the institutional model pioneered by Kimball in Boston and Barnum in New York that “hinged on [the proprietors’] personal reputations and their production of moral drama,” according to

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<sup>96</sup> Gough, JBG Journal, 47.

McConachie.<sup>97</sup> What might explain the popularity of this grotesque image? In soliciting the audience's sympathy for the drunken protagonist, did reformers and theatre producers encourage spectators to be more considerate of and open-minded about inebriates? In other words, what modes of feeling and meaning did the DTs scene convey?

Theatre historians who have explored this question provide disparate answers. McConachie, for example, argues that museum theatres offered moral reform melodramas like *The Drunkard* in order to “fold thousands of status-anxious urbanites into the embrace of the emergent business-class culture.”<sup>98</sup> He ultimately proposes that contract-making and vow-keeping are the central concerns in such plays, because characters suffer dire consequences when they do not keep the promises they are expected to make. His interpretation suggests that melodramas like *The Drunkard* served a disciplinary function, because they privileged and celebrated business-class values.

Although Mason views the question through a slightly different lens, his conclusions are somewhat similar to McConachie's. In his theoretical framing of melodrama, Mason maps distinctions between myth and ideology and warns against conflating the two, arguing that melodrama's tendency toward *myth* (which he defines as “a form of symbolic narrative” that is “inherently allegorical”—“the voice not of individuals but of entire peoples”) contrasts starkly with *polemic*, “or any other mode that eschews symbol, narrative, allegory, and overt fiction.” Although he does not discuss this antithesis in much detail, focusing instead on the collective nature of myth and its ambition to “bring everyone together,” Mason seems to suggest that myth is conservative, collective, and static whereas polemic tends to be progressive, particular, and active. This assumption is evident in his discussion of *The Drunkard*: he argues that temperance

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<sup>97</sup> McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 175.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

melodramas “fostered a myth that promoted the ideology of the rising middle class,” and “appeared only when the mainstream temperance rhetoric and publications . . . had evolved to the point at which popular theatre was possible.”<sup>99</sup> In other words, Mason asserts that *The Drunkard* conveyed values that, by the play’s premiere, had already been collectively embraced; therefore, it was mythic (conservative) rather than polemic (progressive).

In contrast, Frick suggests, “temperance drama was born of the intersection of temperance motives and ideology with *progressive* trends in literature and the arts.” He argues that “the more sensationalist reformers” embraced performative and theatrical activities because “they were directed principally at the senses; they appealed to the emotions rather than to reason; and, they were perceived by many as being potentially subversive.”<sup>100</sup> Frick’s reading has much in common with cultural historians who have characterized antebellum temperance activists as anti-traditionalist. When exploring the “conservative or progressive” question, these scholars assert that the *means* employed by reformers is an important indicator. For example, Tyrrell contends that Washingtonian tactics, such as the controversial use of amusements, reveal a “strong anti-traditional bias.” Blocker, in his transhistorical survey of American temperance activity, also concludes, “temperance reformers have generally remained good liberals,” asserting that the *means* adopted by different groups can serve as “a recurrent test of their attachment to the liberal dream.” Mintz offers a more nuanced reading of temperance’s place on the political spectrum by emphasizing the paradoxical objectives of nineteenth-century activists; but ultimately, he criticizes scholars who “cynically conclude that antebellum

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<sup>99</sup> Mason, *Melodrama*, 10, 11, 62, and 67.

<sup>100</sup> Frick, *Theatre, Culture, and Temperance Reform*, 13 (my emphasis) and 60. Frick reiterates this assertion in “‘Not from the Drowsy Pulpit!’: Moral Reform Melodrama on the Nineteenth-Century Stage,” *Theatre Symposium* 15 (2007): 41-51.

reform was in its essence an instrument of class hegemony or control,” calling such a conclusion “a mistake of the highest magnitude.”<sup>101</sup>

Such work complicates and challenges a prevailing attitude in the post-Prohibition era that teetotalism was merely “a cranky fad,” to employ Joel Bernard’s apt phrase.<sup>102</sup> Early historiography on temperance, such as Richard Hofstadter’s *The Age of Reform* (1955) and Joseph Gusfield’s *Symbolic Crusade* (1963), portrays the movement as an attempt by conservative individuals to solidify their hegemony through the promotion of traditional values.<sup>103</sup> By drawing attention to the innovative means employed by temperance activists, Frick, Tyrrell, Blocker, and Mintz offer important critiques of a condescending cynicism in liberal circles, including academe, regarding Prohibition and its nineteenth-century precedents. Jessica Warner and Janine Riviere blame this cynicism for the curious absence of scholarship on all forms of abstinence.<sup>104</sup>

However, in their efforts to reveal (or perhaps rehabilitate) antebellum temperance reform as a serious subject of study, has recent scholarship overemphasized the sensational means employed by activists? By focusing on the innovative character of the Washingtonians and their amusements, have scholars obscured their fundamental values or content?

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<sup>101</sup> Tyrrell, *Sobering Up*, 6; Blocker, *American Temperance Movements*, 161; Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers*, xxii.

<sup>102</sup> Bernard, “From Fasting to Abstinence,” 337.

<sup>103</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Random House, 1955); Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade*. The endurance of the arguments advanced by these scholars is evident in later studies that seek to complicate and revise them. For example, Blocker writes in his preface, “Gusfield’s *Symbolic Crusade* played a large part in defining issues of modern temperance research; although I disagree with Gusfield on many points, this book enters a debate that he more than anyone else began” (*American Temperance Movements*, ix).

<sup>104</sup> Jessica Warner and Janine Riviere, “Why Abstinence Matters to Americans,” *Addiction* 102 (2007): 502-05.

In my own effort to understand the politics of the DTs scene, I would like to examine it through a particular theoretical lens: psychologist Jonathan Haidt's theory of moral foundations. In making this gesture, I am not suggesting that Haidt's framework provides the best (or only) strategy for understanding the ideological underpinnings of activist movements or their cultural products. But I propose that it helpfully destabilizes, and potentially dismantles, the architecture of the conservative/progressive binary—a construct that ignores the complexity of moral subjectivity. In addition, the theory reveals points of overlap and contention across groups and collectives, any one of which might serve as a springboard for productive discussion across the divide.

In brief, Haidt proposes that ethical judgments are determined not only by social influences, but also by five innate intuitions that seem to be pre-cultural. Each intuition is not determinate but rather operates as “an innate preparedness to feel flashes of approval or disapproval toward certain patterns of events involving other human beings.” According to Haidt, moral decisions are guided by one or more goals or “virtues”: to protect and help unfortunate and/or suffering individuals (harm/care); to ensure the autonomy and equal treatment of individuals within a society (fairness/reciprocity); to support, sustain, and strengthen the communities to which one belongs (ingroup/loyalty); to acknowledge one's place within a social hierarchy and adhere to its conventions (authority/respect); and to avoid dirty or disgusting experiences, objects, and behaviors (purity/sanctity). These values constitute a complex matrix rather than a linear scale. Not all decisions (or deciders) take all five criteria into account when making a moral judgment, but in the process they do consider some or all in any given situation.

In an article written in collaboration with Jesse Graham, Haidt argues that by analyzing how moral foundations manifest in public discourse, we can perceive how individuals privilege certain intuitions over others and ascertain why they affiliate with particular political positions. For example, Haidt's preliminary research indicates that

liberal and progressive thinkers tend to discount concerns related to ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity—privileging instead the harm/care and fairness/reciprocity criteria. In contrast, traditionalist and conservative thinkers keep in mind all five moral foundations when making moral decisions. This essential, and somewhat incompatible, difference in strategy helps to explain the strong disagreements between liberals and conservatives, as well as the bafflement experienced by both sides when trying to understand the opposing point of view.<sup>105</sup>

Despite its inherent sensationalism, the *delirium tremens* emphasized values related to purity and sanctity—concerns that are closely tied to and expressed by the body. Haidt and Graham point out that this moral intuition tends to carry more weight in conservative cultures; they write, “Those who seem ruled by carnal passions (lust, gluttony, greed, and anger) are seen as debased, impure, and less than human, while those who live so that the soul is in charge of the body (chaste, spiritually minded, pious) are seen as elevated and sanctified.”<sup>106</sup> In antebellum temperance discourse and iconography,

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<sup>105</sup> My brief summary is based on Jonathan Haidt and Jesse Graham, “When Morality Opposes Justice: Conservatives Have Moral Intuitions That Liberals May Not Recognize,” *Social Justice Research* 20 (2007): 98-116. Quotation is from Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph, “Intuitive Ethics: How Innately Prepared Intuitions Generate Culturally Variable Virtues,” *Daedalus* 55 (Fall 2004): 55-66, at 56, which describes an earlier incarnation of the theory based on four moral intuitions. See also Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind: How Five Sets of Innate Moral Intuitions Guide the Development of Many Culture-Specific Virtues, and Perhaps Even Modules,” in *The Innate Mind*, ed. Peter Carruthers, Stephen Laurence, and Stephen P. Stich (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3:367-92. It is important to note that Haidt and his collaborators consider the theory to be subject to revision as empirical research on moral decision-making continues. According to a statement on the project’s web site, “We expect that over the next few years, our empirical findings, and those of critics, will lead us to revise the theory. There are probably several other good candidates for ‘foundationhood’ (such as Liberty/oppression) and it is possible that the five we have identified could be combined or split in different ways (for example, Ingroup/loyalty tends to correlate highly with Authority/respect).” Jonathan Haidt, “Challenging the Theory: The Moral Foundations Prize,” MoralFoundations.org, University of Virginia, <http://faculty.virginia.edu/haidtlab/mft/index.php?t=challenges> (accessed 17 March 2009).

<sup>106</sup> Haidt and Graham, “When Morality Opposes Justice,” 106.

a pure body ensured economic, professional, and familial stability; whereas the impure drunkard, his mind pickled with liquor, lost all. Horrifying and disgusting, the DTs served as sensational evidence of a man's indiscipline, dissipation, and abjection—his failure to stay within the boundaries of the middle-class normalcy. In light of this, it is not surprising that an absolutist notion of discipline (total abstinence) eventually supplanted mere moderation within the temperance movement. Through the adoption of the teetotaler's pledge, working- and middle-class activists endorsed and reinforced the sober, disciplined body as a universal common denominator for all Americans.

Therefore, I argue that depictions of dipsomania played a role in the prescriptive project of corporeal normalization during the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>107</sup> In melodrama and experience speeches, the DTs revealed the spectacular consequences of departing from a theoretical, hyperreal body that constituted the norm. Essentially, the mad man helped to define his controlled opposite. As such, the DTs scene was a conservative spectacle effected through sensational excess. It promoted values that we generally associate with fundamentalist politics: bodily discipline (the grotesque body suffering from dipsomania is, essentially, *undisciplined*), the stable nuclear family (which the drunkard radically destabilizes), and social decorum (as modeled by the respectable middle classes). Reformers employed sensational tactics to advance the cause, but even though their strategies were innovative, the underlying values they conveyed were not.

A more recent example of spectacular performance for conservative ends—the evangelical Hell House—may help to illuminate this point. For the past two decades, hundreds of churches across the U.S. have created theatrical events modeled on Halloween haunted houses, which are designed to attract teenage audiences. Hell Houses

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<sup>107</sup> For more on the material aspects of this process during the colonial period and early nineteenth century, see Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

proselytize purity through the presentation of its opposite. Suffering bodies are displayed in a wide variety of circumstances, ranging from botched abortions to school shootings to drug-infested raves. In most tableaux, the aberrant characters are aggressively disciplined by devils and demons—all with the intention of scaring the deviance out of spectators. In this respect, Hell Houses have something in common with nineteenth-century temperance melodrama. Indeed, one could argue that the DTs scene lives on, in a revised form, in Hell Houses: some include a drunk-driving scene in which a teenager under the influence causes a tragic accident.<sup>108</sup>

Granted, a particular scene in a particular play cannot fully capture the complex corporeal politics of a historical moment. Renditions of the *delirium tremens* were temporary and fleeting, constituting just a few moments in a relatively long evening. In addition, DTs scenes satisfied practical needs related to market share and capital, providing actors with opportunities to leverage their talent and offering audiences the pleasure of witnessing *tours de force*. But as I have argued in this chapter, when the DTs emerged as a medical diagnosis in the early nineteenth century, physicians and activists conceived it as a kind of temporary insanity—a form of mental and corporeal deviance. A spectator's understanding of a performer's feigned madness was likely informed, in whole or part, by these theories. Moreover, the DTs appeared in lecture halls and theatres at a time when a new concept of "normal" was emerging, as Lennard J. Davis has argued.<sup>109</sup> John B. Gough, whose personal struggle to be normal made him famous, succinctly articulated his endorsement of ordinariness in one of his orations: "Time

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<sup>108</sup> For an introduction to Hell Houses, see Ann Pellegrini, "'Signaling through the Flames': Hell House Performance and Structures of Religious Feeling," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2007): 911-35. For a filmed documentary of how such performances are produced, see *Hell House*, DVD, directed by George Ratliff (2001; Brooklyn, NY: Plexifilm, 2003).

<sup>109</sup> Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*.

would fail to enumerate the many habits that, acquired and indulged, mar the beauty and destroy the symmetry of the true man.”<sup>110</sup> In the DTs scene, that beauty was marred and destroyed for a spectacular instant—and in subsiding, the absolute symmetry of the normal man materialized once more, a ready model for the masses.

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<sup>110</sup> Gough, *Platform Echoes*, 83-84.

### 3.

#### The Slave Turned Subject: Eliza's Flight in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

The agency of the enslaved is only intelligible or recognizable as crime.  
—Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*<sup>1</sup>

Slavery has never been represented; Slavery never can be represented.  
—William Wells Brown (1847)<sup>2</sup>

Despite William Wells Brown's declaration that "Slavery never can be represented," cultural producers attempted to do so, both discursively and pictorially. Harriet Beecher Stowe figures prominently within the community of authors, artists, and performers who hoped to persuade U.S. citizens to emancipate those in bondage. Because of its astonishing longevity, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly* (1852) has inspired a formidable body of scholarship across disciplines; with so much written about the novel already, it might be difficult to imagine what remains to be said. But because my central concern in this dissertation is the relationship between sensationalism and reform in mid-nineteenth-century America, I would be remiss to neglect what John W. Frick calls "arguably the greatest moral reform drama of all time."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, I wish to augment the ongoing discussion about this ubiquitous text by investigating why one

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<sup>1</sup> Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 62.

<sup>2</sup> William Wells Brown, *A Lecture Delivered before the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem* (Boston: Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, 1847), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Frick, "Not from the Drowsy Pulpit!" 42.

particular moment in Stowe's story became popular *as a result of* its realization on stage. Although it occupies a mere two paragraphs in the novel, Eliza's dash across the ice floes of the Ohio River became one of the most recognizable images from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* due to its appearance in melodramas. Leslie A. Fiedler describes it as "magically moving" and suggests that it "transcend[s] somehow not just the ordinary criteria of taste, but of credibility itself."<sup>4</sup> Lauren Berlant observes that the quadroon mother's escape is almost always included in adaptations of the story, perhaps because the episode is "electrified by the awesome power of the mother to harness her own sublimity to the natural sublime," and in the process, "Eliza transforms into a species of superpersonhood."<sup>5</sup> Berlant's assessment calls attention to the conflicting discourses driving the scene: powerful motherhood, personal sublimity, nature, transformation, and immanent personhood. I argue in this chapter that the contradictions inherent in Eliza's flight exemplify how a spectacular instant can exhibit ambiguity and paradox rather than assertive, clear-cut doctrine.

When the Compromise of 1850 strengthened the Fugitive Slave Act by facilitating the return of escaped slaves, representations of fugitives played an increasingly important role in abolitionist publications and rhetoric. Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in response to the Compromise, and her documentary companion to the novel, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853), focuses considerable attention on the plight of runaways. Daphne A. Brooks notes that during the years leading up to the Civil War, "motion, migration, and flight worked as operative tropes in the black abolitionist production of the slave's narrative," and Eliza's sprint across the ice floes invokes these

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<sup>4</sup> Leslie A. Fiedler, *The Inadvertent Epic: From Uncle Tom's Cabin to Roots* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 25.

<sup>5</sup> Berlant, *Female Complaint*, 44-45. Quotation on 44.

tropes both literally and figuratively.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, a nuanced reading of the scene must take into account visual and material manifestations of fugitive slaves during the antebellum period. To that end, I pursue the fugitive as both archetype and subject, hunting for iconographic forbearers of Eliza and figurations of slaves crossing the river to freedom. I draw particular inspiration from scholars who have tracked vestiges of Stowe's novel in transatlantic culture, assessing what those mutations reveal. For example, Sarah Meer has investigated how the text circulated in England and Europe as well as the U.S., focusing especially on its relationship with minstrelsy. Patricia A. Turner has explored Eliza as folklore, noting that scenes featuring the quadroon heroine "aren't authentic folklore, but the multiple performances and versions make it folkloric." My project has most in common with Jo-Ann Morgan's *Uncle Tom's Cabin as Visual Culture*, which examines pictorial iterations that appeared well into the twentieth century; but Morgan primarily focuses on how Eliza haunts postbellum depictions of the infamous infanticide committed by Margaret Garner in 1856.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 67.

<sup>7</sup> Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania*; Patricia A. Turner, "The Rise and Fall of Eliza Harris: From Novel to Tom Shows to Quilts," 2007, available at Stephen Railton, ed., *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* (online archive), University of Virginia, <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/utc/interpret/intexhp.html>; Jo-Ann Morgan, *Uncle Tom's Cabin as Visual Culture* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007). See also Patricia A. Turner, *Crafted Lives: Stories and Studies of African American Quilters* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 160-62. Of course, these works have methodological and theoretical strategies in common with earlier scholarship dealing wholly or in part with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, including Harry Birdoff, *The World's Greatest Hit: Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: S. F. Vanni, 1947); Fiedler, *Inadvertent Epic*; and Thomas F. Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985), among many others. Exemplars of the tendency to treat *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a kind of nineteenth-century *ür*-text include Jane P. Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 122-46; Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); and Berlant, *Female Complaint*, 33-67.

I wish to complicate our understanding of *Uncle Tom's* heroine by imagining how she—as character, figure, and icon—invoked the legal dilemmas at the heart of the Fugitive Slave Act. The legislation immediately criminalized slaves who had successfully entered the northern states as well as whites who assisted runaways on the quest for freedom. It also reinforced the idea (expressed by Saidiya V. Hartman in the epigraph above) that any act of free agency by the slave was simultaneously and instantaneously a violation of law. To understand what the Ohio River scene articulates about the immanent subjectivity of the fugitive slave, I examine how the outlaws in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, particularly the members of the Harris family, foreground these ethical quandaries. Ultimately, I suggest that Eliza's rebellious river-crossing may have been read as a radical protest of the erasure of personhood demanded by the slavery system, and that this reading—which has more to do with agency than race—possibly preceded or even exceeded spectators' appraisal of Eliza's ethnicity.

### **Eliza's Flight in Performance, Print, and Material Culture**

Although it eventually became one of the most enduring images of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the Ohio River incident was not illustrated in the original two-volume edition of Stowe's novel issued by John P. Jewett in early 1852, which features six plates by Hammatt Billings. A lavish, single-volume edition published by Jewett in December of that year—timed to take advantage of the Christmas season—includes more than 150 illustrations; Eliza's escape is depicted for the first time in this version.<sup>8</sup> **(Figure 9.)**

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<sup>8</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1852) and *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly*, illustrated ed. (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1853). See also Morgan, *Uncle Tom's Cabin as Visual Culture*, 22-26; and Claire Parfait, *The Publishing History of Uncle Tom's Cabin, 1852-2002* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 67-89 and 212-14.



**Figure 9.**

Eliza crossing the Ohio River. Engraving by Hammatt Billings in Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly*, illustrated ed. (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1853), 73. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

In the interim, a number of theatres in the eastern U.S. prominently featured the scene in plays adapted from the novel. Its frequent appearance on stage and spectators' enthusiastic response to it (as reported in newspapers) suggest that the theatre helped popularize what eventually came to be known as "Eliza's Flight."<sup>9</sup>

Dramatizations of the novel were numerous and widespread, so out of necessity I limit my discussion to a handful of productions in Boston and New York during the years 1852 to 1854. For my close textual readings, I rely principally on George L. Aiken's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, first presented in 1852 by George C. Howard in Troy, New York, and then at A. H. Purdy's National Theatre in New York City. It was among the earliest adaptations and gained a reading audience after its publication by Samuel French in 1858.<sup>10</sup> In addition, I examine materials related to a version by C. W. Taylor (no longer extant) that played at a small number of theatres in 1852. By way of comparison, I also study H. J. Conway's rendition, produced at Moses Kimball's Boston Museum in 1852 and at P. T. Barnum's American Museum the following year. Bruce A. McConachie, Bluford Adams, and others have characterized Conway's *Uncle Tom* as relatively conservative, politically speaking.<sup>11</sup> Because Conway omits Eliza's flight, it provides an

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<sup>9</sup> Morgan observes that Billings's illustration of Eliza's escape "resembles a stage tableau" and this "is no coincidence" in light of the prolific stage adaptations produced after the novel's publication (*Uncle Tom's Cabin as Visual Culture*, 86).

<sup>10</sup> George L. Aiken, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly* (1852-53; New York: Samuel French, 1858). Subsequently, page references to this text will be indicated parenthetically; I leave the original spellings, punctuation, and capitalization intact. As Birdoff notes, many changes were made to Aiken's play during its run at the National Theatre in New York City during 1853-54 (*World's Greatest Hit*, 101-02). It is likely that the 1858 Samuel French edition incorporates those changes. Because I am interested in audiences' reception of the play in the wake of improvements made to the Fugitive Slave Act, I account for this problem by supplementing the published script with newspaper advertisements, reviews, and playbills from the years 1852 to 1854.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce A. McConachie, "Out of the Kitchen and into the Marketplace: Normalizing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for the Antebellum Stage," *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 3 (Winter 1991): 5-28; Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*; see also Toll, *Blacking Up*, 88-97; Loren Kruger, "Our Theater? Stages in an American Cultural History," *American Literary History* 8, no.

intriguing contrast to the Aiken version as well as the panoply of American pictures and objects that depict the scene.<sup>12</sup>

Playbills for Taylor's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at the National Theatre, which ran in August and September 1852 (nearly a year before Aiken's was presented there), demonstrate that the playwright recognized the dramatic potential of the Ohio River sequence. Although he renamed the heroine Morna Wilmot, Taylor retained Eliza's crossing of the ice floes: a scene list from August 30, 1852, reads, "Ohio River Frozen over; Snow Storm; Flight of Morna and her child; Pursuit of the Traders, Desperate Resolve and Escape of Morna on Floating Ice." A *New York Herald* advertisement for the production, which only lists the actors playing Morna and her husband, Edward (a renamed George Harris), suggests that the couple served as the play's focal point.<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, Uncle Tom, Little Eva, and Topsy would eclipse George and Eliza in popularity; but in 1852, it seems Purdy believed that the fugitive slaves—or, at least, the actors in those roles—would be the biggest draw. The run comprised fewer than a dozen

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4 (1996): 699-714, at 708-11; and Frick, "'Not from the Drowsy Pulpit!'" 48-49. In contrast, Jeffrey D. Mason (*Melodrama*, 89-126) argues that Aiken's version is equally conservative in its politics, and Edward Kahn asserts that the political position of Conway's script was "one of compromise" ("Creator of Compromise," 71).

<sup>12</sup> Historians disagree about whether Aiken's or Conway's was more popular. Judith Williams, for example, asserts that Conway's was, whereas Thomas L. Riis asserts the opposite. Judith Williams, "Uncle Tom's Women," in *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*, ed. Harry J. Elam and David Krasner (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2001), 19-39, at 21; Thomas L. Riis, "The Music and Musicians in Nineteenth-Century Productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *American Music* 4, no. 3 (1986): 268-86, at 269. See also Toll, *Blacking Up*, 88-97; and Bruce A. McConachie, "H. J. Conway's Dramatization of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: A Previously Unpublished Letter," *Theatre Journal* 34, no. 2 (1982): 149-54, at 49. However, the question of popularity is somewhat irrelevant to my project: I am interested in a spectacular instant—Eliza's flight—that appeared in many stage adaptations, though not in Conway's.

<sup>13</sup> Advertisement for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, National Theatre (New York), *New York Herald*, 2 September 1852, 6. The advertisement also lists the two leading actors (T. D. Rice and Mrs. Jones) in *Otello*, which shared the bill.

performances, even though the *Herald* reported that the audience was “pleased with the novelty, without being troubled about the moral of the story.”<sup>14</sup> In October, Taylor’s drama was presented at W. Cowell’s Eagle Theatre in Boston; a playbill for the production lists Morna/Eliza’s escape and promises, “no expense has been spared in placing this immense production on the Stage in the most effective manner.”<sup>15</sup>

Around the time that Taylor’s adaptation premiered in New York City, the first part of Aiken’s version premiered in Troy, New York—a hotbed of anti-slavery activity in the state, particularly for African Americans. One of Troy’s most notable residents was Henry Highland Garnet, an escaped slave, minister, and radical abolitionist who had urged slaves to rebel against their masters in a controversial speech at the National Convention of Colored Men held in Albany in 1843.<sup>16</sup> According to Harry Birdoff, newspaper reports in Troy’s *Budget* and *Daily Times* indicate that over a ten-week period, the play attracted an impressive array of spectators, in part because of “the thrilling scenes.” Soon, Aiken adapted the second half of Stowe’s novel under the title *The Death of Uncle Tom; or, The Religion of the Lowly*.<sup>17</sup> Howard eventually offered both plays together in a single evening, thereby initiating what Birdoff terms “a radical change to the

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<sup>14</sup> “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* at the National Theatre” (unsigned; likely James Gordon Bennett), review of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, by C. W. Taylor, National Theatre (New York), *New York Herald*, 3 September 1852, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Playbill for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, National Theatre (New York), 30 August 1852, Harry Birdoff Collection, Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, CT; playbill for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Eagle Theatre (Boston), 16 October 1852, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Both playbills available at Railton, ed., *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture*. Meer, too, observes that surviving records indicate “Taylor made a feature of his ‘Floating Ice’” (*Uncle Tom Mania*, 117).

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 226-28.

<sup>17</sup> Birdoff, *World’s Greatest Hit*, 46, 51, and 54.

American stage”: presenting one melodrama instead of an eclectic bill of assorted entertainments.<sup>18</sup>

After a successful run exceeding one-hundred performances, Howard presented the production in Albany, the state’s legislative capital and the site of the first national convention held by the Liberty Party (a political organization calling for immediate emancipation) in 1840. Then, the company traveled to New York City, where it began its famous engagement at the National Theatre in July 1853. Playbills and advertisements suggest that the Ohio River sequence was a highlight. The first of eight tableaux, it seems to have pleased the crowd, with spectators responding vocally in typical nineteenth-century fashion. The *Times* review describes the audience’s reaction to the scene as follows: “The boys are now wrought up to the highest pitch—and when, finally, *Eliza* is seen with her child, sailing across a blue river on a piece of paste-board ice, and the slave-hunters are shivering and shaking their whips on the shore; one grand cheer goes up from pit and galleries.”<sup>19</sup> Later in the run, Purdy freshened up the production by commissioning new scenery by S. Culbert and J. Whytal, adding four tableaux. A playbill from this time indicates that the Ohio River sequence now incorporated three sets by Whytal: “A Winter Scene near the Ohio River,” “Perspective Ice Scene on the Ohio,” and “New Ice Scene, Banks of the Ohio.”<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, a competing version by H. E. Stevens at the Bowery Theatre, featuring T. D. Rice as Uncle Tom, made a similar investment in the spectacle of Eliza’s flight. A playbill boasts, “Loud applause is given to the FROZEN

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>19</sup> “‘Uncle Tom’ among the Bowery Boys,” review of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, by George L. Aiken, National Theatre (New York), *New York Times*, 27 July 1853, 1 (emphasis in original).

<sup>20</sup> Playbill for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, National Theatre (New York), 16 February 1854, Harvard Theatre Collection. See also Birdoff, *World’s Greatest Hit*, 100.

OHIO, exhibiting a splendidly located Panorama of the same,” and “Eliza’s Peril on the Ice” is listed as the second of nine tableaux.<sup>21</sup>

Cast lists confirm that early productions conceived Eliza as a typical melodramatic heroine intended to attract the audience’s sympathy, with actresses in the leading-lady line performing the role. In Troy, Mrs. G. C. Germon (née Jane Anderson, a third-generation descendent of the first Joseph Jefferson) played Eliza.<sup>22</sup> A review in the *Northern Budget* singled her out as someone who acted “admirably” in the production. At the National Theatre the following year, Mrs. W. G. Jones (née Julia A. Wagstaff) originated the role. Interestingly, in Taylor’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852, a different actress, Mrs. H. F. Nichols, played Eliza at the National, while Jones performed two comic parts: Crazy Meg in Taylor’s melodrama and Desdemona (opposite T. D. Rice) in a blackface burlesque, *Otello*, which shared the bill.<sup>23</sup> It seems Jones had a wide range and played an impressive variety of parts throughout her career; T. Allston Brown asserts, “Her great natural talents have been perfected by diligent study, and she not only knows but comprehends all the parts she undertakes. A more versatile actress has never been seen on the stage.” Jones became a regular member of the National’s acting troupe around this time, “having previously only played on special occasions.”<sup>24</sup> As such, she

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<sup>21</sup> Playbill for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Bowery Theatre (New York), 10 February 1854, Harvard Theatre Collection.

