2014

Staged readings: sensationalism and class in popular American literature and theatre, 1835-1875

D'Alessandro, Michael

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/15103

Boston University
BOSTON UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Dissertation

STAGED READINGS: SENSATIONALISM AND CLASS IN POPULAR AMERICAN LITERATURE AND THEATRE, 1835-1875

by

MICHAEL D’ALESSANDRO
B.A., Hamilton College, 2002
M.F.A., Yale University, 2006

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2014
For Mom, Dad, and Carla
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I consider myself incredibly fortunate to have had a support system of teachers, scholars, librarians, and loved ones who enriched my project in so many ways. First and foremost, I want to thank my first reader, Laura Korobkin. Since we first met seven years ago, she has encouraged my work unfailingly and provided me with consistent reassurance. As my writing of the dissertation progressed, she challenged me to contextualize my work in greater depth and to take greater risks with my arguments. Even when she was on sabbatical overseas or honoring her many other commitments at BU, she always made time to talk and motivate me to pursue new argumentative angles. She represents a model of scholarship and professionalism to which I continue to aspire.

My second reader, Matt Smith, also has been with the project since its vaguest conception, and provided invaluable direction regarding how to navigate the often overwhelming archival materials at my disposal. He guided me to consider textual and historical elements that I overlooked and helped make my arguments infinitely more sophisticated. I am especially grateful to him for remaining so devoted to my project as he moved to different schools (and across the country) when he could have easily channeled his energies elsewhere.

Several other professors in Boston University’s English Department and American Studies Program offered me tremendously useful guidance along the way. Hunt Howell read early drafts and helped me not only to streamline my arguments but also to raise the cultural stakes of the project. He graciously provided feedback on any and all writing that I sent his way, and it’s difficult to imagine the last year without his
mentorship. Will Moore challenged me to consider several unacknowledged contexts as I finished the dissertation, and he has inspired me to research alternative cultures of nineteenth-century performance as I move the project forward. As chair of the dissertation committee, Nina Silber helpfully provoked me to ponder the greater historical ramifications at play in mid-nineteenth-century America. Marilyn Halter also has supported me since I enrolled at BU, and nominated me for crucial research grants that eventually aided my project. I’d be remiss if I didn’t finally mention Marc Robinson, my advisor from my days as a Yale School of Drama master’s student, who made me so interested in nineteenth-century American theatre and sparked my earliest ideas for the dissertation.

I am grateful to a series of libraries and institutions including the American Antiquarian Society, Princeton University’s Rare Books and Special Collections Department, the Library Company of Philadelphia, and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, all of which graciously provided me with research fellowships. Several academic directors, librarians, and members of the curatorial staffs deserve special mention. At AAS, Paul Erickson, Lauren Hewes, and Nan Wolverton all clued me into fruitful research leads during my time there. At the Library Company, Jim Green and Connie King likewise presented me with exciting materials and artifacts seemingly every day.

Finally, I must thank all of the family members and friends who provided me the love and encouragement that I needed to persist. My mother Loretta and my father David will never know just how much I appreciate their patience and devotion. I couldn’t have
accomplished this goal if it wasn’t for their consistent belief in me over the years. Drew and Robert are all that I could ask for in two brothers, and I am as proud of them in their endeavors as they are of me in mine. Last but certainly not least, I must thank my loving, beautiful wife Carla. She has been with me through every stage of this project and never failed to give me her unconditional support. She always let me bounce my ideas off of her, and her thoughts and comments made my arguments significantly richer. During the final stages, Carla made countless sacrifices to ensure that I finished on time, and she provided me with such love and empathy that I don’t know how I can possibly repay her. She is the inspiration for all of my work.
STAGED READINGS: SENSATIONALISM AND CLASS IN POPULAR AMERICAN LITERATURE AND THEATRE, 1835-1875

MICHAEL D’ALESSANDRO

Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2014

Major Professor: Laura Korobkin, Associate Professor of English

ABSTRACT

My dissertation is a historicist examination of the circulatory relationship among popular fiction, theatre, and related non-fiction texts in mid-nineteenth-century America. Though previous critics have acknowledged interactions between mid-century theatre and print, none have fully fleshed out the performative contexts or social consequences of this interplay. In contrast, I contend that the narrative and visual exchanges between theatre and literature are crucial to deciphering how different social classes formed and distinguished themselves. My central claim is that cultural arbiters from the print world (including activist authors and advice-text writers) and from the public amusement realm (entrepreneurial theatre producers and melodrama playwrights) poached each other’s work in order to capitalize on preexisting consumer communities. By cultivating socially homogenous audiences, these arbiters became vital contributors to the consolidation of self-conscious, class-based identities in nineteenth-century America.

Chapter One examines George Lippard’s urban-crime novel The Quaker City; or The Monks of Monk Hall (1844). In it, I argue that Lippard reproduces apocalyptic scenes of disaster familiar to readers from spectacle-centric theatrical melodramas in order to
unify a diverse working class. Chapter Two contends that W.H. Smith’s temperance melodrama *The Drunkard* (1844) co-opts the real-life speeches of working-class temperance lecturers and reframes them as a middle-class landlord’s story of redemption; through featuring this popular show at their curiosity museum theatres, proprietors Moses Kimball and P.T. Barnum established the nation’s first theatrical spaces solely for middle-class audiences. Chapter Three claims that the 1860s proliferation of home theatrical guidebooks—which detailed how to construct makeshift stages, simulate special effects, and adapt well-known stage dramas—offered the emergent middle classes a viable substitute for commercial theatergoing and a key outlet to reinforce their social status. My final chapter studies Louisa May Alcott’s sensation novella *Behind a Mask; or, A Woman’s Power* (1866), a work which engages the dissertation’s collective themes of theatricality, social class, and private space. By depicting a professional actress utilizing her theatrical skills to infiltrate an aristocratic family, Alcott presents the private estate as the ideal venue to gain social status and reveals performance as a critical means for upward mobility.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION ................................................................................................................................................ iv  

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ................................................................................................................................. v  

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................................................... viii  

TABLE OF CONTENTS ..................................................................................................................................... x  

LIST OF FIGURES .......................................................................................................................................... xii  

INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................................................. 1  

CHAPTER ONE: George Lippard’s “Theatre of Hell.” Apocalyptic Melodrama and Working-Class Spectatorship in the *Quaker City* .................................................................................................................. 29  

CHAPTER TWO: The *Drunkard*’s Legacy, or Washingtonian-Era Temperance Drama and the Making of Middle-Class Culture......................................................................................................................... 107  
  
  Section One: Washingtonianism and *The Drunkard* ............................................................................. 129  
  Section Two: Mapping Urban Space in *The Drunkard* ............................................................................. 150  
  Section Three: Temperance Drama and Print Culture ............................................................................ 191  

CHAPTER THREE: Social Stages: Importing Amusements, Recycling Reading and Performing Middle-Class Culture in Victorian America................................................................................................................. 217  
  
  Section One: Privatizing the Public Theatre ............................................................................................. 235  
  Section Two: Claiming a Middle-Class Literature ..................................................................................... 281  

CHAPTER FOUR: Estate Theatre and Class Invasion in Alcott’s *Behind a Mask* ...... 318
APPENDIX: Temperance Plays Produced in the United States (through 1851)........... 370

BIBLIOGRAPHY........................................................................................................... 373

CURRICULUM VITAE................................................................................................. 393
LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1.1 “Frontispiece wood engraving,” from George Lippard, *The Quaker City; or The Monks of Monk Hall* (1844-45) .................................................................................................................. 52

Fig. 1.2 Playbill, *Quaker City; or The Monks of Monk Hall* (1844) .................. 89

Fig. 1.3 Playbill, *Blanche of Brandywine* (1847) ............................................ 90

Fig. 1.4 Playbill, *The Naiad Queen; or the Mysteries of the Lurlei Berg* (1841) .... 92

Fig. 2.1 “The News-Boy In the Pit of the Chatham Theatre,” from *Rural Repository* (1846) .................................................................................................................. 119

Fig. 2.2 Exterior of Moses Kimball’s first Boston Museum, Corner of Tremont and Bromfield Streets (1841) ............................................................................................. 126

Fig. 2.3 Exterior of Kimball’s second Boston Museum, Corner of Tremont and School Streets (ca. 1856) ............................................................................................. 127

Fig. 2.4 Lobby of Kimball’s second Boston Museum, Corner of Tremont and School Streets (ca. 1856) ............................................................................................. 127

Fig. 2.5 Exterior of Barnum’s American Museum, New York, Corner of Broadway and Ann Street (1850) ............................................................................................. 128

Fig. 2.6 “The Lecture Room” of P.T. Barnum’s American Museum, New York, Corner of Broadway and Ann Street (1850) ............................................................................................. 128

Fig. 2.7 John B. Gough, in performance (ca. 1855) ........................................ 139

Fig. 2.8 A New York needlewoman, from George Foster, *New York in Slices* (1849) 166

Fig. 2.9 Playbill, *The Drunkard, or the Fallen Saved!* (1844) ....................... 171

Fig. 2.10 Map of Boston, 1842, marked with locations for Boston Museum production of *The Drunkard* in 1844 ............................................................................................. 175

Fig. 2.11 Map of Boston, 1842, marked with locations for Boston Museum production of *The Drunkard* in 1849 ............................................................................................. 175

Fig. 2.12 Map of New York City, 1849, marked with locations for Barnum’s American Museum production of *The Drunkard* in 1850 ............................................................................................. 176
Fig. 2.13 The front and back covers of the first published version of *The Drunkard* (1847) ................................................................. 203

Fig. 3.1 The home-made drop curtain, from George Arnold and Frank Cahill, *Parlor Theatricals; or, Winter Evening’s Entertainment* (1859) ................................. 248

Fig. 3.2 Advertisement for parlor theatrical scenery, sold by Samuel French (1899) ... 249

Fig. 3.3 Simulating a wind storm in the parlor theatre, from Leger Mayne, *What Shall We Do To-Night?* (1873) ........................................................................ 252

Fig. 3.4 “The Centaur,” from Leger Mayne, *What Shall We Do To-Night?* (1873) ..... 267

Fig. 3.5 “The Giraffe,” from Mayne, *What Shall We Do To-Night?* (1873) ........ 267

Fig. 3.6 “The Table Orator,” from Mayne, *What Shall We Do To-Night?* (1873) .... 272

Fig. 3.7 “How to Make a Giant” from Frank Bellew, *The Art of Amusing* (1866) .... 272

Fig. 3.8 Playbill, *Ruth Goshan: The Great Arabian Giant* (ca. 1862) ................. 273

Fig. 3.9 Playbill, *Dwarf! Exhibit* (1845) ..................................................... 273

Fig. 3.10 “Marriage of the Quaker Giant and Giantess. . . ,” from Anon. *Sights and Wonders in New York . . . Barnum’s Museum* (1849) .............................................. 273

Fig. 3.11 Plates I and VIII from George Cruikshank, *The Bottle* (1847) .............. 280

Fig. 3.12 Carnival of Authors festival, the Academy of Music and Horticultural Hall, Philadelphia, from *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* (1876) ......... 288

Fig. 3.13. Carnival of Authors Festival, Hartford, Connecticut, from *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* (1883) ................................. 288

Fig. 3.14 “Little Eva Reading the Bible to Uncle Tom in the Arbor,” from Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (1852) ............ 305

Fig. 3.15 “Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Berlin work pattern” (n.d.) ................................ 305

Fig. 4.1 Horace Vernet, “Judith and Holofernes” (1831) ....................................... 347

Fig. 4.2 “A Life’s Cross,” from *Frank Leslie’s Chimney Corner* (1867) ............ 355
Fig. 4.3  “The Red Ivy; or, Phillip the Fool,” from *Frank Leslie’s Chimney Corner* (1867) ......................................................................................................................... 355

Fig. 4.4  “Cagliostro’s Magic Mirror,” from Henry Dalton, *The Book of Drawing-Room Plays and Evening Amusements* (ca. 1860) ......................................................................................................................... 356
INTRODUCtion

In January of 1879, Louisa May Alcott stepped onto a platform at Boston’s Music Hall and delivered a theatrical performance that roused hundreds of spectators. Alcott’s friend, Maria S. Porter, persuaded the author to play the role of Mrs. Jarley from Charles Dickens’s novel *The Old Curiosity Shop* as part of a Carnival of Authors festival to benefit Boston’s Old South Church. The scene involved Jarley, the proprietor of a waxwork collection, introducing her different attractions to the audience. As Porter describes the performance, “It was a famous show—never to be forgotten. People came from all parts of New England to see Louisa Alcott’s Mrs. Jarley. . . . Shouts of delight and peals of laughter greeted her original and witty descriptions of the ‘figgers’ at each performance.”\(^1\) Alcott periodically acted in charity theatricals throughout her adult life, and Porter solicited Alcott’s performance of Dickens’s character specifically because “Her impersonation of Mrs. Jarley was inimitable.”\(^2\) Indeed, at this high-profile charity event, Alcott cemented her status as a preeminent amateur actress through her enactment of Dickens’s text. The performance became renowned locally, and it was unexpectedly repeated every night for a week.

Equally as important as the event’s popularity was its encapsulation of the complicated ways that theatre and literature interacted within nineteenth-century America. The Carnival of Authors festivals that had become so popular among the

middle class in the 1870s asked participants—mainly middle-class citizens well versed in popular leisure pursuits—to dress up and perform tableaux or short scenes as their favorite literary characters. By 1879, audiences flocked to see Alcott largely because she was the beloved author of *Little Women* (1869). At least part of the draw was seeing Alcott in person, whether she was appearing in character or not. However, Alcott’s chosen character of waxwork proprietor Mrs. Jarley remained a significant detail as well. The performance presupposed that audiences maintained a familiarity with popular literature, and it succeeded at least in part due to the spectators’ shared recognition of the comic character. The performance also reflected the contemporaneous parlor theatre practices that were influenced by literature. Home theatrical guidebooks of the 1860s and 70s often suggested scenes from the novels of Dickens and other popular writers for domestic parlor performance. George Bartlett, Alcott’s co-star from the Concord Dramatic Union amateur theatre company in the late 1850s, even published a home theatrical guide entitled *Mrs. Jarley’s Far-Famed Collection of Waxworks.* In the text, which bore many similarities to Alcott’s own adaptation of Dickens’s text, Jarley introduces her freakish wax figures including The Chinese Giant, The Curious Two-Headed Girl, and The Celebrated Welsh Dwarf. On the Music Hall stage in 1879, audiences would have recognized these figures not only from Dickens’s novel but also

---


4 Myerson and Shealy, *Journals,* 335. Extracts from her adaptations are available at Harvard University’s Houghton Library.
from the stage boards of mid-century curiosity museums like Moses Kimball’s Boston
Museum and P.T. Barnum’s American Museum. Alcott’s performance as Mrs. Jarley
reveals the open channels between the worlds of American theatre and literature during
this period. Though frequently not as complex as Alcott’s performance, the many
narrative exchanges between playwrights and novelists, between theatre managers and
print publishers, pervade the history of mid-nineteenth-century popular culture.

At its center, this dissertation examines how the intersections between popular
American theatre and literature affected social class formation from 1835 to 1875. Reading
playbills, advertising broadsides, home theatrical guidebooks, and forgotten plays against
best-selling novels and stage-themed sensation stories, I argue that the authors of these
varied texts participated in a continuous trade of narrative and scenic features. Though
previous critics have acknowledged interactions between mid-century theatre and print,
none have fully fleshed out the performative contexts or social consequences of this
interplay. In contrast, I contend that the narrative and visual exchanges between theatre and
literature are crucial to deciphering how different social classes formed and distinguished
themselves in this period. I argue that cultural arbiters from the print world (including
activist authors and advice-text writers) and from the public amusement realm
(entrepreneurial theatre producers and melodrama playwrights) continuously poached and
revised each other’s work. They did so in order to capitalize on preexisting consumer
communities who, specifically through their shared engagement of specific theatrical
shows or literary texts, distinguished themselves from other social groups. By cultivating
socially homogenous audiences, these cultural arbiters became vital contributors to the
consolidation of self-conscious, class-based identities in mid-nineteenth-century America. In turn, working- and middle-class consumers adhered to the arbiters’ directions in order to ensure their social positions during the era.

Social Class, Leisure, and Sensationalism in the Nineteenth Century

The solidification of social classes in the United States paralleled the unprecedented growth of the American city in the same period. Only twelve American cities housed over 10,000 inhabitants in 1820 compared to 101 cities claiming that statistic by 1860. Philadelphia’s population grew from 81,000 residents in 1800 to 408,000 in 1850; similarly, New York City’s population swelled from just 166,000 in 1825 to over 515,000 by 1850. In his seminal study Chants Democratic, Sean Wilentz paints an emergent, multi-faceted working-class population in New York. From the 1830s to the 1850s, Wilentz reports, New York shifted from a majority population of native-born citizens to a city in which more than half of the population was born abroad, including most prominently Irish and German immigrants. This shift produced a number of low-ranking occupations including dockworkers, porters, and female domestic servants. Wealth distribution was increasingly unequal, with four percent of the city’s

---

5 For more on the relationship between urban expansion and class composition, see Stuart Blumin, The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 13.
8 Wilentz, Chants Democratic, 110. Wilentz writes that by the mid-1850s, more than half of New York’s working Irish men found work as day laborers or cartmen. One-quarter of all the Irish women were domestic servants.
population owning half of the city’s wealth in the late 1820s and that number only shrinking over the next two decades.\(^9\) Consisting mainly of merchants, financiers, and the manufacturing elite, the upper class depended upon manual labor for its profits. Prior to the Panic of 1837, most manual workers were native-born Americans who made their living in small shops, factories, and sweat shops; after the Panic, an increasing percentage were rural migrants, immigrants, and free blacks, usually lacking knowledge of the crafts.\(^10\) The Panic and rising immigrant rates split the working classes into multiple factions, often divided by race and religion. Journalists and other writers, however, presented only two oppositional categories—“the poor” and “the rich”—and instilled this simplified dichotomy within the popular imagination.\(^11\)

To a large extent, my project investigates how working- and especially middle-class Americans conceived of themselves in relation to other classes. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, the press regularly cited the urban working classes (as “working-men,” “the working class,” and “mechanics,” among other terms) and the upper classes (as the “aristocracy,” the “higher classes,” and the “upper ten thousand”), while much less frequently acknowledging and labeling the “middle class” until mid-century.\(^12\) In occupational categories, the middle classes made their livings as clerks, retailers, non-manual businessmen, entrepreneurs, and other salaried employees.\(^13\) Still, they remained a largely inchoate group. Walt Whitman defined as middle-class anyone who made

---

\(^11\) Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 10.
\(^12\) Ibid., 244.
$1,000 annually, a salary that likely represented the dividing line between manual and non-manual workers. In her *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, Karen Halttunen also vaguely defines mid-century middle-class Americans “as men in social motion . . . who were neither very wealthy nor very poor.” However amorphous the middle class was defined or could appear at times, an intermediate socioeconomic group undoubtedly began to articulate itself with increasing self-awareness.

*Staged Readings* analyzes the critical cultural methods by which the middle class and the working class separated themselves, mainly from each other. Mid-century citizens may have conceived of their social identities largely according to demographic, residential, and occupational categories, and these remain important factors in my investigation of social divisions. Equally significant, however, was one’s participation in the many networks of popular culture. Studying mid-nineteenth-century literature, Amy Schrager Lang in *The Syntax of Class* argues for “a bounded middle class aware of itself as distinct from both the rich and the poor it its interests, its values, and its styles of life.” In Lang’s view, the middle classes were especially repulsed and often frightened by the urban poor. I build largely from Lang’s contentions, as I attempt to pinpoint precisely what behaviors dictated the middle-class “styles of life” as opposed to working-

---

14 Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 1.
16 Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 12.
18 Ibid., 2-3. See also Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 195, and David Leverenz, *Manhood and the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 78. Both critics contend that the middle classes tried to separate themselves from the working classes, with Leverenz portraying a “middle class far more conscious of the working class than either class is conscious of itself.”
class habits and practices. As an emergent middle class attempted to distinguish itself from the working orders, cultural leisure activities—including not just novel-reading but also theatergoing and performing parlor dramas—played a critical role in assisting social differentiation.

As the century progressed, public theatres were primary venues where American social classes began to express and distinguish themselves. While statistically the most frequently performed plays between 1831 and 1851 were Shakespearean tragedies such as *Richard III* and *Hamlet* and dramas by British writer Edward Bulwer-Lytton or German playwright August von Kotzbue, American playwriting also began to flourish.\(^\text{19}\) American dramatists—especially those working in the genres of farce, spectacle, and heroic melodrama—became increasingly prolific in the 1830s and 40s.\(^\text{20}\) By mid-century, over eighty percent of United States theatres were located in urban areas, and nearly all of the nation’s plays were performed first in the Northeast.\(^\text{21}\) New York, Philadelphia, and Boston emerged as the most popular centers, and each contained separate theatres that catered to different audiences. Prior to 1830, most theatres welcomed the entire spectrum of social classes, and ticket price simply segregated each group to different sections of the theatre.\(^\text{22}\) As the numbers of theatres grew, however, the compositions of audiences changed. Several theatre and class historians pinpoint a marked fragmentation, beginning in the 1830s and early 1840s, of different social classes splitting to separate class-

---


\(^\text{22}\) Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 53.
exclusive theatres. To at least some extent, this phenomenon can be traced to the middle classes’ growing self-consciousness and need to distance themselves from the working class.

During these same decades, several public riots related either directly or indirectly to the theatre may have contributed to the middle class’s wariness of working-class venues and its interest in founding separate theatres. In the most remembered of these disturbances, 1849’s Astor Place Riot, a large group of workers protested British actor William Charles Macready’s performance of *Macbeth* at New York’s aristocratic Astor Place Opera House. After U.S. militia clashed with the rioters, twenty-two men were killed and another 150 were injured. Though not always the sites of such explicit violence, class-associated theatres became prominent host sites for culture wars during the period, and subsequent chapters will detail how several theatres gradually repelled unwanted spectators while cultivating only those within a specific social tier. Hence, my project examines theatre not only for its dramaturgical content but also for its function as a space enabling social solidarity. As an arena that gathered physical crowds and often encouraged a group (and occasional mob) mentality, the playhouse cannot be underestimated as a crucial site of nineteenth-century class negotiation.

---

Following advances in print technology, reading was another leisure activity that came strongly to denote social position in the nineteenth century. From the 1820s through the 1840s, America underwent what has been called a “print revolution.” The importation of the cylinder press in 1825 increased printing rates from a few hundred to 2,000 copies per hour, while the two-cylinder press doubled that number in 1832. The type-revolving press raised the rate to 8,000 copies an hour by 1845, the same year that Congress reduced the price of mailing books. Print technology’s advances became most evident in the rise of the penny press. Descending from Great Britain’s penny dreadfuls and Newgate Calendars, American penny papers like *The New York Sun* (1833) and *The New York Herald* (1835) featured advertisements, news, and graphic crime stories. Meanwhile, the advent of oil and gas lamps led to longer days of reading, and new forums such as reading rooms and school libraries fostered a growing reading population in America. Paperback editions of British novels, available for as little as five cents, found eager audiences throughout nineteenth-century America. A growing number of American writers also began publishing fiction and non-fiction texts, which attracted diverse groups of readers.

One of the era’s most popular literary genres, and the one most central to this study, is sensationalism. In her enlightening *American Sensations*, Shelley Streeby

---

describes a “culture of sensation” emerging in the 1840s. This culture contained two parts: a literary sphere and a wider spectrum of media that included journalism, music, and popular theatre. Focusing on the literary component, Streeby claims that sensation literature “emphasizes materiality and corporeality, even or especially to the point of thrilling and horrifying readers.”31 Several other scholars including David Reynolds, Jonathan Elmer, Jesse Alemán, and Gregg Crane have attempted to organize the sub-genres falling under the umbrella term of sensation fiction, either by publishing format or by reader affect.32 American sensation fiction could range from city-mystery novels inspired by Eugène Sue’s *The Mysteries of Paris* (1842-43), including George Lippard’s *New York: Its Upper Ten and Lower Million* (1850) and Ned Buntline’s *The Mysteries and Miseries of New Orleans* (1851), to the near-pornographic fiction of hack writers like George Thompson and Osgood Bradbury. Whether such works appeared as pamphlet

---

32 Reynolds cites two categories of sensation fiction: first, “Romantic Adventure,” which mainly included violent frontier novels and, second, “Subversive Fiction,” penned by “radical democrats” like John Neal and George Lippard who employed scenes of “gore and chicanery to shock” readers. Subversive Fiction was also known for its “irrational style” and “its unmasking of the social elite […] through extreme violence, sexual scenes ranging from the suggestive to the disgustingly perverse.” David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 183. Crane groups the works of Lippard and amateur writers into a single category, the “sensational romance,” which resembled British Gothicism and advanced a skepticism about New World rationality. He also cites how the “overwhelming nature of the sensations of shock, horror, and desire aroused by” sensation texts negate the reader’s “rational process.” Gregg Crane, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Nineteenth-Century American Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), 95. Also see Jonathan Elmer, *Reading at the Social Limit: Affect, Mass Culture, and Edgar Allan Poe* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), 95-96. He argues that both sentimentalism and sensationalism attempt to penetrate the reader via affect, producing a bodily response of sympathy or terror, respectively. But whereas sentimentalism attempts to control and direct this affective response, sensationalism allows the “affective intensities” to linger and multiply.
narratives, story paper novelettes, or dime novels, sensation writing represented nearly 60 percent of published fiction between 1831 and 1860.\textsuperscript{33}

Enthusiasts of sensation literature came from a variety of social circles. Streeby summarizes the criticism of Richard Brodhead, David Reynolds, and Michael Denning, who all describe a three-tier structure of mid-nineteenth-century American literature: high-cult writing (including Melville, Hawthorne, Whitman, and other American Renaissance authors); a middlebrow sentimental mode (the best-selling sentimental novels of Susan Warner and Maria Susanna Cummins); and a low-level sensation literature (including penny, papers, trial reports, and graphic sensation fiction by writers like Lippard, Buntline, and Thompson).\textsuperscript{34} Though this scholarship has often attempted to assign specific sets of readers to each category—Denning writes that “artisans and laborers” were the primary readers of the penny presses, and Brodhead similarly declares “farmboys, soldiers, German and Irish immigrants” as sensation fiction’s primary readers—in reality, readerships did not divide so conveniently.\textsuperscript{35} These genre divisions fail to take into account two of the century’s best-selling authors, Harriet Beecher Stowe and E.D.E.N. Southworth, whose work engages both the sentimental and the sensational modes. Moreover, Streeby contends that authors and readers crossed between the three

\textsuperscript{33}Alemán and Streeby organize sensation fiction by publishing formats, distinguishing between pamphlet narratives, story paper novelettes, and dime novels. In the 1840s, self-contained crime-novel pamphlets were peddled door-to-door mainly in America’s northern states. By contrast, story paper novelettes, often serialized works which publishers juxtaposed with news stories and editorials, were common on board transportation lines and hence reached a more diverse readership; Alemán and Streeby, introduction, \textit{Empire and the Literature of Sensation}, xviii. The estimated percentage comes from Reynolds, \textit{Beneath the American Renaissance}, 183. He adds that “genteel volumes,” including sentimental fiction, represented about 20 percent of the nation’s fiction.

\textsuperscript{34}Streeby, \textit{American Sensations}, 28-29.

categories frequently, while Lori Merish echoes that Americans within several
demographics read inexpensive, often unseemly story papers.\textsuperscript{36} Because cheaply-printed
sensation novels and story papers were so widely available and portable, every class of
readers had access to them. Studies of Victorian American readers via diaries and letters
reveal that the middle classes, often instructed by literary advisors to read only genteel
works, proudly read forbidden sensation texts nearly as frequently.\textsuperscript{37} Thus I argue that
reading was crucial to the middle classes’ efforts to differentiate themselves from the
lower classes, while I simultaneously caution about assuming any given genre was read
exclusively by a single social class.\textsuperscript{38} At various points, my project asks what happened
when an intended readership did not match the actual readership, or how the middle
classes could prevent other social groups from claiming the genteel books that they
celebrated.

The off-shoots and contexts of sensation literature remain just as important to my
study as the primary works themselves. In addition to fictional works, I dissect theatrical
plays and non-fiction texts such as temperance lectures and home chemistry instructions
that contributed to the nineteenth-century cult of sensation. I also follow sensation fiction
into the Civil War and post-bellum years, as Beadle and Adams’ dime novels and weekly
story papers continued offering sensation fiction for specific groups of readers. Notably,
for over ten years before she published \textit{Little Women} in 1869, Alcott wrote anonymous

\textsuperscript{36} Streeby, \textit{American Sensations}, 29; Lori Merish, “Story Paper Fiction,” in \textit{The Oxford History of
Popular Print Culture: Vol 6: U.S. Popular Print Culture 1860-1920}, ed. Christine Bold (New York:
\textsuperscript{38} Sicherman, “Ideologies and Practices,” 287, 295; Sicherman, “Reading and Middle-Class Identity in
Ryan and Amy M. Thomas (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P), 147.
potboilers for story papers. In these weeklies intended for the middle class but often read by others, Alcott’s stories would appear beside graphic police reports and violent exposés of foreign countries. The concentration of all these thrill-centric readings is hardly surprising. But other contexts of sensation literature—the materials printed on the back covers of pamphlet novels or at the margins of story papers—are critical to identifying sensation literature’s diverse consumers. Publishers’ mission statements, booksellers’ information, announcements of trade exhibitions, and advertisements for theatrical shows are all important factors in identifying the participants in the larger culture of sensation. Hence, my project views sensationalism as a dominant nineteenth-century literary mode, but also a pervasive culture, which played a key role in creating socially distinct consumer groups.

Melodrama of the 1830s and 40s represents literature’s primary counterpart in the larger culture of sensation. The melodrama genre had roots overseas, emerging out of French revolution politics and undergoing various iterations in France and Great Britain before arriving in the United States in the 1830s. The handful of critical studies on this era’s melodrama—including David Grimsted’s *Melodrama Unveiled*, Peter Brooks’s *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Bruce McConachie’s *Melodramatic Formations*, and Jeffrey Mason’s *Melodrama and the Myth of America*—all effectively address the social functions of the genre through its major international iterations. Brooks writes that the genre can either be “revolutionary or conservative, but it’s always intensely democratic.”39 Remarking that America and melodrama came into being at the same

---

time, Daniel Gerould characterizes melodrama as an “unabashedly plebeian dramatic mode—eclectic, vulgar, impure,” which found a natural home among the underclass audiences of antebellum America. Yet by the next decade, middle-class theatrical venues also embraced melodrama, establishing themselves via the popularity of morally respectable temperance and anti-gambling plays. Considering all of the genre’s incarnations, my project examines how melodrama offered distinct appeals to working- and middle-class audiences.

Most importantly, and largely missing from earlier studies of the genre, I seek to tie melodrama and related theatrical genres into the greater culture of sensation. This effort will be concentrated most centrally in examining melodrama beside the sensation literature that influenced it and vice versa. Successful stage adaptations of sensation novels including Solon Robinson’s *Hot Corn: Life Scenes in New York Illustrated* (1854), Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861), and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) demonstrate that playwrights and producers were deeply cognizant of trends in popular literature. A play’s commercial success might even depend upon who could exploit a pre-existent reading community first. In November of 1843, the producers for New York’s Chatham Theatre observed broadside advertisements for the Bowery Theatre’s adaptation of Sue’s sensation novel *The Mysteries of Paris*. Sensing opportunity, the Chatham swiftly mounted a makeshift production and staged it six days before the Bowery’s previously announced show. Both theatres sought to import a pre-

---

packaged community, in this case a literary fan base, as their audience. Sometimes a literary source was not even necessary. As I show in chapter two, the playwright and the producers of temperance melodrama *The Drunkard* (1844) revised elements from Washingtonian temperance speeches which, with their featured convulsive re-enactments of delirium tremens episodes, were yet another outlet within the culture of sensation. As I will outline, this larger culture also involved everyday sights—street fights, riots, building fires, sidewalk drunks, disheveled prostitutes, and homemade firework explosions—that both melodrama producers and fiction writers reproduced in order to recruit consumers craving such spectacles.

**Critical Contexts and Social Communities**

My project relies on previous scholarship that has addressed the overlaps between nineteenth-century theatre and literature, but also examines in greater depth how these two media worked in tandem to create social identities. Previous critics have, to a minor extent, discussed this era’s theatre and literature together. Streeby mentions various types of antebellum theatre including Yankee, Bowery B’hoy plays, minstrelsy, and melodrama as complementing fiction in the culture of sensation. In a related analysis, Alemán and Streeby call nineteenth-century sensation fiction and sentimental literature “form[s] of melodrama.” Isabelle Lehuu, in her examination of nineteenth-century print culture, *Carnival on the Page*, points to how early “mammoth” newspapers of the late 1830s and

---

42 Alemán and Streeby, introduction, *Empire and the Literature of Sensation*, xvii.
early 1840s published the texts of tragedies and melodramas for their readers. All of these studies are invaluable for portraying theatre and literature as parts of a larger culture of sensation. Yet few scholars sustain detailed analyses about how theatre and literature specifically informed one another during this period. A notable exception and useful model, Alan Ackerman in *The Portable Theater* writes that “the lack of a standardized, ‘legitimate’ theater did not betoken a society without theater, but, on the contrary, it enabled a theater that, like a living organism, spread into new forms in order to survive.” As he details, the popular stage greatly influenced authors like Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, and Alcott, who in turn adapted theatrical plot lines, narratives, and characters within their literary works. Yet just as importantly, literature infused itself into theatre. As I demonstrate in chapter two, temperance dramatists recycled non-fiction narratives published by ex-drunkards, and my third chapter shows how parlor theatrical performers staged scenes from famous literary works for one another. Thus *Staged Readings* examines the different exchanges between theatre and literature and scrutinizes the social ramifications of these cross-pollinations. This circulatory relationship between popular media has gone largely unexamined and is essential to a more holistic understanding of nineteenth-century social class.

Expanding upon and complicating several cultural history studies, I argue that mid-century leisure activities were a key determinant of social status. Stuart Blumin asserts that, just as important as residential location and occupational status, cultural

consumption patterns were a sign of one’s belonging to the middle class. Similarly, Lang writes that the several nineteenth-century novels that she examines (including Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables*) “not only shape and are shaped by the experience of class but actively participate in the process of articulating, mediating, and displacing class difference and managing class conflict.”

Recently, history of the book scholars have affirmed such conclusions. Scott Casper writes that “More than a demographic or occupational category, the middle class came to be associated with particular cultural patterns.” Whether that meant participating in lyceums and reading societies or attending theatrical shows and re-enacting them in the home, leisure activities denoted participation in a culture of like-minded citizens sharing a social position. Reading—what one read and where he or she read it—became a significant indicator of a person’s social status. Even though reading was ostensibly a private activity, consumers were attuned to how their reading interests matched up with those of their peers. The market precisely calculated readerships and the social elements that attended reading. In her *In the Company of Books*, Sarah Wadsworth claims that “When publishers and authors segmented particular groups of readers into distinct categories and targeted them with specific types of books, they effectively created or fashioned each readership by summoning its members together into a composite or communal existence, thereby granting them a collective identity and group presence.”

My study accepts and develops Wadsworth’s contention—and indeed all of these critics’

---

45 Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 11.
48 Wadsworth, *In the Company of Books*, 10. Lehuu also writes that nineteenth-century book culture and specifically Americans’ reading practices “contributed to an ongoing process of social stratification” (30).
arguments—by examining theatre’s analogous and interrelated function. If theatre managers were trying to gather limited strataums of society together for a communal experience and book publishers were doing the same, then it is critical to assess how the resulting consumer communities overlapped in membership and in purpose.

My project aims to advance the scholarly discussion by considering citizens not just as readers or as theatergoers, but as members of communities associated with both activities. Cultural historians like Barbara Sicherman and Louise Stevenson have turned up revelatory material about Victorian-era reading circles and societies in America. Similarly, theatre scholars such as McConachie, Grimsted, and more recently Andrew Davis (*America’s Longest Run*) and Melanie Dawson (*Laboring to Play*) study various memoirs and diaries that shed light on the social activity of theatergoing or home theatrical production. These critics’ insightful studies illuminate how working- and especially middle-class consumers reinforced their social positions through their engagement with popular culture. They also identify specific reading and theatergoing communities in the mid-century United States. Yet at this point, no studies consider how these communities were integrated. Investigating the distribution patterns of books and of theatre paraphernalia remains important to filling in this void. Primary evidence reveals theatre tickets available for sale at bookstores, and theatres selling play texts of active shows to spectators as they exited. Comparing narrative content between fiction, non-fiction, and drama also can shed light on how cultural arbiters tailored content to their audiences. When novelists imported scenes from contemporaneous melodramas, for instance, they were summoning the sense of class-based community already inherent in
public theatergoing. Conversely, theatre producers and home theatrical guidebook authors encouraged adaptations from popular literature, appealing to segments of the population who were already familiar with specific novels or books of poetry. Hence, cultural arbiters in both the theatre and literature worlds depended upon audience recognition to appeal to each other’s already existent consumer communities. More specifically, they activated audiences’ pre-established responses to different media. Once novelists, playwrights, or theatre producers triggered such responses, they could summon consumers’ feelings of social communion and even direct consumers to take political action. As I argue, several mid-nineteenth-century literary texts and theatrical shows are coded to unite those who have previously encountered, and understand the symbolic significance of, specific narratives.

In order to reconstruct specific consumer communities, I rely heavily on archival research of largely forgotten play texts, travel journals, autobiographies, and how-to guidebooks, as well as playbills, broadsides, book reviews, and newspaper advertisements, among other ephemera. Often such sources present theatergoing and reading communities as historical fact. Whitman, for instance, witnesses the rowdy “young ship-builders, cartmen, butchers, firemen” and other downtown working-class types that constituted the audience for New York’s Bowery Theatre in the 1840s.\footnote{Walt Whitman, \textit{Prose Works 1892: Volume II: Collect and Other Prose}, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York UP, 1964), 595.} Mission statements from 1870s literary club reports reveal middle- and upper-class members advancing “the cultivation of literature by bringing together persons of literary
taste, and the promotion of social intercourse in this particular class.” Meeting monthly, members of the Madison, Wisconsin Literary Club presented essays on George Eliot’s novels and delivered readings from Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Creisede* or the poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer.

Other times, archival sources name an intended audience, which just as importantly reveals the types of audiences that theatre managers and book publishers were trying to cultivate. An 1848 playbill for *Rob Roy MacGregor* at Moses Kimball’s Boston Museum theatre—and in fact every playbill for the Boston Museum that season—announces “a limited number of Family Slips, containing seven Seats each,” which will be reserved for group sitting. Likewise, story paper publisher Frank Leslie advertised his monthly literary magazine, *Frank Leslie’s Monthly*, to the “Family Circle” and reassured his intended middle-class readers that the publication’s fictional “Romances, although of the most thrilling and interesting description, are unexceptionable in moral and character.” Families and children were not the exclusive audiences for *Rob Roy MacGregor* nor did the middle classes constitute the only readers of Leslie’s story papers.

But this marketing language shows what types of consumers cultural arbiters attempted to reach. Valuing these details, I analyze many oft-overlooked ephemeral sources that can help uncover the era’s shifting book and theatre markets.

---

50 Anon., *The Record of the Madison Literary Club of Madison, Wisconsin 1877-1887* (Madison: David Atwood 1887), 12.
51 Ibid. 29-39.
53 *Frank Leslie’s Budget of Fun*, January 1862, 15.
Following and advancing other critical studies, I also challenge the traditional notions of public and private spaces designated for leisure. To a large extent, my project examines the public spaces that invited spectatorship, including not just public playhouses but also taverns and city streets and sidewalks. However, as a plethora of 1860s and 70s parlor theatrical guidebooks prove, theatre could be an intensely private activity. Instead of understanding parlor theatre as its own phenomenon like previous studies, I detail private theatre’s relationship to public theatre. By staging theatricals in their own homes, the middle classes magnified public theatres’ goals of social exclusivity. Book culture is equally complex. Although I address the conventional spaces of reading within the private home, I am equally invested in comprehending how Americans read materials in public locations. David Henkin’s City Reading draws attention to the many types of public reading that mid-century Americans shared. He writes that when passersby read broadsides on buildings or disposable daily newspapers on streets, it “actually helped to erode differences by opening up channels for political expression and participation.”54 Henkin’s perceptive work reveals a reading public that was perpetually consuming the printed word. But contrary to Henkin’s claims about reading’s inclusiveness, much of America’s public print declared specifically which classes of consumers that they coveted. The archival materials that I study—including theatre and bookseller advertisements, playbills, broadsides, fortune teller games, city maps, and needlework patterns, among other items—all contain vital clues about desired and actual audiences.

Finally, my project contends that private leisure practices were not as isolated as they frequently appeared. Analyzing the popular daily newspaper, Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities* suggests that one’s reading “is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion.”\(^5\) My study utilizes and revises Anderson’s premise of such a “mass ceremony.”\(^5\) Influenced by Gillian Silverman’s recent work *Bodies and Books* which argues that “reading, and particularly book reading, could precipitate fantasies of communion,” often “between like-minded readers,” I maintain that consumers were aware of exactly the classes of people doing the same.\(^5\) Many imagined communities were not, as Anderson implies, comprised of complete strangers. Rather, the power of the private leisure experience often derived from the notion that people of similar social status—including friends, neighbors, and distant family members—were engaging in identical activities.

My study proposes imagined communities of working-class readers and middle-class ones, and it also extends the principle to theatre. Public theatres already gathered people of similar social status to form concrete (and often socially restricted) communities. But this experience did not preclude other abstract ones. When watching some of the era’s more popular plays, these audiences could also imagine a group of analogous spectators viewing the same production the night before or the night after, or


\(^{5}\) Ibid.

taking in a different production of the same drama in another city. Private parlor theatre, the subject of my third chapter, also operates on the presumption of imagined communities. The middle classes enthusiastically participated in parlor theatricals precisely because guidebooks affirmed that other middle-class, genteel citizens were partaking in the same amusements at the same moment. By emulating these socially exclusive theatricals in their own homes, citizens could declare their right to belong to the middle class regardless of whether they met the occupational and residential qualifications for such a group. Thus at its core and through comparing theatrical and literary texts and artifacts, my project aims to understand the nature of class-based communities in nineteenth-century America, whether these communities were readers or spectators, whether they were real, implied, or imagined.

**Classes, Communities, Cases**

Each chapter of *Staged Readings* focuses on a different convergence of nineteenth-century theatre and literature, and dissects how such interactions constructed social boundaries. My first chapter centers on George Lippard’s best-selling sensation novel *The Quaker City; or the Monks of Monk Hall* (1844-45) and antebellum Philadelphia theatergoing. I argue that Lippard invokes working-class spectatorial experiences in order to unite laborers against the ruling classes and the associated forces of capital. By reproducing and adapting climactic scenes from a series of cheap-admission apocalyptic melodramas, Lippard activates the communion and the politics of working-class spectatorship within the reading experience itself. Several *Quaker City*
scenes restage images of ruling-class collapse originating within Philadelphia’s working-
class playhouses (the Walnut St. Theatre, the Arch St. Theatre, and others). One extended
dream sequence features a cosmic destruction of Philadelphia. As tremors shatter the
streets and lightning bolts strike down citizens, Lippard simulates not only the
pyrotechnical climaxes from contemporaneous working-class melodramas but also
violent scenes of plebeian conflict on Philadelphia’s streets. In constructing *Quaker
City*’s climactic motifs, Lippard attempts to galvanize a working-class, theatergoing
readership already programmed to associate such apocalyptic symbols with class conflict.
More precisely, he seeks to merge disparate working-class consumers and re-channel
their energies against capitalist oppression. I close the chapter by analyzing the fall-out
from a failed stage adaptation of *Quaker City* at the upper-class Chestnut St. Theatre. The
production’s announcement on playbills led, tellingly, to a real-life riot between
Lippard’s working-class supporters and the Chestnut’s upper-class patrons attempting to
protect their cultural territory.

In my second chapter, I contend that temperance play producers and various non-
fiction authors exploited working-class experience in order to create a new middle-class
consumer community. I focus chiefly on the period’s most influential temperance
melodrama, William H. Smith’s *The Drunkard; or the Fallen Saved!* (1844). Museum
proprietors Moses Kimball (of the Boston Museum) and P.T. Barnum (of the American
Museum in New York) each staged the play in their museums’ “moral lecture rooms,”
purportedly educational theatres targeting middle-class patrons. The 1844 Boston
Museum premiere of *The Drunkard* as well as the 1850 American Museum production
broke box office records and solidified the middle class as a theatergoing collective.

However, both the play itself and the separate productions rewrote the performative activities of the Washingtonians, a concurrent working-class temperance society. Smith and the producers recycle narrative material from Washingtonian members’ “experience speeches”—in which laborers recited tales of their drunken pasts and sober redemptions—but erase the working-class subjects in favor of a middle-class protagonist. I also claim that in adapting *The Drunkard’s* scenery to fit Boston and New York landmarks, each producer dismissed the urban working classes in distinct ways. Denying that any lower-class city areas exist, Kimball’s two Boston productions direct viewers to visit only safe, middle-class tourist sites from 1840s urban handbooks. Conversely, Barnum’s New York production and his later temperance plays assert the security and readability of working-class Manhattan neighborhoods, contradicting police gazette reporters and traveling writers like Charles Dickens and Richard Henry Dana. Regardless of approach, both productions assure middle-class viewers that they can safely tour the city without encountering the dangers and hedonism that they so often associate with working-class urban life. Finally, I argue that many popular temperance publications specifically excluded laborer consumers as the century progressed. This phenomenon became evident as temperance spokesmen marketed their autobiographies only towards bourgeois readers, and theatre producers sold print copies of temperance plays to their exiting middle-class patrons. By subsequently reading and staging these texts in their homes, the middle classes established private leisure sites entirely segregated from the working masses.
I continue this exploration of the private space and its class-oriented activities in my third chapter. Focusing on home theatre guidebooks in relation to commercial theatre and mass-produced literature, I claim that home parlor theatricals provided the middle class an outlet for further social definition and bonding. The middle classes relied upon their homes, and specifically their parlors, as venues for class solidification in the 1860s and 70s. Parlor theatricals allowed these middle classes the thrills of the public sphere while shielding them from its real-life dangers. Dozens of guidebooks taught performers how to construct homemade stages and perform theatricals that could quell desires to leave the house. As participants redecorated parlors or created custom props and scenery out of household objects, they transformed their insular spaces into foreign lands and remade themselves into dramatic heroes and villains. In contrast to previous critics, I argue that theatrical guidebook authors sought to establish a viable alternative to the commercial theatre. Elaborate chemical recipes for stage effects allowed performers to imitate public theatres’ lightning, fires, and earthquakes in the private sphere. By promoting home stagings of Barnum’s Museum exhibits like dwarves, giants, exotic animals, and temperance waxworks, guide authors encouraged the middle classes to re-perform their own public spectatorship practices. According to guidebook instructions and first-hand accounts, home theatre also permitted consumers an active engagement with popular literature. Through staging tableaux vivants (or “living pictures”) of respectable novels, the middle classes claimed an ownership over texts that other classes also consumed. Home performers could display their shared reading practices to one
another and convert previously private reading experiences into stage material that enabled class consolidation.

My fourth and final chapter is a case study of Alcott’s sensation novella *Behind a Mask; or, A Woman’s Power* (1866), a work which engages the dissertation’s collective themes of theatricality, social class, and private space. I argue that Alcott challenges the notion—espoused in parlor drama literature—that private theatrical performance remains a safe amusement that reinforces class status. Rather, in her England-set tale about working-class actress Jean Muir posing as a governess for the aristocratic Coventry family, Alcott presents parlor theatre as a precarious activity that renders the upper classes susceptible to outside incursion. Though actress anti-heroes in Alcott’s earlier potboilers “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment” (1863) and “A Double Tragedy, or an Actor’s Story” (1865) fail in their secret plots, *Behind a Mask*’s Jean thrives because she masters the demands of private performance. Scheming to marry into the family and climb in social rank, Jean constantly shifts roles and locations: from a tearful governess in the parlor to a forbidden lover in the garden to the Bible’s murderous Judith in a literal tableau vivant. Each performance entices a different Coventry man, as Jean redefines all of the estate’s areas as theatricalized spaces where she can mesmerize naïve spectators. Reading the novella against specific amateur plays and tableaux, I claim that Jean also succeeds by staging the prostrate woman’s body according to guidebook trends. As the public, working-class actress Jean infiltrates the aristocratic family’s private spaces and marries into the Coventry bloodlines, Alcott ultimately reveals performance as a critical means for upward mobility.
Thus my study moves between the theatrical stage and the printed page, between the public streets and the private home. As America’s working classes tried to mobilize at the prompting of activist authors, the emergent middle classes determined leisure practices of their own, in public and private venues that often excluded the laboring population. Such constant transition within and between spaces resulted in numerous crossovers between the theatrical and literary worlds. Accordingly, *Staged Readings* argues that reconstructing this co-dependent, circulatory relationship between performance and print is essential to a scholarly understanding of mid-century social identity.
CHAPTER ONE:

George Lippard’s “Theatre of Hell:” Apocalyptic Melodrama and Working-Class Spectatorship in the Quaker City

In a January, 1842 article for the penny paper *Spirit of the Times*, author George Lippard depicts a visit to the newsroom from a “bona fide spirit, with a tail and two horns.” The devilish creature bestows upon Lippard’s city-reporter alter ego, “Flib,” a magical ring that “render[s] the wearer invisible” and allows him to observe silently the secret exchanges and exploitations of antebellum Philadelphia. Flib’s first destination is an unnamed theatre, where he observes the manager refusing to pay an actress’s salary, even as “a flood of tears . . . roll[s] down her worn and wasted features” and she describes her starving child at home. Two years later, Lippard graduated from penny-press reporting but continued his efforts to expose social villains in his sensation novel *The Quaker City; Or the Monks of Monk Hall* (1844-45). This multi-volume work depicted assorted Philadelphia aristocrats as kidnappers, rapists, and murderers within Monk Hall, a fictional three-story mansion at the city’s fringes. *Quaker City* sold 60,000 copies in its first full year, underwent twenty-seven printings in the next five, and was still selling 30,000 copies in 1854, the year of Lippard’s death. At the height of Lippard’s fame in the late 1840s, the satirical magazine *The John-Donkey* recommended anyone aspiring to write like Lippard visit New York’s blood-and-thunder melodrama

---

59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
house, The Chatham Theatre: “There you will acquire the proper details of your style. There you will be prompted to invent shrieking, suffering, horrible, sanguinary, ferocious, blood-thirsty, and tears-of-gore-bringing incident . . . amid rattling of sheet-iron thunder and the rolling of rivers of pink-blood.”  

Despite its hostility, the press notes Lippard’s loyal debt to contemporaneous theatre culture. This satire, as well as the earlier Flib piece, illustrate how Lippard was attuned both to the theatrical stage and its hypnotic hold upon participants and audiences.

Previous Lippard scholars have acknowledged a link between the author’s work and theatre, particularly the period’s dominant theatrical genre of melodrama. Frank Luther Mott labels The Quaker City “a big melodramatic humbug.”  

Carl Bode notes the resemblance of the novel’s figures to “customary creatures in melodrama,” and more recently, David Anthony cites Quaker City’s “many melodramatic coincidences.” J.V. Ridgely offhandedly states that Lippard derives “the suspenseful plots, the high falutin diction, [and] scenic effects” from various stage genres of the period and borrows images from contemporary dioramas and panoramas. In her American Sensations, Shelley Streeby suggests that novels like Lippard’s represented the literary arm of America’s larger urban cult of sensation—emerging in the 1840s and including (in addition to

---

62 “Hints to Novelists,” The John-Donkey, January 1, 1848, 11-12.
65 David Anthony, Paper Money Men: Commerce, Manhood, and the Sensational Public Sphere in Antebellum America (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2009), 114.
melodrama) the penny dailies, blackface minstrelsy, and Yankee and Bowery B’hoy shows. Yet most of these otherwise valuable critical assessments skim past the era’s actual theatre culture and the varieties of melodrama that dominated it. Even Streeby’s landmark study, which explicitly acknowledges the era’s theatrical landscape and incisively outlines the intersections between the cult of sensation’s media, does not sustain an analysis about Lippard’s absorption of popular theatre. Most critics sum up Lippard’s theatrical ties by noting the author’s own, unproduced stage adaptation of *The Quaker City*. However, Lippard wrote at least one other play—*The Son of Temperance, or Christmas Morning*—produced in 1847, and his novels *Blanche of Brandywine* (1847) and *The Empire City* (1852) found multiple dramatic adapters. As a young journalist, Lippard also composed numerous articles in dramatic form and reported on Philadelphia and New York theatres. Later, he copyrighted and prefaced an English translation of Friedrich Schiller’s influential 1781 play *The Robbers*, and even performed dramatic

---

69 In an 1845 study of established playwrights, James Rees lists one other, earlier play attributed to Lippard: *Coro, The Priest Robber*. No production information is provided, but Rees states it was “laid in the olden time” and “The incidents of this drama are highly romantic, and the interest turns upon the prophecy uttered upon the house of Coro, for the fearful crime of parricide.” See Rees, *Dramatic Authors of America* (Philadelphia: G.B. Zeiber, 1845), 98; Joseph Jackson also refers to this work in his unpublished study of Lippard and asserts that Lippard later recycled the incidents from the play into his last novel, *The Mysteries of Florence*. See Jackson, “Poet of the Proletariat.” (unpublished manuscript), Joseph Jackson Papers (Historical Society of Pennsylvania), 20.  
70 Peter Brooks discusses *The Robbers* as one of several influential Germanic plays in the formation of French melodrama, in *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976; repr., New Haven: Yale UP, 1995), 86.
lectures, full of “painful intensity” and “melodrama,” based on his American Revolution short stories.  

Throughout Lippard’s reception history, many commentators have believed that the graphic shocks and grotesqueries of the author’s work subsume any social or cultural commentary. Of Quaker City, one contemporary reviewer claimed that with its “hash of horror, superstition and ribaldry[,] . . . [w]e find it impossible, as a whole, to tolerate the book.” Indeed, Lippard’s characters often find themselves poisoned, drugged, and raped; he includes lengthy descriptions of fires scorching flesh and blood soaking floorboards. In one Quaker City scene, a character decapitates a woman and swings around her “headless trunk,” while cats soon after peck at her corpse. Despite the preponderance of these horror tableaux, Lippard frequently infused politics into his work, especially his activism for the working class. In 1849, he formed the Brotherhood of the Union, a society that aimed to protect “the men who work against those usurpers of capital who degrade labor in factories and swindle it in banks,” and he devoted a weekly story paper, The Quaker City Weekly, to his cause. He later admitted, “A literature which does not work practically, for the advancement of social reform . . . is just good for nothing at all.” Lippard centralizes laborer heroes in two of his later novels, The Empire

---

71 “Lectures,” Public Ledger, December 23, 1845.
75 Lippard, quoted in Fiedler, introduction, viii.
Reynolds also falls prey to a simplistic definition of melodrama and a limited notion of

*Quaker City* (1852) and *New York: Its Upper Ten and Lower Million* (1854), and *The Quaker City* also has attracted newfound critical attention for its class politics. Dana Nelson reads working-class agendas into *Quaker City* and identifies the text as an “exposé of the wealthy elite” as well as “advice literature for the laboring classes.” In his recent book *Philadelphia Stories*, Samuel Otter also offers an insightful study of the novel against mob violence in 1830s and 1840s Philadelphia. Yet little of this newfound rigor examines Lippard’s comprehension of popular or leisure culture, much less explores how such an understanding remains inextricable from his political aims.

Nor can David Reynolds, who details Lippard’s social politics in four separate studies, entirely connect the author’s reformist desires to his importations of other popular forms and genres. Reynolds appears content to state that Lippard “parodies the sentimental-domestic novel” and “reveals exasperation . . . with the opposing genre of the sensational penny newspaper”; Lippard is “commenting” on sensation writing at the same time he “is writing a mass-oriented sensational text.” Regarding theatre, Reynolds only states that *Quaker City*’s plots “have the feverish, heightened quality of melodrama.” This approach paints Lippard as a cultural sponge who absorbs cultural strands instead of a writer who utilizes them to serve a larger endgame. Like other critics, Reynolds also falls prey to a simplistic definition of melodrama and a limited notion of

---

78 Ibid., introduction to *The Quaker City*, xxiv.
79 Ibid., xxv.
80 Ibid., xxi.
theatre culture during this period. Melodrama indeed reigned as a popular theatrical genre at several of Philadelphia’s theatres, and certainly Lippard imports signature aspects associated with common knowledge of the genre including stock characters and cliffhanger-like suspense scenes. However, nineteenth-century melodrama contained several branches and sub-genres, some more relevant to Lippard’s work than others. Theatrical spectatorship extended beyond the walls of traditional theatres, stretching into new spaces such as museums and gardens and even into the streets. Given Lippard’s preoccupation with social hierarchies, an examination of his knowledge of stage practice becomes especially relevant since antebellum theatergoing so often fostered class divisions and antagonisms.

This chapter argues that via central set-pieces throughout The Quaker City, Lippard attempts to invoke spectatorial experiences already familiar to the working class, in order to unite a community of diverse workers against an expanding ruling class. Comprehending the increasing downward mobility of social classes in antebellum Philadelphia, Lippard recognizes the bloody signs of working-class unrest. His reproductions of disaster scenes—both from apocalyptic melodramas and from public theatrical forms such as parades and urban riots—function beyond a mere reflection of cultural violence, however. In dramatizing familiar theatrical motifs for his targeted laborer readers, Lippard recalls and activates the unity of working-class spectatorship within the reading experience itself. He then directs these unified, working-class consumers against the social rulers trying to oppress them.
Antebellum Philadelphia: Class Divisions and Apocalyptic Theatre

Like antebellum New York and Boston, Lippard’s Philadelphia saw drastic population increases in the first half of the nineteenth century. Railroad and canal building, beginning in the late 1820s, displaced many Pennsylvanians, who migrated to Philadelphia in search of work. By the 1840s, Irish and German immigrants began flooding the city as well. Only holding 81,000 residents in 1800, Philadelphia ballooned to 408,000 inhabitants by 1850. After the financial Panic of 1837, the social hierarchy changed. The upper class—consisting largely of merchants and financiers—began to solidify, and the wealth distribution became increasingly lopsided. At the turn of the eighteenth century, the top 10 percent of Philadelphians owned roughly 50 percent of the wealth, but by 1860, the top 10 percent now owned 90 percent of the wealth (with the top 1 percent owning 50 percent). Many wage earners, including skilled artisans, craftsmen, and mechanics who had thrived in the first third of the century, found themselves suddenly jobless. The General Trades’ Union, which united workers from numerous crafts, crumbled entirely in 1837. Social historian Stuart Blumin finds that from 1800 to 1850, Philadelphia experienced steady upward mobility but also surging downward mobility due mainly to the effects of the Panic and a rising merchant capitalism. In the 1830s alone, many citizens from middle professions like tavern keepers, minor public officials, tobacconists, and teachers shifted to “low-ranking crafts and other manual

---

positions."83 While some artisans from select trades may have moved up, increasing numbers of skilled and unskilled workers saw decreased pay. Simply put, “the city’s lower classes were growing significantly faster than the rest of its population.”84 As the working classes expanded to include immigrants and natives, mechanics and weavers, furniture-makers and draymen, various sub-groups divided the Philadelphia working class itself.

In his novels, Lippard revises this class hierarchy in order to underscore the exploitation of the working classes and to address this audience specifically. During the 1830s and 40s, master craftsmen, clerks, shopkeepers, and master mechanics constituted an evolving middle class, distinct from the manual laborers who made up the urban working class.85 However, Lippard almost never mentions the intermediate classes. In his story paper, the Quaker City Weekly, he writes, “THE WORLD is divided into two great nations, the Rich and the Poor. . . . [A]ll other distinctions of class or race are idle and inexpressive.”86 He even titles one of his novels New York: Its Upper Ten and Lower Million, notably excluding any group in between. In this sense, Lippard follows a thread of Marxist thought which believes that the middle classes have no function in a society dominated by a capitalist economy and so will be absorbed into the two dominant

---

83 Stuart M. Blumin, “Residential Mobility Within the Nineteenth-Century City,” in Davis and Haller, 179, 203.
84 Ibid., 179, 200.
85 Bruce Laurie, “Fire Companies and Gangs in Southwark: The 1840s,” in Davis and Haller, 66; Laurie, Working People, 111.
classes. Such a dichotomy in fact duplicates the two-class system which social observers and urban exposé writers popularized during the period.

Accordingly in *Quaker City*, Lippard presents only a working class and a ruling class, but he gathers most middle and professional classes into the latter. The novel functions as a shifting kaleidoscope of depravities, as successive clients enter Monk Hall and attempt to drug a friend, rape a girl, or kill a rival. Lippard swiftly dismisses assumptions that the funhouse’s frequenters are drawn from the lower dregs of society: “And the Monks of Monk-hall—who are they? . . . Blood-thirsty characters, perhaps, or black-browed ruffians, or wanfaced outcasts of society? Ah no, ah no!” (*QC* 55). One Monk Hall member is the “distinguished millionaire, Col. Fitz-Cowles,” rumored to be the son of an English earl (*QC* 58). Lippard identifies the rest as “lawyers from the court, doctors from the school, and judges from the bench,” “sleek-visaged tradesmen” who are “re-echo[ing] the prayer and the psalm in the aristocratic church,” “solemn-faced merchants,” and even a “fine red-faced parson” (*QC* 55-56). Though these men are not the ilk frequenting the working-class taverns and theatres, neither are they exclusively the manufacturing and capitalist elite. Rather, Monk Hall’s doctors, lawyers, judges, and tradesmen represent the era’s rising professional class, a group that Lippard singled out for scorn in his story paper, according to Streeby. As partner-managers of separate

---

87 For more on this two-class system, see Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 6.

88 Blumin suggests that urban exposé writers like George Foster and city-mystery writers like Joseph Holt Ingraham exaggerated a two-class structure for the sake of sales; *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 15-17.

89 Streeby, “Opening,” 194. In addition to the doctor, preacher, and lawyer, Streeby notes other types belonging to this professional class as including, in Lippard’s words, “the Office Vampyre, and the Stock Gambler.” Merchants could qualify as either middle- or upper-class depending on personal worth.
businesses, Monk Hall visitors Gus Lorrimer and Byrnewood Arlington typify this emerging group. Though critic Mary Unger asserts that “only the privileged elite can partake in the ‘unruly’ excess of Monk Hall, [. . .] highlighting Lippard’s disgust with the wealthy,” the diagnosis is more complicated given the clientele’s actual trades.90 In cataloging the insiders of Monk Hall as like-minded victimizers, Lippard essentially conflates middle, professional, and upper classes into a single ruling class.

Lippard presents the working class as the principal population excluded from Monk Hall and its invited ruling class. He constructs this opposition both geographically and architecturally. Monk Hall lies on Philadelphia’s southern border in Southwark, an industrial section which housed various populations of native-born workers. In the 1840s, the neighborhood’s population grew by 38 percent, and gang violence and hostility to non-native labor groups had been escalating since the 1837 Panic.91 Within this working-class neighborhood, Monk Hall remains a fortress which does not cohere with, or invite, the surrounding community. The building’s facade of black and red brick with accompanying pillars, its “rows of substantial chimneys, fashioned into strange and uncouth shapes,” its “massive hall-door” with a “satyr-face[d]” cornice, and its looming tower at the end contrast starkly with the printing office on one side and the “miserable frame houses” across the street (QC 48). The narrator asserts that if one could “glide into the tenements adjoining Monk-hall, and ask the mechanic or his wife, the printer or the factory man to tell him the story of this strange old building, he would find that the most

---

91 Laurie, “Fire Companies and Gangs,” 71-73. See also David. R. Johnson, “Crime Patterns in Philadelphia,” in Davis and Haller, 90.
remarkable ignorance prevailed” (*QC* 49). The working-class neighbors remain barred both intellectually and spatially from Monk Hall, despite the house’s close physical proximity. Modeled partly after the city’s exclusively-aristocratic social clubs emergent in the 1830s, Monk Hall allows entry to only certain “Club House” members (*QC* 23). Indulging one’s wanton desires becomes a privilege for Monk Hall insiders, while those outside are relegated to speculation and guesswork. Hence from an early moment, Lippard sets the ruling class against the working class via the physical boundary of Monk Hall itself.

Lippard addresses *Quaker City* specifically to the outsider working classes. 92 In the revised preface, Lippard tries to gain credibility among working-class readers for his mutual toil: “Remember that my life from the age of sixteen up to twenty-five was one perpetual battle with hardship and difficulty, such as do not often fall to the lot of a young man—such as rarely is recorded in the experience of childhood or manhood” (*QC* 2). That Lippard never truly experienced this degree of adversity only highlights the myth of himself that he wants to communicate among his presumed working-class readers. Period reviews of *Quaker City* also confirm Lippard’s intentions: “It was not a work addressed to the intelligent or refined” but rather one “read by the mass.” 93 Lippard’s contemporary biographer writes that the author’s defenders derived almost exclusively from this latter group: “The book was the talk of the city. It divided society into two parties, one

---

92 City-mystery authors often assumed a working-class readership, but the actual readers were likely diverse. For instance, Michael Denning notes how sensation fiction author Ned Buntline addresses his *Mysteries and Miseries of New York* specifically to the bourgeois public (“our community”) about “the [working-class] life.” See Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London: Verso, 1987), 105.

justifying the ‘Quaker City,’ the other execrating it and the author. The laborers, the mechanics, the great body of the people, were on Lippard’s side.”94 The novel’s reception exposed a clear fracture in antebellum Philadelphia society: the working classes and everyone else.

Public theatre also represented a distinct arena in which class expression, and accordingly class conflict, played out during this period. Theatre historians often concentrate on the antebellum New York stage, but Philadelphia was also a comparatively popular theatrical center.95 Founded in 1794, Philadelphia’s Chestnut Street Theatre (commonly known as the “Chestnut”), played successful dramas and operas from London and “catered to the upper-class desire to make Philadelphia an important cultural center.”96 In contrast, the Walnut St. Theatre (the “Walnut”) debuted in 1809 with a series of equestrian and circus shows and soon thereafter melodramas that “appealed to a broader and less sophisticated public.”97 Before 1830, different classes of audiences frequently overlapped at the two theatres but sat in segregated sections, usually determined by ticket price.98 At the highest point was the gallery, “the place most suitable for rowdyism” and consistently the cheapest seat; the pit, located in front of the

---

94 [Bouton.] The Life and Choice Writings, 19-20.
96 Andrew Davis, America’s Longest Run: A History of the Walnut Street Theatre (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2010), 40.
97 Ibid., 39.
98 David Rinear, Stage, Page, Scandals, and Vandals: William E. Burton and Nineteenth-Century American Theatre (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004), 23. When the Chestnut Street Theatre burned down in 1820, for instance, Chestnut audiences were displaced to the Walnut. Playbills trying to entice upper-class patrons to the Walnut promised that a newly-built entrance would allow “the audience of the pit [to] leave the theatre without meeting the other part of the audience.” Cited in A. Davis, America’s Longest Run, 42.
stage, contained a mixture of working and “middling classes” and charged slightly more; and the boxes sat above the pit and offered upper-class “fashionables,” including any respectable woman, “privacy, prestige, and a kind of social decorum” for a premium ticket price.99

In the 1830s, however, different classes of audiences began attending socially distinct theatres, ultimately escalating class antagonisms. In New York, the Park Theatre became the city’s, and the country’s, preeminent theatre for higher-class patrons. Downtown, the Bowery Theatre opened in 1826 in the working-class district of the same name and played mainly to rowdy laborers.100 Similarly, in Philadelphia, the Chestnut increasingly became the home for “elite audiences,” while the Walnut, according to one primary source, invited “the smiles of the working man.”101 The distinctions became clear in programming choices as well. Manager Francis Wemyss took over the Walnut St. Theatre in 1834 and nicknamed it the “American Theatre” in playbills and advertisements. Producing elaborate spectacles popular with lower classes, he eschewed aristocratic patrons who frequented the Chestnut for European operas and neoclassical verse dramas.102 While Wemyss produced plays like *Uda and Magnus, or the Doomed Crew* and *Captain Kyd, or The Wizard of the Sea* which utilized newfound stage machinery, the Chestnut’s playbills bragged of their “strong and efficient Police . . .

---

100 Ironically, the Bowery was built by upper-class New Yorkers as a theatre with close proximity to their homes; Bank, *Theatre Culture in America*, 116.
102 Ibid., 62.
engaged to attend the Theatre.” At a time when the Walnut was attempting to present visual wonders to its audience, the Chestnut reiterated its attempts to restore order among its patrons. Yet the fragmentation of audiences had its price. According to Philadelphia historian Susan Davis, the antebellum working classes’ gravitations towards separate, communal spaces such as theatres made higher classes nervous: “Gathered in large groups, workers might recognize and examine their common interests, spread word of their discovery, and learn ways to act collectively.” This “fear of class recognition”—particularly at the low-end theatres spotlighting catastrophe and violence—emerged as the principal downside for upper-class citizens staking out separate playhouses.

Any production remotely sensationalistic carried with it the stigma of lower-class spectatorship. As Charles Durang, Philadelphia’s foremost theatre critic during the era, writes, “Pieces of spectacle and melo-dramatic structure never succeeded at the Chestnut.” Even when the Chestnut attempted spectacle, it remained within the bounds of education. For example, one 1830s Chestnut playbill for a professor’s lecture advertises a “telescopic diorama . . . showing the PLANETS and SATELLITES” and boasts how the “present and succeeding lectures on STEAM will be illustrated by a

105 Ibid., 36.
106 Charles Durang, *A History of the Philadelphia Stage Between the Years 1749 and 1855* (1855), 428 (hereafter cited in text as *PS*). Durang’s work, which combines a history of the Philadelphia theatre with Durang’s own observations as a theatregoer from the mid-1820s to 1855, was originally published as a regular column in the *Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch*. Collector Charles Poulson organized these articles into four volumes of scrapbooks, which the Library Company of Philadelphia currently holds.
collection of models contrived by Dr. Lardner.” Simultaneously across town, the Walnut was staging for its working-class clientele “operatic spectacles” like *The Amazon Sisters; or, The Heroines of Mont Blanc* (1834), which advertised “marches, combats and thrilling events” among other “pantomimical effects” *(PS 363)*. Frequently, though, the Chestnut tried to sell its own programs as a more sophisticated form of spectacle theatre. In an 1845 playbill for *The Bohemian Girl*, the management addresses a special note “to the public”:

> Opera, from its constant and powerful appeal to the Senses by imagery, by sounds and emotions, is well calculated to amuse and stimulate all classes of Society. . . . The production of “The Bohemian Girl” last season in London, produced a sensation never before experienced in the Musical world. . . . The *Elite* of Society honored the Theatre with their presence, and the public became so delighted with the Music, that it was played and sung in every Drawing Room and Street in London.

The playbill promises that opera will “stimulate” upper-class spectators in the ways that a spectacle melodrama might arouse a working-class audience. Even though the opera ostensibly appeals to “all classes of Society,” the spectators it truly affects are “the elite of society” who can reenact the experiences on their way home or within their private parlor rooms. Ultimately, such a bill is an attempt to adopt the sensationalistic language and immediacy of melodrama playbills while offering higher-class patrons a more respectable experience. Yet the strategy did not appear to work. A *Dramatic Mirror* article from 1841 derides the “exclusively aristocratic” Chestnut Street Theatre: “An exclusive theatre cannot exist, cannot live in this country,” the reporter writes; “Open

---


your doors for the many, not for the few; do away with the aristocratic system, and invite
those of every rank to take a place in your temple."¹⁰⁹ Even Philadelphia’s other two
major theatres of the early 1840s—the perpetually struggling Arch St. Theatre (founded
1828) and William E. Burton’s National (founded 1840)—promised respectable shows
but more often than not devolved into spectacle melodramas to sell tickets.

Not surprisingly, melodrama remained the predominant genre in Philadelphia
theatre, particularly as producers amplified stage sensationalism. According to Grimsted,
melodrama constituted 40 percent of the dramatic productions in Philadelphia by 1840
and 52 percent by 1850. In 1840, melodramas appeared four times more frequently than
the second category that year, “nineteenth-century comedy and nineteenth-century
tragedy,” which constituted 10 percent of the productions, while Shakespeare comedies
and tragedies followed, registering 9 percent.¹¹⁰ With its clear polarizations of good and
evil, melodrama drew in working-class spectators struggling to believe in a morally just
universe during a time of economic distress.¹¹¹ One of the genre’s principal attractions
became its increasingly sensationalistic disaster scenes. This feature derived in part from

¹¹⁰ Grimsted, Melodrama Unveiled, 260. Grimsted separates foreign melodrama from American
melodrama during this period. By “melodrama,” Grimsted also includes plays such as Bulwer-Lytton’s
Lady of Lyons and Hugo’s Tour de Nesle, which might fit better into a category of “romantic drama.” For a
distinction between these two oft-overlapping genres, see Brooks, Melodramatic Imagination, 81-82, 91-
93. Despite Shakespeare plays only constituting 9 percent of the productions in 1840, Philadelphia theatres
collectively produced Richard III 183 times between 1831 and 1851. Next to Bulwer-Lytton’s Lady of
Lyons (see f. 58, 181), Richard III was produced more often than any other play during this period; for
production charts, see Grimsted, Melodrama Unveiled, 254.
¹¹¹ Melodrama also became notorious for violating classical drama’s rules. In his review of The Walnut’s
1844 production of The Bohemians of Paris, critic Charles Durang wrote, “The unities of the classic drama
are most decidedly outraged in these revolting melodramas. What says Voltaire on the unities? What is a
dramatic piece? The representation of one action. Why of one only and not of two or three? Because the
human mind cannot take in so many objects at once; because the interest which is divided is soon
destroyed.” See Durang, History of the Philadelphia Stage, 476.
contemporaneous stage practices in England. For instance, British playwright Edward Fitzball specialized in writing “weird mechanical and pyrotechnical effects” into his plays of the 1820s and 1830s, such as one villain’s rising from the sea through a stage filled with flames.\textsuperscript{112} The aptly-nicknamed “Blue-fire Fitzball” saw many of his plays, which often featured proletarian heroes popular with working-class audiences, staged in the United States soon thereafter.