<sup>22</sup> Birdoff, *World’s Greatest Hit*, 44. According to William Winter, Mrs. Germon was the sister of Elizabeth Anderson, later Mrs. J. W. Thoman, whom I discuss in the previous chapter. Winter, *The Jeffersons*, 95.

<sup>23</sup> Review of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, by George L. Aiken, Troy Museum, *Northern Budget* (Troy, NY), 7 October 1852, and playbill for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, National Theatre (New York), 26 July 1853, both available at Railton, ed., *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture*; advertisement for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, by C. W. Taylor, National Theatre (New York), *New York Herald*, 2 September 1852, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Brown, *History of the New York Stage*, 1:309.

may have performed in different lines as she settled into the company. At any rate, the *Times* review of Aiken's *Uncle Tom* described her as "obviously the favorite actress and the heroine of the play."<sup>25</sup> In October 1853, Mrs. J. J. Prior took over Eliza at the National. Fifty years later, Henry F. Stone dubbed her the best actress ever to perform the role and "one of the best leading women of former years . . . a Shakespearean actress of repute."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, leading lady Mrs. Wulf Fries (née Louisa Gann)—whose roles included Portia, Cordelia, and Ophelia as well as Mary in W. H. Smith's *The Drunkard*—originated Eliza in Conway's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at the Boston Museum in 1852.<sup>27</sup>

Casting choices should be taken into account because, as Marvin Carlson has argued, a spectator's overall impression of an actress and her previous roles inevitably ghost subsequent performances.<sup>28</sup> The *Times* writer who saw Jones in Aiken's play describes her as "a very pretty white girl"—suggesting that the production endeavored to elicit the audience's sympathy for Eliza by "whitening" her.<sup>29</sup> The *Times* reporter also observes that the opening scene, during which Eliza and George bid each other farewell, was "not especially different from most plays, where lover and mistress part"—a statement that highlights, perhaps inadvertently, the couple's inability to marry legally under the slavery system. By following a familiar form and structure, the scene instructed spectators who were unfamiliar with the novel that George and Eliza were the hero and

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<sup>25</sup> "'Uncle Tom' among the Bowery Boys."

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Norton Ireland, *Records of the New York Stage* (New York: T. H. Morrell, 1867), 1:620; Henry F. Stone, "Memories of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *Dramatic Mirror*, 25 March 1901, n.p., available at Railton, ed., *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture*.

<sup>27</sup> Boston Museum Cast Lists, vol. 1 (1845-1857), Harvard Theatre Collection.

<sup>28</sup> Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, 52-95.

<sup>29</sup> Stowe, in fact, employed this strategy when she changed the heroine from a mulatto to a quadroon after the story's original serialization in the *National Era* (Parfait, *Publishing History*, 83).

heroine. Turner notes that the positioning of this conversational exchange “shift[s] the emphasis from the ‘Tom sold to the South plot’ and privil[eges] the ‘Harris taking the Underground Railroad’ one.” Mason even suggests that the play’s dramaturgy causes the issue of slavery to serve “as mere background to the Harrises’ domestic situation.” However, I contend that previous experiences seeing an actress in heroine roles primed spectators to sympathize with Eliza’s plight—and perhaps, by association, the plight of all fugitive slave mothers.<sup>30</sup>

Anecdotes about Aiken’s play at the National indicate that the audience intrigued the critics as much as, if not more than, the drama itself. Birdoff suggests that the exchange between Uncle Tom and Aunt Chloe in the third scene (which generally lacked the minstrel comedy associated with black stage characters at that time) had a disciplining effect on the National’s notoriously rowdy audience: “The coldest listeners in the gallery had shown the closest attention to the plot, and there was a multiplicity of ‘Hi! hi’s!’ They called out, ‘It isn’t right!’ and gone were the offending boots over the railing.”<sup>31</sup> Although Birdoff may be exaggerating (as did, probably, reporters), such narratives underscore how the mythology percolating around *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* incorporated beliefs about its potential efficacy, even in 1853. Champions celebrated and critics feared the energetic-yet-orderly collectivity that the story allegedly inspired.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>“‘Uncle Tom’ among the Bowery Boys”; Turner, “The Rise and Fall of Eliza Harris”; Mason, *Melodrama*, 120. Mason’s assessment does not take into account *Uncle Tom’s* close relationship to the Compromise of 1850, as I discuss later. Anxiety about the Fugitive Slave Act may help to explain why Bennett of the *New York Herald* and other critics considered *Uncle Tom* melodramas to be incendiary and inappropriate.

<sup>31</sup> Birdoff, *World’s Greatest Hit*, 69; see also 74-75.

<sup>32</sup> Commenting on this review, Meer observes, “The moment of shared feeling is transmuted into evidence of *Uncle Tom’s* miraculous powers of spiritual enlightenment” (*Uncle Tom Mania*, 115).

Of course, rivers have always had a powerful presence within the spiritual and cultural imagination, which may help to explain both the appeal and the significance of the Ohio River scene. From the River Styx to the River Jordan to the Mississippi River in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, rushing water serves as a radical test of faith, a baptism by fire, or a border between enslavement and liberty. Often, the fording of a river plays a prominent role in escape stories, as well as myths and legends about transitions from earthly to heavenly life. Rivers figure in narratives told by Harriet Tubman and William Wells Brown, among other fugitive slaves. They are also invoked in African American folk songs and spirituals, such as "Deep River," "Michael, Row the Boat Ashore," and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." Howard Thurman observes that for slaves who sang these songs, "the river may have been for many the last and most formidable barrier to freedom. To slip over the river from one of the border states would mean a chance for freedom in the North—or, to cross the river into Canada would mean freedom in a new country, a foreign land."<sup>33</sup>

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the river symbolizes hope and danger, the potential for freedom as well as the dark possibility of death. Rivers and other watery boundaries test the courage and mettle of diverse characters in Stowe's story, as Jane P. Tompkins observes:

Bodies of water mediate between worlds: the Ohio runs between the slave states and the free; Lake Erie divides the United States from Canada, where runaway slaves cannot be returned to their

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<sup>33</sup> Howard Thurman, *Deep River: Reflections on the Religious Insight of Certain of the Negro Spirituals* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1969), 66. For more on the music culture of slaves during the antebellum era, see Dena J. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977). Underscoring the association between rivers and freedom, Vincent Harding uses the river as an ongoing metaphor in his study *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1981).

masters; the Atlantic Ocean divides the North American continent from Africa, where Negroes will have a nation of their own; Lake Pontchartrain shows Eva the heavenly home to which she is going soon; the Mississippi River carries slaves from the relative ease of the middle states to the grinding toil of the southern plantations; the Red River carries Tom to the infernal regions ruled over by Simon Legree.<sup>34</sup>

Sometimes in Aiken's play, water represents a menacing possibility as well: the threat of being sent "down river." For example, in the opening scene George announces that he will flee his master rather than be sold and sent away from his family, telling Eliza, "I will never go down the river alive" (5). Later, Mr. Wilson, a former employer whom George serendipitously encounters in the tavern adjacent to the Ohio River, reiterates this sentiment. He warns the fugitive, "If you're taken it will be worse with you than ever; they'll only abuse you, and half kill you, and sell you down river" (21). Like spectacle, the river derives its power from paradox and contradiction: it liberates and it condemns, sometimes in the same moment.

In Aiken's script, Eliza's sensational escape comprises its own scene (Act I, scene vi) and consists of a single stage direction: "*The entire depth of stage, representing the Ohio River, filled with Floating Ice.—Set bank on R. H. and in front. ELIZA appears, with HARRY, R. H., on a cake of ice, and floats slowly across to L. H.—HALEY, LOKER and MARKS, on bank, R. H., observing.—PHINEAS on opposite shore*" (12). But the river's presence and promise is felt before Eliza appears; the script indicates that it

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<sup>34</sup> Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 138. Stowe makes some of these connections explicit, as in the moment when Eliza first glimpses the Ohio River: "Her first glance was at the river, which lay, like Jordan, between her and the Canaan of liberty on the other side" [*Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), 1:82-83].

appears two scenes earlier, clearly visible through a window in the tavern situated on its bank. Phineas—a rugged Kentuckian in love with a Quaker woman, who assists both Harrises during their respective escapes—describes the river as follows:

Chaw me up into tobaccy ends! how in the name of all that's onpossible am I to get across that yer pesky river? It's a reg'lar blockade of ice! . . . (*Goes to window.*) That's a conglomerated prospect for a loveyer! What in creation's to be done? That thar river looks like a permiscuous ice-cream shop come to an awful state of friz. If I war on the adjacent bank, I wouldn't care a teetotal atom. Rile up, you old varmit, and shake the ice off your back!

At this point, Eliza enters with her son Harry, telling him, “Courage, my boy—we have reached the river. Let it but roll between us and our pursuers, and we are safe!” (9) Later in the scene, she exclaims, “That dark stream lies between me and liberty! Surely the ice will bear my trifling weight. It is my only chance of escape.” And just before she begins her attempt to cross, the fugitive mother declares, “The river is my only hope!” (12)

Her dash across the ice floes is successful, and in some respects extends beyond its occurrence. When the family is reunited in the fifth scene of Act III, Eliza and George discuss the incident in considerable detail, as if to underscore for the audience the danger and peril she risked:

*Geo.* It seems almost incredible that you could have crossed the river on the ice.

*Eliza.* Yes, I did. Heaven helping me, I crossed on the ice, for they were behind me—right behind—and there was no other way.

*Geo.* But the ice was all in broken-up blocks, swinging and heaving up and down in the water.

*Eliza.* I know it was—I know it; I did not think I should get over,  
but I did not care—I could but die if I did not! I leaped on the  
ice, but how I got across I don't know; the first I remember, a  
man was helping me up the bank—that man was Phineas.

*Geo.* My brave girl! you deserve your freedom—you have richly  
earned it! (28)

Here, George explicitly connects Eliza's river crossing with liberty—a liberty realized through courage, fortitude, and faith, and therefore “richly earned.”

The absence of ice floes in H. J. Conway's version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* shows that not all theatre impresarios retained the mother's bold escape. Conway transformed the incident into a joint getaway by the Harrises, which concluded the first act.<sup>35</sup>

Unfortunately, the only known copy of Conway's script dates from after the Civil War, making it a somewhat tricky source for scholars interested in antebellum presentations of the play; however, it follows the outline of scenes in playbills for early productions, suggesting that the promptbook generally resembles the original text.<sup>36</sup> Essentially, Conway combined Eliza's escape with “The Freeman's Defense” scene, during which George exchanges gunfire with the slave catchers who are in hot pursuit. A letter written by Conway to Kimball several months before the play's premiere at the Boston Museum indicates that the question of the fugitives' escape may have been settled early in the writing process. In it, Conway admits, “I find much difficulty in handling it dramatically,” describing dramaturgical challenges like the combination of characters, the

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<sup>35</sup> H. J. Conway, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1876 promptbook, Howard Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, 50-53. Due to limits in time and resources, I was unable to examine the original manuscript for this project; I have relied instead on the electronic transcription available at Railton, ed., *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture*, <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/onstage/scripts/conwayhp.html>.

<sup>36</sup> McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 289 n. 31.

portrayal of the passage of time, and other issues related to the “unity” of the work.

Although the letter includes a brief allusion to “the escape of George and Eliza at the end Act 1st,” Conway does not explicitly propose combining the Ohio River and rocky pass scenes in this correspondence, suggesting that the issue may have been previously settled.<sup>37</sup>

Admittedly, the decision to combine the two scenes may have had little or nothing to do with its politics. Conway explains to Kimball, “Eliza must not be a mother,” because it would necessitate Cassy’s being a grandmother, which “would destroy her not only with the audience but the personator.” He also states he will combine the parts of Eliza and Emmeline because “it will never do to divide the sympathies of the audience.” In his analysis of the letter, McConachie suggests, “Conway sacrificed the Eliza-clutching-her-baby-while-crossing-the-Ohio-on-the-ice-floes scene . . . to allow for a melodramatic recognition scene between mother and daughter nearer the dramatic climax of the show—a decision that probably reflected astute play-carpentry.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, Eliza’s flight might have been omitted for pragmatic, structural, or even financial reasons. I argue, however, that regardless of why the choice was made, it had a transformative impact on the characterization of Eliza and the kinds of affect she mobilized. The most significant change is that the men around her take control, rendering her bravery unnecessary. As a result, the desperation, courage, and faith exhibited by Eliza in the book are dramatically diminished.

For example, in Conway’s revision George fulfills the highly codified role of the hero protecting his damsel in distress. Instead of escaping independently, as in the novel,

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<sup>37</sup> H. J. Conway to Moses Kimball, 1 June 1852, Moses Kimball Papers, Boston Athenaeum.

<sup>38</sup> McConachie, “H. J. Conway’s Dramatization,” 151.

the Harrises flee together, with George masquerading as a white man and Eliza as his slave. In the tavern scene, Mr. Wilson, the slave-catchers Tom and Haley, and the slaveholder Drover John (who practices moderation in his treatment of slaves) converse at various points. From the moment the fugitives enter, it is clear that George is in charge and that Eliza relies on him for guidance. She role-plays the servant, at one point saying “Yes, Massa” to her disguised husband, then exits to “see to the trunks” at his direction. During his exchange with Mr. Wilson, George claims that he ran away because of his wife: “Now, Sir, I have found a wife, you’ve seen her, you know how beautiful she is. When I found she loved me, when I married, I scarcely could believe I was alive. But now what. I am to be dragged, forced to live with another, and this your laws give him the power to do.” At this point, Eliza rushes back in and cries, “Oh, George! The dogs, the dogs! They come this way. We are lost. They will tear me to pieces.” Frozen and fearful, she looks to George to save her, as if the bloodhounds have rendered her incapable of action.<sup>39</sup>

The presence of bloodhounds is significant for several reasons. In the popular imagination, dogs have long been associated with Eliza’s flight, in large part because post-Civil War “Tom Shows” frequently featured them.<sup>40</sup> But they were not ubiquitous in antebellum productions. Dogs are invoked metaphorically in Aiken’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—for example, Eliza likens her pursuers to animals, saying, “How shall I escape these human blood-hounds?” (12)—but they do not appear on stage. Even the Conway

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<sup>39</sup> Conway, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 43 and 46. This scenario is invoked in *The Hunted Slaves*, an oil painting by Richard Ansdell that depicts a male fugitive slave who wields a hatchet to protect his female companion from a pack of dogs. The painting demonstrates that images of bloodhounds pursuing runaways circulated transatlantically at this time; also, given the medium (oil painting), it suggests that such representations were encountered and consumed by diverse audiences, including elites. Richard Ansdell, *The Hunted Slaves* (1861), International Slavery Museum, Liverpool, England.

<sup>40</sup> Turner, “The Rise and Fall of Eliza Harris.”

promptbook suggests that live animals were not used during the Harrises' escape scene; instead, actors barked from the wings.

Moreover, Drover John—who pontificates at one point about the proper way to manage human property—helps the couple escape not because he finds slavery to be objectionable, but because he disagrees with the way Eliza and George have been treated. Upon hearing the barking dogs, he picks up his rifle and swears, “No dogs shall pull down a gal while I can pull a trigger.” John decides to assist the Harrises because he objects to physical violence and cruelty—especially when the fugitive to be “pulled down” is a woman. In the process, John offsets George’s role as protector. When Eliza tells her husband that the dogs are after her, George declares, “They shall tear my heart out first”; but before he can fully enact the hero’s part, John reenters and essentially takes over: he smashes the window, tells George to go through, and “assists out Eliza.”<sup>41</sup>

It is intriguing (and telling) that Barnum advertised this particular *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as “deal[ing] with FACTS, INSTEAD OF FICTION” and as “the only truly sensible version of Mrs. Stowe’s great work.”<sup>42</sup> Conway’s reconceived heroine probably contributes to this alleged realism, because in many ways she has been normalized. Other early adapters—Aiken, Taylor, Stevens—retained the incident as written in the novel, thereby keeping the young mother’s radical courage intact. In contrast, Conway transformed the spectacular Ohio River sequence into a traditional, gender-appropriate chase scene in which two men rescue the distressed (and childless) Eliza, debilitated by her fear of bloodhounds. It is a marked departure from Stowe’s original conception of the heroine who saves herself and her son.

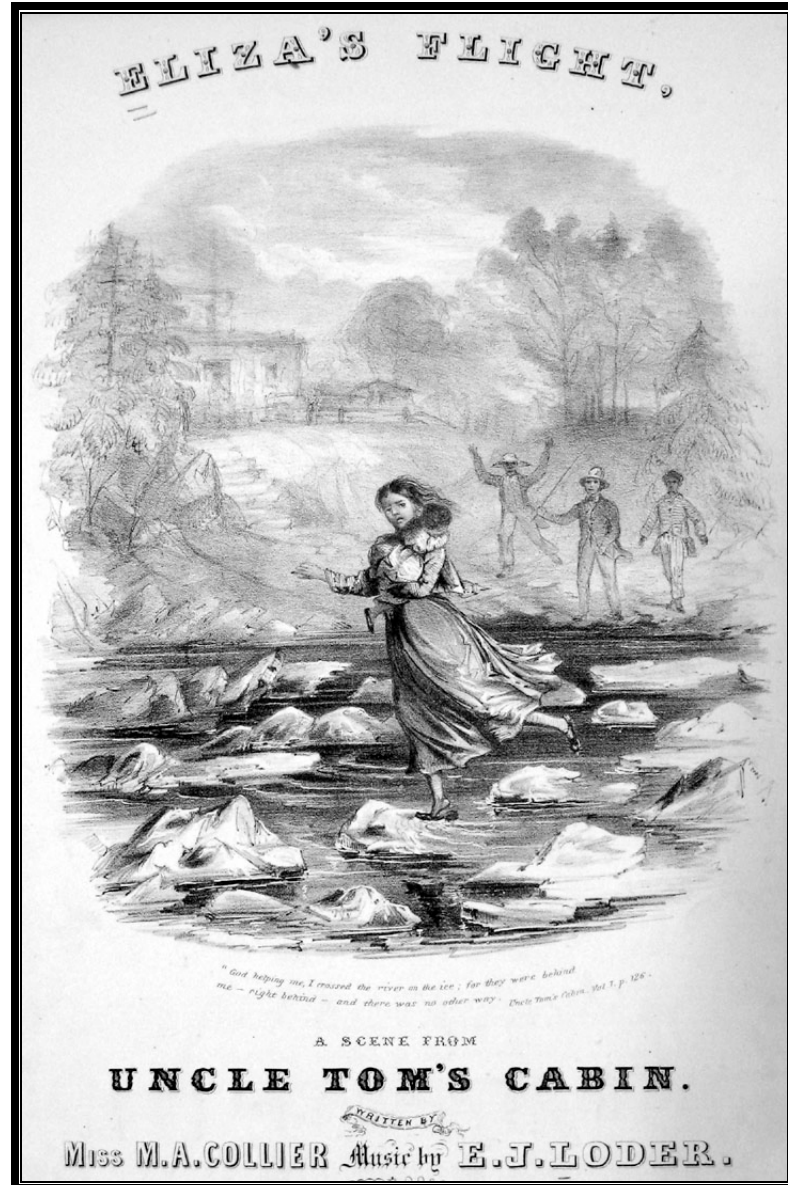
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<sup>41</sup> Conway, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 44, 46, and 48.

<sup>42</sup> Advertisements for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, American Museum (New York), *New York Times*, 22 November 1853, 5 (emphasis in original) and *New York Herald*, 29 November 1853, 5; both available at Railton, ed., *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture*.

Cultural producers extended *Uncle Tom's* reach to other settings and spaces, sometimes on principle, sometimes for profit, and sometimes for both. Perhaps due to her popularity in theatres, Eliza appeared frequently in print and material culture as well. For example, illustrated sheet music, conspicuously displayed on the parlor's pianoforte, had a presence in the everyday lives of members of the household, allowing Stowe's story to exceed the confines of public theatregoing and private novel-reading. Prior to its inclusion in the 1852 Christmas edition of Stowe's novel, the Ohio River scene served as the subject of at least one song: "Eliza's Flight, A Scene from Uncle Tom's Cabin," written by Miss M. A. Collier with music by E. J. Loder, and published by Oliver Ditson in Boston during the same year that Taylor's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* played at the Eagle Theatre in that city. **(Figure 10.)**

Given the timing of the song's publication as well as the inclusion of "scene" in the title, it is tempting to wonder whether the cover illustration echoes, in whole or part, the scenery used for the Ohio River sequence at the Eagle Theatre. In the drawing, a dark-complexioned Eliza faces the viewer, a dazzled and fearful expression on her face and a child in her arms. She is mid-dash, one foot nearly submerged in water as she balances on a thin plate of broken ice. On the shore behind her (what would be upstage left), the tavern is visible, and her three pursuers—faces gashed with rough indications of eyes and mouths—watch incredulously. Their bodies, rather than their faces, indicate surprise and anger: one holds a long whip pointing toward the river; the other lifts his arms high in the air, shocked by what he sees. The caption quotes and cites page 126 of the first edition of Stowe's novel, during which Eliza tells George of her escape after they are reunited: "God helping me, I crossed the river on the ice; for they were behind me—right behind—and there was no other way." Inside, the lyrics emphasize the mother's extraordinary bravery as well as her faith:



**Figure 10.**  
Cover illustration for “Eliza’s Flight, A Scene from Uncle Tom’s Cabin,”  
by Miss M. A. Collier and E. J. Loder (Boston: Oliver Ditson, 1852).  
Collection of the American Antiquarian Society.

Hope lights with her undying gleam  
 The wand'rer and her child.  
 She clasps him closely to her heart,  
 Her only one—her joy;  
 For nought but death the two shall part,  
 The mother and her boy!<sup>43</sup>

Pointedly, the song invokes Eliza's declaration "the river is my only hope!" as well as her insistence that she would rather die than be captured and separated from her child.

Images of Eliza also circulated in domestic spaces by way of juvenile literature, which allowed interested parents to inculcate in the next generation the values embedded in Stowe's text. In late 1852 or early 1853, John P. Jewett published *Pictures and Stories from Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was heavily illustrated and also included songs.<sup>44</sup> According to Stephen Railton, this version was originally printed in England by T. Nelson & Sons and then offered to the U.S. market by way of Jewett.<sup>45</sup> The title page of *Pictures and Stories* promises to instruct boys and girls how to "feel right" about the slavery question by adapting "Mrs. Stowe's Touching Narrative to the understanding of the youngest readers and to foster in their hearts a generous sympathy for the wronged negro race of America." The cover illustration—a vivid rendition of Eliza crossing the ice floes—is one of its most striking features, and the image is reproduced inside as well.

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<sup>43</sup> M. A. Collier and E. J. Loder, "Eliza's Flight, A Scene from Uncle Tom's Cabin" (Boston: Oliver Ditson, 1852), American Antiquarian Society.

<sup>44</sup> *Pictures and Stories from Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1853). The copyright is listed as January 1853, indicating that it may have been timed for the Christmas season of 1852, similar to the lavish illustrated version Jewett published at that time.

<sup>45</sup> Stephen Railton, "Uncle Tom as Children's Book," available at Railton, ed., *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture*, <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/childrn/cbhp.html> (accessed 13 January 2009).

**(Figure 11.)** The book also includes a song about the incident, titled “Eliza Crossing the River.”<sup>46</sup> The heroine’s prominence in *Pictures and Stories* suggests that the publisher believed this tableau (depicting a mother’s spectacular attempt to save her child) to be particularly appropriate for young readers.

A copy of the storybook in the American Antiquarian Society’s collection, which is inscribed “Agnes M. Burleigh 1854,” offers an intriguing portrait of the type of consumer who acquired it. The Oxford South Congregational Church Cemetery in Worcester County, Massachusetts, includes a gravestone for an Agnes M. Burleigh, who died May 18, 1861, at fifteen years of age.<sup>47</sup> Assuming that this is the same Agnes, the date of the inscription suggests that she obtained the book when seven or eight years old. It reached the archive as part of a bequest by Charles Lemoyne Burleigh (1877-1938), the grandson of John O. and Evelina Burleigh, Agnes’s parents. (Had Agnes survived her teens, she would have been Charles’s aunt.) Other materials in the bequest offer clues about the Burleigh family and its interests. For example, *Abolitionrieties*, a pamphlet of short poems about prominent abolitionists, is inscribed with Evelina’s name—suggesting that the matriarch of the family had an interest in anti-slavery literature.<sup>48</sup> The Burleighs included their daughter in this reading practice by way of *Pictures and Stories from Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Agnes’s parents might have considered it to be appropriate reading for her for another reason: Eliza’s flight over the Ohio River, vividly rendered on the cover, conveys potent assumptions about a woman’s role and natural proclivities. This

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<sup>46</sup> *Pictures and Stories*, cover, title page, and 8-9.

<sup>47</sup> Paul Holzwarth, undated transcription of grave markers in Oxford South Congregational Church Cemetery, Oxford, Worcester County, Massachusetts, *USGenWeb Project*, <http://usgwarchives.net/ma/mafiles.htm>.

<sup>48</sup> Benjamin S. Jones, *Abolitionrieties: Or, Remarks on Some of the Members of the Pennsylvania State Anti-Slavery Society for the Eastern District, and the American Anti-Slavery Society* (n.p., 1840[?]).



**Figure 11.**

Cover illustration for *Pictures and Stories from Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1853). Collection of the American Antiquarian Society.

spectacular instant, both in Stowe and on stage, suggests that a mother—no matter her race—desires and endeavors to protect her children at any cost.

In addition, Eliza circulated in the home by way of material objects, such as porcelain figurines, china, toys, and games. Jill Weitzman Fenichell and Louise L. Stevenson, among others, have examined decorative ceramics inspired by *Uncle Tom* scenes and characters.<sup>49</sup> Fenichell asserts that three-quarters of these ceramics depicted two scenes: Eliza's flight across the ice floes and Little Eva decorating Uncle Tom with a flowered garland. She describes the latter as "representing the highest 'moral moment'" in the novel, due to the presence of the Bible on Tom's lap and the generous, Christian affection evident in Eva's gesture. In contrast, Fenichell designates Eliza's escape as "the lowest moral and greatest melodramatic moment"—a statement that, unfortunately, exhibits an anti-theatrical bias and also contradicts her later acknowledgement that the scene "reminded contemporary viewers that slave owners separated family members from one another for commercial reasons and sent bounty hunters across state lines to find escaped slaves and return them, as chattel, to their owners."<sup>50</sup> I would add that the prevalence of artifacts depicting the Ohio River scene demonstrates that women who acquired objects for their homes found the quadroon mother's heroics to be both

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<sup>49</sup> Jill Weitzman Fenichell, "Fragile Lessons: Ceramic and Porcelain Representations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," in *Ceramics in America 2006*, ed. Robert Hunter (Hanover: Chipstone Foundation, 2006), 40-57; Louise L. Stevenson, "Virtue Displayed: The Tie-Ins of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," 2007, available at Railton, ed., *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture*, <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/interpret/exhibits/stevenson/stevenson.html> (accessed 13 January 2009).

<sup>50</sup> Fenichell, "Fragile Lessons," 41. Stevenson argues, however, that we should bear in mind that the inclusion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* objects in "American museums, historical houses, and private collections reflects more about the taste of professional and amateur collectors from the late nineteenth century onward than about the preference of nineteenth-century consumers who lived through the rage for the novel" ("Virtue Displayed"). However, I would add that collectors who preserved these objects after the Civil War were motivated to do so, in part, because they understood them to be politically and historically significant.

respectable and appealing. On a daily basis, the consumer, upon seeing or engaging the object, could experience sensations of sympathy for the slave.

Hartman warns that empathetic identification, a practice that many anti-slavery advocates espoused, may have resulted in “the dissimulation of suffering through spectacle” because it invited the white individual to put herself in the slave’s place, thereby erasing the personhood of the black subject.<sup>51</sup> It is possible that phenomenologically, figurines, dolls, and other souvenirs associated with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* encouraged this performance of empathy. However, because women lacked access to electoral means of change during this period, and were often criticized for expressing themselves in public spaces, I contend that consumption constituted one of the few means by which women could assert themselves politically. In other words, for disenfranchised Americans the accumulation of *Uncle Tom* images and objects might have been a political act—one that could be reenacted and reprised through the everyday rituals of domesticity.