In America, such spectacle-centric plays fell into several sub-categories, but theatre historian Bruce McConachie collects most of the works into a group he labels “apocalyptic melodrama.”\textsuperscript{113} Playbills referred to some of these apocalyptic melodramas as “pantomimic spectacle[s]” (The Walnut’s \textit{Munchausen}, 1844),\textsuperscript{114} others as “grand Chinese drama[s]” (The Arch Street’s \textit{The Bronze Horse}, 1841).\textsuperscript{115} Regardless of such puffery, this sub-genre distinguished itself from the “gentlemanly” and “domestic” melodramas of the period through its protorealistic climaxes of volcano eruptions, earthquakes, floods, fires, and other destructive visions.\textsuperscript{116} Furthermore, McConachie

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{112} Frank Rahill, \textit{The World of Melodrama} (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1967), 159.
\item \textsuperscript{113} Bruce McConachie, \textit{Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820-1870} (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1992), 119.
\item \textsuperscript{114} Walnut Street Theatre, playbill, \textit{Munchausen, or the Sorcerer of the Green Isle and Queen of the Silver Tide}, 1844. Playbill Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
\item \textsuperscript{115} Arch Street Theatre, playbill, \textit{The Bronze Horse or the Spell of the Cloud King}, 28 Dec. 1847. Playbill Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
\item \textsuperscript{116} Rinear, \textit{Stage, Page, Scandals, and Vandals}, 26-27, 58. Rinear lists Bulwer-Lytton’s \textit{Lady of Lyons} as typical of the “gentlemanly” type of melodrama. These plays relied less on spectacle and more on human conflict for their plots. Domestic dramas or domestic melodramas often focused on marriages, families and, in particular, the moral reformation of a character. Arguably, the most popular type of domestic dramas were temperance melodramas, and William Burton himself wrote a three-act “domestic drama” entitled \textit{The Intemperate, or a Sister’s Love} (now lost) in 1835. Also see Rahill, \textit{World of Melodrama}, 162. Additionally, Durang wrote of \textit{One Glass More}, a “domestic drama, of a moral character” that premiered at the Arch St. in 1844; see Durang, \textit{The Philadelphia Stage}, 478. Regarding apocalyptic melodrama, the sub-genre’s playwrights specialized in adapting popular (and sensational) novels of the day such as Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s \textit{The Last Days of Pompeii} (1835) and \textit{Rienzi} (1835) or Robert Montgomery Bird’s \textit{Nick of the Woods} (1838); McConachie, \textit{Melodramatic Formations}, 123.
\end{itemize}
affirms, apocalyptic melodramas expressed millenarian theologies and anti-aristocratic politics. He credits Thomas Hamblin, who assumed management of New York’s Bowery in 1830, with popularizing this particular melodramatic brand in America. Circa 1835, Hamblin quickly “ignor[ed] the tastes of the elite” and began staging increasingly sensationalistic shows for his primarily working-class spectatorship. These productions included Fitzball-like melodramas imported from England as well as original works by semi-professional American playwrights such as Joseph S. Jones and Hamblin’s wife, Louisa Medina. Prompt copies of Bowery scripts reveal notes about constructing buildings to burn down in production each night, and playbills brag about floods of real water “covering the whole of the stage” while battleships are destroyed in the background. In Philadelphia, the various managers of the Walnut, Arch St., and National theatres imitated and occasionally exceeded Hamblin with their elaborate productions. For instance, the Walnut’s 1830 production of *Gasperoni, or the Roman Bandit* ended in a fire of the villains’ house that, according to one contemporary reporter, 

---

117 McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 120. Because of its geographical location in a firmly working-class area of amusements, Hamblin’s Bowery cultivated an exclusively working-class audience, even more so than Philadelphia’s Walnut; Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 121.

118 The Bowery Theatre, playbill, *The Pirates of Signal*, 1840, quoted in McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 142. Several managers preceding Hamblin also specialized in complicated stage effects. *Bunker Hill*, a “national drama” staged in several northeastern cities 1812, became one of the first American plays to warrant repeat productions, largely because it featured a battle in which cannons were fired for fifteen minutes. New York’s LaFayette Amphitheatre advertised its “real tank of water” for spectacular effects in its productions of the late 1820s; see Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 77-81. Philadelphia theatres had experimented with protorealistic spectacle before as well. An 1824 production of William Moncrieff’s *The Cataract of the Ganges*, for instance, climaxed with water splashing on to the stage; see A. Davis, *America’s Longest Run*, 52.

119 In 1842, for example, the National’s William Burton transported his scenery for his successful pantomime melodrama *The Naiad Queen* between Philadelphia and New York to compete with Hamblin directly; see Rinear, *Stage, Page, Scandals, and Vandals*, 62-63.
“nearly choked [the audience] with sulphur and dense volumes of smoke.”

By 1840, Wemyss imported a master machinist from London to upgrade Walnut’s gas lighting in order to further illuminate the stage and allow actors to “perform within the scenery, not just in front of it.” This rise of apocalyptic melodrama in Philadelphia, especially after 1835, prompted the upper classes to shun non-Chestnut theatres even more than before. As Wemyss and others began imitating (and sometimes pirating completely) productions from Hamblin’s Bowery, the Philadelphia managers imported as well the sub-genre’s modes of spectatorship and inherent working-class politics.

The Theatre at Monk Hall

Throughout *Quaker City*, Lippard demonstrates a cognizance of 1830s and 1840s Philadelphia theatre culture and its social class structures. However, this comprehension often becomes buried under the novel’s labyrinthine plotting. Several critics have attempted to break down the novel’s many plots and sub-plots, but two

---

122 Particularly supportive of this idea would be the Chestnut’s booking of two premier opera companies, the Italian Opera Company and the French Opera Company, for long-term runs in 1843. Opera seemed to act as a seemingly competing, higher-class version of melodramatic spectacle; see Wilson, *History of the Philadelphia Theatre*, 23.
123 As Reynolds points out, Lippard also seems acutely aware of the urban curiosity (or “curio) museum, a fad which rivaled the melodramatic theatre during this era; see Reynolds, introduction to *Quaker City*, xxv. In an early *Quaker City* scene, a character finds himself in “McTorniquet’s Museum,” a space full of “surgical curiosities, preserved in jars,” “dead men in fragments,” and a “grisly skeleton.” Lippard, *Quaker City*, 211, 220. Lippard likely models the space after P.T. Barnum’s American Museum which opened in New York in 1841 and regularly exhibited exotic grotesqueries like a Feejee island mermaid resembling “a mummified monkey.” See *Public Ledger* article “On the Feejee Mermaid, July 27, 1842, cited in *The Colossal P.T. Barnum Reader: Nothing Else Like It in the Universe*, ed. James Cook. (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2005), 185-186. Philadelphia spaces like the Masonic Hall and Nathan Dunn’s Chinese Museum carried similarly morbid attractions in the early 1840s.
124 For more complete synopses, see Reynolds, introduction to *Quaker City*, xx, and Ridgely, “George Lippard’s *The Quaker City*,” 81-84.
threads dominate from beginning to end: first, business partner Gus Lorrimer brags to his new friend Byrnewood Arlington that he has seduced and plans to rape a merchant’s daughter in Monk Hall; this “flower of one of the first families in the city” turns out to be Arlington’s sister Mary (QC 14), and Arlington spends the novel attempting to rescue her from Lorrimer’s clutches. Second, Dora Livingstone, a shoemaker’s granddaughter who has climbed the social ladder by marrying an older, wealthy merchant Albert Livingstone, carries on an affair with Algernon Fitz-Cowles, a confidence man and Monk Hall regular masquerading as the son of an English earl; when Livingstone discovers the betrayal, he conspires to kill both his wife and her lover. In both principal plots and most side plots, Monk Hall’s grotesque doorkeeper Devil-Bug assists or thwarts characters’ plans and often contributes a nihilistic violence all his own.

Although no character maintains any explicit ties to the stage, Lippard announces working-class theatre as a crucial part of his Philadelphian landscape from the novel’s beginning. In the opening scene, seducer Lorrimer ponders visiting the Walnut St. Theatre to see Edwin Forrest, a Bowery actor wildly popular among workers. Later, a lawyer at Monk Hall recalls his visit to see Richelieu at the Chestnut St. Theatre when he witnessed “a row in the third tier” (QC 62).¹²⁵ Later allusions indicate Lippard

¹²⁵ Both scenes cite Edwin Forrest, an actor who played in the era’s heroic melodramas and adaptations of Shakespeare to audiences both high and low. Though he became a hero to working-class audiences at the Bowery and the Walnut, Lippard’s depiction of him playing at both theatres is correct: he participated in the star system dominant in the first part of the century which brought him to nearly every notable theatre in the Northeast. For more on his career as an actor, see McConachie, Melodramatic Formations, esp. 112-118; Richelieu, or the Conspiracy (1839) was a play by Edward Bulwer-Lytton which ran in all of Philadelphia’s various theatres during the antebellum period and often starred Forrest in the titular role. It premiered at the Chestnut on May 13th, 1839, and played at the Walnut later that year, at the Arch St. Theatre in 1841, and at the National in 1843. From 1839 through the end of 1845, fifty-two productions of the play had been mounted in Philadelphia; see Wilson, History of the Philadelphia Theatre, 638.
understood well the types of genres and audiences at the different theatres, particularly the working-class frequenters of Walnut melodramas. For instance, after Arlington threatens to drag Lorrimer across fire for seducing his sister, Lorrimer responds, “That melodramatic sneer becomes you well, but it would suit the pantomimist at the Walnut Street Theatre much better” (QC 101). Lorrimer casts Arlington as a stock stage villain, an overemoting performer playing to satisfy the Walnut masses, even though the tempter Lorrimer more closely typifies a melodrama antagonist. More important than this ironic characterization, Lippard cites the Walnut to declare that he comprehends and shares his presumably working-class readers’ theatrical culture. Another scene opens in a confidence man’s apartment and zooms in on “a play bill figured off with intoxicated letters, displaying the entertainment at the Walnut Street Theatre the night before” alongside a “glittering bowie knife” (QC 151). Lippard advances a knowledge of the blood-and-guts melodramas that defined the Walnut. Yet also, with a signature melodrama prop sitting alongside a playbill, he proposes that his characters absorb into their real lives the histrionic plots on the stage. In Lippard’s world, the violent spirit of the melodramatic stage infects those who have attended shows and penetrates spaces beyond the literal theatre.

In addition to his comprehension of the local theatre, Lippard displays a thorough understanding of popular melodrama motifs, particularly the tableau. Though tableaux appeared in other theatrical genres, they became a signature feature of melodrama. In his seminal *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), Peter Brooks states that the melodrama tableau is a moment in which “the characters’ attitudes and gestures [are] compositionally
arranged and frozen for a moment [and] give, like an illustrative painting; a visual summary of the emotional situation.”¹²⁶ Employed at “moments of climax and crisis” and frequently staged at the ends of acts just before the curtains descended, tableaux allowed viewers to see “emotions and moral states in clear visible signs.”¹²⁷ Lippard understands both the tableau’s popularity among spectators and its parallel value for readers. In one scene, Devil-Bug brushes a room’s theatrical “curtaining” aside to peer at a brother kneeling over his unconscious and drugged sister: “‘Quite a pictur’—’ chuckled Devil-Bug as he again gazed through the doorway. . . . A nice little gal and a handsome feller! Ha! Ha! Ha! . . . Advance—and save your sister’s honor” (QC 124). Ever the eager spectator, Devil-Bug expresses a desire for the homemade melodrama to unfreeze and continue. Later, Lippard mirrors the tableau staging with two different characters and even more overtly recalls a theatrical snapshot: “We open this scene with a picture. — Kneeling on the carpet of a princely chamber, a man of some thirty years and more supports the insensible form of a lovely woman in his arms. The dim light of a massive chandelier illumines the scene” (QC 281). Here, Lippard’s text reads like stage directions from a concurrent melodrama, such as one dramatic tableau in Frederic Stanhope Hill’s *Six Degrees of Crime* (1834): “Louise utters a piercing shriek[,] . . . totters and is falling—Julio catches her. Madam Doucet going off, totters and falls. . . . Francois is in attitude of despair—the others form animated groups—curtain falls on tableau and

---

¹²⁷ Ibid., 62.
Lippard mimics not only the staccato, descriptive language from play texts, but he also replicates the frozen organization of bodies, the corporeal vulnerability so essential to melodrama staging. Whether opening a scene as in Lippard’s text or closing one as in Hill’s play, the tableau streamlines the dramatic situation at hand in a single, encapsulating image. Throughout *Quaker City*, Lippard subliminally recalls this playbill language in order to activate his readers’ memories of theatrical marketing and staging. Tellingly, F.O.C. Darley’s frontispiece illustration for the novel’s 1845 edition represents an impromptu tableau: Arlington grasping his sister Mary, vowing revenge, as a group of Monk Hall’s voyeuristic spectators brush back a curtain to observe the scene (fig. 1.1). As the picture suggests, the very act of theatrical spectatorship remains critical to navigating and deriving pleasure from the tortuous spaces of Monk Hall.

---

128 Frederic Stanhope Hill, *Six Degrees of Crime, or Wine, Women, Gambling, Theft, Murder and the Scaffold* (1834), American Drama Full-Text Database (2003), 25. The play was first performed at the Warren Theatre in Boston on January 15, 1834, but was performed frequently in Philadelphia’s working-class theatres. It premiered at Philadelphia’s Walnut St. Theatre in December of 1838, returned there for two shows in 1840, then had a lengthy run at the Arch St. Theatre in May and July of 1842. It saw runs at the Walnut, Arch, and National the next year and continued playing periodically throughout the rest of the decade and early 1850s; see Wilson, *History of the Philadelphia Theatre*, 638.

129 A critical strategy of antebellum theatre marketing announced the various scenery and tableaux to entice spectators. One playbill for an adaptation of Charles Dickens’s *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) consists only of the play’s fifteen listed tableaux. *Barnaby Rudge*, playbill, 27 Sep. 1841. Playbill Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Lippard also portrays parts of Monk Hall as physical theatre spaces themselves. In one scene, Monk-Hall neophyte Byrnewood Arlington marvels at books upon the wall in the Tower Room, but Devil-Bug informs his guest that the furnishings are merely an illusion: “You think them ’are’s books do you? Look a little closer, next time. The walls are only painted like books and shelves—false book-cases you see” (QC 115). Here, Lippard emphasizes both the professional-class Arlington’s faulty spectatorship, which
becomes a theme throughout, as well as the falsity of the space itself. Containing a sofa, a “chest-like table,” a decorative fireplace, and walls teeming with books (QC 115-118), the Tower Room only appears to be the signature leisure room of merchant-like respectability. Devil-Bug reveals the library as a melodramatic stage illusion meant only to attract gullible viewers. Thereafter, he poisons Arlington and leaves him to writhe on the carpet. Each of the house’s rooms also contains trap doors through which an “unsuspecting man might be flung by his murderer, without a moment’s warning” (QC 60), and several characters fall through floor traps throughout. Of course, trap doors became integral pieces of stage machinery within antebellum melodrama theatres, and Lippard essentially animates Monk Hall as a working, spectacle-centric theatre space. In one scene, Devil-Bug enters the pit of Monk Hall which he deems “the Pit of this ‘ere Theater!” (QC 307). As he walks around “broken bottles,” “crumbling pieces of timber, heaps of old boards,” “fragments of broken furniture,” and finally a “ghastly skeleton” with a “blackened skull” (QC 307, 311), he in essence wanders through the basement of a melodrama playhouse. The post-apocalyptic state of the crumbled ruins and shattered bones resembles the final scenes of the era’s spectacular melodramas. Yet save Devil-Bug, this theatrical space is reserved mainly for ruling-class participants and spectators. Despite the actual murders and grotesqueries recalling the content of the Walnut St. melodrama, its working-class spectators are still excluded from entering the theatre that is Monk Hall.

131 In the second quarter of the century, the stage machinist became an increasingly essential presence in theatre companies. Moving battleships, waterfalls, horseback rescues, volcano eruptions, and earthquakes became standard scenes in various melodramas. The New York’s Bowery even built a special stage door to admit cavalry and infantry on stage. For more on the stage machinist and his staging techniques, see Grimsted, Melodrama Unveiled, 78-84.
Unlike the house’s visitors, Devil-Bug comes from a poverty-stricken background, and Lippard aligns him with the working classes. Born with no name in a brothel and of uncertain racial origin, he eventually assumes the role of Monk Hall’s door-keeper as well as the demonic title of those doormen preceding him. Between this occupation and the numerous arrangements that Devil-Bug secures for the house’s clients, Devil-Bug remains resolutely working-class. More importantly, Lippard positions Devil-Bug specifically as a working-class spectator. The reader learns that Devil Bug spent his adolescence “in full and continual sight of scenes of vice, wretchedness, and squalor” (QC 106). Weaned on visions of mayhem and calamity, Devil-Bug comes to crave such scenes in adulthood. Though he drugs, maims, and even murders several characters, Devil-Bug’s primary role is a viewer: “He loved not so much to kill, as to observe the blood of his victim, fall drop by drop, as to note the convulsive look of death, as to hear the last throttling rattle in the throat of the dying” (QC 106). Only as a spectator can Devil-Bug savor his violent deeds; only then are his criminal actions charged with meaning. A simultaneous stage manager, he creates a series of dramas within Monk Hall in order to satisfy his voyeuristic urges.

Using Monk Hall visitors as sacrificial extras, Devil-Bug first recreates scenes from bloody melodramas and subsequently assumes the role of spectator. Once he poisons Arlington’s wine, Devil-Bug locks the young man in a room and gleefully watches him convulse through a glass door: “It works, it works!,” Devil-Bug exclaims, “Ha! Ha! Ha! He is on the floor—he cannot rise—he is in the clutch of death. How the poor feller kicks and scuffles!” (QC 119). Lippard zooms in on Devil Bug’s “solitary eye,
that gleamed like a live coal” and “drank in the tremulous agonies of the dying man” (QC 120). Clamoring for (and adept at) viewing scenes of bloodshed, Devil-Bug emerges as a stand-in for the working-class spectator. Wemyss produced a melodramatic adaptation of Eugène Sue’s *The Mysteries of Paris* for Philadelphia’s National Theatre in 1843, and as Durang describes it, the audience’s experience approximated Devil-Bug’s: “[T]hunder roared, lightning flashed, and mock human blood flowed in the kennels. By a curious device, the moon’s rays were made at night to reflect the blood of humanity mantling the waters of the Seine. . . . [T]he multitude gaped at it with wonder” (PS 457). This spectatorial awe at scenes of gore resounds throughout Devil-Bug’s experiences as the manager of Monk Hall theatre. As Devil-Bug watches the poisoned Arlington coil on the floor, the victim becomes “fully sensible of the awful death that awaited him.” Soon after, “[H]e could see the visage of Devil-Bug peering at him thro’ the glass-door, and the danger which menaced his sister, came home like some horrible phantom to his soul” (QC 121). Lippard contrasts the working-class Devil Bug’s active, controlling form of spectatorship with the helpless, impotent gaze of the “very aristocratic” Arlington (QC 11). Enthralled by the sight of Arlington’s expiring body, Devil-Bug acts as a proxy for working-class readers who have observed scenes of violence and catastrophe on stage and in other working-class venues. Lippard uses the character as a means both to trigger these experiential memories and to provide readers an autonomous spectator with whom they can identify.
The Mind’s Eye: Devil Bug’s Dream

This early mise-en-scène previews the novel’s central recreation of antebellum spectatorship practices, “Devil Bug’s Dream.” Though critic Heyward Ehrlich claims that Lippard’s novel ultimately fails because “it tries to adapt the visual organization of the diorama or panorama” to the novel form, the dream sequence shows Lippard utilizing popular melodrama imagery to solidify a working-class readership. In fact, Lippard specifically frames Devil-Bug’s Dream as a grotesque stage spectacle. In the chapter’s opening image, a curtain covering the sky lifts up as a voice intones, “[T]his is the curtain of the Theatre of Hell!” In response, as “the theatre of hell lay bare to his view,” Devil-Bug “look[s] upon the scene and howl[s] in glee!” (QC 370). The theatre of hell, in Lippard’s estimation, portrays a Philadelphia overrun with rulers’ narcissism and pageantry—a vision not unfamiliar to the city’s theatrical spectators. In reproducing calamitous images from apocalyptic melodramas via Devil-Bug’s Dream, Lippard attempts to engage those working classes already united through their shared spectatorial experiences.

The chapter-length dream continues Lippard’s proposal of Devil-Bug and other oppressed figures as working-class spectators whom readers can recognize and vicariously embody. In the first full segment, entitled “The Last Day of the Quaker City,” Devil-Bug walks among the streets of a decrepit, crowd-filled Philadelphia in 1950 on the eve of the apocalypse. Devil-Bug’s omniscient perspective acquires a certain power; while the throngs of people wander the sidewalks aimlessly, Devil-Bug sees corpses

---

pacing aside the living: “With utter horror he discovered that the gay revellers of the street beheld them not. They walked merrily round while the arisen dead glided all around them, un-conscious of the leaden eyes that were gazing so sadly in their faces, they rent the air with laughter” (QC 376). In one sense, Devil-Bug remains a helpless spectator unable to enter or alter the drama. Yet simultaneously, he maintains a superior vision to anyone else, just as in his waking life in Monk Hall. Devil-Bug tries to inform the “good lady” and “fine gentleman” about the corpses coming to claim them, but the pedestrians’ “sealed eyes beheld them not” (QC 377). Only Devil-Bug possesses the visionary skill to pierce beyond the surface and see the “shrouded dead,” as Lippard privileges the worker’s eye while denigrating the respectable citizens’ viewpoints (QC 387). Despite Devil-Bug’s status as a deviant and a murderer, Lippard bestows him with the skill of perceptive vision. The corpses, meanwhile, arrive not as villains but rather as redeeming agents, promising to eradicate the city’s inequalities and install an egalitarian order.

The Dream’s central processional scene proposes a more visible antagonist: the ever-expanding ruling class. In this sequence, Philadelphia’s streets crowd with people for a gala in which “The King was to be crowned, and the multitude were gathered in grand procession to swell his triumph” (QC 386). Marching behind the king are the “sacred Clergy” and then the “Ministers of Justice.” Lippard continues his Monk-Hall conflation of the aristocracy, the clergy, and the professional classes into a single ruling class. Whether kings, parsons, or judges, this group has deflated the will of the multitudes. Symbolically, the royal mansion sits atop the rubble of Independence Hall.
Despite the absence of actual merchants or financiers, the parade’s collective ruling class finds public praise specifically for its advancement of capitalist values. The crowd cheers the autocratic marchers for their exploitation of lower classes: “This is a liberal mob; it encourages manufactures. The monopolist forever, they yelled, his enterprise gives labour to the poor, hurrah, hurrah!” (QC 389). Blind both to the injustices towards workers as well as to the parade’s walking dead, the crowd members are entirely ignorant of the corruptive system at its society’s core. Unlike the working-class Devil Bug, they lack the proper perceptual skills to understand their own degraded positions within this ruling class’s empire.

Yet Lippard also collects more sub-groups into the oppositional working class. After the King, clergy, and judges pass by in the procession, debtors and a final “manacled,” “lashed” horde follows behind. Included are “the slaves of the city, white and black, marching along one mass of rags and sores and misery, huddled together; a goodly tail to the procession of the King.” Characterizing them as “the slaves of the cotton Lord and the factory,” Lippard displays an inclusive, working-class mob opposing both the social rulers at the front of the parade and the aloof onlookers (QC 389). He expands the working-class faction to include what Streeby categorizes as Lippard’s “alternatives to patrician and middle-class models of masculinity,” a group which includes mechanics, slaves, and ex-felons alike.133 This new working class forms adversarially to the ruling class, with workers and other outcasts solidifying not

---

133 Streeby, “Opening,” 196
according to a distinct political aim but rather via their shared refusal of authoritarian oppression.

In centralizing a procession motif, Lippard recalls stagings of contemporaneous working-class melodramas and the revolutionary sentiments embedded within them. For instance, the Walnut’s *Zanthe* (1835) featured 130 people forming a processional line lit by fireworks, while playbills for the National’s pantomime spectacle *The Naiad Queen* (1840) advertised an ending with a “DOUBLE PROCESSION of the Sons of the Earth, and the Daughters of the Deep.” The Walnut’s Bible-based *The Jewess* (1836) culminated in a march featuring the allegorical figure of Time carrying a scythe as 200 extras joined his procession—a Judgment Day scene that Lippard reconfigures with the invisible reapers of Devil Bug’s Dream (*PS* 374). More prominently, the *Quaker City* parade recalls a procession scene from William Barrymore’s *El Hyder, The Chief of the Ghaut Mountains* (1818), a “grand eastern melodramatic spectacle” which the Walnut mounted four separate times between 1839 and 1844. In an early scene, India’s power-hungry Raja, Hamet, leads a march through the Delhi streets: “A splendid Procession enters the Great Arch: —Banners, six Bengal Seapoys . . . . three Choobdars—Artillery—Seapoys—Prisoners —Seapoys—Artillery—Officers of State—Officers of the Household

---

136 The play’s full title was *The Jewess, or the Fate of Haman*, not to be confused with other plays during the era named *The Jewess*. Wemyss either adapted it from the old Testament story of Esther or from a contemporaneous drama entitled *Esther, the Jewess*. Of Wemyss’s production, Durang reports that “In truth, it had no other merit than its picturesque accessories: its Egyptian and Assyrian scenery which the brush of Russell Smith made impressively beautiful, costumes, and magnificent pageantry.” He also reported that the procession required a platform which was laid over the audience pit to the back of the house and was “the earliest evidence of a runway in any American theatre” (*PS* 374).
Military Band—Princess Zada and Prince Chereddin—Ladies of the Harem veiled, escorted by Black Slaves.” Among this crowd, Hamet appears upon an elephant “and takes his seat upon a temporary throne.” Hamet groups his principal captives—the Princess Zada and her infant son Chereddin—among prostitutes and slaves, subordinating their positions and elevating his own. In his parade, Lippard appears to recall an analogous hierarchy to El Hyder’s, beginning with the king and clergy and ending with the shackled slaves. Yet in both El Hyder and Quaker City, the ruling class’s public hubris threatens its dominance. By play’s end, El Hyder, a warrior whom Hamet enslaves, joins a group of shipwrecked sailors in vanquishing the evil Raja and releasing his other prisoners. At the end of Devil-Bug’s Dream, too, the King’s celebration of his own tyranny provokes his death by thunderbolt in full view of the tyrannized. Both Barrymore and Lippard expose the very nature of the public parade—in which the oppressed must display their submission to their oppressors—as a potentially cataclysmic event. Utilizing this parade imagery from popular working-class melodramas, Lippard expresses the potential for the ruling class’s downfall. For any working-class theatre spectators who already understood the meaning embedded within parade iconography, Devil Bug’s Dream acts as a rallying call for their own revolution.

Beyond activating informed theatrical spectators, the processional imagery appealed directly to a broader group of working-class spectators accustomed to related street scenes. In her study of Philadelphia workers’ strikes, Susan Davis asserts that urban parades became a critical venue for laborers’ communal expression. Throughout the first

---

half of the nineteenth century, parades were “used to attack capitalism’s effects and seeming inevitability.”\textsuperscript{138} Quaker City’s procession directly engages, and at times mirrors, this social function. As a group, the diverse working classes gaze together at the ruined Independence Hall and share the hopes of witnessing an impending apocalypse: “What cared the Poor if they too shared the ruin? Was it not triumph to see the rich and corrupt dragged down from their high places?” (\textit{QC} 383). The sheer bliss of watching the wealthy and clergy perish supersedes the working poor’s other concerns, including possible death. Basing his scene upon the collective spectatorships of real-life, worker-based processions, Lippard calls on all those exploited by the capitalist system to understand the power and unity of their shared experiences. The shrouded dead also nurture this working-class viewership. While the corpses look upon the monarchy and the clergy with “fixed stare[s],” they smile at the “Slaves of Capital and Trade” at the procession’s end: “Look up brothers, they muttered in their awful tones, the day of your redemption draweth near! This is the last day of your toil” (\textit{QC} 389-390). The dream foretells an end to the social order that the segmented procession promotes. Specifically, it commits a promise to the oppressed: the replacement of unrewarded labor with both physical relief and visual pleasure. The working class’s final triumph will manifest in its communal spectatorship of the ruling class’s collapse.

This predicted reversal of the parade’s cruel hierarchy again retains roots within Philadelphia workers’ history. In 1835, Philadelphia coal heavers walked out, followed by various tradesmen in a protest for a ten-hour work day. By the time the protest

\textsuperscript{138} S. Davis, \textit{Parades and Power}, 12.
evolved into a general strike, both black and white workers of all skill levels united.\textsuperscript{139} Together, they created banners naming their demands and marched in strike parades throughout the city. The workers’ signage, which included union flags and illustrations, created a spectacle not simply for their employers but also for each other, as different unions’ marchers would walk past each other in the streets.\textsuperscript{140} Demonstrators became spectators as well; parades forced workers of all kinds to witness and understand each other’s hardships. A group awareness among diverse laborers was inevitable. Among the targeted upper classes, the 1835 strike produced the recognition “that strike parades expressed collective working-class power.”\textsuperscript{141} After the strikers achieved their goal, the working-class solidarity between blacks and whites, immigrants and natives, workers skilled and unskilled, lasted until the Panic of 1837. Notably, Lippard’s later Brotherhood of the Union sought almost identical goals as the 1835 protestors: “Like the national labor unions of the 1830s, [the Brotherhood] gathered workers of various trades into one body; Lippard went beyond previous unionists in his vision of a universal union of all workers.”\textsuperscript{142} Layered throughout Devil-Bug’s subconscious is Lippard’s wish to fulfill the promise of earlier strike parade street theatre, both as workers participated in processions and as they watched them. Writing in 1844, Lippard suggests that his working-class Philadelphian readers should identify in \textit{Quaker City} these processional moments from their own cultural history and reunite to topple the ruling class’s sovereignty.

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 135.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 141
\textsuperscript{142} David Reynolds, \textit{Prophet of Protest}, 12.
As Devil-Bug’s Dream crescendos with a literal apocalypse drawn from melodrama, Lippard imagines the end of the world as a specifically working-class revolution. The collapsing city represents a direct result of the rich’s excess at the expense of workers’ dignity. Before the central parade, Devil-Bug scans past a “lordly Bishop,” a lawyer, and a judge happily strolling along. Instead, he zeroes in on a “hungry and lean” mechanic “looking to the clear blue sky above, as he asked God’s vengeance upon the world that robbed and starved him” (QC 372). Lippard frames the forthcoming apocalypse as a merciful cleansing of the earth, an event wholly in sympathy with (and in response to) workers’ desires for widespread obliteration. The Judgment Day begins the next morning:

A storm on the land, waves of solid earth, billows crested with domes and steeples, with myriads of human beings hanging like foam on the top of each wave and billow—huzaa! Columns of hot vapor rising from the heaving earth, ten thousand, thousand columns, winding upward to the clear blue sky, with a circle of blackened dead, thrown in one huddled mass around each hissing column—huzaa, huzaa! Then the shrieks, and the groans, and the low muttered thunder, echoing from the bosom of each earthly wave! QC 391

As the description persists for several pages, including passages about women and babies being “dashed in fragment on the earth” and bodies flying through the air “with a sound like the whizzing of birds upon the airy!,” the scene’s exhibitionism threatens to obscure any social statement (QC 391-392). Yet Lippard’s focus on the spectator clarifies his aims. During the scene, the marching kings and clergy finally can observe the

---

143 By contrast, critic Dana Nelson claims, “It seems to be less for the debaucheries of the wealthy, than for the unguarded, profligate nature of social/sexual mixing and class-climbing from out of the laboring classes that Devil-Bug’s Dream suggests the city, like Sodom, will be destroyed.” Nelson, National Manhood, 147. Yet this reading discounts the centrality of Devil-Bug within the dream, particularly his role as a working-class, invincible witness.
accompanying corpses who were heretofore invisible: “The film had fallen from their eyes! They knew that the Dead walked among them. They knew that the Last Day was upon them in blackness and fear” (QC 390). The citizens can only scream in terror as lightning bolts strike the ground and giant ocean waves fill the city. As opposed to Devil-Bug’s abilities to see the walking corpses, a gaze which permits him a omniscient power, the crowd members’ visions provide them only a passivity and helplessness. In fact, throughout this scene, Devil-Bug maintains his status as a privileged working-class spectator, immune from the surrounding destruction around him, as he “beh[olds] it all” but emerges “unscathed and without harm” (QC 391). Via Devil-Bug, Lippard proposes the apocalypse as a workers’ uprising, one allowing them to witness first-hand their wishes for a destruction of the ruling class. Importantly, this perceptual ability never redeems Devil-Bug from his heinous deeds. He remains an untrustworthy ally, an immoral kidnapper, and an unrepentant murderer. Yet his role as a fantasizing spectator offers vicarious pleasures for working-class readers. Lippard affirms that readers should condemn Devil-Bug’s actions, but they also should view the character as an imperfect model and surpass him. They can replace his anarchic mayhem with directed violence, and his unconscious fantasies of urban destruction with waking efforts of social revolution.

Many mid-century melodramas at Philadelphia’s working-class theatres featured disaster climaxes that Lippard replicates within The Quaker City. As McConachie specifies that these plays “called forth a distinctive response through their depiction of
working-class solidarity,” they function as a proven blueprint for Lippard. By the time of *Quaker City*’s 1844 release, the city’s resident melodrama playhouse, the Walnut, fostered a working-class spectatorship for its apocalyptic melodramas more than ever. In 1841, the *Dramatic Mirror* predicted success for the Walnut, “as it appears to draw an immense number to the pit and galleries, whose taste it must be allowed is confined to melo-dramatic performances in preference to the higher range of theatrical amusement.” One of the most popular spectacles during this period, the National’s *The Naiad Queen* (1840), featured a vengeful nymph queen who casts a spell of meteorological doom when her human lover marries someone else. As “*thunder and lightning*” crackle onstage and “*a noise of wind and rain*” fills the audience’s ears, a serf narrates, “The waters fast are rising, and in rage propel their angry surges to the banks; dark threatening clouds are driving from the west; and birds fly screaming to their eyries, scared by the distant thunder.” Durang praised the play’s many “scenic illusions that form the gist of melodramatic spectacle” (*PS* 418-419), and the *Spirit of the Times* exclaimed, “its submarine glories dazzle our mundane vision.” When produced with skill as *The Naiad Queen* was, apocalyptic melodramas had the potential to attract press and sustain prolonged runs. These popular dramas consistently gathered large sub-groups of the working class together for a communal observance of societal overthrow, forming a consumer group to whom Lippard could further appeal.

---

147 “*Things Theatrical,*” *Spirit of the Times*, January 2, 1841, 528.
Stage managers began competing to stage these complicated scenes of disaster for an increasingly demanding public. Soon after lauding the *Naiad Queen’s* success, the *Dramatic Mirror* praised the Walnut’s “pyrotechnical department” for a production of *Undine; or, The Spirit of the Waters* (1841) in which “several thousand jets of fire and water” expressed the Fireking’s climactic wrath. The review singles out the “brilliant illuminations of transparencies, with various colored fires, figurative of the Spirits of Fire and Water,” all of which emanated “the terror and power of majesty.”¹⁴⁸ In the summers of 1840 and 1841 in Philadelphia, McAran’s Garden enlisted a famous London machinist to build a thirty-foot high replica of Mount Vesuvius. Featuring a lake of real water and fireworks, the exhibition climaxed in the mountain’s eruption which, according to a newspaper advertisement, resulted in “an appalling effect of sublime conflagration and stupendous destruction.”¹⁴⁹ These reports imply such melodramas and stagings—central to the mid-century cult of sensation—specialized in shocking their working-class spectators. Such calculated sensory assaults found welcome recipients, as audiences began to crave novel spectacles with increasingly elaborate stagings of devastation. Producers of workers’ theatres also paid close attention to real-life natural disasters that they could exploit for their audiences. In April of 1843, the Walnut produced the “MIRACULOUS ESCAPE” of a man and his son “DURING THE FEARFUL

¹⁴⁸ “Philadelphia Theatricals,” (Sep. 4), 29.
¹⁴⁹ “At McAran’s Garden,” *The North American and Daily Advertiser*, June 8, 1840. McAran’s may have initially appealed to a more diverse audience than the working-class regulars at the Walnut and the National. Yet soon after its premiere, the prices decreased to accommodate the lower classes attracted to the grand spectacle.
EARTHQUAKE AT GUADALOUPE,"150 a scenario based on a real-life Caribbean earthquake two months earlier which measured 8.3 on the Richter scale and killed 5,000 people.151 A dramatization of island wreckage offered city-dwellers a certain exoticism, but more importantly it extended concurrent melodramas’ visualization of a society entirely upended. Apocalyptic theatre became a principal form of leisure for the working classes specifically because it promised a reckoning which could wipe out the existing social order.

As with the Vesuvius eruption, local advertisements and playbills perpetuated a working-class following for apocalyptic melodramas. An 1844 Arch St. production of Nymphs of the Red Sea advertised “A STORM AND SHIPWRECK” in bold letters.152 When the Walnut produced The Water Queen in 1841, the playbill touted one storm, two floods, and “5000 JETS OF REAL WATER! And 6000 JETS OF LIQUID FIRE.”153 After seeing the production himself, Durang claimed the jets “all at one time played in opposite directions in varied hues, forming one of the most novel mechanical spectacles on any stage” (PS 436). Ripe with anticipation, the ads played to a collective working-class spectatorship yearning for increasing spectacle. Even the marketing itself resembled melodramatic prophecies of imminent ruin. Durang describes one playbill, “two yards in length,” for a Philadelphia production called Hell upon Earth (1843): “These enormous

---
bills of Hades with their mysterious descriptions, appeared at every conceivable corner. . . As our sober citizens passed on with their families to church naught could be heard but expressions of disgust.” He adds that “The sight alone” of the playbills “raised a hue and cry against the immorality of such productions in the theatre” (PS 445). 154 Bills like this one effectively separated audiences by social class and announced which clientele new theatres were courting. The respectable classes already averse to spectacle certainly would not attend (or be seen attending) a play like Hell upon Earth, as Durang conveys. But the working classes, accustomed to the floods and fires playing regularly at their playhouses, sought out such features. In effect, such theatrical advertising further united and solidified laborers, both as public readers and as theatergoers.