### **Runaways in the Public Imagination**

In his harsh critique of Taylor’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* at the National Theatre in September 1852, James Gordon Bennett of the *New York Herald* meditates more on the dangers of presenting the play than on the merits of the production. Complaining that entrepreneurial “catchpenny imitators” of Stowe were “imperil[ing] the peace and safety of the Union,” he alludes directly to the Compromise of 1850 and its stipulations regarding fugitive slaves:

The Fugitive Slave Law only carries out one of the plain provisions of the constitution. When a Southern slave escapes to

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<sup>51</sup> Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 22.

us, we are in honor bound to return him to his master. And yet, here in this city . . . we have nightly represented, at a popular theatre, the most exaggerated enormities of Southern slavery, playing directly into the hands of the abolitionists and abolition kidnappers of slaves, and doing their work for them. . . . We would, from all these considerations, advise all concerned to drop the play of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, at once and forever. The thing is in bad taste—it is . . . calculated, if persisted in, to become a firebrand of the most dangerous character to the peace of the whole country.<sup>52</sup>

I suggest that discursive and iconic constructions of the fugitive slave can shed light on early stagings of Stowe's story by accounting more fully for the cultural reverberations of the Compromise and by revealing how audiences championed the figure of the hotly pursued runaway. I acknowledge that in most *Uncle Tom* melodramas, Eliza and George are normalized racially ("whitened" through cues like speech and social behavior) and dramaturgically (aggressively encoded as romantic protagonists); as such, they are structured to attract sympathy. But these two characters are also outlaws. Indeed, a playbill for Aiken's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at the National Theatre from February 1854 underscored this by listing them as "George Harris, a Fugitive" and "Eliza, the Fugitive's Wife."<sup>53</sup> Ironically, Eliza's designation as "wife" paradoxically highlights and obfuscates the fact that slaves could not legally marry—one of George's motives for escaping.

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<sup>52</sup> "Uncle Tom's Cabin at the National Theatre," review of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by George Aiken, National Theatre (New York), *New York Herald*, 3 September 1852, 4.

<sup>53</sup> Playbill for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, National Theatre (New York), 16 February 1854, Harvard Theatre Collection. At this point in the run, Mr. and Mrs. J. J. Prior played these roles; the Priors' real-life marriage may have ghosted their performance of the fugitive couple, engendering the audience's empathy to an even greater degree.

Although not all producers emphasized the Harrises' criminal status so emphatically, allusions to the moral dilemmas of the FSA surface repeatedly in the plays themselves, as well as in accounts of spectators' responses to moments foregrounding Eliza and George's outlawry. For the slave, running away is a desperate act of subjectivity: the slave "steals" himself from the master, realizing and declaring agency through criminality. I argue that the Ohio River scene derived its power, in part, from its celebration of radical subjectivity, even though it also generalized cultural constructions of gender, motherhood, and universal humanity.

The problem of fugitive slaves was not a development of the 1850s; on the contrary, it predated the U.S. Constitution. To ensure its widespread adoption, the Constitution addressed the slave states' concerns regarding runaway chattel in the following provision: "No Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in Consequence of any Law or Regulation therein, be discharged from such Service or Labour, but shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such service may be due."<sup>54</sup> In 1793, Congress reiterated this initial gesture by passing the Fugitive Slave Act, but did not address the problem of its enforcement. As a result, it was generally ineffective, especially since several northern states responded by establishing "personal liberty laws" that placed significant obstacles in the way of the FSA's implementation. As sectional tensions mounted over the next decades, a desire to preserve the Union led to a compromise: in 1850, a series of bills made California a free state and banned the slave trade in Washington, D.C., but also mandated federal involvement in the capture of fugitive slaves as well as punishments for citizens who harbored or helped them.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> U.S. Constitution, art. IV, sec. 2, par. 3.

<sup>55</sup> For more on the Fugitive Slave Act and its history, see Larry Gara, "The Fugitive Slave Law: A Double Paradox," *Civil War History* 10 (1964): 229-40; and Stanley W. Campbell, *The*

In the North, the enhancements to the FSA inspired reactions ranging from complacency to outrage. Stanley W. Campbell argues that the federal government and the majority of northerners generally complied with the law; he claims that “public opinion in the Northern states . . . was ambiguous, but on the whole it was acquiescent,” since the Compromise was widely viewed as a necessary evil to avoid civil war. But according to Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, the strengthened FSA served as fuel for the abolitionists’ fire. Frustrated anti-slavery advocates shifted away from the strategy of moral suasion—which focused on the mobilization of affect to effect change—and toward legal remediation. Sometimes, entire communities would harness the power of spectacle in elaborate protests of the FSA, rallying around a fugitive at risk of extradition. For example, Boston residents attempted to rescue Anthony Burns, a runaway arrested in that city in May 1854, by rioting and storming the courthouse. The plan failed, and local and federal officers eventually remanded Burns to his owner. These and other spectacular acts of resistance, which the press widely publicized, infuriated Southerners who had always suspected the FSA would not be fully enforced in the North.<sup>56</sup>

Spurred by the legislation, writers used the fugitive-slave figure as an affective lightning rod. Daniel S. Whitney, among others, dramatized a particularly unjust side effect of the FSA: the kidnapping and enslavement of free men and women, including whites.<sup>57</sup> But the most notable example, of course, is Stowe, who wrote *Uncle Tom’s*

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*Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 3-25.

<sup>56</sup> Campbell, *Slave Catchers*, 49; Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, “Confrontation and Abolition in the 1850s,” *Journal of American History* (1972): 923-37; David R. Maginnes, “The Case of the Court House Rioters in the Rendition of the Fugitive Slave Anthony Burns, 1854,” *Journal of Negro History* 56, no. 1 (1971): 31-42.

<sup>57</sup> For more discussion about Whitney’s *Warren, A Tragedy in Five Acts* (1850) and other plays featuring fugitive or kidnapped slaves, see Nathans, *Slavery and Sentiment*, 80-85; and Amy E. Hughes, “Defining Faith: Theatrical Reactions to Pro-Slavery Christianity in Antebellum

*Cabin* in direct response to the Compromise.<sup>58</sup> The tribulations endured by the fugitives George and Eliza underscored the injustices of the law. And, by peopling the book with whites who assisted the Harrises, Stowe implicitly argued that Christians answered to a higher law (God's) when they aided absconders. In turn, pro-slavery writers penned a plethora of "anti-*Tom* novels," a genre Meer explores at some length in *Uncle Tom Mania*. She observes that the fugitive slave looms large in these texts: they "return obsessively to the subject of runaways, and in the frequency of their references they point to the impact fugitive slaves were themselves making upon the argument."<sup>59</sup>

It is important to remember that Eliza's flight emerged and became popular at a time when abolitionists often spectacularized fugitive slaves in print and in lecture halls, leveraging the abused slave body to make a point. Carolyn Sorisio observes that in early America, the black body was always already public: "More than any other body, the African American body was the one that was scrutinized, taxonomized, and chattelized. It was whipped, worked, sold, raped, and studied with a ferocity close to frenzy. Publicly accessible—through the slave auction or the medical examination table—the body of the African American was figuratively, and quite often literally, public."<sup>60</sup> And indeed, slaves were bodied forth, figuratively and literally, in public spaces ranging from the dangerous to the friendly. For auctioneers, slave catchers, and casual observers, black bodies were made available for all manner of consumption; but similar exposures also occurred in abolitionist contexts, albeit in representational rather than capital form.

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America," in *Interrogating America through Theatre and Performance*, ed. William Demastes and Iris Smith Fischer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 29-45.

<sup>58</sup> Parfait, *Publishing History*, 14-15.

<sup>59</sup> Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania*, 75-101. Quotation at 76.

<sup>60</sup> Sorisio, *Fleshing Out America*, 28.

For example, Theodore Dwight Weld, an early leader of the anti-slavery movement, endeavored to render the black body visible in his treatise *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (1839). According to Stephen Browne, Weld's book was "the largest-selling anti-slavery tract in American history," and notably, both Stowe and Charles Dickens appropriated its graphic descriptions of slavery in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *American Notes* (1842), respectively.<sup>61</sup> The emphasis on witnessing in Weld's subtitle reveals how *seeing* the black body—transforming it into spectacle—was a prevalent strategy in abolitionist discourse. Weld derives "testimonies" of the conditions endured by slaves from letters, first-person accounts, runaway slave advertisements, and other sources; anti-slavery publications often drew on such materials to prove the abuses of the system. Reformers also published narratives and sponsored performances by "professional fugitives" (such as Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Henry "Box" Brown, and Sojourner Truth, among many others) who told their stories before multiple publics. These texts and shows capitalized on the runaways' sensational experiences as well as their liminal, almost freakish, legal status.<sup>62</sup>

Illustrations of slavery in diverse media also contributed to the material culture coalescing around *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Although not all readers and spectators would

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<sup>61</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839); Stephen Browne, "'Like Gory Spectres': Representing Evil in Theodore Weld's *American Slavery as It Is*," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80 (August 1994): 277-92, at 277.

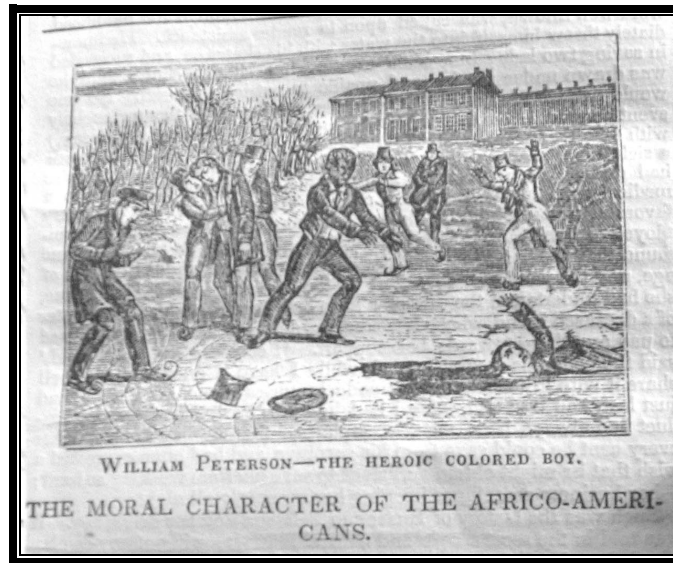
<sup>62</sup> Larry Gara, "The Professional Fugitive in the Abolition Movement," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 48 (1965): 196-204. Lectures and performances by fugitive slaves operated intertextually with other anti-slavery spectacles, including stage adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I have elected not to explore this aspect of antebellum theatre culture, given the limited scope of this chapter; but for more on this phenomenon, see Daphne Brooks, who offers important insights about the spectacular nature of Henry "Box" Brown's performances in *Bodies in Dissent*, 66-130; and Piepmeier, who theorizes the corporeal politics of speeches attributed to Sojourner Truth in *Out in Public*, 92-128. Incidentally, fugitive slave lectures exhibit many of the characteristics of the Washingtonian "experience speech," a performance genre popularized by temperance activists in the early 1840s, as Crowley observes in "Slaves to the Bottle."

have had direct contact with these visual representations, they were exposed to pictures tangentially through advertisements, critical literature, and store displays. So-called “incendiary pictures”—images of Southern slave culture printed in anti-slavery publications—played an important role in abolitionist propaganda.<sup>63</sup> Prior to Weld’s 1839 compendium, outlets such as *The Anti-Slavery Record* and *The Anti-Slavery Almanac* attempted to foster sympathy for slaves by displaying their bodies: working, pleading, escaping, rescuing, suffering, dying. Presented proscenium-style, the pictures are highly theatrical and, in some cases, mimic melodramatic sensation scenes—more evidence of the adoption of sensationalism for the purpose of reform. For example, the first image featured in the *Anti-Slavery Record* of April 1836 seems straight out of a melodrama.<sup>64</sup> Depicting a dramatic water rescue, it illustrates an article titled “The Moral Character of the Africo-Americans,” which tells the story of William Peterson, a “heroic colored boy” in New York who saved two white boys who fell through the ice while skating. According to the article, when Peterson succumbed to the frigid water, “no one would risk his life for him” and he drowned. **(Figure 12.)** Like Eliza’s flight on the ice floes,

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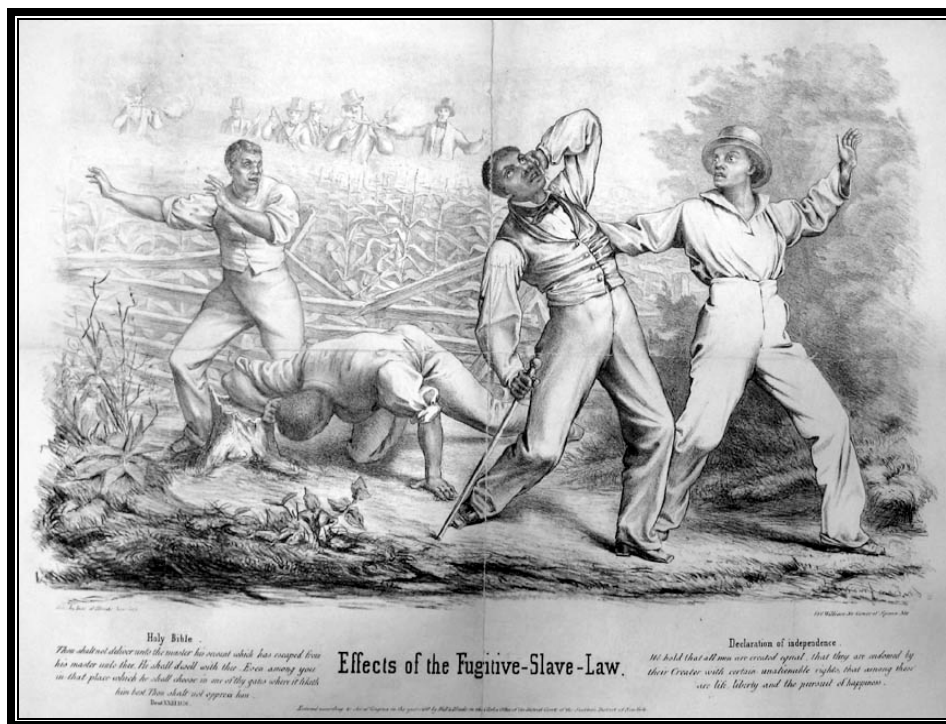
<sup>63</sup> One issue of the *Anti-Slavery Record* explicitly discusses the controversial use of incendiary pictures. A brief article [“Incendiary Pictures,” *Anti-Slavery Record* 2, no. 8 (August 1836): 12], which accompanies an icon used to advertise slave auctions in the South, reads, “Owing to the absence of the Editor no ‘incendiary picture’ was prepared for this number of the Record. We have, however, procured and placed above a little one—‘inflammatory, incendiary, and insurrectionary in the highest degree’—which is in common use at the South. The cast from which it was taken was manufactured in this city, for the southern trade, by a firm of stereotypers, who, on account of the same southern trade, refused to stereotype the Record, because it contained just such pictures! Now, how does it come to pass, that this sad picture when printed in a southern newspaper is perfectly harmless, but when printed in the Anti-Slavery Record is perfectly incendiary?”

<sup>64</sup> “The Moral Character of the Africo-Americans,” *Anti-Slavery Record* 2, no. 4 (April 1836): 1-2.



**Figure 12.**

“William Peterson—The Heroic Colored Boy.” *Anti-Slavery Record* 2, no. 4 (April 1836): 1. Courtesy of the Boston Athenaeum.



**Figure 13.**

Theodor Kaufman, *Effects of the Fugitive-Slave-Law*. Lithograph, Hoff and Bloede, 1850. Collection of the American Antiquarian Society.

this vignette emphasizes the courage and moral purpose of a protagonist from an allegedly inferior race.

Other pictures endeavor to incite readers' sympathy by showing horrific scenes of capital exchange. Accompanying a story about a Kentucky slaveholder who separated a mother from her family, one image in the *Anti-Slavery Almanac of 1838* depicts a woman—her torso stripped naked, her hands chained—kneeling and calling after her two children as they are escorted away by a whip-wielding slave-driver. Despite the woman's graphic nudity, the article addresses an imaginary juvenile reader and urges him or her to contribute to the moral-suasion effort: "Can you do anything to free the poor slave children, so they may not be torn from their mothers and sold? Yes; you can try to convince all your neighbors and playmates that it is wicked to rob the innocent of liberty. When every body believes this, there will be no slaves in the world."<sup>65</sup>

Not surprisingly, fugitive slaves figured prominently in abolitionist texts and ephemera. In some pictures, rivers or river-like borders seem to play a dramaturgical role similar to that of the Ohio River in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, suggesting that Eliza's escape on the ice floes did not emerge from a vacuum but was part of an iconographic tradition. "Effects of the Fugitive-Slave-Law," an 1850 lithograph by Theodor Kaufman published by Hoff and Bloede (New York), is a case in point. **(Figure 13.)** It depicts four male slaves on the run, just outside the fence of a cornfield; several men carrying farm tools and rifles linger in the background. As in some renditions of Eliza's flight, the absconders are close to the viewer, separated from their pursuers by a topographic obstacle—in this case, a river-shaped cornfield, which the slave-catchers must ford in order to capture their prey.

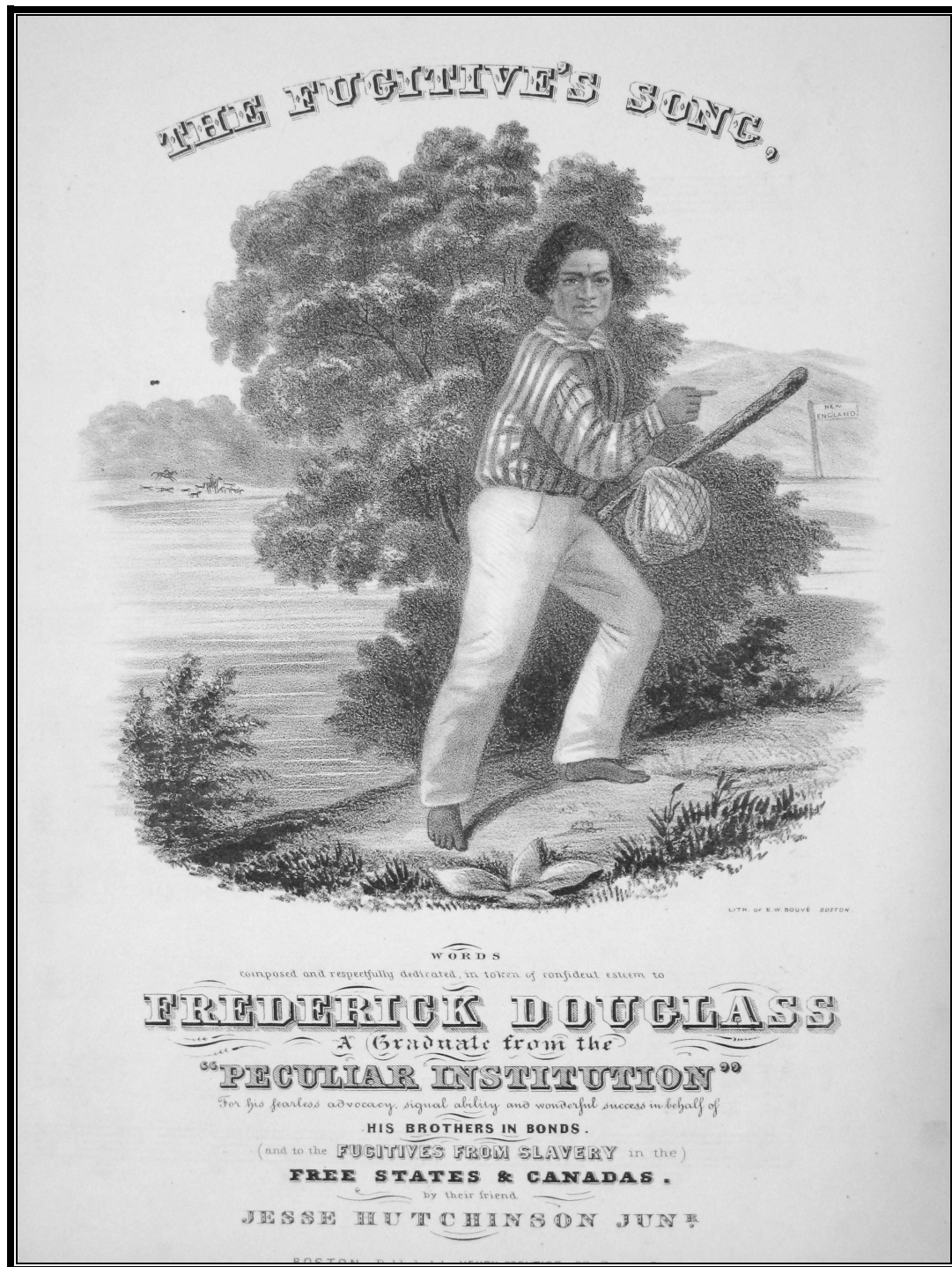
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<sup>65</sup> N. Southard, *Anti-Slavery Almanac for 1838* (Boston: D. K. Hitchcock, 1838), 17.

But one of the most intriguing depictions of a river escape, one that predates *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is "The Fugitive's Song," a piece of sheet music printed *circa* 1845 in honor of America's most famous fugitive, Frederick Douglass. (**Figure 14.**) In the cover illustration, a young Douglass looks squarely at the viewer, body in motion and one finger pointed toward his destination: New England. A river is behind him, and on the opposite bank, his furious and confused pursuers can be seen on horseback, accompanied by a pack of bloodhounds. The picture invokes imagery associated with southern advertisements for runaway slaves, which were routinely reproduced in abolitionist materials. Douglass's simple dress, bare feet, and bundle (a cloth-wrapped bundle of belongings tied to the end of a stick) mirrors the iconic stereotype that often accompanied such ads. I believe the resemblance is not coincidental; rather, it suggests that the icon was fully incorporated into pictorial vernacular by the 1840s.

### **The Immanent Subjectivity of the Fugitive Slave**

When viewed alongside other representations of slaves in flight, especially the ubiquitous emblem that appeared in runaway slave advertisements, Eliza's river-crossing may be interpreted as a spectacular critique of the symbiotic relationship between illegality and subjectivity within the slavery system. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman investigates structures of control and resistance in everyday plantation life in order to show how Southern laws curtailed (rather than disavowed) the personhood of slaves, thereby reinscribing the boundaries between servant and master. Although Hartman asserts that momentary seizures of agency on the plantation helped to strengthen slavery's bonds, I believe her observations reveal how other forms of struggle may have produced opposite effects. She specifies that she is "less concerned with issues of heroic action and oppositional consciousness than with the inadvertent, contingent, and



**Figure 14.**  
Cover illustration (E. W. Bouve, lithographer) for “The Fugitive’s Song” by Jesse Hutchinson, Jr., and J. M. White (Boston: Henry Prentiss, ca. 1845).  
Collection of the American Antiquarian Society.

submerged forms of contestation.”<sup>66</sup> In contrast, I am interested specifically in heroic actions, which differ from Hartman’s examples in terms of scale, style, and public circulation.

Describing the connection between agency and violation within systems of bondage, Hartman offers a thick description of an anecdote about a woman named Sukie, who reportedly staged a small protest on the auction block. In the words of the storyteller, Fannie Berry, “Dey ’zamined her an’ pinched her an’ den dey opened her mouf, an’ stuck dey fingers in to see how her teeth was. Den Sukie got awful mad, and she put up her dress an’ tole de nigger traders to look an’ see if dey could find any teef down dere.”<sup>67</sup>

Theorizing this rebellious gesture, Hartman writes,

Sukie’s actions place her outside the law because she defies the fundamental tenet of slavery: the slave is subject to the master’s will in all things. This breach of law enacted in the insolent disregard of the block’s decorum, interestingly enough, provides the only possibility for the emergence of the subject, since criminality is the only form of slave agency recognized by law. Thus *the fashioning of the subject must necessarily take place in violation of the law*, and consequently, will, criminality, and punishment are inextricably linked.<sup>68</sup>

At first glance, Sukie’s objection bears little resemblance Eliza’s escape: the former harnesses the alleged exoticism of the black female body to conjure a fleeting moment of

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<sup>66</sup> Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 62.

<sup>67</sup> Fannie Berry’s anecdote is recounted in Charles Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Philips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Ex-Slaves* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 49; quoted in Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 40.

<sup>68</sup> Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 41 (my emphasis).

agency, whereas the latter highlights the presumed “natural” drive of the mother to preserve and protect her young. But they do have at least one thing in common: they are spectacles of resistance.

Stories of escape played a vital role in fugitive slave narratives, not only due to their sensational character but also because they marked the transition from thing to human. According to Leonard Cassuto, escape catalyzes the slave’s conversion from object to subject, “construct[ing] the slave as a willful *human* agent in the narrative.” In other words, the struggle to become free, to be person instead of property, mandates and necessitates flight. “Escape was a specific instance of a more general liberation: the entry of the objectified slave into personhood,” Cassuto asserts, adding that “it made rhetorical sense for many fugitive slave narrators to spotlight the escape as the central symbol of their rebellion against objectification.”<sup>69</sup> It is noteworthy that the first play by an African American to be published in the U.S.—*The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom* (1858) by Williams Wells Brown, a fugitive slave who achieved recognition on both sides of the Atlantic as a writer and lecturer—centered precisely on this topic.<sup>70</sup>

The transformation from property to human is a process involving audacity, negotiation, and, most importantly, *movement*: the slave literally “steals away,” and in doing so, steals a body that lawfully belongs to her master. When a slave’s subjectivity begins to conflict with the master’s objectives, an intense negotiation begins. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Eliza enjoys habits of living and laboring on the Shelby estate rarely granted to someone of her status. Ambiguously positioned on the scale of subjectivity, she is introduced in the first scene of Aiken’s play as a mulatto woman who has benefited

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<sup>69</sup> Leonard Cassuto, *The Inhuman Race: The Racial Grotesque in American Literature and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 87, 101, and 102 (his emphasis).

<sup>70</sup> William Wells Brown, *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom* (Boston: R. F. Wallcut, 1858).

from the Shelbys' nurturing and education. Her husband George observes, "They have brought you up like a child—fed you, clothed you and taught you, so that you have a good education" (4). But the family's financial circumstances threaten Eliza's privileged place in the household. The Harrises' impending separation necessitates an aggressive act of resistance: they fly, severing themselves from the structures, routines, and behavioral norms of enslavement. They break the cycle by breaking the law.<sup>71</sup>

By reclaiming ownership over their bodies, fugitives defied legal provisions designed to facilitate the circulation of human property.<sup>72</sup> Cassuto argues that rhetorical and legislative constructions of slaves as "things" played a crucial role in the maintenance of the system. In many respects, the law characterized slaves as nearly but not quite human, strange monstrosities somewhat akin to freaks:

Whether portrayed as a child who never grows up, an inferior race of human being, or simply as a piece of property to be used, the slave stands out as an anomaly of human existence: at once outwardly normal yet inwardly abnormal, a living thing that has human form, but without the full complement of qualities that make someone into a person.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> In addition, when Eliza "steals" Harry, she saves him from a performative routine of oppression: the first time he appears in Aiken's play, Harry does not speak or otherwise express his personality but rather embodies a generic type—Jim Crow—by dancing a "breakdown" at Mr. Shelby's command (6). This moment enacts what Hartman calls the "innocent amusements" of the plantation, when slaves performed for the master's edification (*Scenes of Subjection*, 17-48). Despite the carefree character of such performances, they reinforced the relation between dominator and dominated.

<sup>72</sup> For a discussion of the long-term consequences of antebellum laws reducing slaves to property, see Stephen Best, *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>73</sup> Cassuto, *Inhuman Race*, 80.

Stowe herself seems to have been appalled by this phenomenon, so much so that the initial subtitle for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was "The Man That Was a Thing." By the time installments of the novel began appearing in the *National Era* in 1851, she had changed the subtitle to "Life among the Lowly"—an adjustment that "shift[ed] the focus from the specific category of slaves to the universal one of the poor and downtrodden."<sup>74</sup>

However, her original title reveals a deep concern about the reduction of people to property and the concomitant erasure of human agency.

Reformers understood the law's role in shaping, controlling, and hindering subjectivity. Stowe's documentary follow-up to her novel—a compilation of commentary and sources titled *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853)—explores the legal architecture of slavery at some length. She seeks not only to substantiate the characters and situations in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but also to expose injustices embedded in U.S. law. In the process, she reveals her anxieties about the southern judiciary's authorization of abuse. Stowe's obsession with the law helps to explain why so many characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are celebrated for breaking it. Eliza and George steal away because the law permits owners to divide families; the white characters who assist the Harrises on their journey violate the law in order to adhere to God's.

Stowe quotes, cites, and summarizes a variety of codes and court decisions to authenticate the events in her novel, offering her own commentary and analysis in the process. At one point, she declares, "the slave-code is designed *only for the security of the master, and not with regard to the welfare of the slave.*" She argues that when a law seems designed for the slave's protection, it nevertheless reduces the human being to a thing: "Even such provisions as seem to be for the benefit of the slave we often find carefully interpreted so as to show that it is only on account of his property value to his

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<sup>74</sup> Parfait, *Publishing History*, 21.

master that he is thus protected, and not from any consideration of humanity towards himself.” In other words, the only person honored in these codes is the master. Stowe seems to find so-called “protective statutes,” which offered provisions for the bodily preservation of slaves, to be particularly egregious because they invariably included exceptions triggered by breaches of discipline.<sup>75</sup>

Stowe also discusses statutes related to “outlawry,” the legal process by which a master could disown a runaway and sanction his or her assassination. Sometimes, fugitives took refuge in topographically challenging areas, such as swamps, where small communities of outlawed slaves would form. Presumed dangerous because they were free agents, they caused enormous social anxiety. A North Carolina statute quoted by Stowe reads, “Many times slaves run away and lie out, hid and lurking in swamps, woods, and other obscure places, killing cattle and hogs, and committing other injuries to the inhabitants of this state.”<sup>76</sup> This description invokes visions of skulking monsters and swamp creatures, half-man and half-animal, freakish “What Is It?” exhibits set loose from Barnum’s museum. In this fashion, the law aggressively dehumanized runaways. It was impermissible for a slave to be a free agent, even in the dark recesses of a swamp. By officially outlawing a runaway, the owner authorized and realized the slave’s transformation into hunted game.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1853), 67-123. Quotations on 72 (her emphasis).