Lippard’s fiction approximates these theatre scenes both to replicate the plays’ social morals and to tap into a pre-existent, working-class consumer base. According to McConachie’s definition, the apocalyptic melodramas “dramatized a republican revolution of the people against aristocratic oppression aided by providential design and heroic martyrdom.” 155 Brooks defines melodrama politically as “intensely democratic,” 156 and apocalyptic melodrama carries this conviction to extremes. As in their dramatizations of procession scenes, the genre’s playwrights code working-class agendas within climactic scenes of catastrophe. Joseph Jones’s The Surgeon of Paris (1838)—which played sixteen performances (and saw four different productions) at the

---

154 This production actually opened a new Philadelphia theatre, the Olympic, where it played six performances in January of 1843; see Wilson, History of the Philadelphia Theatre, 585.
155 McConachie, Melodramatic Formations, 124.
156 Brooks, Melodramatic Imagination, 15.
Walnut between 1841 and 1843—highlights the sub-genre’s signature advocacy. In his portrayal of the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of sixteenth-century Paris, Jones rewrites the monarchy’s historical slaughter of varied Huguenots as that of principally Huguenot artisans and “base mechanics.” One early scene depicts the titular savior of the Huguenot mechanics as inspired by an otherwise foreboding sign. Suddenly the “stage darkens,” and the Surgeon narrates, “One by one the stars are covered by the gathering clouds that now hang like a funeral pall over this city of pollution and excess! This is my hour of joy! My thoughts expand and breathe in freedom! (Thunder).” The eclipse-like setting allows Paris’s exploited masses to thrive. Jones and Lippard both set their apocalypses within cities of rulers’ excess, urban wastelands teeming with aristocratic pomp and hypocrisy. Simultaneously, they glorify the working-class presence within this potentially destructive atmosphere. Lippard positions Devil-Bug, the anonymous mechanic, and the shackled workers and slaves all as the primary witnesses to Philadelphia’s destruction. Similarly, the Surgeon liberates imprisoned artisan Michael, and Jones’s play ends with them—amid “Streets filled with bodies, groups of men, women, and children dying and dead—heads, limbs, weapons, &c.”—avenging the massacre of the Huguenots together. The artisan-based working class become not only the primary heroes but also the principal spectators of a ravaged Paris. By depicting visually attuned workers, both Lippard’s and Jones’s works highlight how the working

157 A work by American playwright Joseph Stevens Jones, *The Surgeon of Paris* was first performed at the National Theatre in Boston in 1838. See Jones, *The Surgeon of Paris* (1838), American Drama Full-Text Database (2003), 1.
158 Ibid., 33.
159 Ibid., 20.
160 Ibid., 39.
classes must recognize the public signs of overthrow. This principle extends to audiences as well. Just as he reproduced *El Hyder*'s parade imagery, Lippard restages theatrical scenes of urban collapse in order to speak directly to working-class consumers already unified by such images.

Lippard found perhaps his most advantageous dramatic model in apocalyptic melodramas’ final scenes of urban disaster, allowing him to continue gathering working-class consumers. Most often, such plays build to a single climactic scene, a final “apocalyptic ending, a Last Judgment of carnage and destruction that kills the oppressors and usually some morally noble characters as well.”¹⁶¹ For example, Medina’s widely-produced *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1835) ends with the Egyptian Prince Arbaces admitting his murder of the vengeful crusader Apacides: “I spilt the puddle of his youthful blood—’twas a greater honor so to die than any ye were born.”¹⁶² Mere seconds later, he and the rest of the city’s inhabitants face an otherworldly wrath as a result: “At this moment, the fire breaks forth from the mountain, and the walls of arena fall—everybody cries. The earthquake—the earthquake!—Arbaces is killed by the falling of [a] statue—all in confusion and screams till curtain falls on a grand tableau. THE END.”¹⁶³ Via his sinful deeds and subsequent boastfulness, Arbaces directly provokes the ruin of all Pompeii. An aristocratic figurehead, he becomes the symbolic first sacrifice as God renews the earth. The first victim of the apocalypse in Devil-Bug’s Dream, The King similarly triggers God’s wrath with his sacrilegious arrogance. Upon

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 125.
¹⁶³ Ibid.
climbing his throne, the King curses God and meets a sudden end: “At the very instant, from the clear sky leapt a bolt of red thunder; —the King lay on the earth a blackened corpse” (QC 390-391). As “ten thousand bolts of red thunder” strike the Philadelphia streets thereafter, the King’s death is merely the first of many, as is Arbaces’s demise in *Pompeii* (QC 391). Both Lippard and Medina predict a potentially devastating future for social rulers, while tellingly saving the workers. Viewers do not directly witness any of *Pompeii*’s gladiator slaves or flower girls perish before the curtain descends, nor do readers explicitly see Devil-Bug or any other distinctly poor or laboring figure die in *Quaker City*’s vision. In both cases, the joy lies in witnessing an aristocratic figure’s violent death and then imagining the ensuing destruction killing only like-minded characters. Lippard utilizes theatrical imagery not only to recall the working-class solidarity within these apocalyptic melodramas’ plots, but also to elicit among his readers the communal memory of witnessing the ruling class’s defeat in theatres.

**Millenarianism, Street Theatre, and a Rioting Philadelphia**

In engaging apocalyptic melodrama, Lippard also imports theological fragments from the millenarian groups of this period. Many millenarian views derive from Revelation 20 in which Christ returns to earth and rules with saints for 1,000 years. Less literally, reports J.F.C. Harrison, millenarians viewed their position as “a type of salvationism” in which “the present evil world will not be improved but utterly destroyed,
and replaced by a perfect society.”\textsuperscript{164} This promise underlies the apocalyptic melodramas as well as Lippard’s text. Corrupt Pompeii (\textit{Last Days}), or monarchic Paris (\textit{Surgeon of Paris}), or elitist Philadelphia (\textit{Quaker City}) will experience great destruction and bloodshed, but with these incidents comes a restoration of order to the rightful leaders: the people. With their apocalypses, the melodramatists and especially Lippard graft class politics on to popular millenarian beliefs.

Though many groups espoused millenarianism during Lippard’s time, none held more influence than the Millerites and their leader, the Baptist reverend William Miller. Shaker populations throughout the Northeast, Mormon groups, and John Humphrey Noyes’s Oneida Community all held separate millenarian views during the 1830s and 1840s. Many of them too utilized the dire “signs of the times” as an indication that Christ would return to save the loyal and punish the damned. Unlike other millenarians, Miller predicted a firm date for the end of the world: October 22, 1844,\textsuperscript{165} postdating the release of \textit{Quaker City}’s first installment by only six weeks. Millerite fever swept through the United States, especially the Northeast, during the early 1840s, with reports of up to one million followers.\textsuperscript{166} According to advertisements, Miller lectured at Philadelphia churches in February of 1843, and other speakers refuted him at churches across town.\textsuperscript{167}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[165] The October date was actually the second date that Miller predicted. After the first (March 21, 1844) came and went, a group of radical Millerites decided to recalculate, and Miller begrudgingly agreed to the new date; see Jonathan M. Butler, “The Making of a New Order: Millerism and the Origins of Seventh-day Adventism” in \textit{The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century}, eds. Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan Butler (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1993), 195-196.
\item[167] According to a \textit{Public Ledger} advertisement (February 2, 1843), Miller and others came to Philadelphia for a “CONFERENCE ON Second Coming of Christ in 1843” at a local Universalist Church.
\end{footnotes}
His doomsday rhetoric appeared to have nourished the larger apocalyptic culture. The month after he visited Philadelphia, the city’s Chinese Museum hosted a professor’s lecture about fires in London, Moscow, and New York and featured a description of “The Conflagration of the Last Day.” The event’s flat, 25-cent ticket price, as well as its dedication to a local workers’ fire company, suggests a principally working-class audience. The Philadelphia papers appeared dismissive of Miller, but his influence reached wide enough that the Public Ledger sent a reporter undercover to a Millerite gathering. Miller undoubtedly came within Lippard’s sightlines as well. In the Quaker City’s opening pages, Lippard recognizes the prevalence of Millerism, as one character exclaims: “Miller the Prophet's right! Right I say! The world—d——n the plug, how it shakes—the world is coming to an end for certain” (QC 6). In this early scene, Lippard becomes a millenarian prophet himself. He connects the world’s grim state of current affairs to an impending doom, a prediction which later blossoms within Devil Bug’s Dream.

In millenarianism and Millerism specifically, Lippard seizes upon yet another piece of pop sensationalism he can revise for his intended readership. Miller’s lectures took on a theatrical element of their own, as he toured northeastern cities and narrated

---

The visit was later confirmed in a Public Ledger ad (February 11, 1843), which specifies Miller had been giving lectures in Philadelphia for the last ten days. In another Public Ledger advertisement two weeks before (January 27, 1843), a Rev. John Perry was delivering “a lecture in Refutation of Miller’s Theory of the End of the World.”

168 “The Conflagration of the Last Day/Lecture on Fire” was performed by Professor Maffit at the Chinese Museum throughout March of 1843; see Public Ledger, March 16, 1843, 1.

169 “Millerism—Great Excitement,” Public Ledger, October 21, 1844. The writer goes to a Millerite chapel and while surprised at the “apparent intelligence” of the members, the reporter also writes of those driven mad by “embracing the delusion” and discusses the “cases of insanity [that] have occurred, exhibiting the phenomena of mystic phrenzy, which racks and destroys the nervous system.”
descriptions of the last days. According to historian David Rowe, Miller’s audiences returned night after night and sat “for hours in the glimmer of candles hearing stories of kingdoms rising and falling.”

Miller’s extant writings indicate some of the material he may have presented, including one vision of Judgment Day, from the vantage point of the sinner:

The mountains shake and tremble on their base; the hills move to and fro. . . [F]lash after flash of vivid lightning made darkness visible, and roar after roar of the approaching thunder made horror still more horrible. The air . . . became impregnated with a sulphureous flame, that choked the lungs of man and beast, and seemed to hush in silence those dismal yells and moans of wretched mortals in this wreck of matter. . . . The heat became severe; combustibles began to burn; when suddenly the heavens began to rain a shower of hailstones. . . . The buildings, temples, and proud palaces of kings were all demolished and lay a heap of ruins.

Miller’s “Scene of the Last Day” highlights an apocalyptic landscape—full of “vivid lightning,” “approaching thunder,” and the air’s “sulphureous flame”—which Lippard replicates in his “Last Day of Quaker City” with its “ten thousand bolts of red thunder” and “columns of hot vapor rising from the heaving earth” (391). The “dismal yells and moans” of Miller’s sinners mirror “the shrieks, and the groans, and the low muttered thunder” of Devil Bug’s Dream (QC 391) and the “cries” and “screams” of Medina’s Pompeii. Like those writers too, Miller views symbols of the collapsing monarchy or aristocracy as essential to the earth’s purge. Though Miller’s followers came from all social and financial backgrounds, the Millerites’ derision of “crassly monopolistic

170 Rowe, God’s Strange Work, 108.
wealth” aligns them with the melodramatists’ and Lippard’s anti-capitalist, anti-aristocrat opinions. Miller, the playwrights, and Lippard all also foreground the presence of spectators. Yet Lippard alone, writing after both Miller and Medina, positions the principal spectator, Devil-Bug, as an empowered and immune onlooker. Devil-Bug maintains levels of perception that both Monk Hall’s visitors and his dream’s characters cannot, and accordingly he does not fall prey to the destructive forces (trap doors, booby-trapped parlors, Philadelphia’s walking dead) invisible to these other figures. Hence Lippard implies a working-class perseverance more directly than either Millerism’s or the melodramas’ imaginings.

Miller’s apocalypse never arrived, but some of his predicted images did. As McConachie states, “The closest many urban Americans got to an apocalyptic experience was a working-class riot.” Philadelphia hosted a series of working-class riots during the 1830s and 40s, and these riots provided yet another form of working-class spectacle. Several “anti-Negro” and anti-abolitionist riots took place in the city between 1834 and 1837. In 1842, Irish immigrants and free blacks exchanged musket fire on the streets, and from 1842 to 1844, semi-skilled handloom weavers physically battled their employers and police officers. Perhaps the most relevant to Lippard were Philadelphia’s Kensington riots in May of 1844 and the Southwark riots two months

---

174 McConachie, Melodramatic Formations, 144.
175 Feldberg, “Urbanization as a Cause of Violence,” 58.
176 Ibid., 62-63; Laurie, Working People of Philadelphia, 126.
Both events involved conflicts between two working-class groups: the nativists—Protestant, largely skilled artisans including carpenters, ropemakers, and various apprentices and craftsmen; and the Irish Catholic immigrants—whose recent influx threatened nativist culture and job security. The Kensington riots began as nativists publicly touted their plan restricting German- and Irish- immigrants from holding office and requiring them to live twenty-one years in the United States before gaining voting rights. Nativists’ calculated choice of Kensington, a firmly Irish-Catholic neighborhood, for their speaking venue proved deadly. The Irish immigrants chased the nativists to a nearby market where the opposing sides threw bricks and unleashed gunfire at one another; fighting ensued for the next two days. Notably, the riot ended when the violence approached the houses of Philadelphia’s upper classes. Already averse to witnessing any such mayhem on the stage (much less in real life), the upper-class elite forced the government’s intervention. Two months later, the Southwark riots arose when nativists received word that Irish Catholics were receiving arms in one of their churches. Most of the casualties occurred after troops guarding the church fired into a nativist street crowd. In return, nativists shot cannons full of iron scraps at the militia. Together, the Kensington and Southwark riots of 1844 claimed at least thirty lives. The in-fighting between two distinct working-class populations traveled from public streets to private

---

177 Michael Denning asserts that Lippard actually derided the anti-Catholic nativism which resulted in the Kensington and Southwark riots, though this viewpoint is complicated as Lippard later condemned Catholics for their resistance to the revolutions of 1848; see Denning, Mechanic Accents, 114. Lippard appeared to despise fractiousness and disunion between different working-class groups more than anything else.

178 Laurie, “Fire Companies and Gangs,” 74; Feldberg, Philadelphia Riots, 101-102.

179 Feldberg, Philadelphia Riots, 114-115.

180 Ibid., 150, see also Feldberg, “Urbanization as a Cause of Violence,” 56.
homes, upending the entire city. It proved a far cry from when laborers of all trades and ethnicities united for the general workers’ strike of 1835.

Perhaps no image symbolized the continuous Philadelphia rioting as much as the fires that often engulfed buildings. In 1837, rioters burnt down Pennsylvania Hall, an abolitionist meeting place.¹⁸¹ Another abolitionist space, Smith’s Hall, as well as St. Mary’s Church, fell to arson in the fights between the Irish and free blacks in 1842. During the Kensington riots, nativists ignited Irish homes and churches by day and lit communal bonfires by night. Because houses consisted mainly of wood and because fire engines “were primitive hand pumpers,” many fires simply had to expire on their own.¹⁸² Even when fire companies arrived on time to the Kensington fires, nativists’ threats dissuaded them from saving an Irish-Catholic church and several nearby buildings.¹⁸³ The fire companies’ motives always remained suspect, however. Originally respectable organizations for the upwardly mobile, the majority of fire companies in the 1840s consisted of working-class rowdies who associated themselves with various street gangs and who “appalled their municipal sponsors.”¹⁸⁴ As the companies became increasingly competitive with each other, they escalated rather than quelled the city’s apocalyptic atmosphere: “[T]he volunteers’ brawls had reached the point by the 1840s where many blazes were set deliberately to provoke a riot. . . . Any fire, incendiary or otherwise,

¹⁸¹ Feldberg, “Urbanization as a Cause of Violence,” 55-56.
¹⁸² Feldberg, Philadelphia Riots, 111.
¹⁸³ Ibid., 111-112
¹⁸⁴ S. Davis, Parades and Power, 115. Davis labels the fire volunteers Philadelphia’s “leading recreational brawlers and arsonists.”
became an excuse to fight.”185 Fire manifested itself as a unifying symbol, a call to arms for brawling working-class subgroups.

Moreover, spectators’ omnipresence at these riots and fires exposes the working class’s persistent interest in disaster imagery. After the first day of the Kensington riots, sightseers “gaped at the bullet-scarred buildings” and after the second, hundreds of visitors lined up around a burnt church “to view the destruction.”186 According to one contemporary writer, the firemen in action were “gazed upon and followed with awe and reverence by the gangs.”187 Meanwhile, the gangs themselves attracted a following with their penchants for pistol-shooting and incendiarism. One combat zone, nicknamed the “Battlefield,” “attracted spectators who watched the fun and offered encouragement to their favorites.”188 Between their riots, gang- and company-fighting, and reliance on fire, the various working-class populations cultivated a spectacular street theatre of their own. The sub-groups became united in spectatorship and congregated around real-life images of catastrophe. After the Southwark riots, even the *Public Ledger* could not help but express a theatrical viewer’s glee at the unceasing spectacle: “The greatest excitement prevails throughout our whole community. Terror has seized upon us all. . . . The mind of every person [is] absorbed by the terrific scenes being enacted around us.”189

Not surprisingly, the melodramatic theatre reflected these public images of rioting and fire for its own working-class spectators. A playbill for an 1841 Walnut production

185 Johnson, 99.
188 Johnson, “Crime Patterns,” 98.
of *The Surgeon of Paris* repeats the word “MASSACRE” four times, always in capital letters, and the last scene advertises in bold font, “THE DEAD AND THE DYING.” Carnage as a sellable, alluring feature of the play highlights the theatre’s exploitation of Philadelphia’s street violence. The play’s “Massacre of St. Bartholomew” scene features a captain ordering his troops to fire into a crowd of Huguenots as “women and children cross [the] stage in great terror screaming.” The scene directly foretells the Philadelphia militia’s firing upon the mobs during the Southwark riots. Later, mechanic hero Michael insists that his wife Madelon “see through the streets [how] the people, half naked, fly, and children, in their mothers’ arms, are butchered in our sight, by soldiers from the palace!” An experienced working-class spectator, Michael attempts to train his wife’s eye. He urges her not to look away but to understand the visible signs of urban violence. These chaotic play scenes were eerily familiar to any working-class observers or participants of the Philadelphia riots.

In addition to riot imagery, staged fires proved an equally reliable draw for the city’s playgoers, as numerous melodramas demonstrate. In Fitzball’s *The Bronze Horse* (1835), which played the Walnut for an unprecedented run of thirty-one performances in 1836, one character falls into a cauldron that “emits a blue flame” as it consumes him. Appearing in five separate Philadelphia productions between 1838 and 1841 (for a total of fifty-seven performances between the Walnut and the National), the hippodrama

---

192 Ibid. 34, (my italics).
Mazeppa (1831) features one scene “lighted by the glare of torches and the red beacon-fires,” and the final curtain descends on a grand “conflagration of the forest.” Captain Kyd’s witch, Elpsy, performs an initiation ceremony next to a flaming cauldron, while The Last Days of Pompeii’s Mountain Witch, Saga, makes her first appearance “in the midst of flames” and enters another scene surrounded by “flames of red fire.”

McConachie reports that the new invention of stage gas lighting, with its displays of red and blue fire, added to the protorealistic effects. During one Philadelphia production of Pompeii in which a group of combustible magazines failed to ignite, the Walnut’s manager ran up and lit the fires himself “at the risk of his life.” He exclaimed, “Up with the curtain! . . . [W]e will let the audience see that we have the real fires, and make no mistake” (PS 365). This persistence on exhibiting real fire instead of two-dimensional paintings or panoramas undergirds managers’ need to simulate the actual fire imagery that working-class spectators had been witnessing throughout the city.

The representation of fire both reproduced spectators’ experiences and directed them to remember their ruling-class antagonists. A playbill for The Black Raven of the

---

196 Medina, Last Days of Pompeii, 17.
197 McConachie, Melodramatic Formations, 143.
198 Actually, the ultimate failure of this effect and of Barrymore’s efforts became a source of infamy. Durang continues, “The curtain man had left his post when he dropped the curtain. . . . Up ran Barrymore himself to the curtain crank in the carpenter’s gallery, to take it up. By the time he got to the curtain and commenced drawing it up, the final fires expired, the last explosion took place; and all was darkness and dense suffocating smoke as the curtain arose upon the exhausted fires and lava of poor Vesuvius, and the half swallowed ruins of the ancient city of Pompeii. . . . When the curtain arose upon smoke and darkness, the hisses, hooting and screams of laughter, were of a terrific character. Barrymore, mortified and depressed at the awful failure, ran out of the theatre and was not seen for two days after.” Durang, History of the Philadelphia Stage, 365.
Tombs (1842), a “gorgeous and costly pantomime” at the Walnut, advertises a final scene in which viewers will see the “DREADFUL PUNISHMENT OF THE GUILTY ON A REVOLVING WHEEL OF FIRE!” followed by a “GRAND TABLEAU!” freezing this scene. An original play appearing only months after rioters set ablaze two abolitionist buildings, Black Raven capitalizes upon spectacular sights of fire that working-class audience members were already wired to process. The production pauses on the conflagration because it holds a sensationalistic appeal, but it maintains this attraction specifically because such apocalyptic imagery remained so inscribed upon laborers’ recent memories. Moreover, in lingering on the image of bodies—the “guilty”—upon the wheel, the theatre managers welcome their viewers to insert any imaginative victim to be engulfed by the flames. Since workers maintained numerous antagonists, both within their social class and beyond, the melodramatic stage allowed them a voyeuristic pleasure in watching a substitute villain experience a deserved sentence. The play not only advocates but relishes in violent punishment for the culpable.

Lippard absorbs all of these scenes from the street and the stage and restages them in his fiction to harness working-class readers’ energies against the ruling class. Devil Bug’s Dream includes ten thousand corpses battling one another, zombie “combatants” who converge with “one deafening crash” (QC 382). At another point in Devil-Bug’s waking life, fellow criminal Brick-Top recalls starting a riot by burning “a nigger church, two orphans’ asylums and a school house” (QC 482). The previously imaginative anarchy of Devil-Bug’s dream begins to infiltrate his reality, albeit without the precise

---

targets of his subconscious. As Samuel Otter incisively points out, Lippard’s consistent allusions to riots show the author “join[ing] mob action” in order to “map a characteristic pattern of riot in Philadelphia. Here gothic conspiracy records history: the tacit and explicit support for violence.”²⁰⁰ However, given the complicated antagonisms within Philadelphia’s working class, Lippard persists beyond cataloguing or even endorsing violent activity: he wants to direct that violence for his readers. He writes into his novel the battle images and fire scenes from riots and stage melodramas not simply to hold up a mirror to a violent culture or to discourage spectatorship of such events. In fact, by including passages like one in Devil Bug’s Dream when earth’s vapors “crisp the flesh on citizens’ bones, like the bark peeling from the log before the flame” (QC 391), Lippard answers a public hankering to observe even more microscopically the bodily effects of riots and stage burnings. Like the managers of Black Raven, he asks his working-class readers to imagine victims of their own anarchic desires and proposes a certain population himself. Lippard zeroes in on the motley group constituting his ruling class—the king, the clergy, the professionals—and graphically describes their deaths by thunderbolt strikes and fires. In doing so, he suggests that the working classes unite themselves to topple analogous oppressive forces.

In a Quaker City scene highlighting Devil-Bug’s arson, Lippard continues his attempts to gather the working classes in an overthrow of the ruling class. Devil-Bug accompanies Livingstone’s white-collar clerk, Luke Harvey, to a chapel in which Luke and con-man Fitz-Cowles fight over a woman’s honor. A fire soon erupts within the

chapel, and an inspired Devil-Bug decides to start a separate fire outside: “A wild fancy
seized this monster. . . . He applied the burning wood to the trunk of the tree; in a
moment it took fire, and ere Devil-Bug rose on his feet. The monster then leaped merrily
up and down, executing a devil’s dance in the light of the flame” (*QC* 520-521). The fire
ultimately spreads to the country house of the rich merchant Livingstone, and his
unfaithful wife Dora, where it burns them both alive. As the sky turns “bloody red” and
“the earth beneath change[s] suddenly into an ocean of fire,” the scene climaxes in an
otherworldly roar, “like the groan of millions or the last convulsive throw of an expiring
world” (*QC* 522, 524). Lippard explicitly recycles the fires and purgative doom of Devil-
Bug’s earlier vision. Yet this waking-life apocalypse contains important distinctions from
the previous subconscious one. The fire’s journey from the chapel (the popular Catholic
target of Philadelphia nativists) to the mansion (a symbol of the wealthy’s opulence)
spells out Lippard’s desired redirection of working-class violence. Devil-Bug’s Dream
proves a rehearsal of this later destruction of aristocracy, and Devil-Bug himself becomes
an actor now. Lippard implies the insufficiency of enjoying riot theatre or theatrical
spectacle as passive onlookers. As a working-class stand-in, Devil-Bug graduates from
spectator to participant; instead of the mere observer of catastrophe, he becomes the
instigator of it. This Devil-Bug-created apocalypse, a scene as “awful and sublime as tho’
the Book of Revelations had started into action,” becomes the novel’s true vision of the
future (*QC* 524).

At the same time, Lippard asserts the necessity for additional working-class
participants. At the scene’s end, *Quaker City*’s anonymous narrator acknowledges
Philadelphia’s violent history and announces this scene’s distinction: “I have stood in the streets of the Quaker City, while a fierce mob, hungry for blood, howled onward, their ten thousand faces glaring in the light of a burning church. . . . But here, was neither church nor cross, nor frenzied mob. All was Solitary Desolation” (QC 524). With Devil-Bug’s burning of the country mansion, Lippard presents a melodramatic theatre without sufficient actors, an apocalyptic riot without enough rioters. In drawing attention to this absence of players, the scene transforms into an overt appeal for them. Just as fires became a call to arms for madness on the stage or mayhem on the streets, Lippard now attempts to recruit his own mob. If his working-class readers have identified their intended targets, then these readers now must take riotous action to destroy them. Devil-Bug may have inspired this riot, and his violence is not entirely misplaced. Yet at this point, Lippard implies, motivated working-class readers can finally move past the anarchic energies of the character and aim their revolt against the ruling class.

The theatrical production of Lippard’s novel attempted to name several real-life opponents of the working classes, but the show’s resulting scandal and ultimate cancellation quelled any possible laborer mobilization. In the fall of 1844, Chestnut Street Theatre management noted the popularity of Quaker City’s first installments and commissioned Lippard to adapt his own novel for the stage (PS 287). Within fourteen days, he turned in a script, and playbills appeared throughout the city on the very same day that many Southwark rioters began their trial.201 The inspired idea swiftly met opposition. Singleton Mercer, the recently acquitted inspiration for the novel’s revenger

---

201 See Jackson, “Poet of the Proletariat,” 124.
Byrnewood Arlington, objected to his thinly-veiled portrayal and physically attacked the theatre’s billposter. Mercer’s assault caused a stir within the press and the public. Soon, mobs of onlookers surrounded the theatre and anxiously read the playbills. Serving as the theatre’s stage manager during this time, Durang notes that the Quaker City playbills “elicited much opinion for and against the production” (PS 287).

As opening night neared, however, the upper tier of Philadelphia society became increasingly worried. First-hand accounts confirm the play, no longer extant, shared the novel’s targets of governmental authority and urban aristocracy. Durang reports that the script “struck at Governors, members of Congress, officials of rank, and at the snobbish assumptions of the wealthy classes” (PS 287). An even larger concern became the naming of specific public figures. A Spirit of the Times article defended the uproar against a play “calculated to wound the feelings of the families of a great many of our distinguished citizens.” One prominent judge, Robert Conrad, even demanded to see the script after he heard rumors that he was indicted within the play. The widespread opposition finally prevailed. On the intended premiere date of November 11th, the newly-elected mayor Peter McCall ordered the play canceled after pressure from prominent public figures.

---

202 The press’s continued assault on the play, particularly after it failed to run, forced Wemyss to sue for libel; see Francis Wemyss, Twenty-six Years of the Life of an Actor and Manager (New-York: Burgess, Stringer), 1847, 394-399.

203 Durang’s chapter on the theatrical production of Monks of Monk Hall is missing from the Library Company of Philadelphia’s edition of A History of the Philadelphia Stage. It is, however, included in the edition held at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania: Durang, History of the Philadelphia Stage: 1749-1855 (references will continue in text as PS).

204 Spirit of the Times, November 12, 1844, quoted in Curtis, “Philadelphia in an Uproar,” 45.

205 The Philadelphia-based Conrad was actually a fairly well-known playwright himself during this period, perhaps best known for writing Jack Cade, or the Noble Yeoman (1835). The title character became one of Edwin Forrest’s most famous roles; see Andrew Davis, America’s Longest Run, 74.
citizens and out of fear it would spark another riot. In its place, the theatre played the comedy *Grandfather Whitehead*, an innocuous stand-by.

The programming crisis over Lippard’s stage version of *Quaker City* represented Philadelphia’s larger cultural war that had been simmering between social classes for years. New Chestnut manager Francis Wemyss previously managed the working-class Walnut Street Theatre, where he gained fame for updating the stage machinery to produce spectacular melodramas. His move to the aristocratic Chestnut rankled the regular patrons. A Philadelphia correspondent for the *New York Herald* specifies that much of the public disgust revolved around the corruption of an otherwise respectable theatre: “You may imagine . . . the sensation which the announcement of such a performance at ‘Old Drury’ occasioned. It was the town talk. Ladies flew into hysterics, and gentlemen swore as terribly as did ‘our army in Flanders.’” At least part of the panic derived from the fear that lower-class spectators would infiltrate respectable venues again. Besides select elites fearing personal libel, the upper-class audiences worried primarily about defending the exclusivity of their designated theatre. Several crowds formed around the Chestnut preceding the debut, and Wemyss recalled in his memoir that

---

206 A version of Lippard’s play was produced two months later at New York’s Chatham Theatre. *The Spirit of the Times* called it a “very stupid and vulgar play” which nonetheless “attracted good houses.” “Things Theatrical,” *The Spirit of the Times*, January 18, 1845. Though Lippard gave the manager his manuscript, the Chatham’s version ran only two acts (instead of Lippard’s planned five), and Lippard himself called it “one of the most refreshingly amusing dramatic murders, ever committed;” “Literature, &c.,” *New York Herald*, June 2, 1845. For more on the failed Philadelphia production, see Julia Curtis, “Philadelphia in an Uproar,” 41-47; The Harvard Theatre Collection also holds Mayor McCall’s original note ordering the cancellation in its illustrated version of Francis Wemyss, *Twenty-six Years of the Life of an Actor and Manager*, (Volume 4), Houghton Library.

“threats of tearing down the theatre, sacking it &c. were openly heard.” Conflicting accounts only obscure the make-up of these groups. Yet the Herald report as well as Wemyss’s notoriety for catering to the laboring classes indicate that at least some rioters, ironically, were Chestnut patrons trying to defend the respectability of their venue.

A “[magnet] of universal attraction” according to Wemyss and “libellous” in the mayor’s eyes, Quaker City’s recently rediscovered playbill proves, paradoxically, rather uncontroversial. Like many of the period, the bill separates the action into acts and scenes, some in prominent letters such as “Scene First—AN OYSTER CELLAR” or “Scene 4th—THE ASTROLOGER’S HOUSE”; less important scenes or places appear in small type underneath: “Scene 3rd—Street.” (fig. 1.2) Yet any sensationalism on the bill appears strangely muted. While one anticipatory passage reads in medium-letters, “Loaded Pistols, and then for MONK HALL,” the bill author’s capitalization emphasizes place more than action, setting over spectacle. A spectator passing the playbill on the street would likely notice only the large letters, the majority of which describe locations of scenes: “ROOM OF THE MILLIONAIRE,” “A LADY’S BOUDOIR!,” “DEN OF MONK HALL,” and so forth. Meanwhile, a character’s death appears in much smaller font on the bottom of the page—“One dies by the other’s hand”—and sex is relegated to euphemistic descriptions in miniscule font—“Love in a Cottage very Romantic [sic].” Comparatively, the playbill for an 1847 dramatic adaptation of Lippard’s novel Blanche

---

208 Wemyss, Twenty-Six Years, 395.
209 Ibid.
210 Chestnut Street Theatre, playbill, The Quaker City or the Monks of Monk Hall. 11 Nov. 1841. Playbill Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The playbill was rediscovered by critic Timothy Helwig in 2010. According to the playbill, the play’s characters retain the same fictional names as in the novel, including “Arlington” for Mercer. However Durang claims that he scratched out Judge Conrad’s name when Conrad attempted to inspect the script. See Durang, History of the Philadelphia Stage, 287.
of Brandywine at Philadelphia’s Peale’s Museum proves far more boastful of mayhem and violence. This bill reserves its bold, capital letters for central sensation scenes like “DEATH OF THE BLACKSMITH” and “BLANCHE’S CAPTURE BY PERCY!” (fig. 1.3). Moreover, neither Devil-Bug’s Dream nor the fire of Livingstone’s mansion appear in the Quaker City bill. The Chestnut management tries to conceal much of the violence which transpired within the play, even though Durang reports that the “lower orders of vice and immoralities were . . . embraced” in the script (PS 287). The incendiary response, then, seems rooted partly in Mercer’s and the press’s reaction, as well as the novel’s reputation. By the time of the planned theatrical premiere in November of 1844, Lippard had released only half of the novel’s ten installments. But the Chestnut had commissioned an adaptation because the “book had created a sensation” and “excited much curiosity in the public” (PS 287). The notion of Lippard and his followers entering the city’s foremost bastion of high culture may have been too much for its regular patrons to bear. Still, the upper-class fascination to see the commotion surrounding the Quaker City phenomenon may have proved too magnetic to resist.

212 Jackson, “Poet of the Proletariat,” 150. A contemporary biography of Lippard reports that the first installment was published on September 5th, 1844; see [Bouton], Life and Choice Writings, 19.
213 Wilson, History of the Philadelphia Theatre, 25.
Fig. 1.2: Playbill, *Quaker City; or the Monks of Monk Hall*, 11 Nov. 1841. Chestnut Street Theatre, Philadelphia. Playbill Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
Fig. 1.3: Playbill, Blanche of Brandywine 19 May 1847. Peale’s Museum, Philadelphia. McAllister Collection, Library Company of Philadelphia.
Given such outrage about the *Quaker City* production and its playbill, the bill’s indecipherability is striking. In plot and tableaux details, the descriptions remain noticeably abstract. For instance in Act II, “Scene 1—MONK HALL,” miniscule type describes the scene: “Breakfast—The Dove Caged—How it was done—Remorse—Too Late—Forward is the Word—The Victim most be prepared for the Sacrifice—Fresh Arrivals.” The bill’s writer fails to attach any of the scene’s actions or emotions to specific characters. Nouns such as “Dove,” “Victim” or “Arrivals” are similarly anti-personal. With agents entirely stripped of identities, the bill remains a largely incoherent table of contents. Every scene description follows the same pattern. By contrast, contemporary bills for spectacle melodramas unfurled full-sentence descriptions of scenes. Passages in the *Naiad Queen* bill, for example, read more narratively: “Act Second—THE ADAMANTINE CHAMBER. The Demons at their Work—The Naiad Queen develops the extraordinary Wealth of River Gods” or “Scene 2d THE HALL OF AUDIENCE. Schnapps give his sweetheart, Bridget, a description of the wonders of the Rhine” (fig. 1.4).\(^{214}\) The obscurity of the *Quaker City* bill must have proven frustrating but also enticing, especially for those already familiar with the novel’s characters and situations. The play version offered those who had read the first installments of the novel a visual preview of the succeeding parts, and the bill carefully gave little away. Thus at the same time that the bill tempers its sensationalism for the Chestnut’s clientele, it codes an invitation to working-class spectators already familiar with the novel. That warring factions from Philadelphian culture—upper-class and working-class patrons—

---

congregated outside of the Chestnut should have surprised no one. The bills
simultaneously welcomed both groups.

Fig. 1.4: Playbill, *The Naiad Queen; or the Mysteries of the Lurlei Berg*, 30 Sep. 1841. Walnut Street Theatre, Philadelphia. Playbill Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
With the help of Chestnut Street management, therefore, Lippard essentially arranged a riot. Manager Wemyss recalled that after *Grandfather Whitehead* started playing instead of *Quaker City*, “the difficulty was to prevent a row, because [Quaker City] was not performed.” Similarly, a newspaper reports that following the cancellation notice, “for hours there was every appearance of a destructive outbreak.” Thus the play’s suppression united many of Lippard’s working-class followers in resistance to the upper class’s clout. Lippard appeared that evening, both to give a speech to his followers and to swat the opposition. Dressed in “an ample cloak, and carrying a sword cane to repel assaults,” he came prepared to act within a street melodrama, an apocalyptic showdown of his own creation. In a letter to the *Herald* five days later, Lippard blamed an “infamous clique of Philadelphia aristocracy” for attempting to suppress his play. But by the next May, he bragged that as many as 70,000 copies of *Quaker City* had sold “in consequence of the attacks on my book” which stemmed from the Chestnut theatre riot. So Lippard incited a small riot, but more importantly, the incident allowed him to repeat in public the reformist messages of his novel’s apocalypse.

---

215 Mercer actually threatened his own riot on the night of the premiere. According to a *New York Herald* correspondent, Mercer attempted to purchase 300 tickets to the pit. He wanted to pass them “among that number of regular Southwark rioters” to provoke a collective “destruction of the scenery, and the demotion or conflagration of the theatre”; see “Singular Theatrical Emute [sic].” If credible, the account reveals Mercer trying to co-opt a segment of Lippard’s intended working-class readership and guide their anarchic energies against the author. Yet management’s surrender of only twenty-five tickets to Mercer thwarted his plans. Lippard’s working-class sympathizers constituted the mob gathering after show time passed; see Wemyss, *Twenty-six Years*, 394-399.

216 Wemyss, *Twenty-six Years*, 397.

217 “Singular Theatrical Emute [sic]”


As Devil-Bug’s Dream predicts, “Joy to the poor, oh joy! Their day was come at last. The rich with their purple and fine linen had enjoyed the world long enough; now the God of the Poor would arise in his might, and crush the lordlings under the heel of his power!” (QC 383). After the row at the Chestnut, Lippard effectively announced himself as the workers’ new spokesman.

Unintentional Audiences: Middle-Class Readings of Quaker City

As the theatre incident gained national attention from the press and led to greater sales, the nature of Lippard’s readership expanded beyond the working classes to whom it was directed. Once its installments were combined into a single book in 1845, Quaker City sold an average of 30,000 copies each year for a decade. Reprints of his stories appeared in publications as widespread as the Scioto Gazette (Cincinnati), Hartford Daily Courant, Maine Farmer, Natchez Courier (Mississippi), Vermont Patriot, and Raleigh Register. The scholarly temptation is to assume, as Michael Denning does, that “the actual readers” of Quaker City and other city-mysteries “were the working people of the

---

221 In fact, Lippard wrote the incident into his novel: “’Justice, and in the Quaker City’ said Luke, with a quiet sneer. . . . One day it stands grimly smiling while a mob fires a Church or sacks a Hall, the next ha, ha, it hurries from its impartial throne, and pastes its placards over the walls of a Theatre, stating in pompous works, and big capitals, that THE TRUTH must not be told in Philadelphia!” (QC 205)

222 Wemyss reported that word of the row was carried in newspapers as far wide as Maine and Florida; see Wemyss, Twenty-Six Years, 398.