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

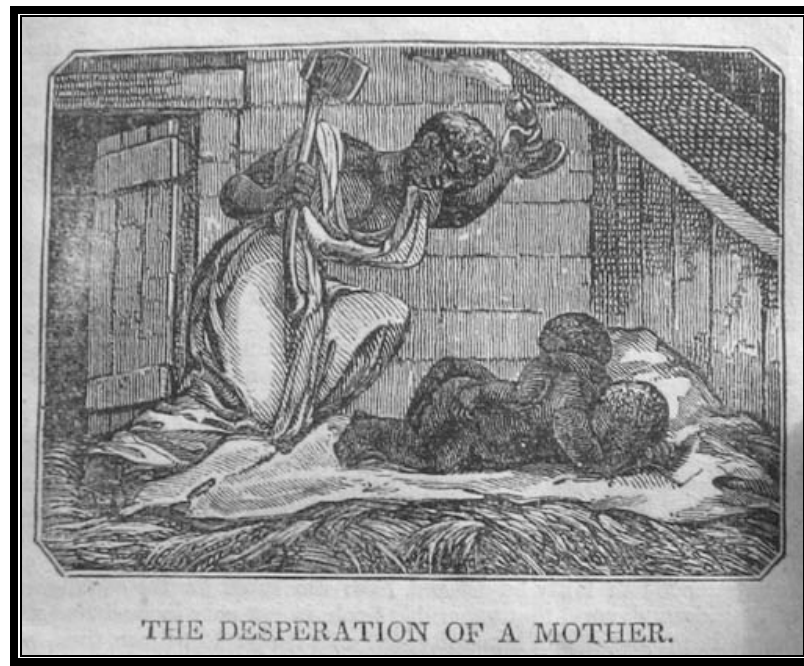
<sup>77</sup> For more discussion about runaways who found refuge in swamps, and especially their influence on antebellum literature, see William Tynes Cowan, *The Slave in the Swamp: Disrupting the Plantation Narrative* (New York: Routledge, 2005); and Lisa Whitney, “In the Shadow of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*: Stowe’s Vision of Slavery from the Great Dismal Swamp,” *New England Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (December 1993): 552-69.

Stowe's unease about the reduction of humans to things deeply informs the plot involving the Harrises, because for George and Eliza, mere survival is not enough: liberty alone makes life worth living. They state this radical philosophy at multiple points in Aiken's adaptation. The first such statement occurs in the opening scene, when George insists, "I'll be free, or I'll die" (5).<sup>78</sup> Eliza makes similar declarations, especially during the Ohio River scene. She announces that it would be "better to sink beneath the cold waters, with my child locked in my arms, than have him torn from me and sold into bondage"; and as she nears the river, she reiterates the superiority of liberty over survival by exclaiming, "we will be free—or perish!" (12) These words invoke real-life slave mothers who murdered their children in order to protect them from lives in bondage—desperate acts that were widely publicized. In the *Key*, Stowe defends her portrayal of the suicidal Eliza by insisting, "Instances have occurred where mothers, whose children were about to be sold from them, have, in their desperation, murdered their own offspring, to save them from this worst kind of orphanage." For example, in 1835 the *Anti-Slavery Record* pictorially reenacted just such an incident, two decades before Margaret Garner's infamous infanticide.<sup>79</sup> (**Figure 15.**) In such stories, the desperate mother seizes agency through violence: she steals her offspring from the master by taking their lives. Indeed, Stowe's broken and disconsolate Cassy, who mourns the newborn son she murdered in order to protect him from a life in bondage, seems to embody a fate that Eliza refuses to accept.

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<sup>78</sup> George reiterates this belief when he is reunited with his family: "I'll fight to the last breath before they shall take from me my wife and son!" (26)

<sup>79</sup> Stowe, *A Key*, 48; "The Desperation of a Mother," *Anti-Slavery Record* 1, no. 9 (September 1835): 1.



**Figure 15.**

“The Desperation of a Mother.” *Anti-Slavery Record* 1, no. 9 (September 1835): 1.  
Courtesy of the Boston Athenaeum.

Runaway slave advertisements offer important insights about slaves-turned-subjects during the antebellum era. For abolitionists, such ads provided evidence of the horrific tortures suffered by human chattel, and so they play a crucial role in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In her *Key*, Stowe invites readers to glimpse the shadowy reality that inspired her novel, but also acknowledges (inadvertently invoking, perhaps, Brown's speech before the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem) that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "is a very inadequate representation of slavery; and it is so, necessarily, for this reason,—that slavery, in some of its workings, is too dreadful for the purposes of art."<sup>80</sup> In other words, she characterizes her novel as being factual but necessarily shrouded out of respect for the reader. Advertisements seem to constitute a good middle ground for Stowe, not only because they are texts drawn from life, but also because they avoid sensationalism at all costs: ruthlessly expository, dry, and clinical, they reveal the truth while skirting grotesquerie.<sup>81</sup>

Stowe applies a rigorous hermeneutic to the ads in the *Key*, carefully tracking punishments inflicted on slaves. Tacitly, Stowe suggests that despite their matter-of-fact rhetoric, the advertisements are miniature discourses in which *the body tells*. She views the body as evidence and artifact, revealing its history through textures and lines.

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<sup>80</sup> Stowe, *A Key*, 5. Stowe extensively cites and reproduces advertisements in her *Key*, even though she admits, "they are less common now, [which] is a matter of hope and gratulation" (21).

<sup>81</sup> For more on the perceptions and pursuit of runaway slaves, see, among others, Herbert Aptheker, "Slave Resistance in the United States," in *Key Issues in the Afro-American Experience*, ed. Nathan I. Huggins, Martin Kilson, and Daniel M. Fox (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 161-73; Paul Finkelman, ed., *Articles on American Slavery*, vol. 6, *Fugitive Slaves* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989); Freddie L. Parker, *Running for Freedom: Slave Runaways in North Carolina, 1775-1840* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993); Freddie L. Parker, ed., *Stealing a Little Freedom: Advertisements for Slave Runaways in North Carolina, 1791-1840* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994); and John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Following Weld's example in *American Slavery as It Is*, she italicizes text describing identifiable marks and scars: "middle finger on the right hand off at the second joint," "a scar over the left eye," "the left arm and right leg somewhat scarred," "two or three marks on his back, a small scar on his left hip," "lost a part of the finger next to his little finger on the right hand; also the great toe on his left foot." She also italicizes phrases like "no scars," "no scars recollected," and "no marks, save one, and that caused by the bite of a dog," as if to emphasize that unscathed bodies are nevertheless "read."<sup>82</sup>

But fugitive slave advertisements comprised more than text. They also exhibited icons that strongly countered images like Eliza's flight. The tiny symbol that often accompanied such ads—a running man or woman carrying a bundle—became recognizable because of its constant iteration in print. **(Figure 16.)** Typographically generic and ruthlessly repeated, the icon (literally, the stereotype) erased the runaway's individuality through duplication. Like the famous abolitionist emblem "Am I Not a Man [Woman] and a Brother [Sister]?" it came in gendered versions, and sometimes featured minor variations (a walking stick instead of a bundle, the absence or presence of footwear, and so forth); but implicitly, the mark also disavowed whatever subjectivity the slave had achieved through escape. Designed to inure rather than intrigue, it denied the singularity of the fugitive, even though the text itself explicated what made him or her unique: identifiable scars, nuances in complexion, distinguishing modes of comport, and the like.

I suggest that fugitive slave logos attempted to operate as Baudrillardian "scenarios of deterrence," reiterating "a moribund principle through simulated scandal, phantasm, and murder—a sort of hormonal treatment through the imaginary."<sup>83</sup> It rejected the outlaw's subjectivity by reiterating his or her status as property. In stark


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<sup>82</sup> Stowe, *A Key*, 175-83. Quotations on 178-79 and 181.

<sup>83</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 18-19.

\$100 REWARD.

**R**ANAWAY from James Hughart, Paris, Ky., the Mulatto Boy NOREON, aged about 15 years; a *very bright* mulatto, and would be taken for a WHITE BOY if not *closely* examined; his hair is black and STRAIGHT. Aug. 4, 1836.



**A**BSCONDED from the subscriber, HER negro man JOHN. He has a VERY LIGHT complexion, *prominent nose*, &c.  
Charleston Mercury, 1837. W. J. SANGLOIS.

\$100 REWARD.

**R**ANAWAY from the Subscriber, living in Sumter Co. Ala., a *bright mulatto* man slave named SAM, calls himself SAM PETTIGREW\* . . . LIGHT SANDY HAIR and *blue eyes*, RUDDY complexion, very stout built, and will weigh about 180 pounds; he is *so white as very easily* to pass for a free white man. . . . He carries a small memorandum book in his pocket, and will pass *very easily* for a *white man* unless *closely* examined—is a first-rate blacksmith and barber.  
Mobile, April 22, 1837. EDWIN PECK.



**Figure 16.**

Fugitive slave advertisements reproduced in N. Southard, ed.,  
*Anti-Slavery Almanac for 1838* (Boston: D. K. Hitchcock, 1838), 35.  
Courtesy of the Boston Athenaeum.

contrast, activist representations of fugitives celebrated the seizure of personhood. By boldly challenging the stock-quality of Southern images depicting human chattel, sensational escapes—including Eliza’s over the ice floes—counteracted the relentless recurrence of the icon that reduced subjects to objects.

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe personalizes the reductive emblem through her characterization of the Harrises. In the *Key*, the first fully reproduced advertisement appears where Stowe describes the inspiration behind her fugitive hero. **(Figure 17.)** Unlike many others in the book, this ad exhibits the symbol of the runaway. Its placement at this precise point in her text is jarring, as if Stowe is underscoring the mark’s significance as a cultural signifier. In the novel, she fleshes out and transforms the (stereo)type into the valiant George: intelligent laborer, faithful husband, loving father, self-declared “freeman.” I argue that images of Eliza’s flight also participated in the recovery of the slave subject by offering a spectacular counterpoint to the cookie-cutter icon.

Interestingly, all of the playwrights that I discuss in this chapter seem to have recognized a public fascination with fugitive slave advertisements. A bill for Taylor’s play at the National Theatre in 1852 alludes to an “Advertisement Extraordinary” in the third-act tavern scene; apparently, Taylor retained the conversation in Stowe’s novel when the notice seeking George is discussed.<sup>84</sup> The *Herald’s* review confirms that the ad figured prominently in the production: the writer lists it as one of several “extravagant exhibitions of the imaginary horrors of Southern slavery.”<sup>85</sup> This loaded comment

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<sup>84</sup> Playbill, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, National Theatre (New York), 30 August 1852, Harry Birdoff Collection, Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford; available at Railton, ed., *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture*.

<sup>85</sup> “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* at the National Theatre,” *New York Herald*, 3 September 1852, 4.


**CHAPTER IV.**

**GEORGE HARRIS.**

THE character of George Harris has been represented as overdrawn, both as respects personal qualities and general intelligence. It has been said, too, that so many afflictive incidents happening to a slave are improbable, and present a distorted view of the institution.

In regard to person, it must be remembered that the half-breeds often inherit, to a great degree, the traits of their white ancestors. For this there is abundant evidence in the advertisements of the papers. Witness the following from the *Chattanooga* (Tenn.) *Gazette*, Oct. 5th, 1852 :

**\$500 REWARD.**

 Runaway from the subscriber, on the 25th May, a VERY BRIGHT MULATTO BOY, about 21 or 22 years old, named WASH. Said boy, without close observation, might pass himself for a white man, as he is very bright — has sandy hair, blue eyes, and a fine set of teeth. He is an excellent bricklayer ; but I have no idea that he will pursue his trade, for fear of detection. Although he is like a white man in appearance, he has the disposition of a negro, and delights in comic songs and witty expressions. He is an excellent house servant, very handy about a hotel, — tall, slender, and has rather a down look, especially when spoken to, and is sometimes inclined to be sulky. I have no doubt but he has been decoyed off by some scoundrel, and I will give the above reward for the apprehension of the boy and thief, if delivered at Chattanooga. Or, I will give \$200 for the boy alone ; or \$100 if confined in any jail in the United States, so that I can get him.

**GEORGE O. RAGLAND.**  
*Chattanooga, June 15, 1852.*

Figure 17.

The first fugitive slave advertisement reproduced in Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1853).

suggests that the runaway advertisement was a kind of ideological lightning rod during this time. Similarly, in Aiken's version the ad for George plays a central role in the third scene of Act II. The opening stage direction indicates, "On flat is a printed placard" detailing his physical characteristics and announcing a \$400 reward for his return, dead or alive. Phineas signals his disgust by spitting, claiming he would also spit on "the writer of that ar paper, if he was here." He takes issue especially with the ad's description of a brand on the fugitive's hand; he says that a master who would do such a thing to a slave "deserves to lose him. Such papers as this ar' a shame to old Kaintuck!" (19, his emphasis)

The equivalent scene in Conway's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* poses an intriguing contrast. In Stowe's novel, the conversation about the posting in the tavern involves a drover named John. Unlike Aiken, who replaces the slaveholding John with the slaveless Phineas, Conway keeps the episode from the novel relatively intact. In the play, Drover John spits after reading the advertisement, complains about abusive masters, then pontificates at length about the appropriate way to manage human property:

I've got a gang o' boys, and I just tells em, run row—cut—dig—  
 [illegible; pint?]  
 —just when you wants to. I shall never come to look arter you. That's the way I keeps mine. Let 'em know they're free to run any time, and it just breaks up their wantin' to. More'n all, I've got free papers for 'em all recorded in case I gets keeled any o' these times, and they knows it—and I tell you, stranger, no man in our parts gets more out of his niggers than I do. Why my boys have been to Cincinnati with five hundred dollars worth of cotes and brought me back the money all stret [*sic*] time and again. It stands to reason they should. Treat 'em like dogs, and you'll have dogs' work and dogs' actions. Treat

'em like men, and you'll have men's works. Ha! (*spits and hawks*)<sup>86</sup>

John's speech reflects the so-called "paternal" approach to slaveholding that was described and promoted in pro-slavery literature.<sup>87</sup> Aiken's Phineas, on the other hand, is a *former* slaveholder: he tells Marks that he let go of his "grist of niggers" at the insistence of the Quaker woman he wishes to marry. Marks asks, "You sold them, I suppose?" and Phineas replies, "You're teetotally wrong, neighbor. I gave them all their freedom, and told 'em to vamose [*sic*]!" (10) His retort indicates that even though female moral suasion influenced his decision, he believes it was the right thing to do. Even so, in the second tavern scene (Act II, scene iii), Phineas (like John) offers a paternal philosophy of slave-keeping during a conversation with Mr. Wilson—"Treat 'em like men, and you'll have men's work" (19).

The *Times* review of Aiken's play at the National offers a glimpse of the spectators' response to the advertisement for George. Apparently, the audience echoed Phineas's disgust. The writer reports that when the Kentuckian and Mr. Wilson "spy, at length, the notice on the walls, of 'A Runaway Slave' . . . the Kentuckian spits on it, with 'That's what I think of that!' Whereat again the boys of the pit are convulsed with delight." The writer continues,

*George Harris* now appears disguised, and holds his conversation with *Mr. Wilson*.

The audience are by this time well absorbed in it. Perhaps the actor knows he is uttering real sentiments of these times—for

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<sup>86</sup> Conway, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 41-42.

<sup>87</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Modernizing Southern Slavery: The Proslavery Argument Revisited," in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 27-49.

he speaks with an unusual spirit. The caps wave, and the “Hey” sounds with almost every sentence, at words which would be hissed down in most public meetings, and be coldly received in churches—but which, somehow, seem to strike some strange chord in the dirty, ragged audience.

Immediately after this paragraph, several lines of dialogue from the play are recounted. The reporter notes that when George declared himself a “*freeman*,” there were “great cheers” from the audience, punctuating his radical sentiments. The writer also invokes the Fugitive Slave Act when he summarizes the play’s impact on the hardscrabble crowd: “The effect of the representation is to elevate the black; and we are very much mistaken, from the tone on this occasion, if the United States’ officers ever get much assistance, in chasing runaways, from the ‘Bowery-boys.’”<sup>88</sup> In its review of the production, the *New York Tribune* echoed this sentiment, announcing that the “B’hoys were on the side of the fugitives.”<sup>89</sup>

By flouting the FSA and offering assistance to the Harris family, Aiken’s Phineas—a circumstantial abolitionist—endorsed the fugitives’ radical subjectivity. As multiple newspaper reports testify, spectators echoed that endorsement from the auditorium. These accounts contradict what Campbell has perceived as a general

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<sup>88</sup> “‘Uncle Tom’ among the Bowery Boys” (emphasis in original). Also cited in Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania*, 108.

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania*, 108. See also Birdoff, *World’s Greatest Hit*, 77. In light of the audience’s supposed support of the mulatto “freeman,” it is tempting to wonder why images of Eliza were more widespread than those of George. Both Conway and Aiken retained the Harrises’ sensational escape on the craggy ravine, when the family flees the slave catchers under gunfire. Morgan speculates that its relative absence in American visual culture reveals the limits of abolitionist sentiment during the 1850s: a mulatto fugitive turning pistols on his pursuers was, perhaps, unpalatable for all but the most ardent abolitionists (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin as Visual Culture*, 26). If this is true, then it helps to explain why Northerners would embrace the mother’s dash for freedom in lieu of the more radical “Freeman’s Defense.”

acceptance of the FSA during the fifties. Indeed, the audience's response suggests anything but complacency. Elizabeth Ammons asserts that the escapes of Eliza and George signal "Stowe's approval of courageous rebellion against slavery and, in the character of proud George Harris, her respect for conventionally manly defiance of injustice and enforced submission."<sup>90</sup> It seems that people who attended the first run of Aiken's play at the National signaled their support of George and Eliza's defiance through their cheers.

### **Dénouement: The Ambiguity of an Enduring Image**

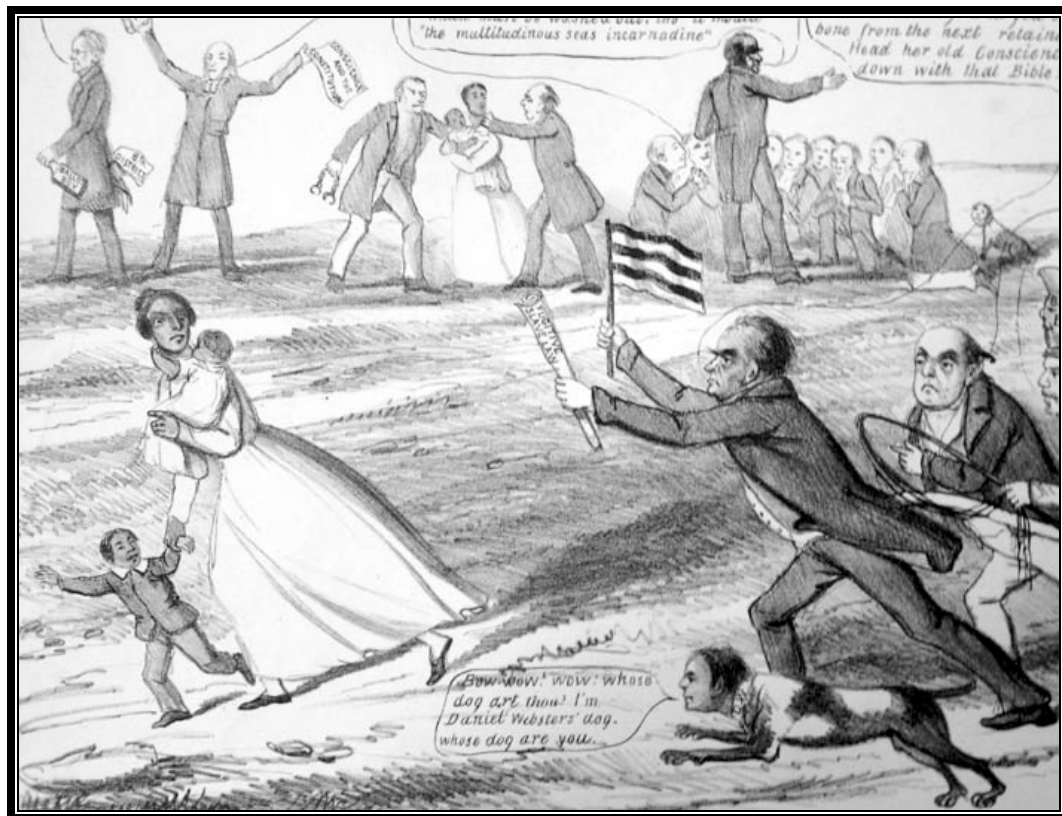
The complexities of the slavery question during the 1850s inspired an extraordinary range of political opinions, making a one-size-fits-all reading of Eliza's flight unrealistic. Heather S. Nathans points out that anti-slavery plays and events combined "sympathy and sensation, pathos and professionalism" in order to affect audiences, and abolitionist propaganda often encouraged the reader to identify sympathetically with the slave—a dramaturgical strategy relentlessly employed by Stowe in the novel.<sup>91</sup> But as Michel de Certeau contends, readers are always "poachers," actively mining a text for different meanings.<sup>92</sup> Eliza even seems to haunt a political cartoon that circulated soon after the publication of Stowe's novel. In it, Daniel Webster—who played a central role in the successful passage of the Compromise of 1850—chases a slave mother fleeing with her two children. **(Figure 18.)** In short, the

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<sup>90</sup> Elizabeth Ammons, "Heroines in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *American Literature* 49, no. 2 (March 1977): 161-79, at 171.

<sup>91</sup> Nathans, *Slavery and Sentiment*, 193.

<sup>92</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 165-76.



**Figure 18.**

Detail of *A Grand Slave Hunt, or Trial of Speed for the Presidency*. Daniel Webster and other politicians chase a runaway slave mother and her children. In Webster's hand is a paper labeled "Fugitive Slave Law." Unsigned lithograph, ca. 1852-1856.

Collection of the American Antiquarian Society.

messages conveyed by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its permutations have always been “partly in the eyes of their beholders.”<sup>93</sup> This is one reason why Stowe's novel has inspired such diverse appraisals by scholars from multiple disciplines.

Precisely because the Ohio River episode has been interpreted so differently, the analysis I offer in this chapter has a unique significance within my project as whole. Eliza's flight is a remarkable spectacle because it communicates multiple, sometimes contradictory, ideas: the “natural” tenacity of mothers; the innate potentialities of women, regardless of color; the relative value of preserving one's life, when survival means living in bondage; the insistence on subjectivity despite the suffocating limits of law. This far-from-inclusive list proved attractive to a wide variety of producers and consumers, which is why Eliza appeared in a plethora of visual and material contexts.

“Slavery never can be represented,” Brown declared before the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem in 1847; but is it the subject matter or the spectator that makes representation problematic? The answer may be in one of Brown's subsequent statements: “Your fastidiousness would not allow me to do it. . . . Were I about to tell you the evils of Slavery, to represent to you the Slave in his lowest degradation, *I should wish to take you, one at a time, and whisper it to you.*”<sup>94</sup> Paradoxically, Brown acknowledges both the need for and the impossibility of representation. The tension between necessity and ability in his statement does not seem to derive from a belief that slavery cannot be represented, but rather from the conviction that it would be in bad taste—especially in the presence of respectable women. In talking about *talking about* slavery, he offers a private, intimate exchange in lieu of a sensational exposé. In other words, “incendiary pictures” of suffering, separated, and sold bodies—cruelly whipped, immodestly stripped,

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<sup>93</sup> Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania*, 129.

<sup>94</sup> Brown, *A Lecture*, 4 (my emphasis).

and severed from one another despite familial ties—are too excessive, *too much*, to be represented.

This leads to a crucial question: Was the vision of the stubborn, daring, suicidal, law-breaking Eliza in good taste? One testament to the image's respectability and malleability was its circulation in domestic and everyday spaces. Berlant observes that *Uncle Tom* objects and toys brought "politics into the home as much as the novel form did, but this time the consciousness it produces must be shared and noncontroversial, requiring a group consensus conventional to melodrama about what winning would mean, where evil resides, and how to read the moral meaning of different deaths."<sup>95</sup> Women who acquired sheet music and objects depicting the slave mother could feel confident that no matter who visited their homes, the song on the pianoforte or the figurine on the sideboard would be viewed favorably by visitors; and yet, they also could assert and exhibit their views about a pressing political issue at a time when the law inhibited them from doing so electorally.

Moreover, I contend that the dramaturgy of the scene itself addresses Brown's concerns about representation. Not content with mere survival, Eliza chooses instead to reject the distasteful scenes of suffering that await her in the future. She flees the unbearable excesses of torture and the imminent spectacle of the auction block. Refusing to serve as the center of a spectacle, Eliza *becomes* the spectacle through escape. Perhaps this is why so many types of audiences appreciated and applauded her.

Even in instances of De Certeaudian poaching, scenes derived from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* may have continued to convey abolitionist sentiment, which of course is what inspired Stowe to write in the first place. It seems unlikely that changes made by playwrights fully eradicated the novel's political orientation. Meer suspects that even

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<sup>95</sup> Berlant, *Female Complaint*, 48.

Conway's version "retained something of Stowe's antislavery tone" despite the producers' efforts to inoculate it.<sup>96</sup> Perhaps this was inevitable, given the subject matter and the historical context in which the play was originally presented. An anecdote relayed by Birdoff regarding Conway's *Uncle Tom* at Barnum's museum offers evidence of this. At one point during the run, "Barnum dug deep into his pocket" and commissioned a banner to be displayed in his lecture hall. According to Birdoff, "High along the cornice, some fifty feet, the title of the play was blazoned forth in ornamental letters. Below floated some five hundred yards of cotton muslin, representing on one side a Negro dance, and on the other the anti-fugitive slave law fight between runaways and pursuers."<sup>97</sup> Materially and figuratively, Barnum's banner invoked the contradictions at the heart of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which have plagued it for more than a century and a half: one image conjures minstrelsy's "Old Folks at Home" vision of the happy plantation, while the other invokes the polemical Fugitive Slave Act by showing slaves turned into subjects.

The curiosity and contempt with which scholars continue to regard Eliza's flight attests not only to its historical and cultural significance, but also to the uneasiness it continues to inspire. Much of this disquiet seems to stem from the heroine's ambiguous racial status. Because Eliza mimics the color, speech, and behavior of the Shelbys, some argue that she has been whitewashed beyond recognition. For example, Meer asserts, "in the process of dramatizing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* many of the more powerful female characters were watered down or even dropped." Along these lines, Hartman argues, "In antislavery dramas, beleaguered slave heroes and heroines supplemented rather than

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<sup>96</sup> Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania*, 111-12.

<sup>97</sup> Birdoff, *World's Greatest Hit*, 92-93.

replaced darky fanfare.”<sup>98</sup> I concede that Topsy and other blackface characters function as counterparts—perhaps even as antidotes—to the amalgamated fugitives, potentially offsetting the story’s progressive politics. In addition, Eliza cannot be deemed a wholly radical figure because she personifies essentialized notions of gender and motherhood that endure to this day. But it is important to acknowledge that she embodied both the best intentions and the worst assumptions of the abolitionist project. If paradox and contradiction are essential to spectacle, as Kershaw argues, then the blackface characters may have amplified Eliza’s heroics on the river.

The proliferation of Eliza’s flight in multiple media attests to both its playability and its palatability. Apparently, the quadron heroine represented values, ideals, and hopes that could be mined and admired by many. As Tompkins observes, “The text that becomes exceptional in the sense of reaching an exceptionally large audience does so not because of its departure from the ordinary and conventional, but through its embrace of what is most widely shared.”<sup>99</sup> After the Civil War, Eliza’s crossing of the ice floes continued to proliferate, adopted and adapted for myriad uses. A set of twelve magic lantern slides produced around 1881 offers evidence of the image’s endurance. Produced by C. W. Briggs Company, the slides painted by Joseph Boggs Beale closely mirror Billings’s pictures in the illustrated edition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, suggesting that the book served as Beale’s model.<sup>100</sup> But since the illustrated edition includes more than 150 pictures, Briggs’s selections were likely influenced by his awareness of the images’

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<sup>98</sup> Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania*, 118-19; Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 27.

<sup>99</sup> Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, xvi.

<sup>100</sup> Stephen Railton also makes this observation in “UTC as Magic Lantern Show,” 2007, available at Railton, ed., *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture*, <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/onstage/lantern/lanternhp.html>. Railton’s online archive features a digital reenactment of this magic lantern show, based on an extant script that accompanied the slide set.

relative popularity in theatrical, visual, and material culture. “Eliza’s Flight” made the cut. **(Figure 19.)** In short, this sensation scene became obligatory in the telling of Stowe’s story, as its inclusion in a postbellum lantern show attests.