Yet as Isabelle Lehuu argues, wealthier readers could afford to read penny papers and inexpensive publications and often did. Reviews of his novels in a wide range of periodicals suggest that Lippard attracted a variety of readers. As Nina Baym states, novel reviewing “was directed toward readers, was conducted in constant awareness of what people were reading, and was always trying to understand the reasons for public preferences.” Hence, 1843 and early 1844 reviews of Lippard’s work in publications like *Western Literary Journal and Monthly Review* or *Godey’s Lady’s Book* (a middlebrow periodical full of stories, sketches, recipes and which “avoided politics and current events”) suggest his fiction reached diverse audiences even before *Quaker City* was released. Though Lippard sometimes encouraged alternate readers, especially women, he despised most genteel publications as well as their readers of “light literature.” Still, many of them likely read *Quaker City*, as the close proximity of

---

227 Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers*, 14-15. The *Western Literary Journal and Monthly Review* reviewed Lippard’s *The Ladye Annabel* (November, 1844), 62, and excerpted one of the novel’s episodes—“The Doomsman’s Glee”—in the same issue (November, 1844), 58. It also reviewed the first four installments of *The Quaker City* (January, 1845), 183. *Godey’s* reviewed favorably one of Lippard’s first published works, “Adrian, the Neophite” [sic] (October, 1843), 192.
228 Several of his shorter, earlier works appeared in George Graham’s “respectable publishing” outlets like *Saturday Evening Post* and *United States Saturday Post*, the latter subtitled “a family newspaper, neutral in politics.” Christopher Looby, introduction to “Spermaceti Papers,” *The Early Writings of George Lippard*, ed. Looby (http://lippardarchive.cdh.ucla.edu/index.php?ser=spermaceti). Also, Lippard invited women readers almost immediately upon beginning his writing career, stating that “their influence in society is secret and silent, but effectual when devoted to good purposes,” though he warned their influence was also “terrible when misdirected for the accomplishment of evil.” Lippard, “What is the Citizen Soldier?,” July 19, 1843, *The Early Writings of George Lippard*, ed. Looby. (http://lippardarchive.cdh.ucla.edu/series.php?ser=misc#82). He later welcomed women readers to peruse his story paper, *Quaker City Weekly*, especially “women who work;” cited in Shelley Streeby, “Opening up the Story Paper,” 188.
Lippard’s works to more respectable ones within advertising space and the marketplace proves. The Western Literary Journal’s review of Lippard’s gothic novel The Ladye Annabel (1844) appears alongside evaluations of various medical journals and the latest issue of The Ladies’ Repository. Meanwhile, numerous New York Daily Tribune advertisements in 1846 list Lippard’s new novel Blanche of Brandywine for sale at a depot also holding more expensive, clothbound texts and issues of Graham’s Magazine, a publication Lippard denounced for its founder’s apoliticism and devotion to mundane fiction. Exclusively cheap literature depots existed, but Lippard’s books sold in a myriad of outlets. Lippard’s sharing of space—either on the newspaper page or on the bookseller’s shelf—with any symbols of respectable culture contradicted the separatism he advocated in his works.

In fact, he retained little control over who could access his works, and the middle, professional, and even upper classes likely read his novels. According to Leslie Fiedler, Lippard’s books frequently appeared at railway-station bookstalls, where “middle-class people [were] slumming as it were: temporarily taking a holiday from the ‘serious literature’ on their library shelves at home” as they rode in stagecoaches. Contradicting Denning’s claims about Lippard’s exclusive laborer readership, Barbara Sicherman writes of the danger in assuming that only the working classes read lowbrow

---

231 Fiedler, introduction, xi.
literature like Lippard’s. She notes as evidence the 1844-45 journal of one upwardly mobile apprentice cabinetmaker, Edward Jenner Carpenter, who maintained a wide-ranging library containing everything from temperance newspapers to United States history texts to Eugène Sue’s *Mysteries of Paris*, a novel “often condemned as sensational and morally harmful.”

The press frequently dubbed Lippard the “American Sue” for his city mystery writing; if Carpenter stored Sue’s work on his bookshelf, then a middle-class peer likely kept Lippard’s books in his parlor. As this anecdote proves, “men and women of the comfortable classes read, often apologetically, what they labeled ‘trash’” like *Quaker City*. Lippard appears to recognize this idea of a fetishistic consumer culture among the middle and upper classes. In Lorrimer’s library at Monk Hall, Arlington notices walls “supplied with books of all classes, and of every description, from the ponderous history to the trashy novel.” (*QC* 98). In order to portray a convincing illusion of an upper-class parlor, Lippard centralizes the objects of leisure themselves. With books ranging from highbrow to lowbrow, the library mesmerizes Monk Hall initiate Arlington with its decorative authenticity.

Sicherman claims that “We know little about the reading practices of the United States working class.” Indeed first-hand accounts from workers, such as diaries akin to the middle-class Carpenter’s, appear to be nearly non-existent. Yet as Baym states, “reviews offer guidance and correction in a way that enables us to see what [critics]

---


233 Reporting on the play adaptation of *Quaker City*, the Philadelphia Correspondent for the *New York Herald*, called the novel “one of those abortive and flatulent imitations of the absorbing *Mysteries of Paris*.” “Singular Theatrical Emute,” *New York Herald*, November 13, 1844.


235 Ibid., 296.
thought they were guiding and correcting.”236 If true, then Lippard’s reviewers attempted to sway his readership back to Lippard’s intended working-class followers. Most did so by indicting readers directly as deviants. Holden’s Dollar Magazine wrote that Lippard’s works “pre-suppose a morbid appetite or perverted taste on the part of the buyer,”237 while the Athenaeum writes that Quaker City “rakes all the filth it can from the common sewers of society to stimulate the morbid appetite of jaded curiosity, or some worse purpose.”238 The magazines paint Lippard’s readers as abnormal and perverted, suggesting that these consumers differ little from the book’s dastardly characters. In effect, the literary advisors attempt to shame any middle- and upper-class readers for their slumming and then direct their return towards respectable publications. The reviewers concede that Lippard will always have a following, but they want their readers to identify with a mainstream culture that excludes cheap literature. This culture decidedly did not welcome manual workers. Some critics employ gentler terms, but the anti-laborer message remains the same. In its obituary of Lippard, Graham’s Magazine writes that his “style of writing was not pleasing to us,” but it “won for him a very wide circle of readers.”239 The Home Magazine’s announcement of the author’s death acknowledges that Lippard, while “not a careful, finished writer,” possessed a “graphic power, which commanded the attention of the masses.”240 Using “wide circle” or “the masses” in place of explicit terms like “workers” or “working-class readers,” these middlebrow publications identify a popular taste which clearly diverges with the readers of their

236 Baym, Novels, Readers, and Reviewers, 19.
238 “Our Library Table,” The Athenaeum, October 18, 1845, 1014.
magazines. Sometimes reviewers would even brand the unutterable laborers as subhuman for their sensationalistic cravings. For instance, *Nassau Literary Magazine* states that while Lippard’s works “have gained a popularity among a certain class of readers,” they also “pander to the lowest passions of our nature.” Whether successful or not, these reviewers attempted to guide their readers into adopting a two-class system of reception: Lippard’s opponents and his followers, the distinguished consumers and the base ones, the cultivated consumers and the untamed workers.

Lippard attempted a similar tactic of splitting his readers from others and utilized consumers’ previous experiences as theatrical and street spectators to do so. The reading public proved too mercurial, and reading practices too diverse, to rely on sellers to divide audiences. Lippard required the inherent class stratification that theatre activated. As Lehuu writes, “[S]ocial distinctions of reading were . . . less immutable than the later classification of other cultural activities because, unlike theatergoing, reading did not require the attribution of a specific public space.” By invoking working classes’ theatrical and spectatorial experiences—whether a spectacle melodrama, a street procession, or a church fire—Lippard separates his readers into those who recognize these scenes and those who do not. At moments, he even implies an insufficiency of reading without that previous spectator experience. In one early *Quaker City* scene, Lorrimer seduces his captive, Mary, by showing her the text of Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s

---

Lorrimer gives her the book which begins with a lush description of the “Lake of Como,” after which he unfurls a similar romantic story as part of his “atrocious design”: “[I]t was his intention to wake [Mary’s] animal nature into full action. And . . ., when her heart grew animate with sensual life, when her eyes swam in the humid moisture of passion, then she would sink helplessly into his arms, and—like the bird to the snake,—flutter to her ruin” (QC 127). A merchant’s daughter and all “youth, girlhood, and innocence” (QC 18), Mary admits her unfamiliarity with the play, Philadelphia’s most frequently performed melodrama during this period. Lorrimer wants to capitalize specifically on Mary’s spectatorial virginity; without previous experience as a theatrical viewer, she proves unprepared emotionally as a reader. He envisions her becoming overwhelmed by the play’s emotion instead of experiencing any class-based, consumer recall that Lippard enabled within his observant working-class readers. Unlike these intended readers of *Quaker City*, Mary cannot pick up a book and recognize the images from Philadelphia’s popular culture or street life.

This middle- and upper-class inability to read—not just plays or books but the very environment and those within it—becomes yet another reason Lippard believes that the working class can usurp the higher classes. For all of Devil-Bug’s apocalyptic fantasies and enactments of workers’ revolutions, the novel does not conclude with a

---

243 Though Lippard refers to the play by this name, it was better known as *The Lady of Lyons, or Love and Pride*, a play by Edward Bulwer-Lytton. Characterized as a “romantic drama,” *The Lady of Lyons* played to all types of audiences. By the time of the release of *Quaker City*’s first installment (September 5, 1844), the play had been performed 76 times in Philadelphia and at each of the city’s major theatres (the Chestnut, the Walnut, the Arch St., and the National); for production information, see Wilson, *History of the Philadelphia Theatre*, 601-602. Grimsted characterizes *Lady of Lyons* as a melodrama and counts it as the single most-performed play between 1831 and 1851 both in Philadelphia (185 performances during this period) and cumulatively for all the locations of his case study (384 performances between Philadelphia, Charleston, New Orleans, and St. Louis); see Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 254.
manifestation of these id-driven desires. Instead, Lippard implies that a working-class victory might be far more subtle. In the novel’s penultimate scene, police raid Monk Hall and corner Devil-Bug but he slyly escapes. In the absence of an interior space which usually contains his contemptible behavior, now Devil-Bug can infiltrate the bourgeois’ public world and rot it from the inside out. The final marriage of the “white-collar merchant-in-training” Luke Harvey to Mabel, the sole heiress of the rich merchant Livingstone, ostensibly links the values of American upward mobility with aristocratic bloodlines.²⁴⁴ Yet the union is undermined by the secret that Mabel is in fact Devil-Bug’s biological daughter. Devil-Bug celebrates her newfound status in a mockery of the ruling class: “Ha! The g-a-l shall roll in wealth, dress in silks an’ satin’s, and be a lady all her life . . . Old Devil-Bug’s daughter among the grandees o’ the’ Quaker City!” (QC 556).

Devil-Bug gloats not because he has contributed a daughter to the upper ranks of society but rather because he has poisoned this society with a working-class lineage. Nor does Mabel’s own obliviousness to her biology negate the greater social ramifications. As David Anthony writes, “the insertion of Devil Bug’s ‘blood’ in to the middle classes suggests that sentimental narratives of middle-class stability and purity are themselves a fiction.”²⁴⁵ Lippard proposes an invisible infiltration of the higher classes instead of, or in addition to, the bloody revolution of Devil-Bug’s Dream. As only surface-level spectators and readers, other classes will not be able to perceive their own ranks’ dilutions.

Furthermore, Lippard insinuates that the professional class’s perceptual ineptitude will lead to its own self-destruction. Lorrimer, for instance, misreads the crucial signs of

---
²⁴⁵ Ibid., 116.
urban apocalypse. At the beginning of the novel, an astrologer instructs friends Lorrimere and Arlington never to see one another again; otherwise, one will kill the other by sundown within three days. Of course, neither man abides. Three days later, Lorrimere is fleeing the pursuant Arlington by boat, and the sky portends doom: “One thick mass of clouds lay over the city, and along the western horizon, a dense gloom covered the face of the waters, not a ray shone over the surface of a rippling billow” (QC 565). Unlike the working classes in The Surgeon of Paris or Devil Bug’s Dream who recognize the environmental symbols of ruling-class collapse, Lorrimere looks at the sky and daydreams about sitting in his parlor at home, surrounded by his family and “lighted by the Christmas Eve fire” (QC 566). Though he exploited Mary’s naïve spectatorship earlier, here Lorrimere is susceptible to a similar untrained eye. When the clouds break and “the red sun pour[s] a flood of glory over the waters,” he celebrates his freedom from the prophecy, ignoring that the sun still shines and that a pistol-ready Arlington stands behind him. Lippard’s final apocalypse ironically excises working-class participation entirely, as the middle and professional classes ultimately eliminate themselves. Arlington kills Lorrimere because the latter has violated Arlington’s sister Mary, and hence robbed Arlington of the same parlor fantasy that Lorrimere dreams about himself.

Moreover, in the novel’s final scene, Lippard tears down this middle-class vision of fireside bliss entirely. Arlington, his mother, his wife Annie, and his half-mad sister Mary have all retreated to a Wyoming farm, far removed from the carnivals and crimes of Philadelphia. At first, the scene appears a bucolic paradise, as the women drink fresh water from a spring and pick flowers on the hillside. “A calm sheet of water, embosomed
in the crest of the mountain” foregrounds the “blue heavens” behind, a stark contrast to the foreboding clouds and biblical red light framing Lorrimer’s river death. “Free sunbeams and the glad summer air” pierce the windows of the country cottage, reversing the claustrophobic, dank settings of Monk Hall (QC 569). However, the residue of urban mystery still undergirds this ostensibly pleasant scene. The recently-acquitted Arlington bans the women from entering his private chamber off the parlor, where he regularly re-enacts his murder trial. He plays the roles of himself, his attorney, and law clerks himself, ending with his full confession: “Ha, ha! I am guilty, I am the murderer, I shot the libertine, and would shoot him again! Now gentlemen, convict me if you can!” (QC 574). At soliloquy’s end, he tears a curtain aside to reveal a portrait of Lorrimer, much to the shock of the eavesdropping women. Despite his physical distance from Philadelphia, Arlington cannot escape the nightmares of Monk Hall. He remains stuck in a theatrical loop, cursed with reenacting his urban experiences over and over. Unger states that the scene reveals Lippard’s “unease with an ending steeped in a middle-class lifestyle,” and indeed Arlington’s homosocial fixation on Lorrimer instead of his doting wife affirms the impossibility of a rural, domestic utopia.246 The murder of Lorrimer, meanwhile, has solved little for Arlington: “He had avenged his sister’s wrong, but the memory of the scenes he had witnessed in Monk-Hall, in the parlor of his father’s house, in the streets of the Quaker City, or on the broad river, dwelt like a shadow on his soul” (QC 574-575). He remains an inexperienced spectator, an inept reader. Unlike an inured working-class spectator such as Devil-Bug, Arlington cannot process the physical sights of anarchic

Philadelphia. Whereas the real-life working classes could comprehend these chaotic urban images as a rallying call for unity, such scenes leave Arlington crippled and his middle-class aspirations a sham.

Ultimately by engaging his era’s visual and theatrical culture, Lippard composed a roadmap for a contingent of working-class readers. During the summer of 1843, in one of his final writings as a journalist before turning full-time author, Lippard wrote a diatribe against his era’s literary state: “Mediocrity is the order of the day. We have mediocre novels, mediocre tales, mediocre poetry, mediocre essays and mediocre wit. Large crowds linger round the half-way house of Literature—none dwell in the temple at the summit.”

In summoning the notion of crowds, however derogatorily, Lippard acknowledges that a consumer base existed that had not yet been rewarded. Releasing the first installment of *The Quaker City* just over a year later, Lippard began creating his desired literature of the masses that pushed past previous limits. From reviewers’ perspectives, such boundaries involved respectable taste. Summarizing *Quaker City*’s reception, Holden’s complains, “It gratified the appetites of a hundred thousand readers, it is true, but few among them could, for the life of them, see the silver thread of light running through it. What were the beautiful thoughts or aspirations, or sublime imagery, that at times burst forth in its pages—what were these to readers of the ‘Quaker City’?”

The reviewer misses the point. Lippard’s intended working-class readers found enjoyment not in the novel’s pockets of picturesque scenery or in its stray scenes of

---


moral righteousness but rather in the identification of ruling-class villains and apocalyptic landscapes. No other novel had absorbed and restaged working-class experience and consumerism quite like *The Quaker City*. Above all, the novel’s principal attribute is this uncanny level of familiarity that it produced. Working-class readers could recognize the images of a crowded theatre or a street fight or a riot and know that like-minded readers were experiencing the same recognition.

With *Quaker City*, Lippard announced a new literature that communicated the working-class experience but, just as importantly, infiltrated middle-class life. As the middle classes began attending theatres and reading books specifically designated for non-workers, Lippard proposed a countercultural sphere that looked no further than concurrent working-class spectatorship for inspiration. Separate spaces—both public and private—formed for these rivaling cultures. Even so, Lippard could not help but invade the sacred spaces which supposedly served as barriers. For instance, in his later city-mystery novel *New York: Its Upper Ten and Lower Million* (1854), Lippard breaks the narrative to address bourgeois readers: “Proud lady, sitting on your sofa, in your luxurious parlor you regard with a quiet sneer, that paragraph in the paper (you hold it in your hand), which tells how a virtuous girl, sold her person into the grasp of wealthy lust for — bread!” 249 Similarly, in *Quaker City*’s final scene, Arlington is surrounded by symbols of a proper middle-class reading experience such as books and letters. Yet instead he pores over a sensational newspaper detailing Philadelphia mysteries and Monk Hall loose ends: the gathering of secret orders, a woman’s corpse being found and buried,

Fitz-Cowles’s incarceration, and a clergyman’s seduction of a wealthy merchant’s daughter (QC 571-572). Lippard exposes the middle class’s hypocrisy simply by depicting their consumerist patterns. Whether scanning stories about the lower classes like New York’s imaginary middlebrow reader or vicariously consuming lowbrow literature like Quaker City’s Arlington, the middle classes’ attempts to alienate themselves from the working orders fails in the age of sensational print. In Lippard’s eyes, this small-scale invasion is only a preview of greater things to come. Once Lippard’s working-class readers mobilize and his apocalypse dawns, neither the mansion doors nor the parlor walls will be enough to keep the masses out.
CHAPTER TWO:

*The Drunkard’s Legacy, or Washingtonian-Era Temperance Drama and the Making of Middle-Class Culture*

In July of 1844, *The Cincinnati Weekly Herald and Philanthropist* denounced a new type of melodrama appearing across America: “Temperance Theatricals will awaken a passion for the Theatre, in many persons, who will then continue to visit it . . . for their own special gratification. Nor will they be repelled, even when they see the drinking and drunkenness which are the usual accompaniments of theatrical amusements.”250 *The Herald* journalist believes that the representations of drunkenness onstage and in the lobbies glorify drinking habits. In his formulation, temperance dramas will contribute not to the goals of the social movement itself but rather to the further endemic of intoxication. Furthermore, the new theatre genre might affect the sales of more reputable temperance-themed exhibitions: “The tract or the lecture will not be highly spiced enough for a taste inflamed by exhibitions which have overheated the passions, and we should expect to see our reformed drunkards lecturing to empty benches.”251 Audiences will become so expectant of thrilling temperance plays—in which the drunkard’s temporary ruin enables viewers a voyeurism into hedonistic life—that the more traditional temperance lecture will become an obsolete form. In his lament that “reformed drunkards” will no longer have audiences, the writer specifically refers to the Washington Temperance Benevolent Society (or the Washingtonian movement), a working-class based temperance organization active principally from 1840 to 1845. In Washingtonian


251 Ibid.
meetings, former drunkards would gather in halls and taverns and listen to each others’
dark and oftentimes gripping tales of degradation. These “experience speeches” found
instant media attention, as Washingtonians would violently re-enact their convulsions and
hallucinations from past drinking binges. Despite the Herald writer’s claims,
Washingtonian meetings were inherently sensationalistic affairs and largely inspired the
temperance theatre which superseded them.

The journalist may have been voicing a broader prejudice against mainstream
drama as well; in 1844, popular theatre still carried a stigma as a disreputable leisure
form. Many theatres, especially in working-class urban districts, cultivated noisy throngs,
rowdy behavior, and sexual bartering. Newspapers that endorsed attending temperance
melodramas for the sake of instruction simultaneously called for the elimination of
prostitutes or, in euphemistic terms, “the exclusion of the usual occupants of the third
tier.”

Even Washingtonians themselves largely avoided commercial theatres because
of the preponderance of alcohol in the lobbies; instead, Washingtonian chapters would
import popular plays and minstrel acts to designated temperate theatres.

At least initially, most temperance melodramas did not play at mainstream theatres either. They
appeared more often at new theatre spaces within curiosity museum theatres, dubbed

of early nineteenth-century theatres and arranged to meet men after the show. For studies on the third tier,
see Rosemarie Bank, “Hustlers in the House: The Bowery Theatre as a Mode of Historical Information,” in
The American Stage, ed. Ron Engle and Tice L. Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 47-64, and
Timothy J. Gilfoyle, City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-
1920 (New York, Norton, 1992), 110-112. According to Gilfoyle, New York’s Bowery Theatre was
especially well-known for its array of prostitutes and even the city’s upscale Park Theatre was not exempt.

253 Sean Wilentz, Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-
1850 (New York: Oxford UP, 1984), 310. The “third tier” became a term synonymous with the prostitutes
who picked up male clients in the high balcony seats of theatres.
“Moral Lecture Room[s],” which expressed no tolerance for the alcohol or criminal behavior rampant in more popular theatres. Museum producers used these behavior codes, as well as temperance dramas, to attract respectable, largely middle-class audiences.\textsuperscript{254}

The archetypal American temperance melodrama—and the focus of much of this chapter—is William H. Smith’s \textit{The Drunkard; or, the Fallen Saved!} (1844). The play remains significant for several reasons besides its status as the first major temperance drama by an American writer. Most earlier British temperance dramas followed working-class protagonists. Yet \textit{The Drunkard} features landlord Edward Middleton who begins as a middle-class character, mirroring the social status of the majority of the play’s spectators. \textit{The Drunkard} popularized new theatres within both Moses Kimball’s Boston Museum in 1844 and P.T. Barnum’s American Museum in 1850, where it ran for 144 non-consecutive and 100 uninterrupted performances,\textsuperscript{255} respectively, and established the “long-run” for American theatres.\textsuperscript{256} The play derived from and extended several formal

\textsuperscript{254} John Frick, \textit{Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America} (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 119.
\textsuperscript{255} Frick, \textit{Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform}, 113; Rosemarie Bank, \textit{Theatre Culture in America, 1825-1860} (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 147. Reports about production numbers vary, but these appear to be the most accurate. The show opened at Kimball’s Museum in February 1844 and reached at least 140 non-consecutive productions by the next year. For production histories see Frick, 143, Walter Meserve, \textit{Heralds of Promise: The Drama of the American People in the Age of Jackson, 1829-1849} (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986), 152, and Bank, \textit{Theatre Culture in America}, 143. Only Bruce McConachie reports the original Boston run as a more modest 101 performances; see \textit{Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820-1870} (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1992), 178. Opening July 8, 1850, Barnum’s production ran 100 consecutive performances to October 7\textsuperscript{th} and perhaps 150 total including matinees and evenings; see Judith N. McArthur, “Demon Run on the Boards: Temperance Melodrama and the Tradition of Antebellum Reform.” \textit{Journal of the Early Republic} 9.4 (1989): 520, and McConachie, \textit{Melodramatic Formations}, 178.
\textsuperscript{256} According to David Grimsted, during this era, most shows did not run more than a week. Only about twelve shows had performed at least fifty nights in the first half of the nineteenth century. “[E]ven a ‘long run’ rarely lasted more than a week.” Grimsted, \textit{Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800-
features of Washingtonian meetings and other temperance literature such as fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and hymns. Premiering in February of 1844, *The Drunkard* emerged just as Washingtonianism had begun to decline in popularity. Two later temperance plays, *Hot Corn* (1853) and *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* (1858), matched the popularity of *The Drunkard.* However, Smith’s play was the only temperance drama which attained box office success before Washingtonianism—and its priority on redeeming the drunkard himself—gave way to calls for legal prohibition of alcohol consumption. The watershed Maine Law in 1851 prohibited alcohol sales in Maine and inspired similar laws in twelve other states. With this legislative momentum in the 1850s, temperance dramatists often altered their agendas from reforming the individual to outlawing liquor sales and consumption.* While other temperance plays remain valuable for study, *The Drunkard* is the principal artifact of temperance drama from the pre-Maine-Law era. In fact, most American temperance dramas inherit their formal features from Smith’s play; as melodrama critic Bruce McConachie states, *The Drunkard*’s unprecedented success “establish[es] it as the model for most subsequent dramas of dipsomania.”

Critical debate about *The Drunkard* and about temperance melodrama in general has addressed the significance of temperance drama as a tool of temperance activism. In *Melodrama and the Myth of America*, Jeffrey Mason notes the lack of references to

---

257 Even so, *The Drunkard* maintained its popularity past the 1840s. There were an estimated 450 separate productions of the play from 1844 to 1878; see Jeffrey Mason, *Melodrama and the Myth of America* (Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1993), 85.
drama within temperance organizations’ reports and advocates’ memoirs as evidence that “the reformers do not seem to have regarded the plays as providing significant assistance in their struggle.”

Barbara Cohen-Stratyner’s exhaustive bibliography of published temperance texts supports Mason’s assertions: most antebellum temperance organizations released various tales, hymnbooks, sermons, and instructional guides but almost never dramatic plays. However, in his influential study *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America*, John Frick refutes any assumptions that temperance dramas were ineffective weapons and aims instead to “position temperance entertainments within the bounds of temperance activism and not on the margins.”

Similarly, Walter Meserve argues that theatre furthered the larger temperance cause, citing a *Spirit of the Times* review of an 1850 *Drunkard* production in New York that stated, “We know of nothing more conducive to the cause of Temperance than the spectacle at the Bowery [Theatre].”

Though scholars have addressed the play’s audiences to a limited extent, they largely ignore the play’s importance within the history of middle-class theatergoing. Many critics successfully pinpoint the links between Washingtonian experience speeches and temperance drama. Frick states that *The Drunkard* “structurally emulated the Washingtonian experience speech” with its “inverted arc” structure, which follows a

---

socially stable, sober protagonist as he plunges into drunken desolation and then finally returns to his initial position by signing the abstinence pledge.\textsuperscript{264} In addition, Bluford Adams writes that \textit{The Drunkard}'s delirium tremens scene “boasts all the horror and drama of a Washingtonian experience meeting.”\textsuperscript{265} Yet neither critic fully unpacks the ramifications of this dramatic borrowing in terms of reception, especially among the differing social classes. Filling in this void, Judith McArthur suggests that temperance drama appealed to a range of social classes; she argues that while the sub-genre’s morals appealed to the middle class, its graphic \textit{mise-en-scènes} simultaneously entertained many working-class viewers.\textsuperscript{266} While McArthur’s analysis astutely summarizes the play’s widespread interest, she fails to consider that many theatres began catering to socially homogenous spectators during the antebellum period. In their respective Boston and New York productions, Kimball and Barnum staged \textit{The Drunkard} specifically to attract new middle-class audiences to the theatre. Thus the historical and geographical contexts for each production remain essential to understanding how the American middle classes first attended American theatre.

This chapter contends that the American temperance melodrama, as emergent in the Washingtonian-era 1840s and represented principally by \textit{The Drunkard}, exploited working-class experience in order to create a new middle-class consumer community. The temperance drama accomplished this goal in three separate, though interrelated, ways. First, playwrights and theatre producers extracted formal features and narratives

\textsuperscript{264} Frick, \textit{Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform}, 121. Jeffrey Mason first used the “inverted arc” phrase to describe Washingtonian speeches; see Mason, \textit{Melodrama and the Myth}, 72.


\textsuperscript{266} McArthur, “Demon Rum,” 526-527.
from working-class Washingtonian meetings. Yet instead of functioning as a drama of social class leveling as did many Washingtonian meetings, middle-class temperance drama recast a working-class condition as a middle-class problem. Second, temperance drama operated simultaneously as a navigational guide to the cities of its most prominent performances (Boston and New York) and to the spectacles of working-class figures within them. Emphasizing urban orientation and safety, *The Drunkard* mirrors and complements emergent tourist and urban sketch literature during the period. The play’s producers either erase or falsely sanitize working-class city locations in order to attract middle-class tourists to their theatres. Third, the printed materials associated with temperance drama, especially the circulating play texts, became another method in which the middle classes could consume working-class culture. Advertised for families and read and dramatized in parlors, these texts allowed middle-class spectators to supplement their theatergoing experiences in a forum even further removed from working-class subjects.

**Class, Leisure, and Museum Theatre**

Scholars question exactly what the terms “middle class” and “middling class” constituted in antebellum America. Unlike the working classes who often mobilized “by evoking well-understood symbols and myths in response to the hostility of other classes,” middle classes “generally lack these sources of cohesion” according to Stuart Blumin.267 Lacking the oppression that the working classes faced, the middle classes took a longer time to form a unified identity. Whereas in eighteenth-century England and America, the

---

title “middle class” indicated a class level at the mean between an aristocracy and a working class, by the 1830s, the term applied to a large number of Americans located at any point between these poles.\(^{268}\) While many journalists and popular writers cited a two-class society consisting only of the wealthy and the poor—or the “upper ten and the lower million” as Lippard phrased it—a diverse central class was emerging.\(^{269}\) The middle class’s inchoateness can be largely attributed to its members’ persistent class fluidity. As Karen Halttunen writes, “[T]o be middle-class was to be, in theory, without fixed social status. Members of the middle class imagined themselves on a social escalator to greater wealth and prestige. They lived suspended between the facts of their present social position and the promise . . . of their economic future.”\(^{270}\) This liminal status enveloped a variety of different professions, including retailers, merchants, jobbers, salespeople, clerks, and non-manual businessmen and workers.\(^{271}\) The middle classes distinguished themselves not by envying the wealthy classes but rather by distancing themselves geographically from the working classes.\(^{272}\) Certain boardinghouses in cities appealed to single businessmen, clerks, and other professionals. Middle-class families often lived in private homes, replete with multiple bedrooms and at least one parlor, located a fair distance from artisans’ and manual workers’ dwellings.\(^{273}\)


\(^{269}\) The phrase was used throughout trade papers and inspired the title of George Lippard’s 1853 novel: *New York: Its Upper Ten and Lower Million* (Cincinnati: H.M. Rulison, 1853).

\(^{270}\) Halttunen, *Confidence Men*, 29.

\(^{271}\) Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 161, 244; McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 158.

\(^{272}\) McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 158.

\(^{273}\) Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 151, 160-161.
Historians also point towards leisure activities, and particularly theatergoing, as a principal source of how different social classes negotiated space. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, a single theatre in Philadelphia or New York could contain members from all the new republic’s classes. The “fashionables” sat in the high-priced boxes, the “unfashionables” watched from the cheap-seat gallery, and everyone in between these two categories occupied the modestly-priced pit. In 1820s and early 30s New York, the Bowery Theatre’s gallery members even walked through a separate entrance to shield them from the more respectable spectators in other sections. Yet in the mid-1830s, this three-tier division began converting into a two-tier one, and individual theatres started cultivating more homogenous types of viewers. In New York specifically, the Park Theatre became a more elite venue and the Chatham Theatre “served a distinctly working-class audience.” The Bowery Theatre downtown also played to laborers, as it had devolved from a previously intermediary theatre to one attracting the “raucous working class.” As George Odell states in his *Annals of New York Stage*, “Plebeian New York had fewer resources and narrower quarters; it therefore found solace at the Chatham or the Bowery.” Indeed, as working-class institutions, the Chatham and the Bowery often fought for the same audience and offered rival productions of the same plays.

275 Bank, *Theatre Culture in America*, 208. From 1826 to 1836, the Bowery’s box and pit seats were accessible via a main entrance on Bowery Street, but the gallery was accessible only via an entrance on Elizabeth Street.
276 Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 144.
277 Bank, *Theatre Culture in America*, 50.
279 See, for example, *The Mysteries of Paris* in November 1843; Odell, *Annals*, V.32.
Hence, theatrical programming often reaffirmed social divisions in the 1840s. In the first half of the nineteenth century, theatres’ repertoires changed from a dominance of comedy and tragedy to two-thirds melodrama and one-third comedy.280 A review of play titles from the mid-1840s reveals the growing prevalence of melodrama, especially at the lower-class New York theatres: *The Pirate’s Legacy, or, The Wreckers Fate* (Bowery, 1843), *The Council of Blood, or, the Butchers of Ghent* (Bowery, 1844), *The Wizard of the Wave* (Bowery, 1845), *The Wreck of the Rapid* (Chatham, 1845), and *The Seven Escapes of Adelaide of Dresden* (Chatham, 1846). These productions often involved elaborate machinery and stage effects. The playbill for an 1840 Bowery production of *The Pirate’s Signal, or the Bridge of Death!!!* boasts about a climactic “Explosion of the Powder Magazine and Destruction of the Boats!,”281 while the bill for the Bowery’s 1840 show *Yankees in China* promises a “Moat of Real Water—Deep, Dark and Silent” onstage.282 Of course, these melodramas were interspersed with productions of Shakespeare’s plays, standard comedies (such as Edward Bulwer Lytton’s *Money*, Dion Boucicault’s *Old Heads and Young Hearts*), and respected European tragedies (Schiller’s *The Robbers* and *William Tell* and similar fare). Melodrama often played to the eager Bowery and Chatham audiences who principally consisted, as one contemporary wrote, of those “living—somehow—from day to day and week to week—upon the labor of their

---

280 Bank, *Theatre Culture in America*, 111.
282 Bowery Theatre, playbill. *Yankees in China*, 23, July 1840. Playbill Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Indeed, the Bowery soon gained a reputation for being “steeped” in “gore and horrors;” see Odell, *Annals*, V.108.
hands.”283 Walt Whitman remembers that even as early as the 1830s, the Bowery was “pack’d from ceiling to pit with its audience mainly of alert, well dress’d, full-blooded young and middle-aged men, the best average of American-born mechanics.”284 Meanwhile the Park Theatre looked down upon melodrama and presented high-minded dramas and operas for upper-class audiences.285 Bowery stars Edwin Forrest and Edwin Booth would not play engagements at the Park because, in Whitman’s estimation, “their performances were taboo’d by ‘polite society’” for “being too robustuous.”286

Although assumptions about absolute class separation at theatres must be made with some caution, a general fragmentation began cementing by the 1840s. Sometimes low- and high-end theatres offered shows outside their expected programs, and theatres never presented one type of play exclusively. The aristocratic Park occasionally produced spectacle-centric melodramas such as *The Bohemians of Paris* (in 1845), while the low-end Chatham and Bowery sporadically hosted operas such as *Fra Divolo* (in 1848) and *Maritana* (in 1848), respectively. Certainly, some overlap of audiences still occurred in

---

283 George G. Foster, *New York by Gas-Light: With Here and There a Streak of Sunshine*, 1850, in *New York by Gas-Light and Other Urban Sketches*, ed. Blumin (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990), 87. Occasionally, a high-class opera and ballet would play at the Bowery, attempting to improve the theatre’s reputation and attract higher-class clientele. For example, Odell records an opera, William Vincent Wallace’s *Maritana*, which launched a temporary programming change in the summer of 1848: “The season of opera and ballet must have been tempting to playgoers not habituated to visiting the Bowery; what Shirtsleeves and Peanuts thought of it I do not even dare to conjecture”; see *Annals*, V.351. For more about the popular culture of the Bowery neighborhood including and beyond its theatre, see Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 257-271 and Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1987), 89-101.


286 Whitman, *Prose Works*, 594. Whitman’s assessment might not be entirely accurate. Though both actors may have refused engagements at certain points, Odell records Forrest playing in *Damon and Pythias* and *The Gladiator* at the Park in the fall of 1836, and in *Othello, King Lear, and King Lear* the following fall, among other performances. He visited the Park more infrequently in the 1840s. Booth appeared at the Park much less often, but returned there after fourteen years to perform *Richard III* in 1843. Odell IV.112, 191, 617.
these theatres and others. Yet as evident in the first-hand accounts and programming records, the different classes of audiences had begun to split to separate theatres. Grimsted, McConachie, Blumin, Faye Dudden, and Paul Gilmore all note that, beginning in the late 1830s and early 1840s, most theatres began attracting socially homogenous groups of spectators. The press instructed potential theatergoers about the increasingly discrete clientele at the different theatres and helped facilitate the process. For example, a \textit{Dramatic Mirror} editorial from 1841 complains that Philadelphia’s Chestnut St. Theatre has become “exclusively aristocratic,” pandering to the elite but not inviting even the “middling class” and its families. Another article in Hudson, New York’s \textit{Rural Repository} entitled, “The Newsboy in the Pit of the Chatham Theatre” (1846), portrays the eponymous New York theatre hosting a crowd of restless youths munching on peanuts and yelling at the prompter to commence the show (fig. 2.1). By reporting on the class makeup of audiences at various theatres, newspapers encouraged audiences to

\footnotesize

\begin{itemize}
\item Bank points out a fair amount of overlap in repertory material between the Park, Chatham, and Bowery, and indeed many traditional comedies, tragedies, and even some fairy-tale extravaganzas such as \textit{Cinderella} found productions at each theatre during the antebellum era. Melodramas (but never spectacle melodramas) occasionally appeared in more elite theatres, but nearly as frequently as tragedies appeared in working-class ones. Bank also warns about the problems “in hierarchizing theatres along class lines”; see \textit{Theatre Culture in America}, 208. Yet primary evidence shows that different theatres began cultivating large groups of one social class or the other by the 1840s. Melanie Dawson also cites the hierarchal division of theatrical audiences according to social class at mid-century; see Dawson, \textit{Laboring to Play: Home Entertainment and the Spectacle of Middle-Class Cultural Life, 1850-1920} (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2005), 33.. See also Richard Butsch, \textit{The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1900} (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 66-81.
\item “Philadelphia Theatricals,” \textit{The Dramatic Mirror, and Literary Companion}, September 25, 1841, 54.
\item “The News-Boy In the Pit of the Chatham Theatre,” \textit{Rural Repository} (Hudson N.Y.), May 23, 1846, 1. The article describes the boy as admiring famous melodrama actor James Kirby, who notably played the role of Copsewood in one of the first temperance dramas imported to New York from England, Douglas Jerrold’s \textit{Fifteen Years of a Drunkard’s Life}, which was produced in May of 1841; for remarks on that production, see Odell, \textit{Annals, IV.489}.
\end{itemize}
attend the theatre most associated with their social tier. Even when individual theatres tried appealing to multiple classes, the press strengthened social divisions by designating each theatre as belonging to a single class.

These diverging theatrical tastes and audiences found their most violent expression in the Astor Place Riot in May of 1849. Following a series of more minor theatre riots throughout the 1830s and 1840s, the Astor Place Riot resulted from a long-standing feud between the American-born, Bowery hero Edwin Forrest and the

Fig. 2.1: Image of an newsboy eager for the show to begin at New York’s Chatham Theatre. From “The News-Boy In the Pit of the Chatham Theatre.” Rural Repository (Hudson N.Y.), May 23, 1846. Rare Book Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

English Shakespearean actor William Charles Macready. Forrest’s followers were Bowery regulars, almost exclusively working-class, who admired the actor’s virile acting style and supported American-born performers. Simultaneously, a contingent of upper-class “mercantile aristocrats” followed the popular trends of England. They preferred the more restrained method of actors like Macready and promoted venues like the Astor Place Opera House which were devoted to a higher culture than mainstream theatres.292 On the morning of the riot, sensation novelist and working-class champion Ned Buntline posted bills over New York City underscoring the tensions which had been simmering within theatres for years: “WORKING MEN, Shall AMERICANS OR ENGLISH RULE in this city?”293 In response, Bowery boys and other working-class participants congregated outside a performance of Macready’s Macbeth at Astor Place. Those who managed to infiltrate the theatre threw chairs and terminated the performance; those outside started fires and battled with militia. By the next day, twenty-two participants had died and over 150 were wounded, and the press quickly diagnosed the fray as exposing what “every good patriot hitherto has considered it his duty to deny—a high and a low class.”294 Yet this cultural divide appears more than a simple bifurcation. Importantly, Faye Dudden attributes this dispersal of different social classes to separate theatres—a fragmentation which culminated in the Astor Place Riot—as “partly the result of the

middle-class drive for status.” The middle classes sought to establish theatrical spaces separate from the many working-class theatres in order to declare themselves a distinct population. Hence, locating these middle-class audience members becomes essential to a historiography of antebellum American theatre.

Two museum entrepreneurs, Moses Kimball of the Boston Museum and P.T. Barnum of New York’s American Museum, created America’s first theatres intended for exclusively middle-class audiences. In 1838, after failed starts in real estate and newspaper publishing, Kimball bought Boston’s New England Museum, which had been operating since 1912. His new museum, which opened in 1841, continued to display the New England Museum’s paintings as well as Chinese curiosities, statuary pieces, and stuffed giraffes and elephants, among other curiosities (fig. 2.2). In the 1843-1844 season, Kimball decided to expand with a dramatic company. Within one of his Museum’s large rooms, he installed 1,200 seats in flat rows in place of gallery, pit, and box designations and deemed the space not a theatre but a “Moral Lecture Room.” He also hired the Wales-born William H. Smith, a journeyman actor in the United States since 1827, to serve as both stage manager and performer for his Museum’s theatrical shows. The Museum was so successful that, in 1846, Kimball moved it to a significantly larger building that could accommodate all of his attractions and allow room for future expansion (figs. 2.3 and 2.4).

Also beginning his museum career in 1841, Barnum purchased Scudder’s American Museum and reopened it as the American Museum the next year (fig. 2.5).

Like Kimball, Barnum showcased a variety of attractions, including insects, bows and arrows, fish tanks, landscape paintings, an Egyptian mummy, and live armadillos and zebras. More colleagues than rivals, Kimball and Barnum wrote each other almost weekly during the 1840s, trading advice and even exhibits. In his own lecture room, Barnum initially favored variety acts such as minstrel troupes, assorted giants, burlesque operas, and fake dwarf Tom Thumb. Admiring his friend Kimball’s success, Barnum soon ventured to produce full length theatrical productions in the lecture rooms of his short-lived Philadelphia Museum in 1849 and then again in his New York American Museum in 1850 (fig. 2.6). Both entrepreneurs found great success with their theatrical productions and other attractions. Upon the Boston Museum’s closing in 1903, *New England Magazine* claimed that from the 1850s to its end, the venue maintained “a half century of such continuous and substantial prosperity as no other Boston playhouse could or can claim.” 297 For his part, Barnum claimed that he sold 38 million tickets of admission to his American Museum between 1841 and 1865 (when it succumbed to a fire).298

Kimball and Barnum cultivated middle-class spectators specifically by reimagining the theatre as an educational and genteel experience. Though evidence exists that both working-class and even upper-class patrons visited the museums to some

---

298 A.H. Saxon, *P. T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 107. Saxon notes that many of these tickets were no doubt repeat customers, but the number is still staggering considering that the total population of the United States in 1865 was 35 million.
degree, \(^{299}\) “Kimball, Barnum, and the museum theatre movement in general hitched their show business wagons to the ascendant new middle class,” which included “salaried workers, retail clerks, upwardly mobile entrepreneurs” and their families. \(^{300}\) The museums reinforced the middle class’s behavioral codes of decorum and gentility, qualities separating them from the boisterous viewing habits of the immigrants, working classes, and participants in the Astor Place Riot. Both Kimball and Barnum cultivated these new spectators through a variety of methods, including producing plays that featured, as one contemporary reviewer phrased it, “excellent moral point[s]” and “good instruction.” \(^{301}\) The proprietors also specified exactly what and whom would not be present. Kimball promised that “all profane, expletive, and indecent allusions will be totally expunged,” \(^{302}\) and the Boston Museum’s lecture room was soon nicknamed the “deacon’s theatre” for the large numbers of clergymen who patronized it. \(^{303}\) In 1850, *The Hudson River Chronicle* praised Barnum’s Museum as a place “where all those who disapprove of the dissipations, debaucheries, profanity, vulgarity and other abominations which characterize our modern theatres may visit without fear of hearing or seeing

---

\(^{299}\) William Clapp asserts that while representatives from “all classes” attended the Boston Museum in its opening years, the venue became most notable for attracting those from wealthy and educated social circles as well as those in respectable classes who had not visited theatres before; see Clapp, *A Record of the Boston Stage* (Boston: James Munroe, 1853), 471.

\(^{300}\) Robert Clyde Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1991), 64. In addition to Allen’s assertion that mainly middle-class audiences populated the museum theatres, Dudden, Adams, and Paul Gilmore suggest that the museums intended to cultivate a middle-class (and specifically not working-class) audience, and they succeeded; see Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre*, 112; Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 121-124; and Gilmore, *Genuine Article*, 34.

McConachie speculates that some working-class citizens may have attended museum theatres based on the overlapping programming (*The Drunkard*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, etc.) with working-class theatres. However, he also asserts that Catholic immigrants and the urban poor were shut out from the museums due to the 25-cent ticket price; see *Melodramatic Formations*, 196, 285.

\(^{301}\) *Boston Daily Atlas*, March 5, 1844, 2.

\(^{302}\) Quoted in Claire McGlinchee, *The First Decade of the Boston Museum* (Boston: Bruce Humphries, 1940), 21-22.

anything that might shock the most susceptible moral sensibility.”

Unlike most other theatres, no alcohol was served or permitted, and ads specified that “no improper persons, male or female, [are] admitted.” Kimball scolded men who spoke too loudly during the performance, and Barnum’s playbills required audiences to remain in their seats, as those who leave prematurely “seriously annoy, however involuntarily, the other spectators and the company, and destroy the effect of the Final of the piece.”

Contradicting the policies of most contemporaneous theatres, Kimball and Barnum encouraged women and families to patronize their venues. Both museums singled out a reduced ticket price of 12 ½ cents for children under ten (as opposed to a flat 25 cents for an adult), and offered reserved slip seats for a family of up to seven members. Soon after The Drunkard premiered at the Boston Museum in 1844, local advertisements declared it “a capital chance for families” to attend the theatre. In fact, both Kimball and Barnum presented several matinees a week to prompt women to attend with their children. This policy contrasted sharply with other theatres’ bills which rarely mentioned children except to discourage their presence. Even middle-class reformers who had previously denounced the theatre in the 1830s came to embrace the museum.

---

304 Hudson River Chronicle, July 2, 1850, 3.
305 Frick, Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform, 120; Hudson River Chronicle, July 2, 1850, 3.
306 Barnum’s American Museum, playbill. Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 16 Nov. 1853. Playbill Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
307 Series of Boston Museum and Barnum’s American Museum playbills from this era can be found at Princeton’s Rare Books and Special Collection playbill collection and at Harvard’s Theatre Collection at Houghton Library.
308 Boston Evening Transcript, April 3, 1844.
309 A playbill for the Chatham Theatre’s production of 7 Escapes of Adelaide of Dresden! in 1847 specified that “if you have a child, you won’t be admitted to the boxes.” 24 Sep., 1846. Playbill Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
venues. Through their strict conduct guidelines and their continued repertoires of “moral” shows, these new theatres succeeded not just in attracting but also in solidifying a new middle class.

---

310 Gilmore, *Genuine Article*, 34.
Fig. 2.2: Kimball’s first Boston Museum, Corner of Tremont and Bromfield Streets, 1841. Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
Figs. 2.3 and 2.4: Exterior (top) and Lobby (bottom), Kimball’s second Boston Museum, Corner of Tremont and School Streets, ca. 1856. R. L. Midgley, *Sights in Boston and Suburbs, or Guide to the Stranger* (Boston: John P. Jewett & Co., 1856), 34, 37.
Figs. 2.5 and 2.6: Exterior (top) and “The Lecture Room” (bottom), Barnum’s American Museum, New York, Corner of Broadway and Ann Street, 1850. *Barnum’s American Museum Illustrated* (New York: n.p., 1850), 1, 30. Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
I. Washingtonianism and *The Drunkard*

The temperance melodrama, which became a central facet of middle-class museum theatre, derived several of its features from the theatricality of working-class Washingtonian meetings. Yet the changing venues and audiences reveal two separate spectatorial experiences. The middle-class museum theatres essentially stripped Washingtonian spectacle of its working-class roots and social goals. While Washingtonianism valued empathy for the drunkard as a way to bond the working and the middle classes, the middle-class-exclusive museum theatres provoked solidification only among its socially homogenous viewers. Furthermore, by replacing the working-class drunkard with a middle-class protagonist in *The Drunkard*, playwright Smith eliminates the central Washingtonian narrative of upward social mobility. Instead of conveying the Washingtonian speaker’s ability to rise from the working to the middle class through sobriety, Smith expresses the middle-class drunkard’s potential to pledge abstinence and thus reclaim a social status to which he is already entitled.

**The Social Goals of Washingtonianism**

From its foundation, the Washington Temperance Society represented a marked contrast to earlier temperance societies and soon became America’s most prevalent organization opposing alcohol. In February of 1840, six social-drinking Baltimore artisans decided jokingly to attend a temperance lecture.\(^{311}\) They exited the lecture unexpectedly moved and thereafter established the Washington Temperance Benevolent Society, a forum in which drinkers could exchange stories and pledge their future

\(^{311}\) Pegram, *Battling Demon Rum*, 27.
Within months, Washingtonian chapters began appearing throughout the Northeast. Previous temperance groups such as the American Temperance Society (co-founded by Presbyterian minister Lyman Beecher in 1826) or its eventual successor the American Temperance Union (led by Congregationalist reverend John Marsh in 1833) issued zealous, often apocalyptic warnings about the sin of intemperance. In contrast, Washingtonianism was secular in nature and discouraged religious expression during meetings. The organization adopted the platform of “moral suasion,” namely of redeeming the drunkard through appealing to his conscience as opposed to legal prohibition of alcohol consumption. Washingtonian members would rove through city slums in search of drunkards, offering food and shelter in exchange for commitments to sobriety. Most Washingtonian meetings centered on the reformed drunkards’ experience speeches, “spontaneous, unpolished speeches from ordinary men” intended to create a feeling of empathy in audiences and induce listeners to sign the abstinence pledge. Washingtonians also offered a substitute for tavern culture, providing parades,
picnics, fairs, reading rooms and often soliciting minstrel acts, songs, and jokes.\textsuperscript{317}

Following its foundation, Washingtonianism expanded swiftly into loosely-connected chapters and sects. The society reported 200,000 members by the end of 1841 and one million the following year.\textsuperscript{318} New York alone maintained 38 separate Washingtonian chapters in 1842, and public events often drew large crowds, such as an 1841 City Hall Park meeting which drew 4,000 spectators, 2,000 of whom signed the abstinence pledge at its conclusion.\textsuperscript{319}

While Washingtonianism welcomed participants from all social backgrounds, the crux of the movement focused on the working classes. According to temperance historian Thomas Pegram, Washingtonianism strived to usher temperance reform “beyond its foundations in evangelical Protestantism and middle-class respectability to become an authentic expression of working-class culture.”\textsuperscript{320} Following Washingtonians’ six founders—who were a tailor, a carpenter, a blacksmith, a wheelwright, a coachmaker, and a silversmith—the majority of the Washingtonian members were working-class in status.\textsuperscript{321} Many were master craftsmen or journeymen, some were ethnic workers, and others still were plucked from slums and correction houses.\textsuperscript{322} One study of New York and Massachusetts Washingtonian populations suggests that artisans and laborers comprised up to 40 percent of the movement’s activists, and the lack of traceable names

\textsuperscript{318} Hendler, “Bloated Bodies,” 126. Though Hendler notes the numbers were likely exaggerated.
\textsuperscript{320} Pegram, \textit{Battling Demon Rum}, 26-27.
implies “that many more belonged to the least-skilled, most transient occupations.”

Washingtonianism’s two most famous speakers, John H. Hawkins and John Bartholomew Gough, were a journeyman hatter and a bookbinder, respectively. In its earliest stages, the Washingtonian movement included a minority of middle-class participants as well. Merchants and professionals often assumed roles as Washingtonian officers; clerks, doctors, lawyers, and entrepreneurs also joined the cause. Nor was drunkenness a prerequisite for membership: as many as 50 percent of Washingtonians had never consumed alcohol. Women constituted at least half the audience at experience meetings and formed separate Martha Washingtonian societies.

This inclusiveness, however, ultimately derailed the Washingtonians’ success. Middle-class members and some upwardly mobile artisans soon attempted to control the behavior of the working-class members. As early as 1842, a secret society named the Sons of Temperance began recruiting “respectable” Washingtonians. Meanwhile, wealthy and evangelical temperance groups also reemerged and siphoned off middle-class Washingtonians to help their mounting efforts for legal prohibition. Backsliding of Washingtonian members during the 1842 and 1844 political campaigns also disillusioned participants across social classes, and Washingtonian membership began

---

324 Pegram, *Battling Demon Rum*, 28; Tyrrell, *Sobering Up*, 165. Still, Pegram writes, “the new movement was plainly built to support working-class drinkers” (28). Evidence also suggests that a very small number of wealthy men may have temporally joined the Washingtonian cause; see Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform*, 126.
325 Tyrrell, *Sobering Up*, 162.
declining sharply in 1844. By June of 1845, the Sons of Temperance had absorbed the majority of middle-class members, and they insisted on respectable conduct and privacy versus the heightened publicity of the experience meetings.329 Finding near-instant success as a speaker, Gough soon moved beyond Washingtonian taverns and began a career as a lecturer to increasingly middle- and upper-class audiences in churches and temperance halls.330 Sean Wilentz notes that two smaller-scale fraternal lodges, the Rechabites and the Order of the Good Samaritans, remained committed to the working classes and moral suasion principles, and continued to redeem homeless drunkards through the early 1850s.331 Yet with almost no official Washingtonian activity recorded after 1847, the traditional Washingtonian gatherings and their centralized speeches of affective exchange had all but vanished mere years after their first appearance.332

**Revising the Washingtonian Speech in Museum Theatre**

As “respectable” Washingtonians filtered into middle-class temperance organizations and workers shifted their allegiances back to labor unions, playwright Smith and museum producer Kimball imported working-class culture—in the form of the Washingtonian experience speech—into the middle-class drama. At least twenty different temperance dramas, both British and American, appeared in American theatres before the

329 Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 313.
332 Maxwell, “Washingtonian Movement,” 425-426. The only exception seems to be the Boston Washingtonian Society, which may have continued to convene as late as 1860.
Maine Law era began in 1851. Yet only Smith’s *The Drunkard* found widespread success. Temperance melodrama first gained popularity in England with Douglas Jerrold’s *Fifteen Years of a Drunkard’s Life* (1832), which played frequently at working-class theatres like the Coburg, the Britannia, and the Surrey throughout the 1830s. The “prototype of the temperance drama,” *Fifteen Years* featured two drunkards—one middle-class and one working-class—whose fondness for drink ruins them. Like other English temperance-themed plays, including Jerrold’s *The Rent Day* (c. 1832) and George Dibdin Pitt’s *The Last Nail; or The Drunkard’s Doom* (1832) which appeared in American theatres in the 1830s, *Fifteen Years* saw limited success in the United States.

Frick suspects that the dark conclusions of many English temperance dramas restricted their popularity in America; after all, one of *Fifteen Years*’ drunkard leads is imprisoned and the other murders his wife and then spontaneously drops dead. George Cruikshank’s serial illustration *The Bottle* (1847) spawned at least ten different dramatic versions in England, all of which went virtually unnoticed in America. Even though *The Bottle* was one of few major temperance plays of the pre-Maine Law era, a combination of its exclusively working-class characters and grim conclusion (the drunkard kills his wife by

---

333 See appendix for titles.
334 Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform*, 200. Contrary to American temperance movements which focused mainly on restoring middle-class respectability to those who had fallen, England’s middle-class temperance movement focused more on rehabilitating the working class (83-85).
335 *Fifteen Years* premiered at New York’s Chatham Theatre on May 26th of 1841. However, it was replaced with a new show the next night and was rarely revived; see Odell, *Annals*, IV.489.
336 John W. Frick, “Drama, Representations of Temperance in.” *Alcohol and Temperance in Modern History: A Global Encyclopedia*, eds. Jack S. Blocker Jr., Ian R. Tyrrell, and David M. Fairy (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2003), 200-201. T.P. Taylor’s adaptation of *The Bottle* premiered at the Park Theatre in New York on November 15, 1847 for a short run and saw a second production at New York’s Bowery Theatre the next month. It also played at the Boston Museum in November of 1847. However, it was revived infrequently, and was entirely gone from the New York repertory by the early 1850s; see Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform*, 106.
bludgeoning her with a bottle and ends up mad in the almshouse) turned off American spectators. Certainly, mainstream American theatre still had its skeptics, and the American Temperance Union condemned theatrical shows while only reluctantly embracing other popular forms like temperance fiction and poetry. Though temperance novels and journalism found many receptive readers during the period, only the widespread popularity of early 1840s Washingtonianism triggered the emergence of an American-penned temperance melodrama.

Premiering at the Boston Museum in February of 1844, *The Drunkard* follows a familiar formula from other temperance literature and Washingtonian speeches. The Boston Museum’s stage manager William H. Smith, a reformed drunkard himself, was credited as the playwright, though he almost certainly did not compose it by himself. The play’s plot tracks landlord Edward Middleton who, due to his endless thirst for alcohol, plunges from a blissful country life with his wife Mary and daughter Julia in acts

---

337 Augst, “Temperance, Mass Culture,” 313-314. More omnipresent in the 1840s were temperance concerts, some sponsored by Washingtonian societies, but these appeared more often in churches, temperance halls, and second-tier venues. Odell writes of temperance “infesting concert halls” in 1843; see *Annals* V., 684.

338 In the first published version of the play, the preface writer states that Kimball commissioned a play from an unknown gentleman whose script was “entirely deficient in stage tact and dramatic effect,” and thus Smith was charged with revising it for production. See Anon., “Preface,” *The Drunkard: or, The Fallen Saved! By William H. Smith* (Boston: Jones’s Publishing House, 1847), 6. Historians have since identified the gentleman in question as most likely John Pierpont, a Unitarian clergyman who also lectured on temperance. See Amy Hughes, “Answering the Amusement Question: Antebellum Temperance Drama and the Christian Endorsement of Leisure,” *New England Theatre Journal* 15 (2004): 2; McArthur, “Demon Rum,” 519, and Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform*, 116-118. Other sources, including an exchange between Barnum and *The New York Herald*, posit the author of the original “story in dialogue” as New York citizen William Comstock. See *New York Herald*, June 4, 1850, 2, and “The Author of the Drunkard,” *New York Herald*, June 7, 1850, 7. There are also suspicions that *The Drunkard* was originally the winner of a play contest, as Boston Museum bills from 1844 advertised a $100 prize for the “best moral domestic drama adapted to the stock company of the Museum.” In this case, either Pierpoint or Comstock would have answered the advertisement. Quoted in Joseph Sabin, *A Dictionary of Books Relating to America from its Discovery to the Present Time*. 29 vol. (New York: Bibliographical Society of America, 1929), XXI.190.
I and II to a state of intoxicated decay within the urban slums in acts III and IV. Mary and Julia chase Edward to the city but cannot find him and soon fall into destitution themselves. All three characters are ultimately saved by Edward’s foster brother William and good Samaritan Rencelaw, who restore the Middletons to their former village and middle-class positions in the final act. But their redemption takes place only after Edward’s drinking binge finds him on the brink of suicide and Mary and Julia’s maladaptation to urban life leaves them sickly and starving. Smith fills out the cast with recognizable stage types such as the Yankee mechanic (Edward’s foster brother William), the local spinster (Miss Spindle), and various country folk.

Several formal features of Washingtonian meetings and lectures appear in nearly unedited form within *The Drunkard*, suggesting distinct working-class origins for elements of the play. A centerpiece of *The Drunkard*, and successive temperance dramas, became the delirium tremens scene, the drunkard’s low point before redemption or death. In one street scene, Edward wriggles on the ground and yells to William—whom he does not recognize—about “these snakes, how they coil round you.” So popular was the scene that it was excerpted and presented independent of the play, and theatre managers sought able-bodied actors to sustain the required thrashing about stage night after night. In the early 1840s, Washingtonian speakers too shared the frights of delirium

---


340 Bank, *Theatre Culture in America*, 144; McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 192. Bank reports that the scene was produced for both serious and comic purposes with other sketches, while McConachie suspects most extracts were performed as parody within minstrel shows.
tremens. The *New York Herald* reported about one of Gough’s 1845 lectures, “The horrors and terrors of his delirium tremens were so thrilling, that the pocket kerchiefs of the audience were frequently in requisition.” The terror of the DTs was rooted in the drunkard’s detachment, both from reality and from himself. This fear translates regardless of audience as well; Smith replicates the drunkard’s lack of both bodily and intellectual control which so affected Washingtonian audiences. In both the play and the Washingtonian meeting, the rational man’s sudden shift into a discombobulated creature triggers the audience’s instant emotional response. Smith especially magnifies Edward’s disorientation. The character shifts between hallucinating about snakes and believing he is at home with his family. He cries out to the pleading William, “Hush! Gently—gently, while she’s asleep. I’ll kiss her. She would reject me, did she know it, hush! There, heaven bless my Mary, bless her and her child—hush!” (40). Smith pinpoints Edward’s geographical confusion as a particularly horrific side effect of alcohol abuse. Yet Edward also demonstrates glimmers of self-awareness: he counters the visions of his sleeping wife Mary with the knowledge of how his secret drinking threatens to destroy his family. In this scene, Smith conveys not just the physical and emotional terrors of the drunkard’s experience but also the tragic ramifications at home.

---

341 Critic Amy Hughes suggests that Smith derived this feature directly from Gough’s speeches within Boston the previous year; see Hughes, “John Gough’s Afternoon at the Theatre; Or, the Tyranny of an Account Book.” *Performing Arts Resources* 28 (2011), 108. While her theory might be partially true, delirium tremens scenes were popular in temperance literature for years before Washingtonian speakers drew audiences. For examples, see David Reynolds, “Black Cats and Delirium Tremens: Temperance and the American Renaissance,” in *The Serpent in the Cup: Temperance in American Literature*, eds. David S. Reynolds and Debra J. Rosenthal (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1997), 22-59.

Indeed, tales of domestic collapse found visceral expression within the Washingtonian speeches of the period. Temperance-themed sensation novels often highlighted the drunkard’s neglect or abuse of his family, but the first-hand descriptions of the broken home proved even more central to Washingtonian lectures. Gough’s speeches, for instance, presented various scenes of intemperance’s devastating effects on domestic life (fig. 2.7). According to one eyewitness account, Gough laid out “the sketch of the drunkard—the husband, as he sits in this apathy in the grogery” while the wife “sits in her destitution and misery, in the cold damp cellar, or the rickety garret, working her fingers to the bone” next to “half-starving, half-naked shivering children.”

Similarly in The Drunkard, while Edward is out drinking with friends, Mary sits in a “wretched garret,” sewing shirts as Julia sleeps on a “straw bed on [the] floor, covered in part by a miserable ragged rug” (35). In both Gough’s and Smith’s scenes, the emotive power is derived from the juxtaposition of the drunkard’s revels and the simultaneous despair within his family’s domestic space. Smith reproduces tropes from the popular Washingtonian circuit both because they are based in real-life experience and because they serve as proven commodities. Even if the Boston Museum audience may have included more middle-class spectators than the initial Washingtonian meetings, the narrative power of the happy family’s ruin affected all social classes.

The press eagerly linked the theatrical Washingtonian speeches to the new temperance melodrama. In its review of *The Drunkard*, Boston’s *Daily Atlas* wrote that the play “is one of the best temperance lectures ever preached.”344 *Ballou’s Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion* added that Smith’s work was “more potent than fifty lectures

---

delivered before the same number,”\(^{345}\) while the *Gazette of the Union* made an even higher calculation of Barnum’s production in 1850: “The ‘Drunkard’ is calculated to do more good in the cause of Temperance, in one performance, than the delivery of a hundred Temperance Lectures.”\(^{346}\) Despite the American Temperance Union’s general distaste for theatricals and occasional newspaper reviews diagnosing the play as “irredeemably bad and base,” most outlets recognized its assistance to the nation’s temperance cause, supporting Frick’s suspicions.\(^{347}\) A converted drunkard and Sons of Temperance member himself, Barnum even reproduced ceremonial aspects of Washingtonian meetings by inviting *The Drunkard’s* spectators to sign the abstinence pledge in the lobby after performances.\(^{348}\) As Barnum boasts of the *Drunkard* run in his autobiography *Struggles and Triumphs, or, Forty Years Recollections* (1869), “Almost every hour during the day and evening, women could be seen bringing their husbands to the Museum to sign the pledge.”\(^{349}\) Thus the American temperance melodrama extended the basic goals of Washingtonianism. By adding scenery, additional sub-plots, and supporting characters to what were previously first-person speeches behind lecterns, playwrights effectively dramatized the world of the Washingtonian experience speech.

\(^{345}\) “American Museum, New York.” *Gleason’s Pictorial Drawing-room Companion*, January 1, 1853, 73. The article also contains numerous interior and exterior pictures of Barnum’s Museum.

\(^{346}\) “The New Lecture Room at Barnum’s Museum.” *Gazette of the Union, Golden Rule and Odd-Fellows’ Family Companion* 12 (1850), 400.

\(^{347}\) “A Mock Guillotine—Delirium Tremens on the Stage.” *The International Monthly Magazine of Literature, Science and Art*, July 1, 1850, 8.


\(^{349}\) P.T. Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs: or Forty Years’ Recollections of P.T. Barnum written by himself* (London: Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, 1869), 265.
However, given the changes in format, venue, and especially audience, the *function* of middle-class temperance melodrama differed significantly from its working-class basis in the experience speech. Foremost among the differences is Smith’s resistance to the egalitarianism crucial to Washingtonian meetings. He presents Edward as a middle-class landlord of a country cottage rather than a Washingtonian-like urban worker. As the play opens, Mary Wilson (later Mary Middleton following her marriage to Edward) fears her cottage will be sold following the death of Edward’s father. Assuming his deceased father’s landlord duties, Edward initially uses his elevated status for good. He permits Mary to keep the cottage despite her inability to pay the bills, and he generously buys his brother William a custom-tailored suit. As Rosemarie Bank writes, Edward is “not a worker but a manager of (inherited) money.” By recasting the drunkard as initially middle-class, Smith creates a drama for the middle classes exclusively about themselves. Though most Washingtonian speakers were lower-class in status, listeners were both lower- and middle-class. This inclusiveness supported one important goal of the movement: erasing social boundaries. Meetings helped the middle classes “identify with the poor,” and one contemporary observer of an 1842 Washingtonian temperance procession in Massachusetts shows just how diverse the society could be. The reporter states that Marblehead fishermen strode with Middlesex county clergymen, and the U.S Naval Washington Total Abstinence Society featured “colored seamen” walking beside their shipmates. With the exception of the rich, the

---

350 Bank, *Theatre Culture in America*, 146.
writer comments, Washingtonianism “is happily uniting all classes in the great work of raising the fallen.”

However, *The Drunkard* reverses this social harmony: in a theatre with a large middle-class presence watching a middle-class protagonist, the tale reinforces class divisions. The audience members could watch Edward as a reflection or derelict version of themselves. He represents a cautionary tale of a middle-class citizen who, through both internal and external forces, falls to a degraded social level. Smith speaks specifically to the middle-class spectators who are well aware of their own precarious social positions. By dramatizing their prevalent fears of social demotion, Smith unifies the middle class as a theatergoing collective. Such a practice directly opposed the Washingtonian meetings and sponsored talks which unified working-class drunkards and multi-class listeners via common feeling. According to a 1844 *Liberator* article, one of Gough’s speeches to prisoners at a New Hampshire jail united people from several social positions “as if moved by one will, the tears at the same time gushing from every eye, and the prisoners and the officers and attendants, and the citizens who had come in, all sobbing aloud.”

Criminals, lawmen, and assorted observers all can understand the desperation of Gough’s hardships equally. Washingtonian speakers connected all different types and social categories of people through this bond of sympathy. Yet Smith and the museum theatre producers directed the play mainly towards their middle-class audiences. McArthur implies that the “graphic” scenes of the impoverished Mary and Julia may have appealed to the minority of working-class viewers, specifically by sparking memories of

---

Washingtonian narratives. Yet these echoes of reformed drunkards’ speeches still fail to unite working-class spectators with the dominant middle-class ones in any type of shared recognition. The tragedy of Mary and Julia’s plight becomes their fall from respectable country life, a representation aimed not towards the stray working-class viewers but rather towards the museums’ new middle-class audiences.

Therefore, instead of presenting working-class Washingtonians’ aspirations of upward mobility via sobriety, the American temperance drama increased middle-class spectators’ anxiety about losing class status through insobriety. Once Edward forgoes church and starts earning a reputation for his drinking, the village’s Farmer Gates tells William, “We used to consider Mr. Edward a promising young man, and when we seed him get married and settle among us, we thought to have a respectable man like his father for a neighbor. . . . I earnestly hope he han’t a going to stick to these bad ways” (22). The threat of Edward’s descent, whispered by neighbors and foreshadowed by his drinking habits, overshadows his ostensible stability. Though Edward weds Mary early and he appears to be enjoying rural prosperity, his status remains fluid and not fixed. Once Edward plunges into drunkenness in the city, the villainous Lawyer Cribbs—a former representative of the Middleton family who harbors a secret vengeance against them—taunts him by relaying that Mary “would be glad to see you—to see you become a respectable member of society” (31). For a man previously untested as a practicing landlord, Edward stiffens at Cribbs’s implication that he has fallen from the middle class.

Of course, this position reflects the radically shifting fortunes of the new middle class

---

354 McArthur, “Demon Rum,” 527
During this period, and Edward becomes, in Bank’s words, “one of those ten thousand clerks adrift in New York in 1845.” The Drunkard mirrors the narrative trajectory of typical Washingtonian speeches, tracing the drunkard’s journey from stability to degradation and back again. Frick even cites this “inverted arc” structure as key to the similarities between temperance melodrama and Washingtonianism. Yet contrary to Edward’s decline, the Washingtonian speakers began as working-class citizens with more modest comforts. Their recoveries allow them not only to reclaim their former lives but also to surpass them. The most successful speakers emphasized how they in fact climbed class levels through sobriety. In 1848, when one of Gough’s books reached Great Britain, a Scottish journal praised him for having “sprung from the ranks of the working classes, . . . from the degraded herd of the dissipated.”

By rewriting the drunkard’s change in social status, Smith revises the working-class drunkard’s social rise as a middle-class drunkard’s reclamation of his previous social position. When Edward is redeemed by the temperance spokesman Rencelaw at play’s end, he becomes restored to the station to which he belonged by birth. The mechanic William ultimately saves Mary and Julia from poverty as well as his foster brother Edward from a brawl in the slums. However, it is the landlord Edward who is awarded middle-class status for returning to his sobriety instead of the laborer William for maintaining his self-discipline throughout. As Bluford Adams states, Smith shows

355 Bank, Theatre Culture in America, 145.
356 Frick, Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform, 66.
357 “Gough, the American Temperance Apostle,” Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal 5 (1846), 375.
358 Bank suggests that William becomes an exemplary model “to lower-grade clerks and workers”; see Theatre Culture in America, 146.
the “respectable classes” as “uniquely worthy of being saved.” Conversely, when a working-class Washingtonian speaker redeems himself through sobriety, he transcends genetics. Most often, he does so by finding work at the middle-class occupational level. The most famous example remains Gough’s rise from a bookbinder to a famed temperance lecturer. Like Gough, former drunkards like rock blaster George Haydock and hatter’s apprentice John H.W. Hawkins made careers as prolific temperance speakers, and the latter eventually became a Methodist minister. Middle-class audiences of The Drunkard can take relief in knowing that respectable drunkards can reclaim their previous genteel status. Yet Smith and the producers deny their spectators the central lesson of Washingtonian meetings: workers could, through sobriety and self-dedication, vault themselves into the next social category.

Most problematically, the antebellum temperance melodrama abandons the Washingtonians’ emphasis on affective exchange, even as it retains the model’s value on spectators’ empathy. The Drunkard evoked unrestrained emotional expressions from its audiences. One review of the 1844 Boston Museum production stated that the play “cannot be witnessed without exciting the deepest emotions,” and the preface for the first printed version (1847) reports that in reaction to Mary and Julia’s poverty, “it was no uncommon thing to see scores of men and women in the auditory weeping like children.” For its principal effects, temperance melodrama relied heavily on the audience’s abilities to empathize with the characters’ plights. The Washingtonian

---

359 Adams, E Pluribus Barnum, 123.
360 Crowley, Drunkard’s Progress, 15, 191-192.
meetings, too, became known for the spectators’ emotional outbreaks. One reporter covering an 1841 Hawkins experience speech related how “fountains of generous feeling, in many hearts, gushed forth in tears.”

Haydock, who also delved into rum-selling before achieving sobriety, recalls how even a small group of protesting liquor merchants were affected during one of his speeches: “They came out hollowing and howling . . . [but] I saw before I finished their heads drooping, and the tears freely flowing.” By triggering an emotional contagion within the room, Haydock erases boundaries between different social classes and neutralizes aggression from alcohol retailers. The power of empathy trumps any individual commercial interests.

While the audiences of temperance melodramas and of Washingtonian lectures similarly expressed compassion for the drunkard, the drama’s moral lecture room altered the Washingtonian meetings’ dynamic between performer and spectator. The power of Washingtonian gatherings arose from the seemingly improvisational nature of the drunkard’s recitation. Washingtonians “insisted that their stories were not in fact written texts, directing any amount of scholarly labor or compositional skill to persuade the


365 Hendler characterizes the Washingtonian meetings as appropriating the effects of the increasingly popular genre of sentimental fiction, which included best-sellers like Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Maria Susanna Cummins’s *The Lamplighter* (1854) released not long after Washingtonianism folded. As with Washingtonianism, Hendler suggests, “Both defenders and critics of women’s fiction characterized the sympathy performed and evoked as a kind of affective contagion”; see “Bloated Bodies,” 129-130. However, like the problematic comparisons between Washingtonian meetings and melodrama, the venue itself changes the overall function. Though sentimental fiction may have spawned groups of readers who shared and communicated similar reading experiences, reading remains a private activity, counteracting the publicity so crucial to the open emotional exchanges of Washingtonian meetings.
rational understanding of auditors or readers.” With each lecture, a former drunkard could relive his feelings of hopelessness in harder times. Speeches were not simply performances but also the speaker’s method to access despairing emotions from the past and remind himself of alcohol’s catastrophic effects. The very rawness of the working-class drunkard’s confession operated as the catalyst in triggering an emotional exchange and solidarity with spectators. The Drunkard and other temperance dramas functioned differently. While middle-class audiences might weep at the sight of a starving Julia Middleton, only the audience’s emotions were real. Conversely, as Washingtonian lecturers delivered experience speeches, the speaker and listeners bonded over their simultaneous experiences of feeling. As Glenn Hendler asserts, “A drunkard could be redeemed, the Washingtonians argued, if he could be induced to exercise his sympathy while listening to the story of a reformed drunkard. This sympathy was designed to produce an emotional equivalence between speaker and audience.” Upon hearing a tale resembling his own, a listener would then provide a spontaneous confession in front of the group, as “narratives and emotions are figured as objects that should be freely exchanged.” The experience meetings—a working-class creation—were distinct in the mutual empathy between those “performing” and those in the crowd, regardless of class. The meetings functioned according to a circulation of emotion among all those present. Working-class Washingtonian speakers may have embellished or been performative in their recitations. Yet the basis of their speeches were in truth, and the

---

368 Ibid., 129.
369 The lecture circuit in churches and halls, with mixed classes in the crowd, more likely resembled the model at theatres in which audiences would listen, cry, and perhaps even sign the pledge.
lecturers’ genuine emotion allowed them to touch middle- and even upper-class listeners. The very nature of a fictional drama in a public theatrical venue negated such an effect. Instead of Washingtonian speeches triggering spontaneous listeners to confess their own stories of drunken shame, museum rules prohibited theatre audiences from expressing themselves vocally. Because museum theatres cultivated mainly middle-class audiences, members of different social classes could not form the bonds of sympathy so critical to Washingtonian meetings. While *The Drunkard* may have brought middle-class spectators closer together as a distinctive theatergoing group, it sacrificed the emotional democracy of Washingtonianism.