Discussing the dangers and potentials of sentimental texts such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Berlant asserts, “The possibility that through the identification with alterity you will never be the same remains the radical threat and the great promise of this affective aesthetic.”<sup>101</sup> Perhaps the radical threat and great promise of Eliza was that everyone could find something to appreciate in her, even after the question of slavery had been settled and the harrowing process of Reconstruction had begun.

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<sup>101</sup> Berlant, *Female Complaint*, 47.



**Figure 19.**

Joseph Boggs Beale, "Escape of Eliza and Child on the Ice." Third of twelve slides in a magic lantern show distributed by C. W. Briggs Company, 1881.

Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

4.

“That’s a True Woman!”:  
Womanhood, Suffrage, and Citizenship in *Under the Gaslight*

Some tell us that this is not the time for woman to make the demand; that this is the negro’s hour. No, my friends, we have a broader question than either on hand to-day. This is the Nation’s hour.

—Elizabeth Cady Stanton (February 1867)<sup>1</sup>

Such would be the successive phases of the image:

it is the reflection of a profound reality;  
it masks and denatures a profound reality;  
it masks the *absence* of a profound reality;  
it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its  
own pure simulacrum.

—Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*<sup>2</sup>

When Augustin Daly’s sensation drama *Under the Gaslight* opened at the Worrell Sisters’ New York Theatre on August 12, 1867, it was an instant success. It ran for six weeks and then played for another eight when it was remounted a month later. Since this was a time when, in the words of Marvin Felheim, “a month’s run meant a real hit,” the sheer number of performances demonstrates *Gaslight*’s popularity with audiences during its initial presentation in New York City.<sup>3</sup> One advertisement in the *New York Times*

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “‘Reconstruction’: Lecture by ECS in Brooklyn, New York [19 February 1867],” in *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony*, ed. Ann D. Gordon (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 2:25-41, at 28.

<sup>2</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Marvin Felheim, *The Theater of Augustin Daly* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1956), 51-55. Although it remains the definitive biography of Daly, Felheim’s study lacks documentation and bibliographic references, so in this chapter I sometimes refer to the doctoral dissertation upon which the book is based: Marvin Felheim, “The Career of Augustin Daly” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1948).

boasts, “*Under the Gas-Light*, Witnessed by 100,000 people, and pronounced the most interesting, truthful and exciting picture of Life and Love at the present day. The wondrous Railroad Sensation, the universal topic of conversation.” Even after accounting for marketing hyperbole, such ads suggest that the play was on the public mind—an event for everyone to see and experience. Apparently, audiences found the “wondrous Railroad Sensation” to be especially affecting. One early advertisement lists all of the sensation scenes in the drama, but later ones focus exclusively on the railroad sequence.<sup>4</sup>

Widely considered “one of the most famous spectacles on the American stage,” this spectacular instant, during which the heroine saves a one-armed Civil War veteran from an oncoming train, took on a life of its own.<sup>5</sup> Imitations of the speeding locomotive appeared in other melodramas (most notably Dion Boucicault’s 1868 play *After Dark*, which led Daly to file a copyright lawsuit) and, later, films. Indeed, for many Americans it is the first image that comes to mind when they think of “melodrama.” Generally, the railroad rescue has come to symbolize the decadence, emotionalism, and extremity associated with the genre as a whole.

In this chapter, I explore why this scene fascinated its original audiences by investigating how it invoked gendered notions of U.S. citizenship in the immediate wake of the Civil War. Tensions over the suffrage question were at a fever pitch as the nation discussed which rights and responsibilities would be granted to different segments of the population. *Gaslight* premiered in the midst of this cultural ferment: one year after Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony founded the American Equal Rights

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<sup>4</sup> Advertisements for *Under the Gas-Light* at the Worrell Sisters’ New-York Theatre in the *New York Times*, 30 September 1867, 7; 2 October 1867, 7; and 11 December 1867, 7. The production was also presented for a short time at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in between these two engagements (*New York Times*, 8 October 1867, 7).

<sup>5</sup> Felheim, *Theater of Augustin Daly*, 49.

Association, which advocated voting rights for women, and a year before the full ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, which laid the foundation for the enfranchisement of African American men but in the process excluded all women. In his melodrama, Daly alludes to the question of black male suffrage in the cast of characters, where he describes Sam as “a colored citizen, ready for suffrage when it is ready for *him*.”<sup>6</sup> But Daly’s most direct reference to the debate occurs during the railroad sequence: after the heroine frees the war veteran Snorkey from the train tracks, he proclaims, “And these are the women who ain’t to have the vote!” Why was this point raised at this precise moment in the melodrama? How did spectators read and interpret such a radical statement, encased in a spectacular instant?

To address these questions, I examine representations of bodies and objects in *Gaslight* that had accumulated dense ideological meanings by the time the play premiered. Like Robert Darnton, I seek to “get the joke” by analyzing the components of the railroad scene as kernels of culture—fragments evoking historically specific customs and ideals. In some respects, my method mirrors the “thick description” of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who undertakes to “draw large conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts; to support broad assertions about the role of culture in the construction of collective life by engaging them exactly with complex specifics.” Peter Brooks and Andrew Sofer, among others, have shown how elements of the *mise-en-scène* operate in tandem to convey meaning. Indeed, Brooks claims that melodramatic dramaturgy uses a

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<sup>6</sup> Augustin Daly, *Under the Gaslight: A Totally Original and Picturesque Drama of Life and Love in These Times, in Five Acts* (New York: W. C. Wemyss, 1867). The play is also available in Daniel C. Gerould, ed., *American Melodrama* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983), 135-81.

“sign language” that “can be deployed in interplay and clash in such a manner that the struggle of moral entities is visible to the spectator.”<sup>7</sup>

Heeding Patrice Pavis’s warning that an “object-bound and concrete conception of the theatrical relationship is dangerous,” I acknowledge that not all audience members may have seen or sensed the connotations I attribute to Daly’s railroad rescue. To avoid a reductive analysis of audience reception, Pavis recommends that the scholar take “two historicities” into account: “that of the work within its literary and social context, and that of the receiver in his own time and within a system of ideological and aesthetic expectations.”<sup>8</sup> Toward that end, I briefly trace the development of the antebellum women’s rights movement, discuss the concept of “true womanhood” articulated by the suffragists’ opponents, and analyze how the play’s heroine, Laura, exceeds this historically specific construction of femininity.<sup>9</sup> In addition, I study discursive and pictorial depictions of the “soldier-citizen” during this time to illuminate Snorkey’s significance in the story. Laura’s use of an axe during the railroad sequence is also noteworthy, because the American version of this tool (literally, the “American axe”) came to be associated with a host of gendered, nativist values during the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. I assess how these icons manifested in a wide variety of media and, through rigorous cultural circulation, potentially informed spectators’ readings of the scene.

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (1973; reprint, New York: Basic Books, 2000), 28; Brooks, *Melodramatic Imagination*, 28; Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Patrice Pavis, *Languages of the Stage: Essays in the Semiology of the Theatre* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 71 and 72.

<sup>9</sup> The seminal essay on this topic is Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 151-74.

Finally, returning full-circle to the epigraph of this chapter, I reflect on how the gender politics of the railroad sequence were eventually “corrected” within the popular imagination. Over time, the original scene and its sensational role-reversal transformed into a more conservative scenario: the damsel-in-distress tied to the tracks and saved by the hero, an image that Peggy Phelan has called “the epitome of cross-cutting, neck-wrenching melodrama.”<sup>10</sup> I conclude with a few thoughts regarding the significance of this free-floating, immaterial, Baudrillardian simulacrum, which has somehow eluded the material confines of the archive. Ultimately, I argue that its stamina and stickiness attest to the enduring importance of the spectacular instant in American culture, even today.

### **From Moral Suasion to Electoral Politics: Transitions in Equal-Rights Feminism**

In the early nineteenth century, essentialist views of human labor and morality within U.S. culture cast men as political and economic agents while women were to serve as ethicists. In other words, it was generally believed that the female should act as the moral compass of the family, inculcating in her husband and children the standards of morality and civilized behavior. This assumption helped to rationalize “separate spheres” for each gender, with men engaging in the sordid, messy worlds of business and government while women advised boys and men in the home.<sup>11</sup> However, for some

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<sup>10</sup> Peggy Phelan, “Feminist Theory, Poststructuralism, and Performance,” *TDR* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 107-27, at 122. Interestingly, in her subsequent book, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), Phelan reworks this sentence to read “the epitome of cross-cutting neck-wrenching cartoon drama” (160), referring to Little Nell in the animated cartoon *The Dudley Do-Right Show*, who is frequently tied to the railroad tracks by the villain and saved by Dudley Do-Right, her hero. For me, Phelan’s generalization in the *TDR* article, along with her inclination to be more specific in the revision (transforming “melodrama” to “cartoon drama”), potently reveals the strong cultural association of the damsel-in-distress with melodrama.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the notion of separate spheres, see, among others, Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Women’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Douglas, *Feminization of American Culture*; Keith E. Melder, *Beginnings of Sisterhood: The American Woman’s Rights Movement, 1800-1850* (New York:

women the idea that females were morally superior to men seemed to warrant—even demand—their participation in moral reform causes. According to Keith E. Melder, “Because of her purity, woman occupied a moral pedestal that permitted her to judge the behavior of others. This same virtue gave woman new responsibilities: within the home she should be the moral head of the household; and outside the home she would be vigilant against all evil and destructive influences.”<sup>12</sup> By the 1830s, women reformers were challenging the separate-spheres model, both in theory and in practice, by “band[ing] together in fledgling organizations to struggle to abolish slavery, aid prostitutes, fight the debilitating effects of the unregulated sale of alcoholic beverages, and claim their rights as persons and citizens,” as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell notes. Because these social problems fostered behavior that was incompatible with feminine values—the sanctity of motherhood, the bonds of family, domestic harmony—women considered their participation to be justified. Moreover, since women were viewed as the arbiters of morality, they believed they could safely engage in persuasion-based activities (such as petitioning and lecturing) because those efforts adhered to gendered ideals regarding the appropriate division of labor. As Gay Gibson Cima has argued, women skirted and stretched the boundaries between public and private sphere, as well as between male and

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Schocken Books, 1977), 1-11; and Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women in Antebellum Reform* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2000), 8-14. For alternative views, see Cathy N. Davidson, “Preface: No More Separate Spheres!” *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (September 1998): 443-63, and other articles in that issue critiquing the concept. Two discussions regarding the impact of separate-spheres ideology on women’s moral-reform activity include Melder, *Beginnings of Sisterhood*, 1-11; and Ginzberg, *Women in Antebellum Reform*, 8-14.

<sup>12</sup> Melder, *Beginnings of Sisterhood*, 53. Several scholars have examined women’s involvement in the temperance movement as a precursor to their work for abolition and suffrage. See, for example, Barbara Leslie Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981); Ian R. Tyrrell, “Women and Temperance in Antebellum America, 1830-1860,” *Civil War History* 28, no. 2 (1982): 128-52; and Janet Zollinger Giele, *Two Paths to Women’s Equality: Temperance, Suffrage, and the Origins of Modern Feminism* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995).

female labor, by adopting abstract “host bodies” that facilitated their participation both in print and in person.<sup>13</sup>

Arguably, the abolition movement encouraged female involvement more than any other cause. Indeed, women played an instrumental role in the promulgation of anti-slavery ideology. According to Aileen S. Kraditor, “What was unprecedented in the antislavery societies was the unplanned and unforeseen coalescing of the hitherto separate spheres of work of men and women members.”<sup>14</sup> William Lloyd Garrison, the movement’s pioneering leader, enlisted women nearly from the start. Flouting social prohibitions on speaking in public (especially before “promiscuous” audiences of mixed genders), many female reformers excused their unorthodox circulation in civic spaces by citing the moral degradation of slavery and the pressing urgency of its abolition.

Garrison did not, in Suzanne M. Marilley’s estimation, “envision women’s participation in his abolitionist movement as a first step toward their winning equality”; but as social tensions and debates about slavery increased, female abolitionists (most of whom were “native-born, white, educated, middle-class, and from religious denominations such as the Quakers that called for equality at home as well as in public”) began conceiving a universal notion of freedom and liberty. They envisioned a nation in which women, as well as slaves, would be politically enfranchised.<sup>15</sup> By the 1840s, the Garrisonian philosophy that slaves were human beings and therefore had certain “natural rights” necessitated the inclusion of women’s rights on the agenda as well. Strong

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<sup>13</sup> Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, ed., *Women Public Speakers in the United States, 1800-1925* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), xi and xii; Cima, *Early American Women Critics*.

<sup>14</sup> Aileen S. Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics, 1834-1850* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), 42.

<sup>15</sup> Suzanne M. Marilley, *Woman Suffrage and the Origins of Liberal Feminism in the United States, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 16 and 20.

opposition to this idea among many of Garrison's male colleagues eventually caused strife within the American Anti-Slavery Society: in 1840, a significant proportion of the membership departed to form another body, the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society.<sup>16</sup> By the time the first-ever women's rights convention took place in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, the "woman question" was inextricably bound up with that of abolition.<sup>17</sup> Stanton made a resolution regarding suffrage at the convention, and although it was not unanimously supported, it became a prominent topic of conversation. Even Frederick Douglass spoke in favor of it, aligning himself with Stanton and other women who embraced the idea.<sup>18</sup>

By the 1850s, a woman's ability to keep property, file for divorce, time her own pregnancies, obtain a range of educational and vocational opportunities, and vote were prevalent issues in public discourse, although not all female activists agreed on which rights were most important. As Lori D. Ginzberg notes, women reformers became more overtly political during this decade, increasing their demands for legislative recourse. For example, an 1856 article in Amelia Bloomer's temperance publication, *Lily*, complained, "Why shall [women] be left only the poor resource of petition? . . . For even petitions, when they are from women, without the elective franchise to give them backbone, are of but little consequence."<sup>19</sup> According to Ginzberg, this shift occurred due to a dawning

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<sup>16</sup> Kraditor, *Means and Ends*, 41-62.

<sup>17</sup> Marilley, *Woman Suffrage*, 43.

<sup>18</sup> Melder, *Beginnings of Sisterhood*, 147. For more on Douglass's support of women's rights before the Civil War and his eventual abandonment of that position, see Benjamin Quarles, "Frederick Douglass and the Woman's Rights Movement," *Journal of Negro History* 25, no. 1 (January 1940): 35-44.

<sup>19</sup> *Lily*, 15 February 1856, 28; quoted in Lori D. Ginzberg, "'Moral Suasion Is Moral Balderdash': Women, Politics, and Social Activism in the 1850s," *Journal of American History* 73, no. 3 (December 1986): 601-22, at 605.

realization: moral suasion—the strategy that had dominated most early nineteenth-century anti-slavery activity—“had, quite simply, failed.” She suggests that this prompted some women to believe they needed electoral privileges to effect real change: “Voteless, women discovered that benevolent work’s growing dependence on electoral means had by the 1850s rendered ‘female’ means for change less effective and thus less popular.”<sup>20</sup>

Although the start of the Civil War in 1861 shifted attention to the battlefield, it did not silence suffragists completely. In May 1863, Stanton, Anthony, Lucy Stone, Angelina Grimké Weld, and other prominent female reformers formed the Woman’s National Loyal League, an organization dedicated to supporting Union war efforts.<sup>21</sup> Several resolutions were proposed at the first meeting, including one that asserted, “There can never be a true peace in this Republic until the civil and political rights of all citizens of African descent and all women are practically established.”<sup>22</sup> Stone, who presided at the meeting, defended the resolution during the vigorous discussion that followed. She remarked, “If the right of one single human being is to be disregarded by us, we fail in our loyalty to the country. . . . If justice to the negro and to woman is right, it can not hurt our loyalty to the country and the Union. If it is not right, let it go out of the way; but if it is right, there is no occasion that we should reject it or ignore it.”<sup>23</sup> As had happened in Seneca Falls in 1848, it was the only resolution that was not adopted unanimously. Yet

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<sup>20</sup> Ginzberg, “‘Moral Suasion Is Moral Balderdash,’” 603 and 604.

<sup>21</sup> Wendy Hamand Venet, *Neither Ballots nor Bullets: Women Abolitionists and the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 94-122.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1882; reprint, Salem, NH: Ayer Company Publishers, 1985), 2:57 n. A political manifesto as well as a work of historiography, the *History* illuminates how nineteenth-century suffragists conceived and remembered their activities before, during, and after the war.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:65.

the proposal and the subsequent debate reveal that the notion of universal suffrage persisted in spite of the war. Of course, the Loyal League's central objective was to foster and encourage support for the Union cause among diverse communities and constituencies. Most Loyal League members' activities—coordinating petitions, writing letters to soldiers in the battlefield, encouraging household economy, and providing medical assistance—were designed to further this goal. But because the values of liberty, emancipation, and enfranchisement were at the very heart of the military conflict, the question of women's suffrage persisted in the League's discussions. Their campaign suggests that the fight for women's rights was not fully in abeyance during the Civil War.<sup>24</sup>

When the war ended in 1865, the process of reconstruction commenced. The Thirteenth Amendment was ratified that year, abolishing slavery and making involuntary servitude illegal throughout the United States. Next, through the Fourteenth Amendment, Congress began to establish rights for former slaves, including due process and equal protection. But this landmark legislation had a dark side for women suffragists: it attached the word "male" to U.S. "inhabitants" and "citizens." As such, it constituted the first time a gendered adjective was used to designate who would have the right to vote. This new and deliberate association of suffrage with sex suggests that members of Congress felt obliged to be explicit. Before this time, electoral participation was unmarked: an unequivocally male right and privilege that did not require adjectival descriptors. But women's pre-Civil War reform efforts had generated enough interest and

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<sup>24</sup> In *A Reform against Nature: Woman Suffrage and the Rethinking of American Citizenship, 1840-1920* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), Carolyn Summers Vacca states that "women's rights activists subsumed their agenda to the war efforts and the plight of slaves" (45); but her study does not address the suffrage rhetoric employed by leaders of the Woman's National Loyal League.

discussion that the masculine qualifier was suddenly necessary. The amendment was proposed in June 1866 and began the process of ratification that year.

Its passage propelled women suffragists to step up their efforts to obtain the vote alongside black men. Flouting Wendell Phillips's assertion that it was "the Negro's Hour," in May 1866 the members of the Women's Rights Society (formerly, a division of Garrison's Anti-Slavery Society) decided to dedicate their organization to the fight for universal suffrage, renaming themselves the American Equal Rights Association (AERA).<sup>25</sup> Anthony and Stanton became its leaders. In December of that year, the AERA held a convention in New York City and passed several resolutions, including one that declared,

Resolved, That the ballot, alike to the woman and the negro, means bread, education, intelligence, self-protection, self-reliance and self-respect. To the daughter it means industrial freedom and diversified employment; to the wife it means the control of her own person, property and earnings; to the mother it means the equal legal right to her children; to all it means social equality, colleges and professions open, profitable business, skilled labor, and intellectual development.<sup>26</sup>

Another resolution suggests that the AERA's activities in New York received wide and favorable press coverage: "we are rejoiced to see so friendly a spirit towards our new enterprise by the newspaper press of the country generally, as well as of this State; and

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 45-46.

<sup>26</sup> "Resolutions of the Equal Rights Convention in New York City [7 December 1866]," in *Selected Papers*, ed. Gordon, 2:3-4, at 3. Incidentally, many of the commodities described in this passage—"bread, education, intelligence, self-protection, self-reliance and self-respect," and so forth—are, for the most part, successfully obtained by Laura in *Under the Gaslight* after she is forced to live on her own.

we are still more happy to know that this acknowledgement is due alike to the religious and literary as well as the political journals, irrespective of party.”<sup>27</sup>

However, the organization eventually divided over the issue of African American suffrage. After investing their talent and energy in the anti-slavery cause, for some female suffragists the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment represented a huge blow; for others, it seemed a temporary setback that would help their cause in the long term. Douglass tempered his pre-war advocacy for universal suffrage by insisting that men of color needed the vote more urgently than women did.<sup>28</sup> Some women activists, such as Abby Kelley Foster, agreed that securing the vote for black men was a step in the right direction, even if it meant that women must continue to wait for electoral rights. Stone maintained the position that both populations deserved the vote, which led her to eventually break with the AERA. Anthony and Stanton grew frustrated with colleagues who espoused this view, and even adopted racist rhetoric characterizing native-born, educated white women as more deserving of the vote.

### **Women Out of Place: Nature, Gender, and the Suffrage Debate**

Premiering in New York City soon after the Civil War, when African American and female suffrage were fraught topics of public conversation, *Under the Gaslight* featured labor- and gender-role reversals that flouted cultural norms and expectations regarding the privileges and responsibilities of U.S. citizenship. As Emma Dassori has observed, the majority of mid-nineteenth-century dramas addressing women’s rights were “anti-suffrage comedies, satirizing the New Woman and her plight for equality” and were

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<sup>27</sup> “Resolutions of the Equal Rights Convention in New York City [12 December 1866],” in *Selected Papers*, ed. Gordon 2:6-7, at 7.

<sup>28</sup> Marilley, *Woman Suffrage*, 71-80; Vacca, *A Reform against Nature*, 46-52; Quarles, “Frederick Douglass,” 41.

principally performed in amateur settings.<sup>29</sup> The absence of the suffrage question in public drama during this period demonstrates both the radicalism of the idea and, perhaps, a lack of audience interest. In marked contrast to these earlier plays, the issue of voting rights haunts *Gaslight* in a variety of ways, probably because it was on the minds of New Yorkers who attended productions of Daly's play from 1867 to 1869, when the suffrage debate gained renewed vigor and urgency.<sup>30</sup>

A particular construction of womanhood is offered in *Under the Gaslight* through its heroine, Laura Courtland, who tumbles from her comfortable bourgeois life to the bowels of New York City's underworld before finally regaining her place among the elite. Multiple characters in the play discuss Laura's character and actions in light of what it means, to them, to be a "true woman." And yet, in the 1850s and 60s the definition of womanhood—whether true or not—was itself a source of debate. A woman's *nature* often played a prominent role in these discussions. Anthony, Grimké Weld, and other activists argued that a woman's natural sense of morality made her an excellent decision-maker in both political and domestic contexts. But opponents of female suffrage, such as Sarah Josepha Hale and Horace Bushnell, invoked nature to support a more traditional version of femininity. At the heart of this conflict lay two contrasting definitions of true womanhood. For the most part, members from both factions hailed from the middle and upper classes; but like other mid-century reformers, they sought to establish a moral telemetry that would apply to all Americans. Regardless of social and economic station,

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<sup>29</sup> Emma Dassori, "Performing the Woman Question: The Emergence of Anti-Suffrage Drama," *ATQ* 19, no. 4 (December 2005): 301-17, at 301. For several examples, see Bettina Friedl, ed., *On to Victory: Propaganda Plays of the Woman Suffrage Movement* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987).

<sup>30</sup> Felheim's production history indicates that during these two years, multiple theatres in New York City, Brooklyn, and England presented *Gaslight* ("Career of Augustin Daly", 15-19; and *Theater of Augustin Daly*, 51-53). He indicates that a production of the play was presented in Brooklyn or Manhattan nearly every year until the 1880s—further testament to its popularity.

any woman could be a true one, because the idea of true womanhood itself capitalized on the belief that females had natural, inherent proclivities. In other words, it operated as a norm rather than an ideal—or, to put it another way, true womanhood was an ideal theorized and publicized as a norm.

Women suffragists justified their efforts, in part, by adapting and updating what Linda A. Kerber terms Republican motherhood, a concept that emerged around the time of the American Revolution. Rather than serving as a passive supporter of fathers and husbands, the Republican mother took an active role in her family as nurturer and counselor:

The concept of the “republican mother” had developed in the era of the American Revolution as a way of deflecting male criticism that the woman who “meddled” in political ideas necessarily desexed herself; it also develops, as Elizabeth Blackmar has argued, as a language that permitted the wives of upwardly mobile, entrepreneurial men to account for their household responsibilities as productive, even civic, duties requiring them to supervise working-class women as domestic workers.<sup>31</sup>

Pro-suffragists modified this idea by conceiving their moral authority in utilitarian terms, asserting that their ability to provide ethical guidance (to, in effect, save men from themselves) made them all the more indispensable in the political arena.

Opponents of suffrage employed the concept of Republican motherhood, too, to situate women in their proper place. As Luce Irigaray notes, opponents of women’s

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<sup>31</sup> Linda K. Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 146. Here, Kerber acknowledges Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent: 1785-1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 117. See also Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); and Marilley, *Woman Suffrage*.

liberation routinely appropriate arguments originally advanced by activists; she observes that this is one of “the difficulties women encounter when they try to make their voices heard in places already fixed within and by a society that has simultaneously used and excluded them, and that continues in particular to ignore the specificity of their ‘demands’ even as it recuperates some of their themes, their very slogans.”<sup>32</sup> Anti-suffragists adopted the Republican motherhood ideal by arguing that a woman’s natural virtue exempted her from the corrupt world of politics. They insisted that feminine morality proved most effective when exercised *exclusively* within the private sphere.

Anti-suffragists often focused on natural differences between men and women in order to circumscribe women’s position in American culture. For example, *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, which catered to self-defined “respectable” women, articulated and disseminated a conservative, biologized view of womanhood.<sup>33</sup> For example, an issue published around the time of the premiere of *Gaslight* includes an editorial addressing the question “Ought American Women to Have the Right of Suffrage?” It cites Biblical evidence regarding the physical characteristics distinguishing men from women and the responsibilities associated with those fundamental differences: “The Word of God settles the question of differences between the sexes in perfect accordance with the natural laws that indicate the best way of human happiness and progressive improvement. . . . Man is the *protector, provider, and lawgiver*. Woman is the *preserver, the teacher, or inspirer, and the exemplar*.”<sup>34</sup> Here, men’s and women’s roles—dictated by “the Word of God”

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<sup>32</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (1977; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 127.

<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, the publication was founded in 1851, at the dawn of the decade when female reformers began emphasizing electoral action in lieu of the traditionally feminine tactic of moral suasion. See Ginzberg, “Moral Suasion.”

<sup>34</sup> Sarah Josepha Hale, “Editor’s Table,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine* 75 (October 1867): 354 (her emphasis).

and “natural laws”—are defined in terms of labor. Whereas a man’s work is active (protector, provider) and public (lawgiver), a woman’s is passive (inspirer, exemplar) and domestic (teacher).

Anti-suffragists also considered women seeking the vote to be abnormal—almost freakish. In their view, female reformers who attempted to secure the rights, responsibilities, and employment of men dangerously exceeded the strictures of normalcy. *Godey’s* routinely characterized suffragists and other women who participated in the public sphere (in other words, women “out of place”) as eccentric and aberrant.<sup>35</sup> A pamphlet written by an anonymous “Member of the Press,” titled *An Appeal against the Anarchy of Sex* and published during the same year that *Gaslight* premiered, reveals the category crisis that female suffragists inspired:

The assurance with which these few so-called “strong-minded” women and their few followers claim to represent the sex which disowns them with virtual unanimity, is extraordinary, and is really worthy of a stronger term. It would be truly deplorable if the general sense of the citizenship should be so misled as to foist upon women a position which they do not desire, and which is out of their legitimate sphere, because of the outcry of a few persons, who seem to constitute substantially a kind of *third sex*, so to speak, of *somewhat monstrous aspect*.<sup>36</sup>

In this passage, women seeking electoral rights represent radical exceptions to the rule. Their opinions and activities do not reflect the vast majority of true (normal, genuine,

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<sup>35</sup> Vacca, *A Reform against Nature*, 54.

<sup>36</sup> *An Appeal against the Anarchy of Sex to the Constitutional Convention and the People of the State of New-York by a Member of the Press* (New York: John A. Gray & Green Printers, 1867), 8 (my emphasis).

*bona fide*) women. A *true* woman would never subject herself to the distasteful dominion of civic activity.

This argument was buttressed, in part, by the notion that women were morally superior to men. As Carolyn Summers Vacca summarizes the situation, “women were different from but not inferior to men, and this difference created an appropriate inequality, but . . . not an inferiority, in rights.”<sup>37</sup> It was held that on those rare occasions when a true woman desired to influence politics, she worked behind the scenes and above the fray, fulfilling her responsibility as her family’s ethicist. The anonymous writer of the *Appeal against the Anarchy of Sex* describes this true woman as follows: “She is so intuitive that, left to herself, she will never go astray, but will work out her own beautiful and beneficent sphere just as unconsciously and as certainly as any power of nature or any angel.”<sup>38</sup> By 1869, when Bushnell published his treatise *Woman Suffrage: The Reform against Nature*, opponents of women’s suffrage habitually cited biological reasons for gendering voting rights.<sup>39</sup>

When defending a resolution at the Woman’s National Loyal League convention in May 1863, which demanded the vote for women as well as African American men, Angelina Grimké Weld seemed to respond to these conservative notions of a woman’s nature. In her remarks, she equates “true women” with much more than embroidery, dancing, and fashion:

True, we have not felt the slave-holder’s lash; true, we have not had our hands manacled; but our *hearts* have been crushed. . . . A

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<sup>37</sup> Vacca, *A Reform against Nature*, 6.

<sup>38</sup> *An Appeal against the Anarchy of Sex*, 9.