Nor do characters within *The Drunkard* hold feelings of pity or empathy in the same esteem as did Washingtonian members. After Cribbs informs Edward of Mary’s concern for him, Edward exclaims, “Has it then come to this?—an object of pity to my once adored wife: no longer regarded with love—respect—but cold compassion, pity” (32). He polarizes love and pity, the former being a sign of respect and wifely deference, and the latter serving as an undignified emotion. To Edward, Mary’s presumed pathos becomes yet another signal of his demoted position. By contrast, the Washingtonians often spoke of their conversions to sobriety following their own observations of someone else’s sadness. In his speeches, Hawkins would recall his daughter’s influence when one day he returned home, “miserable beyond conception” and suicidal. His daughter begged her father not to send her after whiskey, then “went [away] weeping.” Hawkins remembers that at that moment, “I wounded her sorely, though I had made up my mind I
would drink no more.” The recognition of his daughter’s pity awakens Hawkins in this scene, providing a sobering clarity even while he lies down inebriated and otherwise disoriented. Both within the Washingtonian print narratives and during the experience speeches themselves, expressing pity for someone else and accepting that feeling become critical steps towards redemption. The temperance drama, however, implies that such exchanges lead to conflict instead of salvation. When finally revealing his motives, Cribbs explains that he hated Edward’s father because “in early life, he detected me in an act of vile atrocity, that might have cost me my life. He would not betray, but pardoned, pitied, and despised me” (49). Thus, The Drunkard’s revenge plot is triggered by a character’s rejection of another’s pity. Smith poaches the real-life experiences of drunken workers but erases the Washingtonians’ dramaturgical valuation of piteous feeling. By not stressing the weight of emotional exchange, The Drunkard again adopts only the outlines of the Washingtonian society meeting instead of its essence.

This amendment particularly reflects the middle class’s attempts first to control Washingtonian spectacle and then to stake out temperance forums separate from the working classes altogether. Pegram writes that by 1843, middle-class Washingtonian members had begun to find experience speeches and other Washingtonian entertainments—which consisted of singing, joke-telling, and minstrel acts—“low and vulgar,” and even circus-like. These opinions began to mirror those of the wealthy who, according to one Washingtonian member, balked at the idea of providing drunkards

---

371 Horace Greeley protested in the New York Herald that the local meetings resembled “the porterhouse of the circus.” Quoted in Augst, “Temperance, Mass Culture,” 312.
“who but yesterday were rolling in the gutters” a public forum for speaking.\textsuperscript{372} Instead of trying to control activities within certain meetings, the middle class soon created separate organizations and spaces entirely. With the temperance melodrama, the museum theatres could retain the worker’s story but excise the worker himself. Theatre proprietors coded this elimination by deeming the play a “moral and domestic drama” on playbills, and audiences could understand that they would be observing representatives of their own class on stage instead of laborers. With its aggressive inclusiveness, Washingtonianism seemed destined to collapse. Yet \textit{The Drunkard} and the museums’ moral lecture rooms accelerated the process by designating a new middle-class genre and forum precisely for the rewriting of working-class narratives.

\textbf{II. Urban Tourism: Mapping Urban Space in \textit{The Drunkard}}

\textit{The Drunkard} also advances another middle-class aim of the period: demystifying and safely navigating urban space. Both Kimball (in his 1844 and 1849 Boston Museum productions) and Barnum (in his 1850 New York production) capitalized upon domestic tourists’ simultaneous curiosity and hesitancy about cities. This section argues that the play attempts to initiate these middle-class viewers to each production’s respective city and its lower-class areas and figures. Replicating and at-times revising goals of contemporaneous tourist literature, \textit{The Drunkard} affirms working-class urban spaces as traversable for outsiders. Though such portrayals proved false historically, theatre

\textsuperscript{372} B.P. Aydelott, \textit{The Church’s Duties in the Temperance Cause} (Cincinnati, 1865), 15. Quoted in Dannenbaum, \textit{Drink and Disorder}, 40.
producers successfully recruited middle-class tourists as their new audiences by promoting them to enlightened city insiders.

**Mid-Century Tourism: Literature and Museum-Going**

During the antebellum decades, American cities were becoming common destinations for permanent residents and tourists alike. From 1820 to 1860, the percent of city inhabitants rose 797 percent, marking America’s fastest rate of urban expansion ever. The home of only 43,000 people in 1820, Boston swelled to a population of 137,000 by 1850. New York tallied 202,000 permanent residents in 1830 but had grown to nearly 515,000 by the time Barnum’s *Drunkard* premiered in 1850. Due partly to an influx of nearly three million immigrants between 1830 and 1850 and to a growing population of rural men hoping to solidify middle-class status, cities became increasingly overcrowded.

As such, they also became attractive destinations for visitors. European writers would stroll through urban areas and record their impressions, while many middle-class Americans toured cities as extensions of business trips or visitations with their

---

373 Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 35.
families.\textsuperscript{377} In the 1830s and 40s, tourists flocked to Boston’s waterfront to walk the
wharves and spot the clipper ships.\textsuperscript{378} Representing the scores of European visitors upon
his tour of the U.S in 1842, Charles Dickens admired the visual splendor of Boston’s
private houses, the State House, and the Boston Common, writing “I sincerely believe
that the public institutions and charities of this capital of Massachusetts are as nearly
perfect as the most considerate wisdom, benevolence, and humanity, can make them.”\textsuperscript{379}
New York City, meanwhile, provided a port for steamboat tours of the Hudson Valley
and other Central New York sites including Albany, Ballston, and Saratoga Springs. The
route became increasingly popular among the middle classes from the 1810s onward, and
travelers often spent nights in New York City while waiting for transfers.\textsuperscript{380} By the mid-
1830s, New York welcomed nearly 70,000 tourists and visiting businessmen annually.
They initially congregated at the City Hall area with its park, churches, and theatres, but
by the 1840s travelers were extending their ventures to witness the diverse spectacles
within the city’s slums.\textsuperscript{381}

This influx of outsiders produced various literature genres, many intended to
make the overwhelming cities navigable for outsiders. City-mystery sensation novels,
such as Lippard’s *Quaker City* (1844-45) or Ned Buntline’s *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York* (1851) featured graphic scenes of urban decay and were marketed largely towards working-class city readers, though a more diverse population actually read them.\(^{382}\) A related genre, the “urban sketch,” appealed more towards rural consumers unfamiliar with the city. Original reviewers referred to the sketch volumes as being “scattered over the country” by door-to-door book peddlers and “horrify[ing] many a farmer by the perusal of [their] pages.”\(^{383}\) Stuart Blumin credits journalist George G. Foster for the invention of the sketch form, which began as *New York Herald* serial pieces. Five months before *The Drunkard*’s New York premiere in July of 1850, Foster’s *New York by Gas-Light* was first released in book form, on its way to selling upwards of 200,000 copies. While both the urban sketch and the city-mystery genre conveyed urbanity’s voyeuristic thrills, only the sketches emphasized the topography of the city.

The urban sketches purported to be “detailed, factual, and comprehensive guides” to urban locations, with chapters devoted to specific neighborhoods and leisure sites (including “Bowling and Billiard Saloons,” “The [Five] Points at Midnight,” and “Butter-Cake Dick’s” newsboy eatery).\(^{384}\) According to Blumin, the genre’s primary purpose was “explaining the new metropolis,” including making sense of the beggars, workingmen,

\(^{382}\) Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London: Verso, 1987), 105. Denning argues that the genre’s “actual readers were the working people of the city,” but his findings have been convincingly challenged; see especially, Streeby, *American Sensations*, 29.


and prostitutes who made city strolls “socially uncomfortable for the respectable middle class.”

Two other types of less tawdry traveler literature—tourist guidebooks and travel journals—simultaneously informed the period’s readers about American cities. In the 1830s, travel articles “appeared regularly in middle-class magazines,” many of which were circulated throughout the Midwest and which “detail[ed] each city’s trade, industry, and culture.” These articles soon evolved into a tourist guidebook genre consisting of national travel manuals, urban handbooks, and “stranger’s guides.” In the late 1840s, New York publisher Daniel Appleton released the first national tourist guidebook, *Appleton’s United States Guide Book for Travellers*, which contained city maps and was written “specifically for pleasure journeyers.” Most local guidebooks provided a brief history of a given city, and then directed readers to respectable streets and renowned buildings (hotels, libraries, banks, churches) there. Simultaneously, writers including Dickens and Richard Henry Dana published travel journals describing their visits to American cities in the 1840s. Though these authors did not prioritize directional assistance as much as other genres, they described low-class areas in gleefully graphic

---

385 Cocks, *Doing the Town*, 35.
386 Ibid., 25.
387 Some independently published “stranger’s guides” had actually predated the outbreak of national guidebooks and urban handbooks in the 1830s. See, for instance, John Adams Paxton, *The Stranger’s Guide to Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Edward Parker, 1811) or Blunt’s *Stranger’s Guide to the City of New-York* (New York: Edward M. Blunt, 1817). However, the rise in the tourist industry in the late 1830s prompted a new wave of stranger’s guides released by national guidebook publishers. See Appleton’s *Philadelphia as it is: the stranger’s guide to the public buildings, institutions and other objects worthy of attention in the city of Philadelphia and its environs* (Philadelphia: Appleton, 1845).
388 Ibid., 27. In a footnote, Cocks notes Dona Brown’s report of this late 1840s launch-date for Appleton’s guide in *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington: Smithsonian, 1995). However, Cocks notes that the earliest Appleton’s guide she had personally seen was published in 1853; see Cocks, *Doing the Town*, 218.
389 Ibid., 26.
detail. As fears of and fascinations with the American city grew, urban visitors could consult any of these literatures—urban sketches, city guidebooks, and travel journals—in order to familiarize themselves with metropolitan areas.

American theatre contributed to and borrowed elements from all these genres, but playwrights often relied upon a prerequisite understanding of the city. Following England’s successful stage adaptation of Pierce Egan’s city-rambling novel *Tom and Jerry, or; Life in London* (1821), American theatres produced such plays as *The Times; or, Life in New York* (1829), *Life in Philadelphia* (1832), *Life in New York* (1834), and *Old Manhattan; or, Wall Street in an Uproar* (1840). These works ranged from depicting the upper classes to the lower ones and highlighted popular urban landmarks, but audiences largely ignored the productions and reviewers often detested them. For instance, Walter Meserve cites one review that labeled the Philadelphia-set *The Night Hawk* (1830) “a display of low, vile, and disgusting indecency.”

The American urban play climaxed with Benjamin Baker’s *A Glance at New York* (1848), a farce which featured several local sites and relied on inside jokes and songs. Starring Frank S. Chanfrau in his famous character of the Bowery fireboy Mose, Baker’s play sparked a craze among downtown workers and generated several sequels including *Mose in a Muss* (1849), *Mose in California* (1849), and *Mose in China* (1849). Mose’s characteristic

---

390 *Ariel, IV*, November 27, 1830, quoted in Meserve, *Heralds of Promise*, 119.
391 The Bowery B’hoy, named after the working-class district where he spent most of his time, was a “manly white mechanic” who emerged as a common street type in newspaper articles and illustrations. He maintained a distinctive fashion, including greased hair tucked under a top hat, a loosely-buttoned collared shirt, a frock coat, and green-striped trousers, and a cigar in the mouth. The Bowery B’hoy was often referred to as a fire b’hoy because he volunteered for a fire company when not working his day job (Mose worked as a butcher). Bowery B’hoys were known particularly for their rowdiness and penchant for getting into fights. Stock actor Frank Chanfrau originated the role of Mose in *A Glance at New York*’s premiere at
bar-room rowdiness turned off respectable and “uptown audiences.” Instead, “the appeal was clearly made to a certain class of citizens” who recognized and participated in Mose’s working-class life.392 Predating *A Glance at New York* by four years, *The Drunkard* relied less on insiders’ knowledge of the city and focused more on outsiders’ perspectives. Smith’s play typified, in McConachie’s terms, the “moral reform” melodramas that museum theatres programmed to appeal to the middle classes. These frequently urban plays, largely descending from Great Britain’s eighteenth-century bourgeois tragedies, cautioned against hedonistic and often criminal pursuits such as sex, thievery, drinking, and gambling. They followed the “victim’s temptation and downfall from [a] modest position and public esteem to the depths of ruin and shame” and sometimes (but not always) concluded with his restoration.393

While the precise demographic composition of the audiences attending the museum theatres is not known, both Kimball and Barnum actively recruited audiences from their cities’ outskirts. Most of these audiences were part of the nation’s growing middle class, possessing enough money and time to consume the emergent middle-class tourist literature and to travel into town. Kimball recruited audiences specifically from Boston’s outskirts. His playbills advertised an omnibus service (for 12 ½ cents) that

---

393 McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 178. Titles of other plays in the sub-genre included *Thirty Years, or the Gambler’s Fate* and *The Six Degrees of Crime, or Wine, Women, Gambling, Theft, Murder and the Scaffold*.
transported spectators from the theatre to far-flung neighborhoods such as Roxbury and East and South Boston and nearby towns such as Cambridge and East Cambridge. When Kimball moved the Museum’s location in 1848, coach departure times stretched from ten in the evening until midnight. The coach companies noticed that “Boston was rapidly growing less provincial,” and that many viewers wished to stay in town for hours after the theatrical shows concluded.

Some esteemed patrons from more remote villages like Salem, fifteen miles north of Boston, enlisted their own private carriages to transport them to museum shows and other town attractions. Kimball also coordinated his efforts with other events that would draw patrons into the city. In May of 1844, for instance, a Boston correspondent for the *New York Herald* wrote that the upcoming Massachusetts Temperance Exhibition “will probably bring more people to the city than have ever visited it before on any similar occasion. . . . [E]very room, house, and shanty is being put in requisition to accommodate the swarm expected.” Accordingly, Kimball produced a new temperance play (*The First and Last Pledge*) and promised a painted banner of *The Drunkard* to the county which sent the most delegates to town. The following September, a furniture and farming exhibition brought, according to the *Evening Transcript*, “thousands on thousands of strangers in the city who [had] heard of

---

394 For instance: Boston Museum, playbill. *The Rent Day*, 9 Nov. 1849. Playbill Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. All of the Boston Museum’s playbills in this year contain the identical message regarding omnibus destinations at the bottom.


398 Ibid.
the fame of this celebrated play, [The Drunkard].” Kimball anticipated the crowds and increased performances of Smith’s drama to three times a day. As the newspaper reports display, venturing to see The Drunkard became an essential experience for city tourists. Kimball cast his Museum, and specifically his biggest theatrical hit, as key to an understanding of authentic urban life.

Barnum marketed his American Museum as a similarly crucial city stop, and often bragged about his abilities to lure country visitors. In its 1851 profile of Barnum, The Spirit of the Times asserted that “the country visitor considers that he has not ‘been to town,’ unless he has witnessed the wonders of the American Museum, Broadway.” Barnum plied his country patrons with illustrated playbills and lithographs to bring home and mount as advertisements. Through this strategy, Barnum elaborated, “people scarcely thought of visiting the city without going to my establishment.” He advertised at the downtown hotels that tourists frequented, and he set matinee performance times to coincide with rural daytrippers’ ventures into the city. Thus like the Boston Museum, Barnum’s American Museum emerged as an important city landmark for tourists.

Referring to his “provincial patrons” in his autobiography Struggles and Triumphs, or, Forty Years’ Recollections (1869), Barnum recalled that “I was determined that there

---

399 Boston Evening Transcript, September 18, 1844.
400 Ibid.
401 Barnum’s New York Museum was likely split almost evenly between urban and rural patrons during its most popular years, but Barnum’s shrewd targeting of country tourists became especially notorious. Adams estimates this split patronage based on the programming of Barnum’s slavery plays in the mid-1850s. Barnum produced anti-abolitionist blackface minstrelsy shows for city patrons who supported compromise with the South, and also staged antislavery dramas such as George Aiken’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1853) for rural antislavery spectators. See Adams, E Pluribus Barnum, 129-130.
403 Barnum, Struggles and Triumphs, 142.
404 Adams, E Pluribus Barnum, 113.
should be nothing in my establishment, where many of my visitors would derive their first impressions of city life, that could contaminate or corrupt them." Barnum strived to provide tourists not just any view of urban life, but their very first ideas about the city. He viewed his lecture room plays as initiatory experiences to New York and wanted his spectators to view the city through the Museum’s sanitized lens. Like Kimball, Barnum noticed rural middle classes’ newfound zeal for urban tourism and envisioned potential patrons. In *The Drunkard* specifically, both producers found a play that would satisfy these spectators’ curiosities about the city.

### The Confounding City and its Sketch Figures

In the course of *The Drunkard*, playwright Smith directly addresses middle-class tourists’ anxieties about urban life. Portraying the host city (Boston in the original production and first printed version) as a confounding maze of alleys and byways, he mimics the audience’s limited spatial knowledge in the play’s characters. When Village spinster Miss Spindle attempts to tour Boston, her efforts to find a landmark are frustrated by the labyrinthine avenues: “Why! This Boston is the most awful place to find one’s way I was ever in; it’s all ups and downs, ins and outs. I’ve been trying for two hours to find Bunker Hill Monument and I can’t see it, though they tell me it’s six hundred yards high” (32). In the New York version of the play, she announces a similarly unsuccessful search for Trinity Church steeple. Certainly the contemporaneous urban

---

405 Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs*, 160.
406 *The Drunkard* remained critical to Barnum’s recruitment of country audiences, because of its ties to a nation-wide temperance cause and, as he wrote playwright Smith, his display of “entirely new local scenery” in New York. See *Journal of the American Temperance Union*, July 1, 1850.
407 Smith, *Drunkard*, in Richards, 282.
handbooks could have provided her a desired bearing, but she eschews them. Spindle enters as a naïve tourist figure who relies on gossip alone to orient her rather than consulting the urban handbooks designed to help tourists navigate unfamiliar metropolitan areas. Edward, too, appears lost in the city. In the first city scene, Cribbs ponders of his victim Edward, “I wonder where that drunken vagrant can have wandered? Ever since he came to Boston, thanks to his ravenous appetite and my industrious agency, he has been going down hill rapidly” (30). The city’s confusion actually assists Edward’s debauchery, providing him a venue to feed his self-destructive habits and the conniving Cribbs adequate cover to organize his schemes. However, the city also proves an indecipherable maze, as Cribbs cannot even locate Edward in order to corrupt him further.

The city’s overwhelming gloom and incessant noise add to the visiting characters’ bewilderment, thwarting their efforts to orient themselves. In the 1847 play text, act three, scene two takes place on “School street—stage little dark” (32), scene 5 is set in a garret with a “lamp burning dimly” (35), and the act’s final scene plays out in “Phillips Place. Lights down” (38). The progressively dimming light schemes symbolize not only Edward’s gradual decline, but also reflect the increasing physical obscurities of city life. The Phillips Place scene, in which William finally rescues Edward, also shows “rowdies” fighting and ends with the stage direction of “General Confusion.” Despite William’s ultimate role as savior, he initially encounters the same navigational problems as Miss Spindle and Cribbs. Following his rescue of Mary and Julia from their garret, William

408 Smith, Drunkard, in Richards, 288.
vows to redeem Edward, but admits that first he must find him within the city’s maddening din: “There’s another row, well, if this Boston isn’t the awfullest place for noise. Come, Mrs. Middleton, I’ll find him if he’s in Boston, jail or no jail, watch-house or no watch-house” (37). The urban sounds signal the incessant volatility of the city and prompt the characters’ anxieties about becoming entangled in it. Though William eventually locates all the Middletons, the city itself threatens to obstruct him at every corner.

Smith also establishes the city as a place where human connection, particularly between lovers, barely exists. Despite Mary’s devotion in following Edward to Boston, Smith denies them a single scene together there. Rather than Mary tracking down the itinerant Edward, the foster brother William finally locates him in the slums. By that point, according to the original Boston production’s playbill, Edward appears successively at Phillips Place and Court Street (III.1), School Street (III.2 & III.4), Faneuil Hall and Dock Square (III.6), and Hawley Street (IV.1) as he slips deeper into degradation. In the New York version, Edward crawls across a series of downtown bars, as his loafer friends promise to take him to Cross Street in Five Points—an area of near legendary depravity in antebellum America—in search of liquor.

---

409 Edward and Mary are in fact reunited at Rencelaw’s house before retreating to the village. The residence could be in the city, but Smith never specifies the address. Dramatically, the house functions as a transitional space for Mary and Edward between the city and country more than it does as a distinct urban location.

410 Though they otherwise match up, the opening night playbill and the earliest published play text (Jones, 1847) contain a significant difference: the setting of Act 3, scene 6. The playbill specifies that the scene takes place at Faneuil Hall and Dock Square and the text lists it as Phillips Place. The playbill seems the most reliable resource regarding how the play was first performed during its year-long run of at least 140 performances, but it is possible that during some minor revivals between 1844 and 1847, Phillips Place (already the site of Act 3, scene 1) was used as a substitute.

411 Smith, Drunkard, in Richards, 280.
Broadway (III.1) to a Broadway bar (III.3), then finally to outside the presumed
destination bar-room in Five Points (III.4), before awaking crumpled on the ground at an
unspecified “wretched out-house or shed, supposed to be near a tavern” (IV.1).⁴¹² Smith
paints Edward as a relentlessly peripatetic, public figure. Yet Mary, sitting at an “old
table and chair” and sewing shirts in a Five Points garret, remains entirely immobile and
private.⁴¹³ The two fates are equally undesirable. Neither character—Edward aimlessly
wandering; Mary locked away—possesses the navigational capabilities to operate in the
city’s dizzying landscape. As both characters are dysfunctional urbanites, the prospect of
finding one another, much less reconciling, becomes seemingly impossible.

Once in the city, Edward and Mary transform into lower-class stock types within
urban sketch literature instead of acting as informed middle-class tourists themselves.
Historian Eric Homberger reports that as early as 1846, various city literature detailed not
just standard attractions but also “lurid accounts of [the city’s] inhabitants.”⁴¹⁴ The urban
sketch especially functioned as a voyeuristic window into familiar city figures. The street
drunkard was one of these principal spectacles, as Foster outlines in New York by Gas-
Light (1850): “Here and there a lamp-post is embellished with a human swine who leans,
a statue of drunkenness, against it for support, and consigns his undigested supper to his
fellow pigs who rise early o’mornings.”⁴¹⁵ Juxtaposed with a “flashily-dressed woman”
shuffling down the street and groups of men “waiting for a last and desperate chance of
game,” Foster’s drunkard becomes yet another degenerate accent within the city’s

---

⁴¹² Ibid.
⁴¹³ Ibid., 284.
⁴¹⁴ Eric Homberger, Scenes from the Life of a City, 33.
⁴¹⁵ Foster, New York by Gas-Light, 75.
panorama.\textsuperscript{416} When Edward appears at the end of act II, “lying on ground, without hat or coat, clothes torn, eyes sunk and haggard, appearance horrible,” he too has been absorbed into the cityscape and becomes a mere attraction for others to behold (38). No longer an urban subject, he transforms into a disempowered object. He loses any comprehension of the city that he may have possessed as a visitor, finally crying out “Where am I?” to designate the disorientation he shares with the other misplaced characters (38). Bereft of any money or spatial bearing, Edward exemplifies the middle-class tourists’ fears of becoming lost in the bewildering city.

Yet by explaining the middle-class origins of this urban drunkard, Smith assures viewers that Edward’s restoration always remains possible. Edward becomes progressively attuned to his decline from a middle-class rural landlord to a lowly urban figure on display. Awaking on the street after one drinking binge, he exclaims, “I wanted daylight, but now it has come, what shall I do in daylight! I was out of sight when it was dark.”\textsuperscript{417} Though the stage darkness indicates the characters’ impending blindnesses within the city, it simultaneously operates as Edward’s cloak, his protection from being exposed as an exhibition for tourists’ eyes. If the goal of the urban sketch is, in Foster’s words, “to discover the real facts of the actual condition of the wicked and wretched classes,” then Edward fears most of all this social demotion.\textsuperscript{418} However, William saves Edward before he becomes a permanent fixture in the neighborhood. By permitting the audience to witness Edward as a respectable landlord both before and after his fall, Smith

\textsuperscript{416} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{417} Ibid., Drunkard, in Richards, 288.
\textsuperscript{418} Ibid., 69.
contextualizes urban types like the drunkards that spectators might encounter on the streets. In doing so, he shows audiences that not all seemingly working-class drunks remain identical. Some inebriates are, in actuality, middle-class citizens waiting to be discovered and returned to their proper societal positions. Audiences then can be confident that any middle-class visitor lost in the city will eventually find such recognition and reinstatement.

Smith’s portrayal of Mary as a seamstress also marks her as an urban object awaiting restoration, a displaced victim closely aligned with analogous sketch literature figures. In the 1820s, the clothing trade employed thousands of outworkers to sew clothing at home. These seamstresses often worked six days a week, from dawn until ten at night, and were subject to unpredictable fluctuations in demand. By 1848, there were an estimated 30,000 New York City seamstresses, most earning at best $1.50 a week when employers did not withhold their wages. The seamstress was the “quintessential victim” in the popular imagination, and remained a central figure in sensation fiction. The front cover for the anonymously-penned city-mystery novel The Orphan Seamstress (1850), for example, explains about how the “Great City . . . take[s] every country girl from the path of virtue and happiness and plunge[s] her into shame and misery.” Foster, too, devotes a chapter in his urban sketch New York in Slices (1849) to communicating the sad plight of the “needlewomen.” He depicts them as “wives and daughters of broken-down merchants and speculating politicians” who have been

---

419 Stansell, City of Women, 110-111.
420 Homberger, Scenes from the Life of a City, 22; Stansell, City of Women, 111-112.
421 Stansell, City of Women, 125.
inhumanely “reduced from affluence to poverty” (fig. 2.8). Though Blumin acknowledges that Foster rarely sympathizes with any group, the seamstresses prove a notable exception. Mary typifies the empathetic literary portrayals of this era’s ubiquitous working woman. Her speech about her ruined condition recalls the perpetually struggling seamstress: “Alas, alas! It is very cold—faint with hunger—sick—heart weary with wretchedness, fatigue, and cold (Clock strikes one) . . . . These shirts I have promised to hand in to-morrow by the hour of eight. A miserable quarter of a dollar will repay my industry” (35). She even contemplates stealing her daughter’s bread but then relents. Just as he recasts the formerly middle-class Edward as a city street drunkard, Smith exhibits the previously respectable Mary as a generic working-class seamstress.

Instead of treating the drunkard and the seamstress as separate entities, Smith draws a causal relationship between these two urban types. In this case, the drunkard (Edward) is directly responsible for the social demise of the seamstress (Mary). However, the seamstress’s appearance offers perhaps an even greater thrill for spectators than the drunkard’s, because she appears within a private urban space usually invisible to observers. As Smith reveals Mary in a “wretched garret,” wearing “miserable apparel,” and “sewing on slop-work,” he offers spectators a privileged mobility all their own (35). Peeking into the life of the seamstress, viewers can observe a secret scene of urban
misery they would not likely encounter in their walking tours of the city. Audiences can become urban slummers themselves without leaving their seats.

Smith also contributes to popular narratives linking the seamstress with a more public and lower-class city figure: the prostitute. Foster writes that most seamstresses work “until they sink beneath temptation or despair—to the brothel or the grave!,” and Smith proposes that Mary could follow the same trajectory. At one point, Cribbs suggests that Mary change professions: “[T]here are plenty of women, not of the most respectable class, who are always ready to receive presents . . . and are not very particular in the liberties that may be taken in exchange” (36). Cribbs announces Mary’s new social status by convincing her that she no longer belongs in the “most respectable class.” He disregards Mary as a working-class seamstress and instead casts her as a potential prostitute. In an effort to streamline his portrayal of the city for middle-class visitors, Smith conflates working-class and lower-class professions. The difference between the two actually could be quite thin, at least in contemporary opinion. Investigating the causes of New York prostitution in his 1858 History of Prostitution, William Sanger writes that seamstresses’ exclusively male employers often obscured the line between needlewoman and prostitute. Sanger cites many instances in which “the sacrifice of a woman’s virtue [has] been required as an equivalent for the privilege of sewing at almost nominal prices.” Just as he unveiled the drunkard’s origins via Edward, Smith explains how easily someone like Mary can fall from being a respectable wife to a working

---

seamstress to an urban pariah like the prostitute. By educating spectators that lower-class figures may have middle-class backgrounds, Smith urges middle-class viewers to sympathize with the human predicaments of recognizable individuals like Edward and Mary.

**Staging Localities, Programming the Tourist**

Beyond initiating viewers to the working and lower orders, *The Drunkard* functions simultaneously as a local guide to specific landmarks and areas of each city in which it was produced. These idiosyncrasies are most apparent upon comparing *The Drunkard*’s three most prominent productions: the play’s 1844 debut at Kimball’s Boston Museum, the 1849 revival at a relocated Boston Museum, and the 1850 production at Barnum’s American Museum in New York.427 The Boston productions direct viewers to visit safe, middle-class tourist sites from 1840s urban handbooks and city guides, as producer Kimball essentially denies that any hazardous areas exist. Conversely, P.T. Barnum’s New York production mimics contemporaneous travel-journal and sketch literature in its voyeurism of dangerous working-class neighborhoods; yet Barnum overwrites his textual sources to insist that such areas are legible and may be approached by wary country dwellers who have been properly instructed.

---

427 There were, of course, many other notable productions of *The Drunkard* during the period. When Barnum debuted the play in New York at his American Museum in the summer of 1850, the Chatham, the National, the Bowery, and Niblo’s Garden (where it was retitled *One Glass More*) all produced rival versions of the play, but they had very short runs and were ultimately overshadowed by Barnum’s dominant production; see McArthur, “Demon Rum,” 520, and Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform*, 127. McConachie adds that in the years following, the Bowery, the Brooklyn Museum, and Philadelphia’s Arch St. Theatre, among other theatres, often produced *The Drunkard* to help profits; see *Melodramatic Formations*, 178.
While Smith’s script attempted to introduce spectators to diverse city figures, Barnum and Kimball chose the play precisely because they could adapt it easily to local sites and therefore appeal to middle-class tourists. In the original, 1844 Boston Museum production, Moses Kimball and The Drunkard’s scene painters provided a virtual tour of Boston via backdrops that displayed famous local landmarks, city views that most tourists would recognize from travel guidebooks or newspaper profiles. The preface to the play’s first published edition in 1847 specifies that the Boston “scenery, mostly local views . . . served to aid in the triumphant success that was awarded [the play] on its first representation.”428 At its head, the opening night playbill promises “great local interest” and boasts about the “new and beautiful scenery, Views in Boston and its Vicinity” (fig. 2.9).429 Throughout the playbill, Kimball promotes scene painters T. C. Bartholomew and George Curtis, who prepared ten backdrops for the play’s five acts (six of them for the two acts set in the city). Kimball explicitly emphasizes urban geography throughout the bill. One central heading declares “BOSTON IN 1843” and proceeds to list various local sites. The bill’s largest type is reserved for well-known urban locations such as a “WRETCHED ATTIC IN ANN STREET” and “FANEUIL HALL and DOCK SQUARE.” By contrast, crucial plot elements such as “Despair and Suicide,” “The Plot! The Detection!,” and “The Confession! The Punishment!” are relegated to small type.430 Privileging settings over dramaturgical events, Kimball markets a selective picture of Boston as one more spectacle in his arsenal of museum curiosities. The play therefore

---

429 Boston Museum, playbill. The Drunkard, 26 Feb. 1844. Playbill Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
430 Ibid.
becomes a vehicle for piquing the viewers’ interest in the same city they will encounter when they exit the theatre.
Fig. 2.9: Playbill, *The Drunkard, or the Fallen Saved!* 26 Feb., 1844. Boston Museum. Broadside Playbills; 18th-20th century, Rare Book Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
Like Kimball, Barnum understood the importance of setting the play within the same city that tourists were visiting. Stranger’s guides often presented him with free promotion. In his urban manual, *New-York: Past, Present, and Future* (1849), author Ezekiel Belden notes that there remain “numerous sources of more rational entertainment than theatrical representations,” but Barnum’s American Museum—with its “beautiful marble edifice” and “most novel curiosities”—stands as a notable exception.\(^{431}\) Ten years later, *Norton’s Handbook of New-York City* (1859), deeming Barnum’s Museum “one of the most extensive and *instructive* places of Amusements in the United States,” advised that “strangers visiting the city should not fail to visit the American Museum,” especially its lecture room.\(^{432}\) For non-residents wary of disreputable mainstream theatres, the guidebook entries promised that Barnum’s Museum delivered more edifying entertainments. In opening his Museum’s moral lecture room with *The Drunkard* in 1850, Barnum catered to outsiders craving information specifically about the unfamiliar city. Considering the play in 1848, he wrote Kimball and asked “Would your piece of *The Drunkard* do here by changing localities a bit?”\(^{433}\) With some adjustments to accommodate local tastes, Barnum first launched *The Drunkard* in 1849 at his Philadelphia Museum. When he brought it to New York the following year, he featured familiar city sites like Broadway and Five Points. His strategy, borrowed from Kimball,
paid off. Soon after the play’s New York premiere, Barnum boasted in a circular that day-travelers were journeying “a distance of forty miles” to see *The Drunkard*.\textsuperscript{434}

In all productions, the close proximities of the urban settings within the play to the actual locations of the Boston Museum and Barnum’s Museum indicate that the producers acknowledged, and likely advocated, an urban tourism to accompany the spectator’s experience. A majority of the settings specified in Kimball’s original 1844 production—the intersection of Phillips Place and Court Street, School Street, Hawley Street, and the Mall and Winter Street—were located within three blocks of the Boston Museum’s first home, on the corner of Tremont and Bromfield Streets (fig. 2.10). By the time of the 1849 production, the Boston Museum had moved one block to the corner of Tremont and School Streets.\textsuperscript{435} But the updated scene locations—including one scene at Revere House & Bowdoin Square, one scene at the Boston Common, and two scenes at Summer & Washington streets—all remained within four blocks of the theatre (fig. 2.11).\textsuperscript{436} Similarly, with only one exception,\textsuperscript{437} all of the urban sites represented in Barnum’s 1850 New York production—Broadway Avenue, the Arbor bar on Broadway,

\footnotesize{
\textsuperscript{435} McGlinchee, *First Decade*, 49.
\textsuperscript{436} The only scenes occurring outside of the four-block radius in Boston are Mary and Julia’s scene of poverty on Ann Street (in both the 1844 and 1849 productions) and the following scene of an inebriated Edward being freed by William at Faneuil Hall and Dock Square (only in the 1844 version). This juxtaposition in the 1844 version is notable, however, because Ann Street and Faneuil Hall are so close to each other. As Mary and Julia are starving and shivering in their impoverished attic, Edward is presumably in watchmen’s custody merely two blocks away.
\textsuperscript{437} Act IV, scene 2 of the New York version takes place in Union Square, quite far from the rest of the downtown city scenes. In this scene, Cribbs sends a boy with a forged check with Rencelaw’s name to the bank, and Miss Spindle expresses her distaste for the city and her intentions to return to the village. The location remains important geographically because it is the only city scene featuring none of Middletons, underlining their inabilities to escape dangerous downtown areas like Broadway and Five Points. The scene also furthers Smith’s theme of urban disorientation by demonstrating just how far the directionless Spindle—last seen lost on lower Broadway in Act III, scene 2—has drifted.
}
Broadway (with a view of Barnum’s Museum), and Five Points—were located within just eight blocks of one another and of the theatre itself (fig. 2.12). This clustering of scenes so close to Kimball’s and Barnum’s museums promised visiting spectators that the play’s urban stimuli could be observed just outside the theatre doors. Hence the play itself operated as a guide for out-of-town viewers who wished to complement their theatrical spectatorship with walking tours of the city.
Locations for Boston Museum production, 1844:

Locations for Boston Museum production, 1849:

Figs. 2.10 and 2.11: Map of Boston, 1842, from H. S. Tanner, *The American Traveller; or Guide Through the United States*, 8th ed. (Philadelphia: Tanner, 1842). Locations marked correspond to the Boston Museum’s 1844 (left) and 1849 (right) productions of *The Drunkard*.