<sup>39</sup> Horace Bushnell, *Woman’s Suffrage: The Reform against Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1869).

teacher said to a young lady, who had been studying for several years, on the day she finished her course of instruction, “I thought you would be very glad that you were so soon to go home, so soon to leave your studies.” She looked up, and said, “What was I made for? When I go home I shall live in a circle of fashion and folly. I was not made for embroidery and dancing; I was made a woman; but I can not be a true woman, a full-grown woman, in America.”<sup>40</sup>

Here, Weld portrays the female sphere as frivolous and restrictive rather than pleasant and pleasurable. Being a true woman is not possible, in her eyes, unless she is able to pursue serious pursuits. In this manner, Weld offers a counter-image to the true womanhood espoused by the writers of *Godey’s Lady Book* and others who asserted that normal women steered clear of electoral politics.

### **The “True Woman” in *Under the Gaslight***

Several months before the premiere of *Under the Gaslight*, Anthony said during a speech in Brooklyn, “Woman is held in her sphere by the same immutable law which holds the fish in the sea, the bird in the air and the planet in its prescribed orbit; and, after these false customs are all swept away, woman will rise up in her native strength and dignity, and be woman still.”<sup>41</sup> Laura, the heroine of the play, seems to embody a “native strength and dignity” that is realized most vividly when she is outside of the domestic sphere—in other words, when she is *out of place*. Laura’s steady composure, autonomy, and courage are apparent from the outset of the play, and climaxes, arguably, during the

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<sup>40</sup> Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, eds., *History*, 2:60-61.

<sup>41</sup> Stanton, ““Reconstruction,”” 36.

spectacular instant that is the railroad rescue. Overall, this “true woman,” as Snorkey repeatedly calls her, reflects suffragist conceptions of femininity as opposed to the norms espoused by *Godey’s*, Bushnell, and other conservative commentators.<sup>42</sup>

Despite a drastic change in her fortunes in the first act, Laura maintains an air of dignity and poise. When her fiancé Ray discovers she is an adopted rather than natural daughter of the Courtlands, he grows cold, announcing to the audience his intent to break their engagement.<sup>43</sup> But Laura barely bats an eyelash, pretending lofty unconcern; a stage direction specifies, “Laura looks at him a moment, smiles and then crosses without further noticing him” (10). Surprised by her reaction, Ray eventually comes around and promises his devotion once more, despite her supposed lack of breeding. But Laura does not respond to his pronouncement with effusive joy; rather, she expresses dismay that feminine charms blind men’s eyes to the true woman within:

LAURA: (*Laughing heartily at him, then seriously.*) How happy  
must those women be, who are poor, and friendless, and plain,  
when some true heart comes and says: I wish to marry you.

RAY: Laura, you act very strangely to-night. (10)

Here, Ray underscores Laura’s bizarre, atypical behavior. Unlike heroines whose race or class status undermines their matrimonial aspirations (Zoë in Dion Boucicault’s *The Octoroon*, for example), Laura does not revel in self-loathing or woe, but rather reacts to

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<sup>42</sup> Given the limited scope of this chapter, I have chosen to concentrate on how Laura seems to embody a pro-suffrage model of womanhood, rather than on how she fits into the long tradition of melodramatic stage heroines. For more discussion of the heroine and the other stock figures associated with the genre, see Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 171-203; and Lyn Stiefel Hill, “Heroes, Heroines, and Villains in English and American Melodrama, 1850-1900” (PhD diss., Graduate Center, City University of New York, 1981), among others.

<sup>43</sup> Daly, *Under the Gaslight*, 10. Subsequent page references will be indicated parenthetically.

the situation calmly and matter-of-factly.<sup>44</sup> Even when the Courtlands' well-to-do friends soundly reject her at the end of the first act, she does not falter, but "proudly waves [Ray] away" instead (14).

In addition, Laura's independent streak denies the value of womanly submission. She disappears into the city's underworld, never asking for help from her well-to-do friends or former family, and establishes herself in a humble apartment. Her sudden severance from the Courtland clan not only forces her to leave the confines of her comfortable home, but also necessitates her becoming a laborer. Laura retouches photographs for a meager income while she searches for a position as a tutor. Although she expresses concern about the people she left behind, she remains lighthearted despite her circumstances. Getting ready to make a meal for herself in Act II, her sense of humor is evident: "Now to be cook. (*Laughing*) The 'Tuesday Sociable' ought to see me now. Artist in the morning, cook at noon, artist in the afternoon" (18). As she is preparing the repast, Snorkey leads the pining Ray to her apartment. Rather than expressing relief and joy at his arrival, she laughs off his dismay at her state, then asserts her independence by rejecting him:

RAY: Alone, without means, exposed to every rudeness,  
unprotected, is this not misery for you?

LAURA: (*Laughing*) Oh, it's not so bad as that.

...

RAY: Laura, by the tie that once bound us—

LAURA: (*Going up.*) Yes, *once*. It *is* a long time ago.

RAY: What have I said?—the tie which still—

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<sup>44</sup> Dion Boucicault, *The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana* (1859), in *Major Voices: The Drama of Slavery*, ed. Eric Gardner (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2005), 485-553.

LAURA: (*Sharply turning.*) Mr. Trafford must I remind you of that night, when all arrayed themselves so pitilessly against me? When a gesture from you might have saved me! . . . No, you made your choice then—the world without me. I make my choice now—the wide, wide, world without you. (20-21)

In this exchange, her willingness to forgo the comforts of marriage for the “wide, wide, world” seems to challenge the desirability of separate spheres and gendered labor divisions. Furthermore, Laura underscores the necessity of self-reliance, citing Ray’s passivity and his lack of masculine heroics.

Bruce A. McConachie suggests that Laura’s composure has most to do with her bourgeois blood and breeding. He argues that the play was one of several mid-nineteenth-century American melodramas that reflected the concerns of a growing business community in the U.S. In his estimation, *Gaslight* and other sensation dramas “shift[ed] the definition of respectability from inner qualities of character and morality to ‘natural’ attributes resulting from birth and upbringing.” For example, he points out that when *Gaslight*’s villain, Byke, and his wife Old Judas capture the heroine, Judas observes Laura’s composure and remarks, “How her blood tells—she wouldn’t shed a tear” (30). Indeed, this line resonates deeply with McConachie, because it serves as the title of his chapter on sensation drama.<sup>45</sup> Although I acknowledge the value of his observation regarding the naturalization of class in *Gaslight*, I suggest that his reading does not take into account the political context in which the play premiered. As I discussed earlier, immediately before and during the year 1867 the nation struggled with monumental questions regarding U.S. citizenship, especially as it related to race and gender. Reading the play with this in mind, it becomes clearer that *Gaslight* spectacularizes Laura’s

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<sup>45</sup> McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 215 and 198-230.

womanhood as much as her breeding. For instance, Byke's reply to Old Judas's line "how her blood tells" underscores how Laura acts differently than he expects a typical woman to behave: he says, "Bah! If she'd been *more of a woman* and set up a screaming, we shouldn't have been able to get her at all. Success to all girls of spirit, say I" (my emphasis). In other words, Laura *exceeds* Byke's expectations, impressing him with her unusual (for a woman) response to adversity.

Laura's courage is displayed most dramatically in the railroad rescue itself: the spectacular instant that thrilled audiences, inspired imitators, and generated "universal conversation" (42-43).<sup>46</sup> When she escapes the clutches of Byke, Laura tries to catch a train from the Shrewsbury Bend train station back to New York City; when told by the signalman that no trains will stop there until the next day, she asks him to lock her in a storage shed overnight (40). Snorkey, eager to protect Laura and her family from the murderous Byke, also arrives at the station in hopes of boarding a train to New York. But Byke has followed him. He quickly overcomes Snorkey, ties his legs with rope, and fastens him to the rails, leaving him there to be crushed by an oncoming locomotive. Snorkey calls out for help, and when Laura hears him through the window of the shed, she finds an axe inside and uses it to bash her way out. Emerging with axe in hand, she reaches him just in time to move him off the tracks before the locomotive rushes by.

According to Hugh O'Donnell, who wrote a description of the railroad sequence in a newspaper forty years later, the train effect was created and patented by John (Jack) Denham, a stage machinist.<sup>47</sup> He reports that the train "dash[ed] across the stage" and

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<sup>46</sup> Advertisement for *Under the Gas-Light*, by Augustin Daly, Worrell Sisters' New-York Theatre, *New York Times*, 30 September 1867, 7.

<sup>47</sup> Hugh O'Donnell, "Sophie Worrell: Responsible for Frou-Frou in America," unidentified press clipping (stamped 22 July 1900), William Worrell and Worrell Sisters Clippings File, Harvard Theatre Collection. See also Brown, *History of the New York Stage*, 2:385.

“was a marvelous effect, and although at the first performance the train ran zig-zag and anywhere but on the track, the engine snorted and hissed steam and puffed . . . fireworks from the smoke-stack.” In addition, documents related to the court case *Daly v. Palmer et al.* (1868) help to illuminate how the scene was realized. Daly sought an injunction against Henry D. Palmer and Henry C. Jarrett, who planned to present Boucicault’s *After Dark* (1868) at Niblo’s Garden. Daly argued that the railroad rescue in Boucicault’s play infringed on his copyright because it was nearly identical to the one in *Under the Gaslight*. The case was decided in the plaintiff’s favor and became a legal landmark, in that it afforded copyright protection for recognizable *mise-en-scène*.

The opinion written by the presiding judge, Samuel Blatchford, features detailed descriptions of the railroad rescue in both dramas, based on court testimony as well as the scripts. It summarizes Laura’s escape from the station shed as follows: “She takes an axe and strikes the door. The whistle is heard again, with the rumble of the approaching train. She gives more blows on the door with the axe, it opens, she runs and unfastens Snorkey, the lights of the engine appear, and she moves Snorkey’s head from the track as the train rushes past.” Significantly, in his decision Blatchford considers not only the spectator’s *visual* recognition of the scene, but also his *visceral* response. He writes,

such adaptation . . . is a piracy, if the appropriated series of events, when represented on the stage, although performed by new and different characters, using different language, is recognized by the spectator, *through any of the senses* to which the representation is addressed, as conveying substantially the

same impressions to, and *exciting the same emotions* in, the mind, in the same sequence or order.<sup>48</sup>

Essentially, Blatchford indicates that the feelings provoked by Daly's railroad rescue were part of its inherent value and therefore warranted protection; therefore, Boucicault's scene, which he designed to elicit the same reactions in the spectator, amounted to plagiarism. In other words, the *sensations* inspired by the sensation scene were copyrightable.

In the published version of *Under the Gaslight*, the railroad sequence begins when Laura glimpses Snorkey through a window in the station shed and cries out, "O Heavens! He will be murdered before my eyes! How can I aid him?" Hearing her, Snorkey expresses surprise that it is Laura, exclaiming, "I almost thought I was dead, and [the voice] was an angel's." On the brink of death—traditionally a moment of clarity, when one's life flashes before one's eyes—the helpless veteran seems to mistake the flesh-and-blood female for a heavenly figure of salvation. Laura's initial attempt to break out of the shed (shaking the door) is unsuccessful. Meanwhile, Snorkey is disabled in two senses: tied up and incapacitated by Byke, and one-armed due to his service in the Civil War. Laura, being physically intact, is his only hope—as she seems to be aware.

SNORKEY: Never mind me, Miss. I might as well die now, and here, as at any other time. I'm not afraid. I've seen death in almost every shape, and none of them scare me; but, for the sake of those you love, I would live. Do you hear me?

LAURA: Yes! Yes!

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<sup>48</sup> *Daly v. Palmer et al.*, 6 F. Cas. 1132, 1134 and 1138 (my emphasis) (S. D. New York 1868). The *Times* published a sizable excerpt from Blatchford's decision after the verdict ("Dramatic Copyright," *New York Times*, 18 December 1868, 2).

SNORKEY: They are on the way to your cottage—Byke and Judas—to rob and murder.

LAURA: (*In agony.*) O, I must get out! (*Shakes window bars.*)  
What shall I do?

The shuddering door, the clanking metal, and Laura's cries foreshadow the cacophony of the train that will soon appear. These sounds signal Laura's willingness to dive into the fray and materially embody the guardian angel Snorkey hoped to see.

SNORKEY: Can't you burst the door?

LAURA: It is locked fast.

SNORKEY: Is there nothing in there?—no hammer?—no crowbar?

LAURA: Nothing! (*Faint steam whistle is heard in the distance.*)

O, heavens! The train! (*Paralysed for an instant.*) The axe!!!

As the tension builds, it seems that Laura—crying out helplessly to the heavens—will lose her signature composure and spiral into a panic. But after a mere “instant” of paralysis, her senses return and she is struck with an epiphany: she can use one of the axes in the shed to break down the door.

As I discuss in more detail below, the axe, in contrast to the hammer or crowbar, is a striking symbol of destructive power. It is a man's tool used for a wide variety of tasks, ranging from the mundane to the heroic, such as splitting firewood or breaking down doors in a burning building. Laura's axe makes a spectacular noise, as the stage directions indicate:

SNORKEY: Cut the woodwork! Don't mind the lock—cut around it! How my neck tingles! (*A blow at the door is heard.*)  
Courage! (*Another.*) Courage! (*The steam whistle heard again—nearer, and rumble of train on track. Another blow.*)

That's a true woman! Courage! (*Noise of locomotive heard—  
with whistle. A last blow; the door swings open, mutilated—  
the lock hanging—and Laura appears, axe in hand.*)

Soon, however, the blows of Laura's axe are punctuated by the train whistle—louder this time—as well as a new sound, a “rumble” of the train on the tracks, which adds to the dramatic tension. Determined and seemingly unconcerned for her own safety, Laura ultimately secures her freedom by “mutilating” the door.

Even more interesting are Snorkey's cries of “Courage!” which culminate in the exultant statement, “That's a true woman!” Lying prostrate and helpless, his neck tingling from the vibrations of the track, it is easy to imagine that his call for courage might be as much for himself as for Laura. In any case, his shouts seem to express faith in the heroine's ability to save him from imminent death.<sup>49</sup> After all, prior to this climactic point in the play, he has witnessed Laura's courage, steadiness, and independence in myriad ways. David Grimsted, in his discussion of the melodramatic heroine, suggests that “vulnerability and a kind of passivity were as characteristic of the melodramatic heroine as her perfect goodness. . . . Indeed the heroine's weakness was such that she had to be carefully sheltered.”<sup>50</sup> But this is clearly not the kind of heroine Laura embodies. Plucky and unconventional, she responds to adversity with laughter; she rejects the hero's apologetic pleas for reconciliation; she violently chops her way out of a shed with an axe. In the process, she represents a much different standard of womanhood.

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<sup>49</sup> McConachie—citing Hill's “Heroes, Heroines, and Villains”—underplays Laura's actions in the railroad sequence, asserting that “courageous heroines were fairly common in English and American melodramas after 1850” (*Melodramatic Formations*, 298 n. 33). However, I would say that the prevalence of courageous heroines after 1850 upholds my argument: after all, the first major U.S. women's rights convention took place in Seneca Falls in 1848.

<sup>50</sup> Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 174.

The actress who played Laura during the initial run of *Gaslight* offers more clues about the audience's perception of the character. Rose Eytinge had recently enjoyed accolades for her portrayal of Nancy Sykes in *Oliver Twist* at Wallack's Theatre, a role she performed throughout her career. In her autobiography, she reports that the managers originally rejected her request to play the part, because "in every particular—physically, mentally, and temperamentally—I was wholly unequipped for it." She continued to press for the opportunity, and they agreed under the condition that she conclude the evening in "some light one-act piece . . . in order that the audience should not take away with them the ghastly picture of Nancy in her death throes." In light of Eytinge's anecdote, it seems that her success may have been the result of the paradoxical, contradictory effect she generated as a beautiful ingénue playing Nancy—a role that Lewis C. Strang describes as the epitome of "melodramatic horror." Echoes of Nancy may have ghosted her performance in *Under the Gaslight*. According to the *New York Times*, Eytinge "presented an exceedingly good picture of a young girl with *genuine American pride and sense*, and was the pet of the spectators from the first scene to the conclusion"—a comment that I believe reflects the reading I offer of Laura as a uniquely resourceful, independent, and determined heroine embodying a suffragist vision of femininity. Incidentally, upon her death in 1911, the *Evening Transcript* in Boston described Eytinge as "a strong and persistent advocate for the advance of woman and the extension of her rights," reporting that she once declared "I want my rights afforded me, even if I do not use them."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Rose Eytinge, *The Memories of Rose Eytinge* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1905), 85-86 (quotations on 86); Lewis C. Strang, *Players and Plays of the Last Quarter Century* (Boston: L. C. Page, 1902), 103-04; "Amusements," review of *Under the Gaslight*, by Augustin Daly, Worrell Sisters New-York Theatre, *New York Times*, 13 August 1867, 5 (my emphasis); obituary for Rose Eytinge, *Evening Transcript (Boston)*, 20 December 1911, n.p., Rose Eytinge Clippings File, Harvard Theatre Collection.

Snorkey's final line in the railroad sequence reveals his feelings about the type of "true woman" that Laura represents. As the train appears, the sensation scene concludes with a direct allusion to the women's suffrage movement:

SNORKEY: Here—quick! (*She runs and unfastens him. The locomotive lights glare on the scene.*) Victory! Saved!  
Hooray! (*Laura leans exhausted against the switch.*) And  
these are the women who ain't to have the vote!

In stark contrast to the reading I offer in this chapter, McConachie asserts that spectators probably dismissed Snorkey's line. He states that it is "clearly intended as a throwaway remark to spark a laugh" and that "because it is said by the comic and not by the hero or heroine, it carries less dramatic weight."<sup>52</sup> I agree that audiences may have found humor in the scene; reports about early productions indicate that this was especially the case when the scene's machinery went awry. For example, Joseph Daly admits that on opening night, "The intensely wrought feelings of the spectators found vent in almost hysterical laughter when the 'railroad train' parted in the middle and disclosed the flying legs of the human motor who was propelling the first half of the express." But he goes on to say that "the suspense and emotion created by the whole situation . . . was beyond chance of accident," pointing out that despite such mishaps, it was a hit with spectators.<sup>53</sup> In addition, as I will discuss later, anecdotal evidence suggests that the audience sometimes interacted physically and verbally during the railroad sequence—for example, shouting out "The axe! The axe!" while the heroine searched for a tool to break the shed's door. In short, it would be reductive to assume that the scene's comic qualities extinguished its impact—even though they may have blunted its edge.

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<sup>52</sup> McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 297 n. 33.

<sup>53</sup> Daly, *Life of Augustin Daly*, 75.

Moreover, I disagree with McConachie's contention that Snorkey's position within the play's social hierarchy may have lessened his "dramatic weight." Felheim notes that Snorkey "serves as the playwright's method of keeping the strands of the story together," in part because of his role as a professional messenger. Similar to the Yankee character that appears in many American melodramas, Snorkey offers comic relief while serving as the moral center of the play. He also functions as a "proto-detective character," a phrase McConachie uses to describe resourceful secondary characters such as Badger and Myles-na-Coppaleen in Dion Boucicault's *The Poor of New York* (1857) and *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), respectively. McConachie puts Snorkey into this category, a "heroic protagonist" who fills an important role because the encoded hero (in this case Ray) is "too self-divided and too ignorant to push to resolution the plots which entangle [him]." In McConachie's estimation, the proto-detective is more assertive than the melodramatic hero—which, I would argue, gives him *more* dramatic weight. McConachie persuasively argues that Ray, the hero of *Gaslight*, is typical of "bourgeois heroes" in mid-century sensation melodramas who "float passively through their plays."<sup>54</sup> Ray's ineffectualness contrasts starkly with Snorkey's pluck and dedication—leaving one to wonder whom the real hero is.

During the two initial runs of *Gaslight* at the Worrell Sisters' theatre, J. K. Mortimer played Snorkey. T. Allston Brown describes Mortimer as an eccentric but popular actor, "one of the finest of American light comedians," who was well known for his portrayal of Boucicault's proto-detective, Badger.<sup>55</sup> A notable actor in the role

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<sup>54</sup> Felheim, *Theater of Augustin Daly*, 48; McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 224 and 221.

<sup>55</sup> Brown, *History of the New York Stage*, 1:515. Felheim observes that Mortimer "had just made a hit as Badger" and that Badger's "function in uniting the principle characters and his general attitude are similar to Snorkey's" ("Career of Augustin Daly," 15 n. 2).

probably heightened the character's importance in the minds of spectators. According to the *Times*, Mortimer gave a performance as the "light-hearted, free, spirited soldier lad" that was "a thing to be remembered."<sup>56</sup> As I argue in the next section, this character—a one-armed Civil War veteran—implicitly invoked questions about American citizenship that lay at the heart of the suffrage issue in 1867. For this reason, I contend that Snorkey's line about the women's vote should not be dismissed as the comic utterance of a minor figure. Also, the placement of his pro-suffrage statement at the height of the play's most spectacular instant constitutes a notable intersection of sensationalism and reform culture.

### **Fighting for the Vote: The Soldier-Citizen as Public Icon**

Militant action has always been integral to the myth of America—a nation born of violence and revolt. Metaphors of war surface repeatedly in discussions about civil rights and responsibilities, with activists in minority groups "fighting" for equality; women "battling" sexism and harassment in the workplace; and "wars" waged on crime and illegal drugs. The nation's revolutionary beginnings may have inspired such rhetoric. But whatever the cause, in the United States "the association between soldiering and entitlement runs very deep," as Kerber observes.<sup>57</sup>

It took masculine force, not the feminine tactic of moral suasion, to eradicate slavery. On the battlefield, soldiers engaged in violence—"the unique province of males," according to Jim Cullen—so that women would not have to do the same.<sup>58</sup> Because

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<sup>56</sup> "Amusements," review of *Under the Gaslight*, by Augustin Daly, Worrell Sisters New-York Theatre, *New York Times*, 13 August 1867, 5.

<sup>57</sup> Kerber, *No Constitutional Right*, 224.

<sup>58</sup> Jim Cullen, "'I's a Man Now': Gender and African American Men," in *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 76-91, at 79.

*Under the Gaslight* portrays a reversal of not only gender roles, but also *labor* roles, the cultural association between soldiering and citizenship is important to keep in mind. In the wake of the Civil War, the icon of the soldier-citizen haunted the postwar suffrage debate when Reconstruction legislation, including the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, defined voters as male. But in Daly's railroad rescue, it is the woman, not the soldier, who fights and protects.

The Civil War remains the bloodiest, most devastating conflict in U.S. history. The sheer number of men involved and the incredible losses suffered by both sides meant that the war affected a considerable number of American families.<sup>59</sup> Willing to lose his life to protect his home, the soldier-citizen who fought for the Union became a powerful icon in the North, circulating in pictorial media as well as political discourse. Sweeping views of a regiment's departure for the front, portraits of soldiers holding American flags, and iconographic allegories depicting God's support of the Union celebrated the spirit and bravery of northern men in the militia—and, by extension, the patriotism of the consumer who purchased and displayed the images.<sup>60</sup> Supporters proudly displayed lithographs of soldiers in their homes or wrote correspondence on patriotic stationery that would pass through multiple hands (printer, merchant, letter-writer, mail-carrier, recipient, collector). In some respects, these objects not only reflected but also shaped

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<sup>59</sup> Theda Skocpol describes the human impact of the Civil War this way: "Overall, the Union side in the Civil War suffered 364,511 mortal casualties (including 140,414 battle deaths and 224,097 other deaths, mostly from disease). These numbers translate into a ratio of 18 (17.95) northerners killed per thousand in the population, whereas only 1.31 Americans per thousand were to die in World War I, and 3.14 per thousand in World War II. As for the Union military's wounded who survived, they numbered some 281,881, or about 14 (13.88) per thousand in the northern population." *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 103-04.

<sup>60</sup> Mark E. Neely, Jr., and Harold Holzer, *The Union Image: Popular Prints of the Civil War North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

how Americans viewed each other and themselves. As such, they offer useful information about how spectators may have perceived and understood a character like Snorkey.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the relatively inexpensive process of lithography made popular prints more accessible than ever before. One of the nation's most prominent printers, Currier & Ives in New York, adopted the advertising slogan "Colored Engravings for the People," which invoked both the cultural capital and wide accessibility of the new art form. According to Harry T. Peters, Currier & Ives was "a democratic firm in a democratic country. . . . In their heyday Currier prints were to be found adorning the walls of barrooms, barbershops, firehouses, and hotels, as well as of the homes of rich and poor alike."<sup>61</sup> The company sold prints directly to individual consumers and also distributed them internationally through a thriving wholesale business.

During the war, lithographs produced by Currier & Ives and other northern printers reminded consumers that the Union soldier fought not only for the nation, but also for the family he left behind. One popular image, "The Soldier's Dream of Home," sentimentalized the soldier-citizen's sacrifice by juxtaposing men on the field with their wives and children at home. **(Figure 20.)** A soldier lies asleep in the foreground of the image while his comrades mill around behind him—chatting, eating, drinking, or engaging in mundane tasks. At the top of the print, the smoke from a nearby fire collects above the sleeping soldier and reveals his dream: a vision of his homecoming, with his beautiful, feminine wife and strapping young son (usually dressed in military gear)

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<sup>61</sup> Peters, *Currier and Ives*, 3 and Plate 5. For more on the popularity and democratic connotations of lithography in mid-nineteenth-century America, see Marzio, "Lithography as a Democratic Art."



**Figure 20.**  
*The Soldier's Dream of Home*, Currier & Ives, 1862.  
Collection of the Wisconsin Historical Society.



**Figure 21.**  
*The American Patriot's Dream*, Currier & Ives, 1861.  
Collection of the American Antiquarian Society.

running to meet him. Some variations of the image feature an older couple behind the mother and child—presumably, the soldier’s parents—who also celebrate the young man’s return.<sup>62</sup> **(Figure 21.)**

The domestic utopias enacted in these soldiers’ dreams manifest in other pictorial products as well. One example is an 1863 lithograph honoring volunteers in “Company C, 8th Regiment, of Connecticut.”<sup>63</sup> It lists soldiers “mustered” into service in September 1861 who had died or been injured sometime before August 10, 1863. Allegorical imagery, thumbnail icons, and four larger scenes embellish the memorial. Two scenarios at the top show soldiers on the battlefield, while two below illustrate domestic scenes similar to the “soldier’s dream”; however, in these pictures the men seem to be departing for the front, taking leave of wives and children while their pristine homes loom in the background. In other words, this memorial print honors the soldiers’ sacrifices by freezing on the last instant of domestic harmony they enjoyed: bidding farewell to their loved ones.<sup>64</sup>

Civil War stationery constitutes another rich source of iconography that circulated in everyday spaces. Some depict the soldier’s dream, nearly identical in form and composition to the lithographs described above, while others depict scenes of farewell

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<sup>62</sup> Neely and Holzer analyze several other war-themed illustrations featuring women, home, and hearth in *The Union Image*, 84-107. See also Le Beau, *Currier & Ives*, 98-103.

<sup>63</sup> *Soldier’s Memorial* (1863), lithograph by Sarony, Major & Knapp, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

<sup>64</sup> Neely and Holzer point out that surviving copyright registry books for Currier & Ives indicate that the firm produced prints on many subjects during the Civil War and the proportion of war-themed prints decreased over the course of the conflict (*The Union Image*, 87-88). Although this possibly reflects a lessening appetite for pictures of soldiers, it is likely that prints purchased by consumers early in the war had a long-term presence in domestic spaces, which may account for the decline in consumption as combat continued.

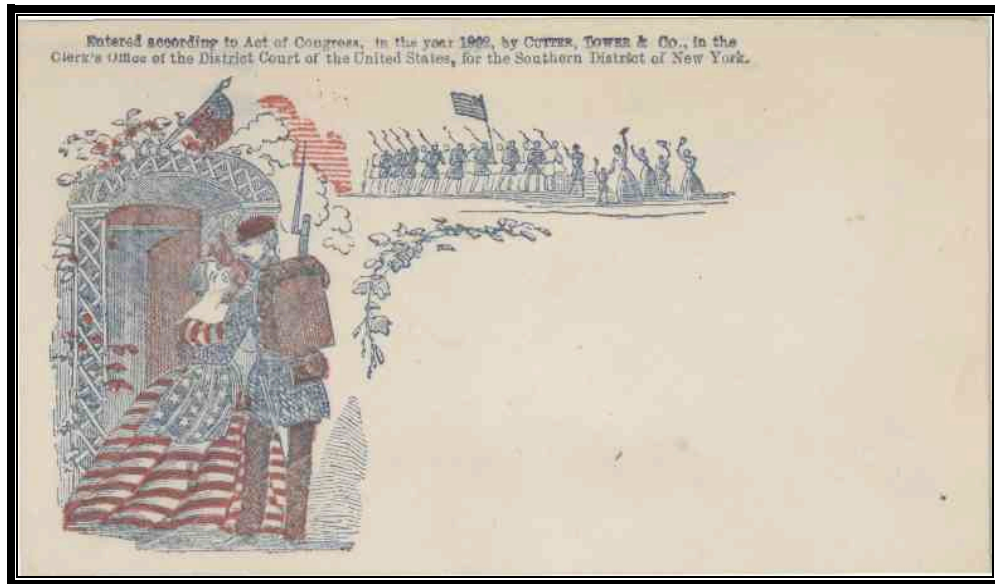
between wives and uniformed husbands setting out for the front. **(Figure 22.)** Still others focus exclusively on the wife, sister, or mother at home, whose performance of domestic tasks presents a stark contrast to the soldier's more-violent labors on the front—confirming William F. Thompson's assertion that "Women were expected to help the Union only in ways that did not compromise their femininity."<sup>65</sup> In several examples, a woman works a needle and thread and is captioned "Our hearts are with our brothers in the field," or simply "Our hearts are with them." **(Figure 23.)** In others, a woman washes clothes while wondering about her "boys gone to the war" and whether "they [her boys? the army?] would take me." **(Figure 24.)** Yet another image, depicting a woman busy baking, celebrates a woman's wish to contribute to the war effort but also circumscribes her contribution along gender lines: the caption reads, "If I cannot fight, I can feed those who do." **(Figure 25.)**

Collectively, these artifacts juxtapose types and sites of citizenship: home versus battlefield, family versus military, husband/father versus wife/son, man versus woman. Moreover, their depictions of idealized women—passive, pretty, and laboring at traditionally female tasks—evoke a fantasy of domesticity that disavows the rigorous, public, sometimes belligerent activism of women who helped launch and sustain the antebellum reform movements. In other words, they represent what Simone de Beauvoir describes as the paternalistic "myth of woman," which "claims woman for hearth and home [and] defines her as sentiment, inwardness, immanence."<sup>66</sup> The soldier's dream, in particular, employs this strategy. As a dramaturgical device—in literature and visual art as well as drama—a dream communicates something to or about the subject. It

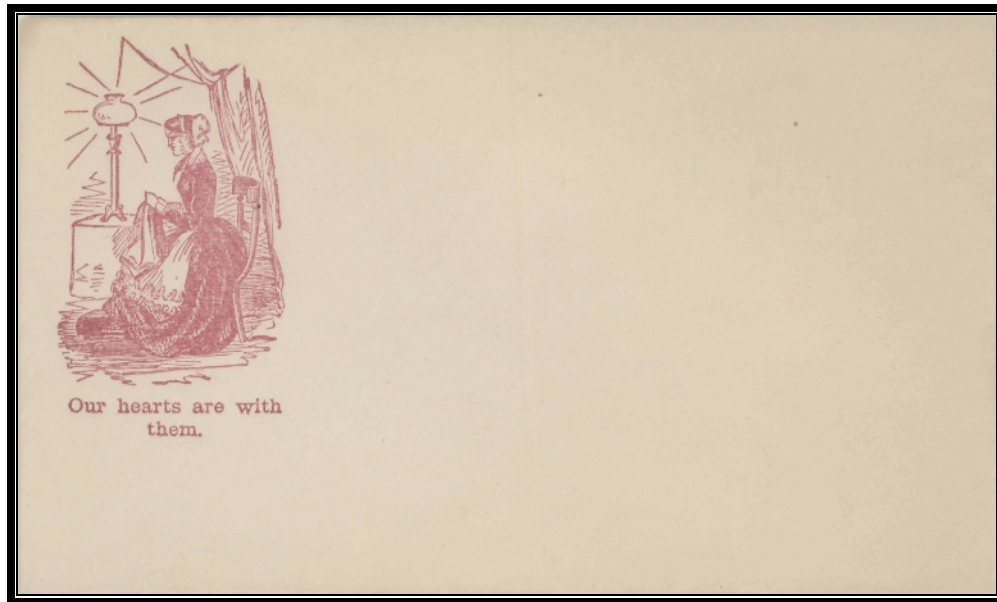
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<sup>65</sup> William F. Thompson, *The Image of War: The Pictorial Reporting of the American Civil War* (1960; reprint, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 104.

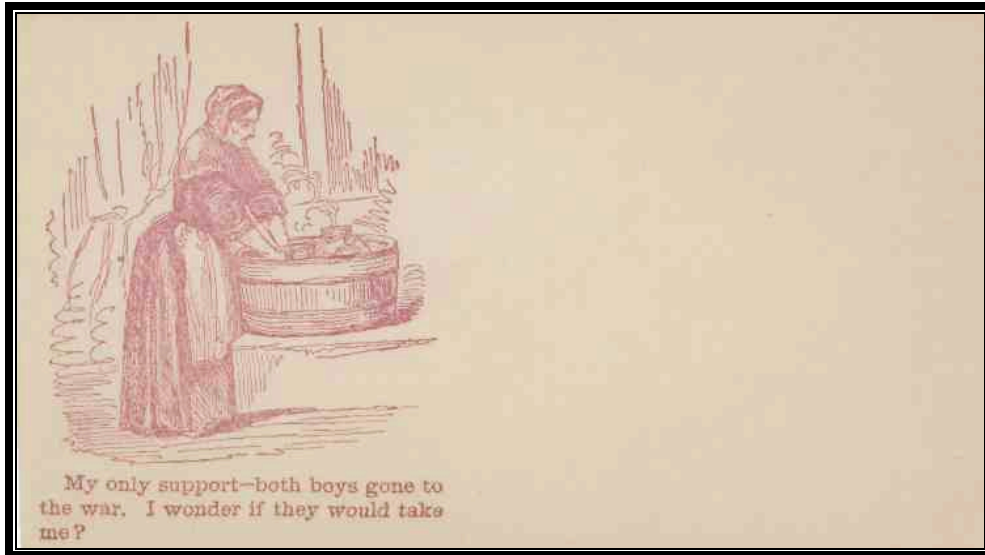
<sup>66</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (1949; reprint, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 255.



**Figure 22.**  
Civil War envelope, Cutter, Tower & Company, 1862.  
Collection of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

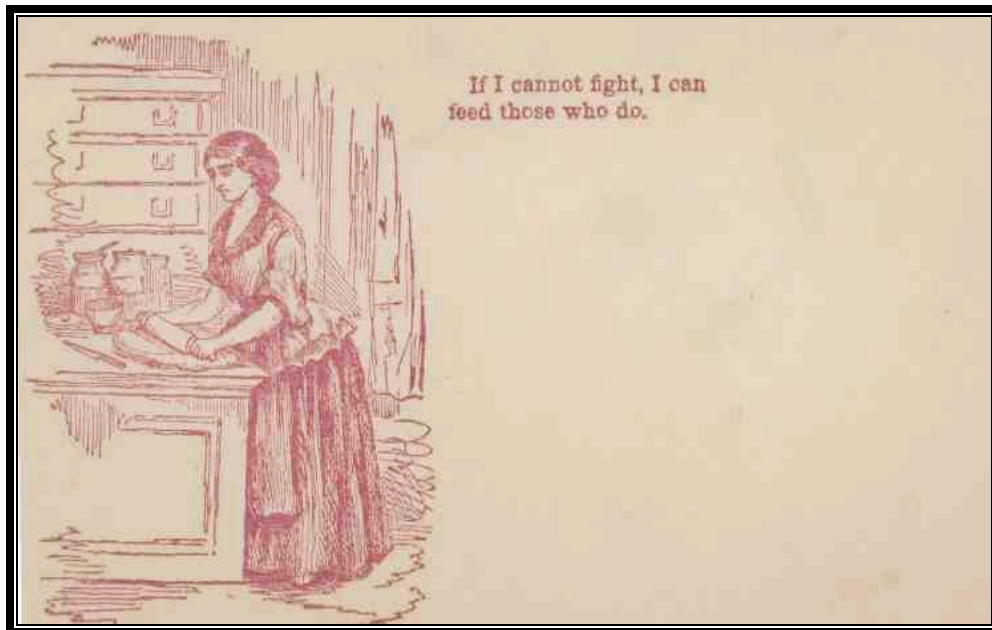


**Figure 23.**  
*Our Hearts Are with Them*, Civil War envelope, n.d.  
Collection of the Library Company of Philadelphia.



**Figure 24.**

*My Only Support—Both Boys Gone to the War*, Civil War envelope, n.d.  
Collection of the Library Company of Philadelphia.



**Figure 25.**

*If I Cannot Fight, I Can Feed Those Who Do*, Civil War envelope, n.d.  
Collection of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

can also serve as an idealizing space, at once imaginative and visionary. Lithographs and stationery depicting “The Soldier’s Dream” seem to preserve the separation of spheres by presenting simultaneous narratives: the husband on the front and the wife waiting from afar.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, a “dream,” in contemporary parlance, connotes a goal, a wish, or (more pejoratively) a figment of one’s imagination that is impossible to realize or materialize. So instead of a dream, a fragment or ferment of imagination, it seems these images may also represent the soldier’s wish or hope.

The increase in women’s suffrage activity immediately prior to the Civil War, which gave rise to fears and anxieties about “monstrous women,” is essentially erased by these depictions of men and women in their proper roles, spaces, and places. When viewed in light of this historical context, wartime images like the “soldier’s dream” begin to look like dreams of normality: average men living normal lives with normal wives. In a way, these glorified, sentimental renderings resemble what Robert Bogdan calls the “aggrandized mode” in nineteenth-century freak shows. According to Bogdan, in aggrandized presentations of unusual people “the freak was an upstanding, high-status person with talents of a conventional and socially prestigious nature. . . . One, some, or all of the following attributes were fabricated, elevated or exaggerated, and then flaunted: social position, achievements, talents, family, and physiology.”<sup>68</sup> I am not suggesting that

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<sup>67</sup> Jeanie Attie offers a contrasting view, arguing that “the antebellum ideology of gender spheres faced one of its first crises” during the war [“Warwork and the Crisis of Domesticity in the North,” in *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 247-59, at 248]. Although women supported the Union cause in valuable ways, I would counter that the proliferation of Civil War images depicting women in domestic spaces, paired with the marked absence of prints featuring women working in male-dominated professions (such as clerking) during the war, suggests that “progressive” depictions of women were either unmarketable or unwelcome. See Neely and Holzer, *The Union Image*, 100; William Fletcher Thompson, Jr., “Pictorial Propaganda and the Civil War,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 46, no. 1 (Autumn 1962): 21-31, at 24.

<sup>68</sup> Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 108. See also 147-75 in Bogdan, which offers several case studies of freaks presented in the aggrandized mode.

artists, lithographers, and printers of Civil War iconography drew direct inspiration from freak shows, but I do see intriguing parallels between the two genres, because they use similar representational techniques. As I discussed above, the idea of true womanhood was not a universal or unilateral concept, but rather a site of theoretical struggle. The notion of a “true woman,” in itself, is a kind of aggrandizement, and different constituencies constructed her using (inadvertently or not) the same tactics that freak show proprietors employed to transform freaks into celebrities. As De Beauvoir famously argues in *The Second Sex*, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. . . . It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature.” Her statement is a haunting echo of the idea that freaks are not born, but rather made.<sup>69</sup>

The strict division of spheres in these images is most intriguing, I think, in light of postwar legislation and discourse that associated electoral privileges with military service. During the antebellum era, opponents of universal suffrage cited the absence of women on the battlefield as a way to uphold their argument. For example, after the Seneca Falls convention in 1848, a writer in the *New York Herald* quipped that women seeking rights belonging to men should also be granted the “right” to fight: “we confess it would go to our hearts to see them putting on the panoply of war.”<sup>70</sup> Such rhetoric became especially prominent after the war, when the soldier-citizen ideal not only inspired an unprecedented pension program for veterans and widows, but also buttressed efforts to give African American men the vote. In her study *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*, Theda Skocpol

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<sup>69</sup> De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 267. Of course, other feminists, especially Judith Butler [*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990; reprint, New York: Routledge, 1999) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits Of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993)], have augmented and updated De Beauvoir’s idea; but I appreciate how De Beauvoir’s phrasing, in particular, is invoked by scholars working within disability studies.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Melder, *Beginnings of Sisterhood*, 148.

argues that postwar pensions served as the foundation for later welfare initiatives in the U.S.; but unlike modern entitlement programs, which are usually designated for the profoundly poor or needy, Civil War pensions singled out “a group that ought to be generously and constantly repaid by the nation for their sacrifices” who “by their own choices and efforts as young men had *earned aid*.”<sup>71</sup> In other words, public assistance was a form of *compensation* for soldier-citizens who had contributed labor to the Union cause.<sup>72</sup>

Prior to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, northerners were highly ambivalent about black men’s involvement in combat.<sup>73</sup> Newspapers and patriotic stationery feature caricatures of slaves on the battlefield that often border on the grotesque. **(Figure 26.)** Then, Abraham Lincoln tied soldiering to liberty, announcing that slaves would be “received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service.”<sup>74</sup> As Kerber notes,

The Emancipation Proclamation itself merged emancipation and arms bearing, welcoming into the armed service of the United States and the people whom Lincoln declared free. For enslaved blacks, arms-bearing for the Union was an experience that came

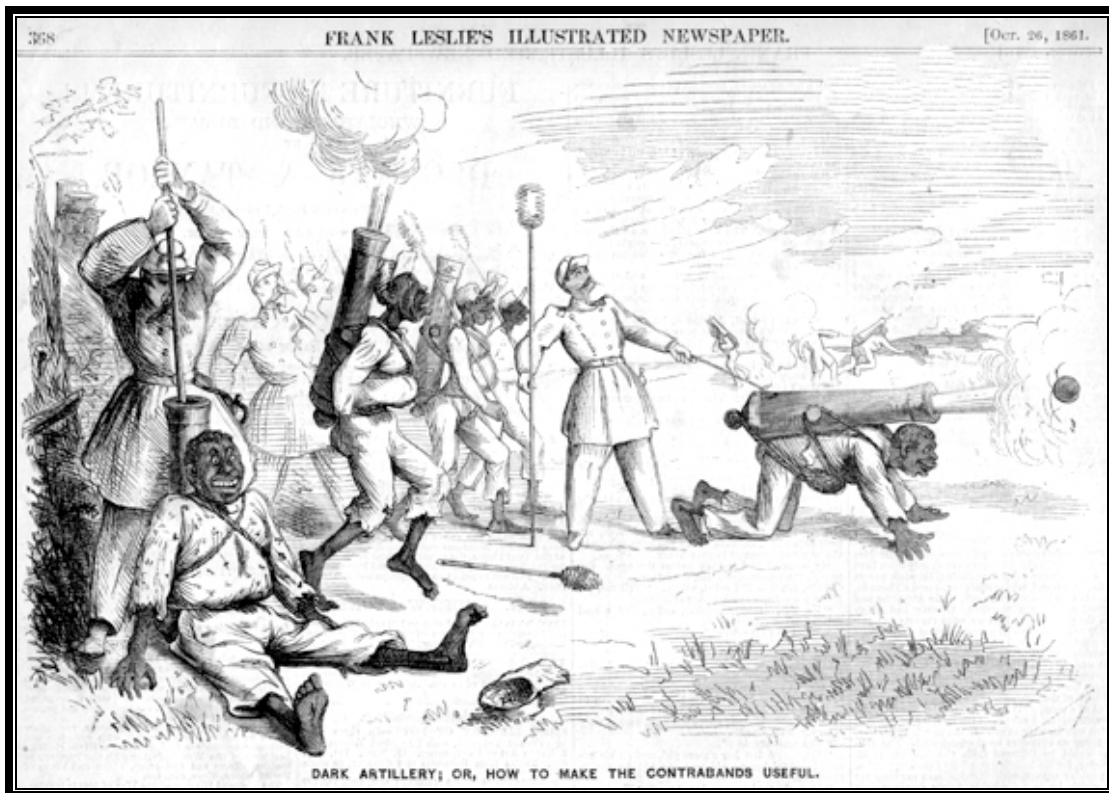
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<sup>71</sup> Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, 149 and 151 (her emphasis).

<sup>72</sup> Complicating this view, Venet notes that radical Republicans pursued universal male suffrage “for both humanitarian and tactical reasons. They needed the votes of Southern blacks to ensure their dominance in the South and their national political hegemony” (*Neither Ballots nor Bullets*, 151).

<sup>73</sup> William Fletcher Thompson, Jr., “Pictorial Images of the Negro During the Civil War,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 48, no. 4 (Summer 1965): 282-94, at 285-88.

<sup>74</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Emancipation Proclamation,” 1863, available at American Treasures of the Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trt026.html> (accessed 28 March 2009).



**Figure 26.**

“Dark Artillery; or, How to Make the Contrabands Useful.”

*Frank Leslie's Illustrated*, October 26, 1861, n.p.

Courtesy of the New-York Historical Society.

before citizenship and helped to set the terms for it. Black men risked their lives for the Union long before the Thirteenth amendment, and the claim that they had bought their rights with their blood suffused constitutional debate and also the discourse of Reconstruction.<sup>75</sup>

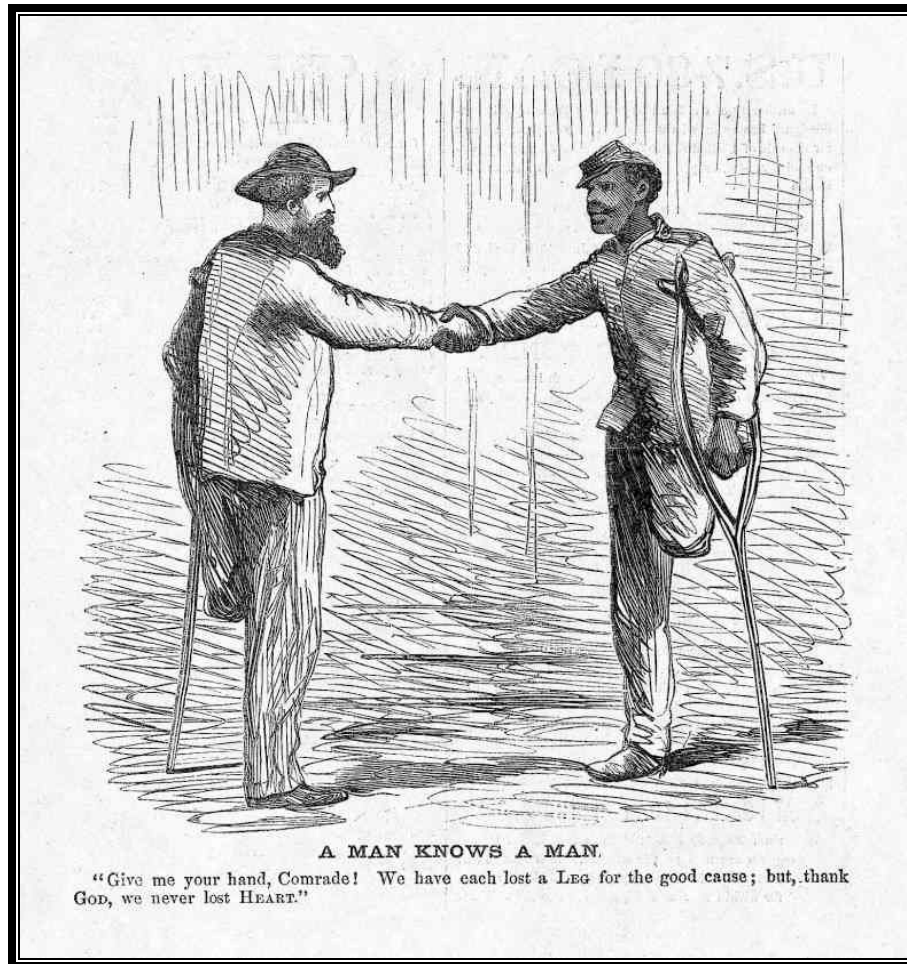
The Confederate and Union armies both employed African American soldiers. Freeborn blacks and former bondsmen were enlisted in the Union's effort to suppress the South; slaves and fugitive slaves were also invited to serve, even though their freedom was not uniformly guaranteed. The Confederacy, on the other hand, made no promises of freedom in exchange for their service.

As the conflict continued, sympathetic depictions of African Americans appeared with more frequency. Although they comprise a relatively small subset of popular iconography, these images offered a stark contrast to the politically ambiguous, comic illustrations of slaves that tended to dominate U.S. visual and performance culture. According to Thompson, "Sketch artists showed how slaves helped the army by bringing in information, by caring for exhausted and wounded soldiers, and by sheltering and feeding soldiers who had escaped from southern prisons—an Underground Railroad for white men."<sup>76</sup> Images of black soldiers, uniformed and bearing arms, underscored the sacrifices made by men of color, even though they were less common than those of white men laboring on the battlefield. **(Figure 27.)** For example, a lithograph depicting Martin R. Delany, the first African American awarded the rank of major, mimics the pose and posture of famous white officers that also appeared in popular prints, such as George B. McClellan and Ephraim Elmer Ellsworth. Delany's portrait may be cited as an

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<sup>75</sup> Kerber, *No Constitutional Right*, 243.

<sup>76</sup> Thompson, *Image of War*, 172. See also Le Beau, *Currier & Ives*, 222.



**Figure 27.**

"A Man Knows a Man," *Harper's Weekly*, April 22, 1865.  
Caption reads, "Give me your hand, Comrade! We have each lost a Leg for the good cause; but, thank God, we never lost Heart."

Courtesy of the New-York Historical Society.

example of how, in Cullen's words, "the Civil War did indeed mark a watershed for black manhood."<sup>77</sup> In short, these images reflect a subtle shift (if not a total transformation) of white perceptions of black men, even though relations between the two races remained troubled after the war and true parity remains elusive to this day.

Pamphlets, speeches, and other commentary demonstrate how the soldier-citizen haunted the debate over black male versus female suffrage.<sup>78</sup> Military service is a theme in Parker Pillsbury's speech before the AERA in New York on May 9, 1867, which was later published as a pamphlet titled *The Mortality of Nations*. He implores,

Must a brave soldier fight and bleed for the government, and, pruned of limbs, plucked of eyes, and scarred all over with the lead and iron hail of war—must he now hobble on his crutches up to a Republican, Democratic, yea, and a Christian throne, and beg the boon of the ballot in that government, in defense of which he periled all, and lost all but bare life and breath, only because an African instead of a more indulgent man looked upon him or his ancestors in their allotment of life?<sup>79</sup>

Throughout the address, he insists that active participation in government is a God-given right, as opposed to a "gift" doled out by privileged white men. Keenly aware that the

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<sup>77</sup> *Major Martin R. Delany U.S.A.: Promoted on the Battle Field for Bravery*, lithograph by John Smith (Philadelphia), ca. 1865, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC (reproduced in Neely and Holzer, *The Union Image*, 233); Cullen, "I's a Man Now,"<sup>77</sup> See also LeeAnn Whites, "The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender," in *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3-21.

<sup>78</sup> Marilley, *Woman Suffrage*, 66-71.

<sup>79</sup> Parker Pillsbury, *The Mortality of Nations: An Address Delivered before the American Equal Rights Association, in New York, Thursday Evening, May 9, 1867* (New York: Robert J. Johnson, 1867), 10-11.

military argument excluded women from enfranchisement, Pillsbury insists, “The right of the black man to a voice in the government was not earned at OluStee or Port Hudson. It was his when life began, not when life was paid for it under the battle-axe of war.”<sup>80</sup> In this way, Pillsbury cites black men’s service on the field as evidence of their worthiness while also insisting that women are entitled to the vote as well.

In his remarks supporting women’s suffrage at the Constitutional Convention of New York on July 19, 1867 (published by the AERA as a pamphlet titled *Equal Rights for Women*), George William Curtis seems to invoke popular images of both the soldier’s farewell and his dream of home: “Those homes were both the inspiration and the consolation of the field. They nerved the arm that struck for them. When the son and the husband fell in the wild storm of battle, the brave woman-heart broke in silence, but their busy fingers did not falter. . . . There are thousands and thousands of these women who ask for a voice in the government they have so defended. Shall we refuse them?”<sup>81</sup> Curtis invokes these sentimental visions to assert that women’s war-work was no less worthy than men’s, because ladies, in their way, supported the effort as well.

More evidence of the pressure exerted by the soldier-citizen ideal can be found in Stanton, Anthony, and Gage’s *History of Woman Suffrage*. Although the *History* was compiled and published more than a decade after the Reconstruction amendments, it reveals that many of the discursive tropes of the late sixties continued to resonate years later. For example, the opening chapter of the *History*’s second volume (covering 1861 to 1876) chronicles “Woman’s Patriotism in the War,” which has less to do with the fight for equal rights than the burdens women had to bear during the conflict—burdens that

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>81</sup> George William Curtis, *Equal Rights for Women. A Speech by George William Curtis in the Constitutional Convention of New York at Albany, July 19, 1867* (New York: American Equal Rights Association, 1867), 22.

were, the authors assert, just as heavy as those borne by men. The American soldier haunts the narrative from the first page:

At this eventful hour the patriotism of woman shone forth as fervently and spontaneously as did that of man; and her self-sacrifice and devotion were displayed in as many varied fields of action. While he buckled on his knapsack and marched forth to conquer the enemy, she planned the campaigns which brought the nation victory; fought in the ranks when she could do so without detection; inspired the sanitary commission; gathered needed supplies for the grand army; provided nurses for the hospitals; comforted the sick; smoothed the pillows of the dying; inscribed the last messages of love to those far away; and marked the resting-places where brave men fell.<sup>82</sup>

The writers go on to discuss women who provided all kinds of service during the war, including those who ventured bravely onto the battlefield. In one lengthy footnote, no fewer than fifteen women soldiers are mentioned and briefly described, highlighting especially the physical injuries they suffered while fighting in disguise—suggesting that bodily wounds are the true test of a soldier’s mettle.<sup>83</sup> Alluding directly to the argument that African American men earned the vote on the battlefield, the authors assert, “When in the enfranchisement of the black man [women] saw another ignorant class of voters placed above their heads, . . . and demanded for the protection of themselves and

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<sup>82</sup> Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, eds., *History*, 2:1.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:19-20. Contemporary scholars have verified that hundreds of women fought in the Civil War, almost always in disguise. See, for example, Elizabeth D. Leonard, *All the Daring of the Soldier: Women of the Civil War Armies* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999); and DeAnne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook, *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002).

children, that woman's . . . opinions in public affairs be expressed by the ballot, they were coolly told that the black man had earned the right to vote, that he had fought and bled for his country!"<sup>84</sup>

I assert that the icon of the soldier-citizen and its role in suffrage discourse may have influenced spectators' readings of the train sequence *Under the Gaslight*. Given the prominence of military themes in the postwar suffrage debate, Snorkey's final line regarding women's suffrage—"and these are the women who ain't to have the vote"—seems all the more significant. Permanently disabled in the war, Snorkey physically embodies the sacrifices made by countless men who fought for the Union's stability. His missing arm (likely rendered with some awkwardness by the actor, who had to camouflage his intact arm while portraying the character) is a constant reminder of that sacrifice. But in Daly's railroad scene, it is the Civil War soldier who needs saving. Although he protected women and children during the war, it is a woman who rescues him now. Laura returns the favor and repays the debt by rising to the occasion in the face of crisis.

### **Laura and "The Axe! The Axe!": The Mythology of a Uniquely American Tool**

Thus far in my examination of the railroad rescue, I have discussed how ideas about women and soldier-citizens circulated in American culture prior to and during the run of *Under the Gaslight*. Drawing inspiration from Sofer's argument that stage props generate culturally specific meanings, in this final section I look closely at the object Laura uses to break free from the station shed: the axe. Ronald Jager asserts that nineteenth-century America was "a culture aware and fond of its love affair with the felling axe as a noble national weapon in what was callously seen as a saga of wilderness

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<sup>84</sup> Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, eds., *History*, 2:88.

conquest—a catalytic element, this, whose potency was imaginative and symbolic.”<sup>85</sup> I suggest that the mythology coalescing around the American axe during this period—a mythology that incorporated views about nationalism, imperialism, and gender—may have informed spectators’ readings of the heroine’s sensational exertions.

The single-bit balanced axe, which evolved from European models in the late-eighteenth century, eventually became known as the “American axe” in the U.S. and elsewhere. During the colonial period, the most commonly used tool for felling trees in America was the British axe: an implement with a short, straight handle that was positioned toward the blunt end of a thick blade. At some point, this model was enhanced by the addition of a longer, curved handle, which increased its momentum and therefore its efficiency. The handle also shifted toward the center of the blade, which made it more balanced and improved the accuracy of the logger’s swing. Finally, the thickness of the iron wedge was reduced, allowing for a deeper cut. Although it is unknown precisely when, where, and how these innovations occurred, the earliest archeological example of an American axe dates to the Revolutionary era.<sup>86</sup>

Forests dominated the landscape of colonial America and had to be cleared for farming. For this reason, the increased effectiveness of the new axe was not only a necessity, but also a source of national pride. According to Carroll Pursell, the improved tool “was distinctly American, a fact recognized with pride by [citizens] and admiration

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<sup>85</sup> Ronald Jager, “Tool and Symbol: The Success of the Double-Bitted Axe in North America,” *Technology and Culture* 40, no. 4 (1999): 833-60, at 858.

<sup>86</sup> Henry J. Kauffman, *American Axes: A Survey of Their Development and Their Makers* (Brattleboro, VT: Stephen Greene Press, 1972), 17-18; Gary Kulik, “American Difference Revisited: The Case of the American Axe,” in *American Material Culture: The Shape of the Field*, ed. Ann Smart Martin and J. Ritchie Garrison (Winterthur, DE: Winterthur Museum, 1997), 21-36, at 29 and 31; Charles A. Heavrin, *The Axe and Man: The History of Man’s Early Technology as Exemplified by His Axe* (Mendham, NJ: Astragal Press, 1998), 110; David E. Nye, *America as Second Creation: Technology and Narratives of New Beginnings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 44.

by visitors.” The naming of the “American axe” was the first step toward claiming it as a national treasure. This sense of ownership eventually manifested in the practice of naming axe patterns after specific regions: examples include the Yankee, the Connecticut, the Wisconsin, and many more. Because, in the words of Gary Kulik, “substantial numbers of ordinary Americans as well as European travelers writing in the early nineteenth century believed that America was different and that difference was important,” the axe served as a sign of national ingenuity, creativity, and fortitude.<sup>87</sup>

Newspapers indicate that the American axe played a role in nativist discourse during the mid-nineteenth century. In 1851, a writer in *The Cultivator* of Albany proclaimed, “It is a maxim that ‘necessity is the parent of invention;’ and the great use required of the ax in this country, may have been the chief cause of its improvement; at any rate we believe it may be said that the ‘American ax’ has reached a perfection unknown in the old world.” Similarly, a *Vanity Fair* article ten years later shows how the British and American axes competed for dominance in the Western imagination. Responding to a claim in the London *Times* that the British axe was better, *Vanity Fair* sardonically stated,

Many of our readers, probably, have never seen a British axe. . . .  
It takes two men so long to cut down a tree with one of these tools, that the birds are quite sarcastic about it. A crow has been known to build her nest in a tree after the first blow of the hatchet had fallen upon it; do up her incubation, hatch and educate her family, and soar jubilant away with them just as the tree began to fall. . . We defy the *Times* to have a Crow over the American axe.

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<sup>87</sup> Carroll W. Pursell, *The Machine in America: A Social History of Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 14; Kulik, “American Difference Revisited,” 22.

If the *Times* tries that little game, we shall only say that It, like the British axe, is a clumsy tool in the hands of a heavy party, unaccustomed to making clear tracks through a wood.

In 1862, the *New England Farmer* in Boston also underscored the importance of the American axe as a sign of Western progress: “To the American *axe* there is nothing superior, and we may regard it as the emblem of the civilization of the western hemisphere.” Jager notes that Europe increasingly adopted the American axe in its forestry operations, implicitly acknowledging the superiority of the U.S. version over the Continental original.<sup>88</sup>

Unlike patriotic commentary in newspapers and other publications, nineteenth-century visual art depicts the tool more ambivalently. Barbara Novak asserts that the axe is a paradoxical symbol in American painting: “National identity is constructed and threatened by the double-edged symbol of progress, the axe that destroys and builds, builds and destroys.”<sup>89</sup> The over-mantel painting of the Lazarus Hathaway House in Paris Hill, Maine (ca. 1805), depicts deforestation positively, showing several men felling trees and turning forest into useable land. Their tools exhibit the innovative characteristics of the American axe outlined above. According to Gary Kulik, “there is no ambivalence [in the painting]. This is a forceful and prideful image, representing an act played out daily as forests gave way in the new nation.”<sup>90</sup> But later artworks, most notably the landscapes

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<sup>88</sup> “Progress of Agriculture,” *The Cultivator* (Albany, NY), January 1851, 33; “Raising the Hatchet,” *Vanity Fair*, 20 April 1861, 185; D. W. Lothrop, “Legislative Agricultural Society,” *New England Farmer*, May 1862, 211-12, at 211 (original emphasis); Jager, “Tool and Symbol,” 851.

<sup>89</sup> Barbara Novak, “The Double-Edged Axe,” *Art in America* 64, no. 1 (1976): 44-50, at 46.

<sup>90</sup> Unknown artist, *The Clearing of Paris* (ca. 1805), Hamlin Memorial Library and Museum, Paris Hill, ME; Kulik, “American Difference Revisited,” 26.

of Thomas Cole, are more troubled by what a man can do with his axe. Novak discusses how the tree stump, in particular, symbolizes the tool's destructive power. In Cole's *River in the Catskills* (1843), the axe and the railroad train combine in an unsettling image that Alan Wallach describes as "antipastoral"; Tony Tanner asserts that Cole seems to suggest that the logger must "deface and then destroy" the land. A man holding an axe stands in the foreground of the painting, surrounded by severed tree branches. His back is to the viewer as he watches a train in the distance, as if he is looking toward an industrialized future his axe is helping to make possible. Nevertheless, the tension between nature and industrialization in the painting is subtle; as Wallach points out, the art market probably would not have tolerated an activist statement against railroads and human progress at this time.<sup>91</sup>

In addition to conveying narratives of nativism and progress, the American axe had strong gender associations. Describing James Fenimore Cooper's depiction of the axe in his novel *The Prairie* (1827), Tanner observes that the axe's penetration of the tree is "a rape; . . . America [is] an endlessly brutalized female body waiting for the proper relationship . . . The signs of the axe are signs of desecration and violation." Moreover, the material qualities of the American axe demanded a man's strength, because the shape of the blade made it heavier than its European counterpart. In comparison to the practice of girdling, clearing a forest with an axe required significant effort and toil. In the 1880s, when steel production improved, the lower cost permitted axe-makers to craft the whole

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<sup>91</sup> Thomas Cole, *River in the Catskills* (1843), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, available at [http://www.mfa.org/collections/search\\_art.asp?coll\\_accession=47.1201](http://www.mfa.org/collections/search_art.asp?coll_accession=47.1201) (accessed 21 March 2009); Alan Wallach, "Thomas Cole's *River in the Catskills* as Antipastoral," *Art Bulletin* 84, no. 2 (2002): 334-50, at 341-42; Tony Tanner, *Scenes of Nature, Signs of Men* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 7-8.

blade of steel, making the tool lighter and easier to handle. But until that time, axes were relatively heavy and unwieldy—another reason why they were considered a man’s tool.<sup>92</sup>

The emergence of the professional logger during the mid-nineteenth century served to masculinize the American axe even further. As the country’s borders stretched across the continent, professional axemen made careers out of forest-clearing.<sup>93</sup> The grueling logger was eventually mythologized in the figure of Paul Bunyan, an icon of rugged masculinity. As Kulik writes, “If later folklore surrounding Paul Bunyan tells us anything, American farmers, and later lumbermen, came to revel in that toil and especially in their strength and skill with an axe as they cleared prodigious, even mythic, amounts of land.”<sup>94</sup> Indeed, Bunyan is the American axe personified: efficient, nativist, pioneering, and manly as he penetrates and disciplines the virgin forests of an uncharted continent.

At the dawn of the Civil War, the axe became strongly associated with another man who quickly became an icon: Abraham Lincoln. During his 1860 presidential campaign, Lincoln was often called “The Rail-Splitter”—a nickname that referred directly to his early experiences splitting wood, particularly fence rails, with his axe. According to Gary L. Bunker, the appellation invoked several nativist themes, including the rugged American frontier and the rigorous work ethic of the self-made man.<sup>95</sup> Born to an agrarian family in Kentucky, Lincoln “had an axe put into his hands at once, and from

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<sup>92</sup> Tanner, *Scenes of Nature*, 9; Heavrin, *The Axe and Man*, 110 and 120.

<sup>93</sup> Jager, “Tool and Symbol,” 852.

<sup>94</sup> Kulik, “American Difference Revisited,” 33-35.

<sup>95</sup> Gary L. Bunker, *From Rail-Splitter to Icon: Lincoln’s Image in Illustrated Periodicals, 1860-1865* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2001), 16.

that time within his twenty-third year, he was almost constantly handling that most useful instrument,” according to his campaign autobiography.<sup>96</sup>

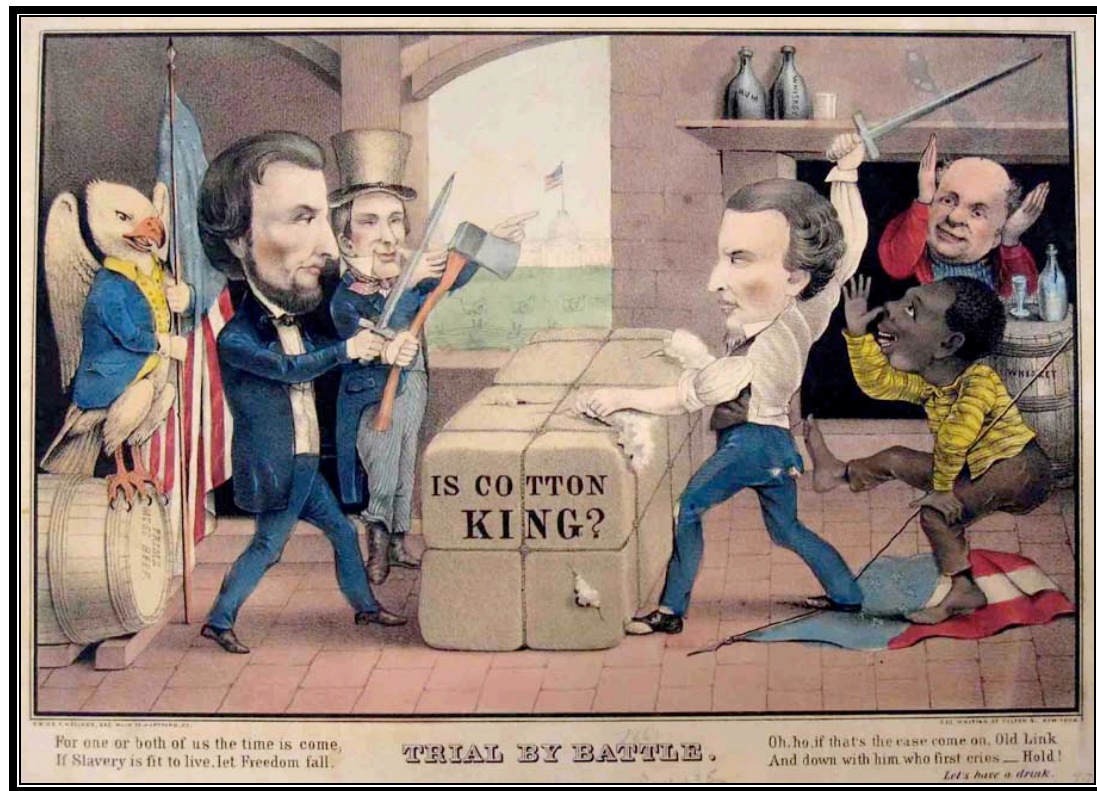
Axes and fence rails appeared in lithographs, illustrations, and cartoons featuring Lincoln, which sustained and strengthened the connection between America’s axe and America’s top executive. A colored lithograph titled *Trial By Battle*, published by E. B. & E. C. Kellogg in Connecticut around 1861, is one example. **(Figure 28.)** In this image, President Lincoln faces off with Jefferson Davis, the president the Confederacy. An American axe—easily identifiable due to its curved poll—is in Lincoln’s left hand, and in the other he holds a sword. Davis’s weapons are a sword and a handful of cotton. According to Harold Holzer, who briefly discusses *Trial By Battle* in his study of Lincoln and visual culture, the printmaker armed Lincoln “with one of the symbolic props that had been employed in earlier campaign prints to help introduce him to the public: the tools of the railsplitter who had risen inspiringly from frontier obscurity to national fame.”<sup>97</sup> Given the tool’s nationalist associations, I would argue that its appearance in *Trial By Battle* underscores Lincoln as the nation’s true leader: he who wields the axe is the true president.

Admirers and supporters celebrated the “The Rail-Splitter” by way of material culture as well; axes he wielded and rails he split were treated reverently during his life and fetishized after his assassination. For example, D. W. Bartlett, in his 1860 biography *Life and Public Services of Hon. Abraham Lincoln*, relates a story from a Chicago journal in which fence rails hewn by Lincoln were transformed into spectacle. At the 1860

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<sup>96</sup> D. W. Bartlett, *Life and Public Services of Hon. Abraham Lincoln* (New York: H. Dayton, 1860), 17. These are Lincoln’s own words—they are part of an autobiography he wrote during his presidential campaign. See Don E. Fehrenbacher, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865* (New York: Library of America, 1989), 160-67.

<sup>97</sup> Harold Holzer, *Lincoln Seen and Heard* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2000), 75.



**Figure 28.**  
*Trial By Battle*, E. B. & E. C. Kellogg, ca. 1861 or 1862.  
Collection of the American Antiquarian Society.

Illinois State Republican Convention, a man from Macon County (where the young Lincoln once spent a season splitting rails) paraded through the hall carrying two fence rails adorned with patriotic decoration and a placard proclaiming, “Abraham Lincoln, The Rail Candidate for President in 1860. Two rails from a lot of 3,000 made in 1830, by Thos. Hanks and Abe Lincoln—whose father was the first pioneer of Macon County.” Apparently, “The effect was electrical. . . . The cheers upon cheers which rent the air could have been heard all over the adjacent country.”<sup>98</sup>

In addition, the last axe Lincoln ever wielded in public was saved for future generations to contemplate and admire. A week before his assassination, the president spent the day shaking hands with 5,000 Civil War veterans who were recovering from injuries at a field hospital in City Point, Virginia. Responding to a suggestion by a member of the crowd, he demonstrated his stamina by picking up an axe and chopping wood for several minutes. He also used the axe to perform a feat of strength: holding it by the handle, he raised it slowly until it reached a right angle to his body. Through this performance, Lincoln transformed the tool into a celebrated relic. Upon its rediscovery in the archives of the Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in early 2008, Thomas Schwartz, Illinois’s State Historian, compared its importance to that of Lincoln’s top hat—another iconic object housed in the library’s collection.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Bartlett, *Life and Public Services*, 109. For more about how axes and rails figured in Lincoln’s first presidential campaign, particularly in illustrated periodicals, see Bunker, *From Rail-Splitter to Icon*, 31-66.

<sup>99</sup> Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, “A Presidential Discovery: Presidential Library Discovers Original Axe Lincoln Used to ‘Show Off’ for Wounded Soldiers a Week before His Assassination,” news release, 16 February 2008. According to this news release, the axe was long thought to be one of the “numerous ‘Lincoln axes’ that have turned up through the years . . . [with] no proof . . . that Lincoln actually held and used them” (2); but documents recently discovered in the library’s archives suggest that the tool is, indeed, the one used by Lincoln in Virginia on 8 April 1865.

In short, by the time *Under the Gaslight* premiered in 1867, the axe was not merely a utilitarian tool, but a symbol of nationalist sentiment and masculinity. These connotations—embodied most spectacularly by Lincoln himself—help to explain why the signalman in *Gaslight* laughs aloud at the thought of Laura’s stealing an axe from the shed. When he informs Laura that she’s missed the last train of the day, he agrees to lock her in the station shed overnight, but apologizes that he must crowd her in with several packages that were dropped off by the last train. Loading them into the shed, he inventories the packages one by one: “hoes, shovels, mowing machines, and what is this—axes. Yes, a bundle of axes. If the Superintendent finds me out, I’ll ask him if he was afraid you’d run off with these. (*Laughs.*)” (41). The signalman’s joke suggests that Americans considered the idea of a woman using an axe to be ridiculous.

Therefore, Laura’s use of an axe may have been as sensational, in its own way, as the rushing locomotive. When Laura hears the train coming and calls to Snorkey from the locked shed, he yells back, “Is there nothing in there?—no hammer?—no crowbar?” The script indicates that Laura experiences momentary paralysis before exclaiming, “The axe!!!” The destructive American axe contrasts markedly with the hammer or crowbar that Snorkey requests. “Cut the woodwork!” he cries, and the audience hears Laura’s physical exertion as she makes a spectacular racket with the axe. Playing the hero’s part, Laura “mutilates” the door. Snorkey’s cries of “Courage!” which culminate in the exultant statement “That’s a true woman!” reflect his faith in the heroine’s ability to destroy the door and save him from imminent death (43)—even though Laura’s employment of this masculine tool is “out of place,” bucking traditional ideas regarding the separation of spheres at a time when suffrage was on the public mind.

I acknowledge that my interpretation of the importance of the axe may seem extreme; however, the response of the original audiences who watched the heroine search frantically for the axe and then use it to free herself and Snorkey suggests that mid-

nineteenth-century spectators were attuned to nuances of political and cultural symbols that might elude contemporary scholars. Anecdotes about performances of *Gaslight* can help to illuminate this aspect of the scene. Jacky Bratton asserts that anecdotes “have not often been read for what their writers or their subjects seem to stress,” but suggests that they are “important as a control of social resources through the making of myth and legend.”<sup>100</sup> In other words, individual accounts of an event are valuable not only for their content, but also for the mythic, even flamboyant, qualities perpetuated by the act of storytelling. Autobiography is historiography—an exercise in selective memory. Errors, omissions, and hyperbole are inevitable byproducts of the process. But the selections ultimately incorporated into a narrative, by virtue of *being* selections, tend to be noteworthy. In essence, they are spectacular instants burned into memory.

Three anecdotes regarding spectators’ reactions suggest that audience members had the axe firmly in mind when Laura used it to rescue the soldier-in-distress. They also underscore the rowdy character of nineteenth-century theatregoing generally as well as melodrama’s tendency to invite participation. Granted, these stories constitute only a handful of perspectives, and therefore may not be representative of the diverse reactions to *Gaslight*. However, when viewed together, the anecdotes’ similarities verge on the mythical. As such, I propose that they provide important evidence regarding the significance of the axe in performance.

The first story belongs to Eyttinge, the original Laura. In her autobiography, she dedicates a mere two pages to *Under the Gaslight*, despite the popularity of the drama. She admits that her recollection of the play is hazy at best. But for a variety of reasons, she vividly remembers the axe.

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<sup>100</sup> Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History*, 95 and 103.

I confess I do not remember the story [of the play]. I only remember that the situation of the piece is where I break down a door with an axe which I opportunely find, and rescue somebody who is lashed down on a railroad track, and that this “business” was preceded by my frantic exclamation, “The axe, the axe!” This exclamation became a sort of catchword, and [A. H.] Davenport [originator of the Ray Trafford role], who was an incorrigible guyer, used to serve it up to me on all possible and impossible occasions, with the result that there was a great deal too much giggling and guying during the performance.<sup>101</sup>

Unfortunately, it is unclear here whether “The axe, the axe!” was a catchword of the cast or if spectators also picked it up.

Searching for newspaper commentary about the premiere of *Gaslight* in San Francisco at the Metropolitan Theatre—a production featuring Charles Wheatleigh as Snorkey—I came across another intriguing reference to the axe:

“Under the Gaslight” drew another crowded house last night, and the audience were [*sic*] as much impressed with the sensation in the fourth act as on its first production; true, there was no *suggestion from the gallery* to aid Laura Courtland to burst open the door by *telling her of the axe*, but there was many a fair lady

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<sup>101</sup> Eytinge, *Memories of Rose Eytinge*, 116. It is interesting to note that Eytinge describes the railroad sequence here as a “situation” rather than a “sensation scene,” even though her autobiography was published long after the latter phrase entered general usage in the 1860s. This provides further evidence that the concept of the “situation” resembles the later coinage “sensation scene,” as I argued in my first chapter.

in the dress-circle who felt like hurrying up the release of the one-armed hero before the train could run over him.<sup>102</sup>

The critic observes that some hustling-and-bustling occurred among the dress circle's middle-class female spectators, who supposedly were so moved by the sensations of the railroad scene that they seemed eager to step in and play the heroine's part. But in the process, the reporter also notes the *absence* of a response that happened during a previous performance: rowdy theatregoers in the gallery telling Laura of the axe. On that occasion, Daly's careful dramaturgy inspired them to call out helpfully to the heroine, "The axe! The axe!" as Eytinge remembered, perhaps because the signalman had pointed out the axes while locking Laura into the shed. When the helpless Snorkey cries out to the heroine, "Is there nothing in there?—no hammer?—no crowbar?" the spectators knew to "suggest" the axe. Indeed, Laura's next line in Daly's script seems to anticipate this response from the audience: after a moment of paralysis, she, too, cries out, "The axe!!!"—in acknowledgement or even in reply.

Possibly, this chant became part of the ritual of the scene. If so, it exemplifies the fluid exchange between stage and auditorium in nineteenth-century theatre culture.<sup>103</sup> But I admit I might never have noticed this passing reference in the *Daily Alta California* had it not been for an anecdote that Marvin Carlson once shared about his experience playing Snorkey in a 1957 production of *Under the Gaslight* at the University of Kansas. He reports that during some performances, the audience shouted "The axe! The axe!" during the same moment. In other words, they echoed the enthusiastic chant of the play's original spectators, even though they were separated from them by nearly a century.

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<sup>102</sup> "Amusements, Etc.," review of *Under the Gaslight*, by Augustin Daly, Metropolitan Theatre, San Francisco, *Daily Alta California*, 27 November 1867, 1 (my emphasis).

<sup>103</sup> Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 178-92.

Admittedly, the vocal response of this twentieth-century audience was somewhat different, in that it likely exhibited a cheerful irony. Even so, it is possible that the spectators were inspired by Daly's careful dramaturgy or the scene's poetics of endangerment. Whatever the explanation, these anecdotes by Eytinge, the *Alta* reporter, and Carlson indicate that Laura's use of an American axe was sometimes highlighted by the energetic responses of spectators themselves.

### **Dénouement: The Railroad Rescue Revised and Reprised**

As anxieties over the rights and privileges of U.S. citizenship increased during the postbellum years, Stanton and her fellow activists decried the injustice of granting suffrage to all men while denying it to white, tax-paying, native-born women. Meanwhile, the icon of the soldier-citizen, popularized during the war in a wide variety of illustrated media, haunted discourse about the suffrage question by implicitly justifying black men's right to vote while excluding women who could not "earn" it through military service. And yet, J. K. Mortimer materialized the specter of the Civil War soldier in *Under the Gaslight* every night only to be rescued, paradoxically, by a woman. Therefore, when Snorkey conveyed his amazement that women like Laura "ain't to have the vote" at a time when African American men were about to gain that right, audiences witnessing the heroine's courageous actions may very well have perceived an activist statement. By picking up the American axe, the heroine in *Gaslight* embodied the steadfastness, self-reliance and independence of an alternative definition of true womanhood offered by suffragists. The professional role reversal in the railroad sequence was compounded through Laura's use of the tool, which by 1867 had amassed considerable socio-cultural meaning—weighed down not only by its history as a nativist and masculine object, but also by its strong association with President Lincoln. Three decades later, temperance advocate Carry A. Nation would also wield an axe in her

famous “hatchetations”—utilizing, consciously or unconsciously, this iconic object for her own activist spectacles.<sup>104</sup>

Although contemporary scholars may never be able to determine whether Daly’s sensation scene communicated a particular political position, it does seem fully reflective of its historical moment: a time of conflict, confusion, mixed messages, and mixed feelings regarding race, gender, and citizenship in the wake of a devastating war. However, the reappearance of the railroad sequence in other melodramas and media indicates that it was effective (and affective) enough to repeat. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, the ubiquity of the spectacular instant during the mid-nineteenth century, especially in the context of reform, signals the appeal of spectacle during an era when greater discipline and normality were also actively sought.

But sensation’s role in the shaping of American culture seems all the more evident in light of spectacular instants that were revised or reprised in other times and contexts. Arguably, the railroad rescue is the most vivid example of this phenomenon. Today, the division of labor in the original railroad sequence tends to surprise a contemporary reader encountering Daly’s play for the first time. This is because the vision of a *woman* tied to the train tracks, saved by the hero, circulates in the collective imagination—operating as a kind of visual shorthand for the melodramatic genre itself.

It is a spectacle inviting curiosity and contempt if there ever was one. And interestingly, like Jean Baudrillard’s simulacrum, it has no clearly identifiable progenitor; it is hyperreal, “generat[ed] by models of a real without origin or originality.”<sup>105</sup>

Although Boucicault’s imitation of the scene in *After Dark* (1868) transformed Daly’s

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<sup>104</sup> For more on Nation, see Fran Grace, *Carry A. Nation: Retelling the Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). Nation was widely criticized for her “unwomanly” behavior, which she exhibited most sensationally during her hatchetations.

<sup>105</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1.

heroine into a hero, the victim on the tracks was still a man; and the presiding judge in *Daly v. Palmer* identified sufficient similarities between the two scenes that he decided the case in Daly's favor.<sup>106</sup> In other words, as Nan Enstad argues, the image of the heroine tied to the tracks constitutes a "flamboyant display of historical forgetfulness," especially since early twentieth-century film serials, such as *What Happened to Mary* (1912-13), *The Perils of Pauline* (1914), and *The Hazards of Helen* (1914-17), featured female protagonists who were often placed in dangerous situations but rarely needed a rescuer, male or otherwise.<sup>107</sup>

Thus far in my research, I have been unable to document an instance of the gender-reversed version on stage or in film prior to its enactment by Dudley Do-Right and Nell Fenwick in *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show* (1959-64) and its offshoot, *The Dudley Do-Right Show* (1969-70)—animated cartoons that self-consciously parody melodrama. But a parody cannot exist without a source text, and its success hinges on the audience's recognition and knowledge of that source. In other words, the spectacular instant reprised by Dudley and Nell derives its humor from an antecedent, albeit a simulacrum extant only in the public imaginary.

Although I cannot identify the precise moment when the gender politics of Daly's scene were "corrected," the simulacrum's persistent presence seems to reveal the potency of the original. If this hyperreal woman who struggles and awaits rescue is, in Baudrillardian terms, "no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody" but rather "a question of substituting signs of the real for the real," then—like

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<sup>106</sup> For more discussion about Boucicault's version, especially its presentation in England, see Nicholas Daly, *Literature, Technology, and Modernity, 1860-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 10-33.

<sup>107</sup> Nan Enstad, "Dressed for Adventure: Working Women and Silent Movie Serials in the 1910s," *Feminist Studies* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 67-90, at 83 and 90 n. 44.

Bratton's notion of the distorted-yet-true anecdote—her performative reiteration is both powerful and significant.<sup>108</sup> She may have no material referent in the archive, but nevertheless, her slippery endurance reveals the radical politics of the original. Rebecca Schneider has discussed how the etymological root of the word “archive” comes from the Greek term referring to the residence, or *architecture*, of the magistrate. She suggests that by considering immaterial evidence (or “residues”) of performance, historians can “articulate the ways in which performance, less bound to the ocular, ‘enters’ or begins again and again, as Gertrude Stein would write, differently, via itself as repetition—like a copy or perhaps more like a ritual—as an echo in the ears of a confidante, an audience member, a *witness*.”<sup>109</sup> I suspect that the image of the woman tied to the tracks is an intangible residue of the premier spectacular instant.

Although the damsel-in-distress exists now as the semiotic super-sign of melodrama, she did have an original in Laura. And yet Laura has been dramatically repressed and upended, transformed from extraordinary savior to typical victim. As such, the simulacrum inspires for me more questions than conclusions. Is she a hyperreal antidote to the empowered heroines of turn-of-the-century melodramas and films, examined at some length by Ben Singer in *Melodrama and Modernity?* Was Laura troubling, culturally speaking, because she was *not* overtly aberrant, performing her role in a dress rather than trousers? Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix asserts in *Wearing the Breeches: Gender on the Antebellum Stage*, “Representative cross-dressed theatrical women implied through their performance that power was not an essentially male privilege, and that

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<sup>108</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 2.

<sup>109</sup> Rebecca Schneider, “Performance Remains,” *Performance Research* 6, no. 2 (2001): 100-08, at 102 and 106 (her emphasis).

gender was as artificial as the painted backdrop behind them.”<sup>110</sup> And yet, the actress in drag is still a fiction, a stunt; Laura is a woman drawn from life, infused with Daly’s signature realism: possible/plausible/probable. Is this why she had to be tied to the tracks, over the course of time and history? Is this why she had to take Snorkey’s place?

As much as I would like to offer answers to these questions, provisional or otherwise, I will conclude instead by offering an anecdote of my own that, I think, underscores the enduring significance of Daly’s railroad scene and its components within U.S. popular culture. While I was researching the history of the American axe, I happened across a televised rerun of James Cameron’s cinematic melodrama *Titanic*, a film that broke worldwide box office records upon its release in 1997. At a crucial moment, the heroine Rose (portrayed by Kate Winslet) abandons her spot in a lifeboat in order to search out her hero and love interest, Jack (played by Leonardo DiCaprio), who has been handcuffed to a pipe in the bowels of the ship. Desperate to free him, Rose runs for help, but every man she encounters turns out to be a selfish coward fleeing the rising water. Then suddenly, she sees—what else?—an axe. Despite her lack of strength and skill, she destroys Jack’s handcuffs with one perfectly placed blow. Since this contemporary film, like *Under the Gaslight*, is a story about the personal empowerment and liberation of a bourgeois woman, I suggest that this spectacular instant from a modern melodrama attests to the continuing power of the sensation scene in American culture.

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<sup>110</sup> Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 221-62; Mullenix, *Wearing the Breeches*, 90. Mullenix argues that women in breeches roles challenged conventional models of womanhood, especially during the early suffrage and dress-reform movements. Several other scholars have examined nineteenth-century actresses whose appeal and popularity centered on drag performances or “trouser roles” (e.g., Lydia Thompson, Charlotte Cushman, Adah Isaacs Menken); see, for example, Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*; Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman*; Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 131-206.

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