Key:
- ★: Boston Museum 1844: corner of Tremont and Bromfield Streets
- A: Phillips Place and Court Street (III.1)
- B: School Street (III.2)
- C: School Street (III.4)
- D: Wretched Attic in Ann Street (III.5)
- E: Faneuil Hall and Dock Square (III.6)
- F: Arch and Building, Hawley Street (IV.1)
- G: The Mall and Winter Street (IV.2)
- H: School Street (IV.3)

Note: In the published 1844 version and playbill, there are no specific locations for the following scene; III.3 (specified only as “a well known Bar-Room”)

Key:
- ★: Boston Museum 1849: corner of Tremont and School Streets
- A: Revere House & Bowdoin Square (III.1)
- B: Summer, Washington Streets (with exterior view of Jones, Ball, and Poor Store) (III.2)
- C: Wretched Attic in Ann Street (III.5)
- D: Exterior of Boston Museum by Night (III.6)
- E: Boston Common (IV.2)
- F: Washington and Summer Streets (IV.3)

Note: On the 1849 playbill, there are no specific locations for the following scenes: III.3 (specified only as “a City Bar Room”), III.4 (“a Street”), and IV.1 (“a Street”)
Locations for Barnum’s American Museum Production, 1850:


★ : Barnum’s American Museum: corner of Broadway and Ann Street.
A: Broadway (III.1)
B: Interior of the Arbor Bar, Broadway (III.3)
C: Exterior of a Bar-room on the Five Points (III.4)
D: The Five Points (III.6)
E: Union Square (IV.2)
F: Broadway with a View of Barnum’s Museum (IV.3)

Note: In the published 1850 version, there are no specific locations for the following scenes: III.2 (specified only as “a Street”), III.5 (“a wretched garret”), and IV.1 (“wretched out-house or shed, supposed to be near a tavern”)
The original 1844 Boston production of *The Drunkard* appealed to city visitors by representing well-known and secure sites from tourist guidebooks. Kimball insisted that if viewers were exploring the city beyond the theatre, then they must understand Boston’s proven stations of safety. By setting scenes at locations highlighted within bourgeois guides, Kimball replicated the guidebook literature’s goals in orienting middle-class audiences who were visiting downtown Boston. The play’s presentation of so many local attractions would be especially alluring to out-of-towners walking through cities, a carefully outlined activity in travel handbooks.\(^{438}\) The 1844 production, for example, features one scene in Faneuil Hall, a Revolutiony Era meeting ground for anti-British factions and a centerpiece of Boston tourism. *The Family Tourist* (1848) wrote about Faneuil Hall’s “lofty brick edifice,” “spacious galleries,” and its importance to local politics,\(^{439}\) while *The Colonial Magazine and Commercial Maritime Journal* (1841) called it “the most popular of all the public buildings in Boston” and “an object of universal veneration.”\(^{440}\) A later *Drunkard* scene takes place at the Boston Mall on the southwest area of the Common, originally a cow pasture that was established in 1830 as the nation’s first public park and a popular strolling area for both residents and visitors.\(^{441}\) According to the *History and Topography of the United States of America* (1846), the Mall was “a very beautiful public walk, . . . a delightful promenade during the summer

\(^{438}\) Cocks, *Doing the Town*, 28-29.
months.” The *Southern Lady’s Companion* (1849) added that the Mall “is the loveliest looking place in the whole city. The most handsome residences are to be found here.”

The dramatized local sites remain notable either for their historical importance or for their consistency in drawing respected visitors and residents—both qualities confirming the locations as safe, heavily-trafficked spots. By staging such primary tourist destinations, Kimball aligns his theatre with these city guidebooks and seeks the same consumers: middle-class visitors to the city.

The Boston Museum’s revival of *The Drunkard* in 1849 updated its settings to include other well-regarded areas, but the goals of orienting the middle-class visitors within secure Boston spaces remained the same. In addition to observing new representations of middle-class tourist areas like Bowdoin Square and Boston Common, viewers of the 1849 production would have thrilled to see a scene displaying the Revere House, a hotel “of the first order,” that had been established in Bowdoin Square only two years before. Founded on teetotaler principles and “filled with columns and splendid furniture and adornments,” the “deservedly popular house” for out-of-towners was described in guidebooks such as *Appleton’s, Bowen’s, and the Gazetteer of Massachusetts.* The 1849 play advertised select commercial establishments, as when it offered an “EXTERIOR VIEW OF JONES, BALL AND POOR’S STORE,” where out-

---

of-towners could purchase fine jewelry and tableware. 446 Jones, Ball and Poor’s store found special attention in *The Stranger’s Guide in the City of Boston* in 1848: “The store has long been considered one of the most brilliant and gorgeous on the city thoroughfare; and the windows exhibit a collection of Gold and Silver Plate, Jewelry, etc. . . . $50,000 worth of property may be seen through these windows.”447 The advertisement’s declaration of the store’s inventory value clarifies the types of clientele to whom the shop caterers. Tellingly, the inside front cover of the *Stranger’s Guide* features a full-page advertisement for the Boston Museum. Underneath a sketch of its exterior, a caption insists that “Strangers visiting the city should not omit seeing the interior of this noble building.”448 Through both his advertising strategies and his scenery choices, Kimball markets his Museum to the same middle-class consumers already predisposed to visit urban retail sites. The advertisement’s placement before the entries for Jones, Ball and Poor’s Store and other Boston landmarks suggests a specific route for tourists. The *Stranger’s Guide* encouraged sightseers to begin their trips with a visit to the Boston Museum, where they would be properly oriented to the larger city. If these same visitors later returned to the Museum to see *The Drunkard* once again, they could take pleasure in revisiting the landmarks and reliving the window-shopping experiences they had recently enjoyed around town.

Barnum’s 1850 New York production also projects a safe urban space but differently so. Rather than limiting the audience’s view to sanitized tourist sites, as did

446 Boston Museum, playbill. *The Drunkard*, 20 Nov. 1849. Playbill Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
448 Ibid., inside cover.
the Boston shows, the New York production depicts genuinely dangerous, mixed- and lower-class neighborhoods as secure. Foremost among these areas is Broadway Avenue, which accounts for three of the play’s city scenes, and which represents a topographical purgatory for Edward before he wanders into the firmly immigrant, working-class Five Points. “Clothes torn away and very shabby,” Edward enters the first Broadway scene complaining that his “last cent is gone” and that a “burning thirst consumes” him. The presence of Edward’s two “loafer” companions denote a lessening social circle and Edward’s spiraling social rank.449 From the very first city scene, then, Barnum warns his audiences that the mixing of classes is one of the principal dangers of a democratic street like Broadway. Barnum’s theatre offered middle-class spectators a haven in which to congregate, but beyond its walls lie the allurements that have trapped Edward, an upstanding citizen such as themselves. In the worst-case scenario, then, Broadway class mixing could lead to a process of rapidly declining social status like Edward’s.

The specific order of bar-room scenes also reveals the city’s swift powers in ensnaring outsiders. In the play’s second Broadway scene, set at the “interior of the Arbor” bar, Edward and his friends dance, fight, and are promptly ejected.450 The top of the very next scene shifts to outside of another bar—this time in Five Points—as Edward and his friends pile out “struggling, singing, shouting &c., &c., Exit fighting.”451 The successive scenes give the impression visually of a single bar-room, but the shift from Broadway to Five Points demonstrates Edward’s descent spatially. The drinkers are

449 Smith, Drunkard, in Richards, 280.
450 Ibid., 283.
451 Ibid., 284.
ejected only from the Broadway bar, but their rowdy behavior remains the same in both locations. Thus Barnum suggests that without the benefit of an education about city life such as he offers, the middle-class tourist can fall just as easily as Edward does from barhopping on Broadway to outright depravity in Five Points.

In his warnings about Broadway’s deceptive safety, Barnum mirrors both the era’s travel-journal and urban sketch literature. These two print genres recorded thrilling spectacles within low-class areas, aspects missing from the tourist guidebooks imitated in the Boston productions. In a journal entry from 1843, Richard Henry Dana points out the close proximity of Broadway’s “cheerful light” and “happy, affectionate & virtuous people” to the “dark, filthy, violent & degraded regions” of the adjacent Five Points. Additionally, Foster writes that Five Points crime could easily spill over into the Broadway area. He describes his observation of two predatory “fishers of men” who snatch a country greenhorn on Broadway, then drug and abduct him. Because Barnum’s American Museum sat at the corner of Broadway and Ann Street, he could hardly portray Broadway as a place to be avoided at all costs. So instead, he instructed his middle-class tourists not only to avoid certain unsavory establishments (that is, the Arbor Bar) but also to understand visual codes that set apart the respectable citizen from potentially menacing Broadway types.

Barnum’s portrayal of Five Points—an area notorious for its lower-class debauchery—further attempts to initiate audiences to real-life spectacles previously

---

recorded by travel-journal writers. The play’s two Five Points scenes feature barflies fighting outside a bar-room, locals battling with police, and perpetual drunkenness, all features that piqued tourists’ simultaneous fear of and interest in the forbidden neighborhood. Dana remembers his “sudden desire to see that sink of iniquity & filth, the ‘Five Points’” while walking down Broadway.454 He recounts the horrifying sights of prostitutes, drunkards, and domestic fights, including one woman whose “drunken screeches & curses were so loud that they could be heard several squares off.”455 The year before, Charles Dickens brought two policemen with him as he “plunge[d]” into the Five Points. He catalogues the “leprous houses,” “drunken frays,” and “coarse and bloated faces” in the neighborhood, and finally determines “all that is loathsome, drooping, and decayed is here.”456

By sharing these spots of raucous behavior and ruined humanity, Barnum’s Drunkard production replicates Dana’s and Dickens’s voyeuristic tourism but diverges by proclaiming the safety of such spaces. As William saves Mary and Julia in one scene and Edward in another, the play expresses hope that respectable virtue can be recognized even in, as Dickens writes, Five Points’ crisscrossed “lanes and alleys, paved with mud knee-deep.”457 Conversely, Cribbs finds himself arrested there and exclaims, “I’m a lawyer, I’m a respectable man,” but no one listens.458 Dana and Dickens portray a Five Points full of filth and indistinguishable degenerates. Overriding these writers’ claims, Barnum affirms that even in a space as disorienting and corrupt as Five Points, true

455 Ibid., 196.
457 Ibid., 101.
458 Smith, Drunkard, in Richards, 288.
middle-class figures can be identified. Thus for middle-class viewers, the scene functions both as a vicarious experience and as a reassurance of safety. For audiences uncomfortable with seeing the real Five Points and its low-class inhabitants, they could observe the representations onstage and then safely return home. For other spectators who wished to follow the characters into the actual neighborhood after the show concluded, the play initiated them into the Points’ sensory assaults. Regardless, tourist viewers were reassured that one’s visit to the slums would not change genetic respectability; Mary and Edward both spend time in the Five Points but eventually reclaim their middle-class status in the country. In this respect, *The Drunkard* safeguarded the urban areas about which audiences were most inquiring and most fearful.

Of course, the suggestion of Barnum’s 1850 New York production— that middle-class tourists can learn to navigate threatening urban spaces—was historically inaccurate and hazardous to suggest. Historian Christine Stansell characterizes Five Points as “an easy walk from most places of business” and a ward where “crime and amusement rubbed elbows.”459 Beginning in the 1840s, businessmen and other middle-class males would venture to Five Points assignation houses, which secretly ran sophisticated robbery schemes.460 Contrary to the play’s picture of Five Points as decipherable, contemporaneous police reports reveal the neighborhood as an unpredictable, unreadable space for outsiders. In one *New York Herald* account from 1848, an Englishman touring the neighborhood met some seemingly friendly men, who then spiked his liquor and

---

459 Stansell, *City of Women*, 174-175.
robbed him of all his money. Another *Herald* report the next year described a Central New York tourist visiting Five Points who was seduced into, and promptly drugged within, one of the homes of the “belles of the vicinity”; he woke up the next day penniless. As Edward and Mary are separately extracted from poverty in the Five Points, Barnum’s *Drunkard* suggests that one’s respectability will be recognized and rewarded in the most degraded of urban areas. Yet as the newspaper accounts prove about the real Five Points of this period, a visitor’s middle-class appearance only marked him or her as a potential victim.

Kimball’s different strategy—ignoring the slums and instead presenting only the public and commercial landmarks of middle-class guidebooks—proved equally as misleading. Both the 1844 and 1849 Boston productions essentially staged the shielded tourist experience from middle-class guidebooks. Boston Museum spectators learned nothing of the salacious street life that Barnum would later stage in Five Points. Rather, the scenes of Edward’s debauchery transpire on unspecified or uncharacterized Boston streets. Only Mary and Julia’s garret scene in Boston’s North End strays from this formula. The scene takes place on Ann Street, a fair distance from the theatre itself and the tourist spots of other scenes, and is confined to an interior space. Thus Kimball envisions a sterilized Boston in which visitors can move safely from one tourist location to the next. Historically, however, 1840s and 50s Boston was far from an innocent strolling town. Barbara Hobson reports that by 1851, Ann Street was considered a dangerous walking avenue and contained an estimated 227 brothels, 26 gambling dens,

---

and 1,500 liquor stores. A contemporaneous report on cholera details Ann Street’s “over-crowded population, bad ventilation, insufficient and unwholesome diet, intemperance, and the entire absence of cleanliness.” During the same years in which Kimball was attempting to attract and placate tourists, Boston court reports also documented an astonishing increase in the city’s overall crime—including spikes in prostitution, battery and assault offenses, and especially public drunkenness. The Municipal Court handled only 169 criminal cases in 1832, but that number multiplied ninefold to 1,538 by 1850. In 1838, Boston’s government became so concerned about rising crime that it instituted a police force devoted exclusively to stamping out vice crimes.

Barnum’s original Drunkard production at his Philadelphia Museum in 1849 also portrayed urban spaces as speciously secure. As he would repeat with his New York production the next year, Barnum adapted the play to several local sites. Yet instead of highlighting actual Philadelphia scenery, he filled his scenes with attractions from his Museum, as one review details: “The introduction of some of Barnum’s curiosities in the Washington Square scene is very funny; indeed, we do not know what could possibly be more mirth inspiring, than [the play’s] dialogue with Gen. Mole, the English dwarf.”

---

466 Ibid., 137.
467 Ibid., 27.
468 “Amusements,” Philadelphia Inquirer, Dec. 18, 1849, 1. Also known as Major Mole, the aforementioned “English dwarf” apparently read several characters parts.
For those audience members unfamiliar with Barnum’s exhibits and side shows, the production offered free advertising for return visits. The implications are greater, however, for the large percentage of patrons who had encountered Barnum’s attractions beforehand. Having already passed by wax statues in the Philadelphia Museum or observed General Mole’s act in afternoon matinees, spectators would notice that *The Drunkard*’s vision of Philadelphia looked strangely similar to the interior of the Museum. Such recognition erases any distinctions of locality and substitutes in Barnum’s familiar carnival atmosphere. In restaging and rendering comical his own exhibits for this *Drunkard* production, Barnum speaks directly to his preexisting patrons. He unifies these middle-class spectators by forcing them to recognize the comedic displacement of his spectacles. Yet by overwriting actual Philadelphia locations with his own attractions, Barnum implies that the city itself is as navigable and as socially homogenous as his museum’s lobbies.

Despite its obstacles, the city (and specifically city theatre) becomes critical to restoring the Middletons to the middle class, as evidenced by two metatheatrical scenes. Both producers featured their respective museums as scenic backdrops that play roles in *The Drunkard*’s plot and reassert the play’s theme of middle-class reclamation. In the 1849 Boston production, the “exterior of [the] Boston Museum” appears in the background of Act III, scene 6, when William rescues Edward.⁴⁶⁹ By choosing to set this specific scene at the Boston Museum, Kimball affirms the theatre itself as a site of class recognition. It becomes a self-reflexive moment in which the Boston Museum spectators,

too, can distinguish themselves from the unruly working-class audiences not invited to share this venue and its reputable amusements. In Barnum’s 1850 New York production, Barnum saves his “view of Barnum’s Museum” for Act IV, scene 3, for a scene between William and Edward’s financial savior Rencelaw. Here, Rencelaw informs William that Edward is resting safe, that Mary and Julia are being sheltered, and that “their home—their happy home—is prepared for them in the village.” The setting of Barnum’s Museum highlights the restoration of middle-class respectability, as signified by Rencelaw’s promise of a private, domestic cottage located far away from the public city. According to one report, the philanthropist Rencelaw was dressed and made up to look identical to Barnum himself. Thus in the production that would secure the success and the patronage of his American Museum for years to come, Barnum portrayed himself as the primary unifier of middle-class consumers.

Pastoral Paradise/Urban Access

The play’s final-act return to the utopian village affirms country values, a comforting message for visiting rural spectators. The last scene reveals the Middleton family inside their cottage as the “sun is setting over the hills at back of landscape” (50). The open airs and defined beauty of the natural world illuminate the scene, providing a welcome respite from the shadow-filled city of the previous two acts. Edward plays

---

470 Smith, *Drunkard*, in Richards, 294-95.
471 Ibid., 295.
472 This link was originally made by Harry Birdoff in *The World’s Greatest Hit* (New York: Vanni, 1947), 85, cited in Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 122.
473 The polarization of country and city as respective sites of virtue and vice certainly was not a new concept. The “wicked city” had roots in eighteenth-century bourgeois literature, and was featured within the American city-mystery literature booming in the 1840s. Adrienne Siegel counts 173 works of city
“Home, Sweet Home” on the flute, Julia sings accompaniment, and Mary sews “handsome work” (as opposed to the “slop-work” she knitted in the city) (50, 35). It recalls the idyllic opening acts when Edward and Mary are married in front of a “beautiful cottage” covered with vines, and the stage directions describe the scene as “The extreme of rural, tranquil beauty” (19). Given the plot’s juxtaposition of such a serene green world with the dank, despairing city, Celia Braxton assumes that the play’s “ideal is located in the family’s home, the sphere of domesticity, which is represented by one particular cottage.”474 The country home represents this “ideal” precisely because of the makeup of the museum theatres’ audiences. Since a significant percentage of Kimball’s and Barnum’s patrons visited from rural locations, the final moments confirm the simplicity and safety of country life. The play’s educational city scenes allow spectators to believe that they could navigate through the convoluted city, but like the Middletons, they choose to return to the purer village.

Still, the play does not uplift the Middletons as knowledgeable and urbane characters, suggesting instead that William and Rencelaw are the real models for attaining a mastery of the city. At first overwhelmed by the city’s multiple stimuli, William ultimately tracks down Mary and Julia in their garret, Edward in the slums, and Cribbs through various urban neighborhoods. In the final act in the village, Cribbs escapes down a back road, boasting “I shall escape all observation” (48). But William witnesses Cribbs’s flight and devises a plan to “cut . . . quick across Farmer Williams’
pasture” and “keep ourselves concealed” to successfully apprehend him (48). William returns to the country with sharpened senses and an improved orientation specifically because he spent time deciphering the tortuous city streets. Rencelaw, too, moves seamlessly through the city and across its limits. In the first Boston version, he helps usher the broken Edward out of a Hawley Street alley, rushes to Court Square to press charges against Cribbs, orchestrates the Middletons’ return to the village, and finally escorts the captured Cribbs back to the city, where the villain is imprisoned. Both William and Rencelaw reject the notion that the bucolic village offers the only haven from corruptive urbanity. Rather these characters show that the border between town and country is permeable for those who learn to successfully navigate the city. In a play that continually offers to initiate viewers to various urban figures and localities, the producers imply that viewers can acquire such boundary-crossing powers themselves.

Ultimately, Kimball’s and Barnum’s productions of *The Drunkard* recast country and tourist spectators as informed urban residents. These outsider audiences congregated under the pretense that after watching the play, they all could comprehend and safely traverse the city. The success of *The Drunkard* may have spawned several more urban plays with similar intentions. Beginning six months after *The Drunkard’s* Boston Museum premiere and running through the early 1850s, Kimball and later Barnum held open prize competitions for the best locally-set play. Advertisements mentioned *The Drunkard* as an exemplary drama in this respect, and producers awarded amateur writers

---

475 For more on the Boston Museum prize winners, see Clapp, “The Passing of an Historic Playhouse.” For a Boston Museum advertisement, see for example, Boston Museum, playbill, *London Assurance*, 9 Oct., 1848. Playbill Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
two hundred dollars and a professional production. Whether winners like Joseph Stevens Jones’s Boston-set *The Wheelwright* (1845) and *Old Job and Jacob Gray* (1848) or other Drunkard-inspired urban dramas like the Boston Museum’s *The Gambler* (1844) or Barnum Museum’s *The Curate’s Daughter* (1850) actually assisted tourists’ navigation remains unseen. Yet if these plays resembled *The Drunkard*’s erroneously secure visions of city life, then they certainly would have led audiences astray. While some urban residents may have recognized the inaccuracies, tourists influenced by urban sketches, city guidebooks, and *The Drunkard* surely did not. Both Kimball and Barnum no doubt understood the fallacy of all their staged urbanities. But they also knew that—for visitors eager to see famous Boston landmarks or infamous New York neighborhoods—there could be no better advertisement for their theatres than the promise of a safe trip to town. Complementing the nation’s legitimate urban tours with their effectively artificial ones, the Boston and the American Museums thus captured the imagination—and the dollars—of middle-class audiences eager to plunge the expanding depths of America’s newly alluring cities.

### III. Temperance Drama and Print Culture

Of course, theatergoing was not the only leisure activity which helped delineate class lines, as the emergent print industry also helped to solidify a burgeoning middle-

---

476 “Prize Dramas: Barnum’s Museum.” *The Dollar Magazine*, December 1851, 279.
477 Kimball debuted a production of *The Gambler* on November 4, 1844, in the middle of *The Drunkard*’s record-setting run; Clapp, “The Passing of an Historic Playhouse.” *The Curate’s Daughter* premiered on December 16th, 1850, only five months after *The Drunkard* opened up Barnum’s lecture room. Though the play was produced simultaneously at the National, Barnum’s production saw a more successful run. George Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*. 8 vol. (New York: 1927-1936), VI.71-72.
class readership. Reading became yet another way for the middle classes to consume working-class narratives of intemperance, now within a safe, domestic forum. Publishers of temperance fiction, non-fiction, and drama expressly marketed their tales of laboring-class drunkards to middle-class readers. By encouraging the middle classes to read and dramatize these narratives in their safe parlor spaces, the publishers further solidified the middle class as a distinct consumer community.

Mid-Century Temperance Reading

By 1850, approximately 90 percent of American white adults were literate, creating a demand for books of all kinds.478 While Americans continued to read texts imported from Europe, the American publishing industry began flourishing with new genres such as history, travel, and especially fiction.479 American writers published only 109 fictional works from 1820 to 1830, but published nearly 1,000 in the 1840s.480 In that same decade, the ten-cylinder press accelerated printing speeds, and expanding rail development allowed publishers to ship their books to a myriad of new markets.481 Cheap publishers flooded the marketplace with loosely-bound periodicals and books, causing more established firms to lower their prices.482 Soon, the titles of books that one read and the activity of reading itself became crucial factors in distinguishing oneself socially.

---

480 Ibid., 4.
Reviewers acted as “cultural custodians” and directed middle-class readers to certain types of fiction that would reinforce class status.\textsuperscript{483} As Barbara Sicherman states, “[B]ooks—reading them, talking about them, sometimes owning them—became a marker of middle-class status, for some perhaps the critical marker” in the antebellum era.\textsuperscript{484} Although working-class readers sometimes bought material intended for wealthier consumers and middle-class readers often read cheap novels about hedonistic working-class life, “the bourgeois culture of reading aimed to mark off boundaries of respectability and taste, boundaries commonly thought to coincide with those of class.”\textsuperscript{485} Soon, the presence and types of books in the middle-class parlor became signifiers of a leisure affordable only to citizens within a certain income bracket.

Within this context, temperance literature and especially temperance fiction found widespread popularity. Although it remained hesitant about the genre’s morality, the American Temperance Union officially endorsed temperance fiction in 1836.\textsuperscript{486} Walt Whitman wrote his temperance novel \textit{Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate} (1842) on

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{483} Machor, James L. “Historical Hermeneutics and Antebellum Fiction: Gender, Response Theory, and Interpretive Contexts,” in \textit{Readers in History}, ed. Machor (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993), 65.
\item \textsuperscript{484} Barbara Sicherman. “Reading and Middle-Class Identity in Victorian America,” in \textit{Reading Acts: U.S. Readers’ Interactions with Literature, 1800-1950}, eds. Barbara Ryan and Amy M. Thomas (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P), 142. Sicherman adds, “In a world in flux, reading, the right reading, differentiated not only the middle from the lower class but the genuinely cultured from the nouveaux riches” (142).
\item \textsuperscript{485} Ibid., 139.
\item \textsuperscript{486} Washingtonians also emphasized reading as an alternative to traditional tavern activities. Most prominently, they created reading rooms for members and promoted poetry readings for “the improvement of mental culture.” Quoted in Frick, \textit{Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform}, 76. In a lecture, Reverend William Ellery Channing lectured that the “uneducated poor” sunk into intemperance in part because they lacked “resource in books;” see Channing, “Intemperance Among the Poor,” in Anon., \textit{My Own Experience: Dedicated to the ‘Suffolk Board of Trade’}” (Boston: Temperance Standard Press, 1846), 25. Gough, too, emphasizes that he should have been practicing middle-class respectability when he was clinging to the bottle: “Instead of spending my evenings at home, in reading or conversation, they were, almost invariably, passed in the company of the rum bottle, which became almost my sole household deity”; see John B. Gough, \textit{An Autobiography by John B. Gough}, 1845, in Crowley, \textit{Drunkard’s Progress}, 139.
\end{itemize}
commission from the Washingtonians, and T.S. Arthur’s fictionalized account of that organization’s meetings, *Six Nights with the Washingtonians* (1842), sold 175,000 copies by 1850. Popular temperance fiction, however, often struggled to balance the morals advocated by the official temperance organizations with the sensationalism of the cheap books dominating the marketplace. As David Reynolds reports, temperance fiction portrayed graphic scenes such as an inebriated husband dragging his wife by the hair (*Letters from an Alms-House*—1841) or a drunken mother locking her toddler son in a closet until he starves to death (*The Glass: or, The Trials of Helen More*—1849). Arthur, too, does not shy away from depicting drink’s brutalities. In a *Six Nights* chapter entitled “The Experience Meeting,” the narrator cites one Washingtonian speaker who recalls throttling his two-year old daughter: “I caught her up madly by one arm, and commenced beating her with all my strength—the strength of a nervous man inspired by intoxication and anger.” When his wife interferes, he punches her in the head and then kicks his daughter across the room. This destruction of the middle-class family presumably triggered both fear and subversive thrills within the many middle-class readers who read the novel. Just as temperance drama recycled elements from

---

488 *Six Nights* was published first serially in the *Baltimore Merchant*, then as pamphlets, and then collected for a book version. This early success of Arthur’s of course foreshadowed his even more popular Maine-Law era temperance novel *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* (1854) which sold at least 400,000 copies; see Reynolds, “Black Cats and Delirium Tremens,” 31. Adams also states that Arthur’s novel and the resulting play in 1858 were intended to quell backlash against the Maine Laws already beginning to manifest by the mid 1850s; see Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 125.
Washingtonian speeches, Arthur’s novel absorbs working-class experience and packages it as private reading material for middle-class consumers.

This co-opting of working-class life—however degraded that life could appear—for middle-class entertainment is even more apparent in the oft-neglected “temperance narrative” genre published in the Washingtonian era.\textsuperscript{491} Critic John Crowley has distinguished this group of largely non-fiction narratives by its strict adherence to a first-person confessional format. While fiction like Arthur’s \textit{Six Nights With the Washingtonians} and Whitman’s \textit{Franklin Evans} technically belong to the genre, most temperance narratives were lecturers’ first-hand recollections of their drunken pasts. The narratives were a direct “outgrowth” of the Washingtonians, and approximated the experience meetings’ confessions more closely than any other written form.\textsuperscript{492} The non-fiction writers were almost exclusively working-class. Jacob Carter (\textit{My Drunken Life}—1848) was a brushmaker and part-time actor, James Gale (\textit{A Long Voyage in a Leaky Ship}—1842) a butcher and farmworker, Charles T. Woodman (\textit{Narrative of Charles T. Woodman, A Reformed Inebriate}—1843) a baker and liquor store clerk, and George Haydock (\textit{Incidents in the Life of George Haydock}—1847) a rock blaster. The genre’s most famous author was the bookbinder Gough, whose \textit{Autobiography by John B. Gough} (1845) was an extended version of his stump speech from Washingtonian meetings and later on the broader lecture circuit.

Both formal aspects and advertising information indicate at least a partial, if not dominant, middle-class readership for the temperance narrative genre. Like temperance

\textsuperscript{491} John Crowley, introduction to \textit{Drunkard’s Progress}, 4.  
\textsuperscript{492} Ibid.
fiction, temperance narratives struggled to counterbalance the gothic horrors of drunkenness with the light of redemption. In his autobiography *The Life and Experience of A.V. Green* (1848), blacksmith and former drunkard Green relates how during one bout of delirium tremens, a “blue-bottle, fiery-eyed devil” told him that he “would pull off my finger nails; then my toe nails; then a finger; then a toe; then pull off one of my arms; then the other; then pull off my legs, and with that brand of fire they should burn up my body.”493 However, he ends his narrative by discussing his signing of the abstinence pledge (albeit only after imbibing four pints of beer).494 Similarly, Gough writes extended DTs passages about “hideous faces appear[ing] on the walls, and on the ceiling, and on the floors,” being “surrounded by millions of monstrous spiders,” and hallucinating that he had “a knife with hundreds of blades in my hand, every blade driven through the flesh of my hands.”495 His tale, too, concludes with a short anecdote about being rescued on the street by a Washingtonian member and signing the pledge. Yet this emphasis on the “shadow” over the “sunshine” of the drinking experience suggests a compulsion to reveal the secret pleasures of working-class hedonism to a readership unfamiliar with such sights. Many of the narratives were self-published, and many details about their availability remains unknown. Gough’s *Autobiography*, however, found success and underwent thirty-one printings between 1845 and 1853.496 Moreover, advertisements for his confessions in the *Christian Register* and the *Episcopal Recorder* point not towards fellow working-class Washingtonians as readers but rather towards the

494 Ibid., 187
religious and middle-class audiences Gough lectured to more often after the waning of Washingtonianism.\textsuperscript{497} This readership existed even from the beginning of the Washingtonian era. The Reverend John Marsh wrote an 1842 novel entitled \textit{John Hawkins' Daughter} which, according to critic Thomas Augst, “appropriated [Washingtonian] ‘experiences’ as material for middle-class reading.”\textsuperscript{498} Marsh fictionalized Washingtonian speaker Hawkins’s famous story of his daughter saving him from alcohol, and later released temperance anthologies reproducing excerpts from Gough’s speeches.\textsuperscript{499} Extracting narratives from venues like Washingtonian meetings, Marsh reframed them for private middle-class readers. Hence, the practice of observing working-class experiences and presenting them anew for middle-class audiences existed in print culture even before \textit{The Drunkard} enacted the same practice in museum theatres.

Temperance organizations and journals also issued various temperance literatures, often aimed at pre-existing temperance groups as well as a rising middle class. In introducing her bibliography of nineteenth-century temperance texts, Barbara Cohen-Stratyner reports that The National Temperance Society and Publication House, the American Temperance Union, and the Woman’s Temperance Publications Association all released or sponsored books of temperance hymns and tales.\textsuperscript{500} These works were mainly aimed towards “an avid, pre-persuaded audience” and were sold to the respective

\textsuperscript{498} Augst, “Temperance, Mass Culture,” 314. Notably, Marsh was also president of the Massachusetts Temperance Society.
\textsuperscript{499} Augst, “Temperance, Mass Culture,” 314.
\textsuperscript{500} Cohen-Stratyner, “Bibliographies,” 78.
membership groups (78-79). Long-winded titles such as *Washingtonian Pocket Companion; containing a choice collection of temperance hymns, songs, odes, glees, duets, choruses, etc.* (1843) and *The Temperance Melodist; consisting of glees, songs and pieces, arranged and adapted expressly for the use of ‘Temperance Watchmen,’ ‘Sons of Temperance,’ societies, temperance gatherings, and for social and family circles throughout the union* (1852) reveal that these books were designed expressly to assist temperance organizations. While not all of these publications may have excluded the working class, titles most often appealed to middle-class, post-Washingtonian organizations like the Bands of Hope and the Sons of Temperance.

The cultivation of middle-class readers became even more pronounced within temperance journals. Boasting a circulation of 10,000 readers, the *New York Organ* was one of the most prominent of these publications. The journal printed serial installments of temperance novellas such as *The Power of the Pledge* (1847), which were later combined and issued in pamphlet form. Advertisements for the *New York Organ*

---

501 Cohen-Stratyner specifically names Dick & Fitzgerald and Funk & Wagnalls as two commercial publishers which issued temperance publications sponsored by temperance organizations; see “Bibliographies,” 78.

502 Other titles directed at specific post-Washington societies include the anthology *The national Temperance offering; and Sons and Daughters of Temperance gift* (1850), Lucius Hart’s *The juvenile temperance harp... [for] meetings of the American Juvenile Temperance Society* (1857), John Marsh’s *Roll and exercise book for the Bands of Hope* (1862), Sidney Herbert’s *The young volunteer campaign melodist. Designed for the use of Bands of Hope and all other juvenile reform organizations* (1864), and James C. Dunn’s *Band of Hope manual; containing directions how to form Bands of Hope; also, constitutions for Bands of Hope and Bands of Hope ritual, together with dialogues, recitations, hymns, etc.* (1867). Many were published by the American Temperance Union and the National Temperance Society. See Cohen-Stratyner, “Bibliographies,” 69-91, for these and other titles.

503 Popular temperance journals included *The Crystal Fount* (1847-48) which was the “national magazine for the Sons, Daughters and Cadets of Temperance” and *The Family Favorite & Temperance Journal* (1849-1850), both of which included dialogues, songs, and hymns in most issues; see Cohen Stratynner, “Bibliographies,” 86-87. Also see Holly Berkley Fletcher, *Gender and the American Temperance Movement of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 169-171, for an exhaustive list of temperance newspapers and periodicals.
assured readers that it was “The Cheapest and Best Temperance and Family Journal” in the nation and “nothing is ever admitted that may not be read with propriety in the most Select Circle.” This conscious recruitment of a higher-echelon readership reinforces the line between working-class drunkards and middle-class consumers that appeared towards the end of Washingtonianism. The advertisement page of a sample 1851 *Organ* issue lists works from nearly every temperance genre: T.S Arthur’s tale “Our Children: How Shall We Save Them?,” a short story about how “the inclination to drink is transmitted from parent to child”; British illustrator George Cruikshank’s *History of the Bottle* (i.e. *The Bottle*), a series of drawings about intemperance; “Appeal to the People for the Suppression of the Liquor Traffic,” an essay espousing prohibition law; “New York Organ Temperance Melodies,” a collection of solos, duets, and glees for temperance meetings; “Ceremonies of the Sons of Temperance,” a guide to the rituals of the post-Washingtonian organization; and the New York Organ Pictorial Temperance Almanac, a calendar for temperance followers. Though one advertisement announces “Temperance Dialogues” for youths, temperance drama notably does not appear. Its conspicuous absence underlines temperance organizations’ uneasiness with temperance drama even at the dawn of the Maine Law era. A “Family Companion” which was “devoted to Pure Literature” according to the journal’s cover page, *The New York Organ*

---

would not risk its reputation even after *The Drunkard* introduced many middle-class and family audiences to temperance theatre. \(^5\)06

**Temperance Drama in Print**

In light of this exclusion from the movement’s popular journals, temperance dramatists and producers relied on the slow-growing commercial drama publishing industry in order to extend their reach. Most antebellum drama publishers began advertising in the 1830s and attempted to foster the same types of middle-class consumers as did museum theatres. An 1839 review of Rufus Dawes’s tragedy *Athenia of Damascus*—the first in a series of publisher “Colman’s Dramatic Library Series”—announces that drama remains an underappreciated form of print: “There exists in the country talent of a higher order for this department of literature than has yet been brought out.” \(^5\)07 As they did with the expanding fiction genre, reviewers attempted to gather a middle-class readership around respected dramas. William Taylor’s Modern Standard Drama series became the principal outlet for play-text publishing in the 1840s, and its ads bragged that “Every play is printed from the most esteemed and authentic edition.” \(^5\)08 The series content, too, reflects a middle- to upper-class readership. For instance, Taylor’s play series contains only established tragedies and comedies and excludes melodrama almost entirely. His first volume included, among other plays, Richard

---

\(^5\)06 *The New York Organ*, March 22, 1851.


\(^5\)08 Simultaneous to Colman’s publishing in the late 1830s and just previous to Taylor’s dominance in the 1840s, Turner and Fisher remained a third prominent source of play text publishing; see, for instance, “Advertisement 2: Theatrical,” *Spirit of the Times*, November 11, 1837, 311. Turner & Fisher’s ad boasts of reprints of plays, operas, and farces directly from London.
Brinsley Sheridan’s *The School for Scandal* (1777), which saw the majority of its New York productions at the esteemed Park Theatre, as well as Edward Bulwer Lytton’s *Money* (1840), which the Park Company first brought to New York.\(^{509}\) It also featured a portrait of playwright Anna Cora Mowatt, whose *Fashion; or Life in New York* (1845) premiered at the Park and became highly popular among the middle classes as a satire about their own social aspirations.\(^{510}\) Though the price of each play text during this period remained inexpensive—usually about 12 ½ cents each or a bound volume of eight plays for one dollar—the advertisement language and play selections indicate that the publishers sought a more exclusive readership than other cheap publications.

The select temperance dramas published during this period appealed to the same middle-class and family audiences already reading these drama texts at home and viewing such plays in respectable theatres. Of the twenty confirmed temperance dramas performed in America before the Maine Law passed in 1851, only Smith’s *The Drunkard* and British playwright T.P. Taylor’s version of *The Bottle* found American publishers before that year.\(^{511}\) *The Drunkard*’s first edition was released by a Boston publisher, Justin Jones’s Publishing House, as the first (and only) in a series of “Boston Museum Edition of American Acting Dramas.”\(^{512}\) The front cover features a picture of the

---

\(^{509}\) Odell reports *A School for Scandal* productions at the Park Theatre in September of 1834, June 1837, February of 1838, July of 1839, February of 1840, November of 1841, March of 1842, September of 1842, October of 1842, June of 1843. Other productions include the Broadway in September of 1836 and The National in October of 1837; see Odell, *Annals*, IV and V.  
\(^{510}\) Halttunen also remarks that *Fashion* became an inspiration for many of the 1850s parlor theatricals; see *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 153-161.  
\(^{512}\) Smith, *The Drunkard* (Boston: Jones’s Publishing House, 1847), front cover.
Museum itself, with angels, cherubs, and a busy-at-work Shakespeare floating above (see Fig. 2.13). The physical representation of the Museum itself, combined with an advertisement on the back for the Museum’s reptiles, quadrupeds, curiosities, and statuaries affirms the text’s appeal to the many middle-class frequenters of the Museum. Furthermore, the edition’s back-cover advertisement for a Boston story paper entitled the *Star Spangled Banner* declares itself “a large and elegant family paper devoted to Literature, Art, Science, the Drama, and everything that contributes to the instruction and amusement of the reading Million.” 513 The ad’s focus upon “family” reading activities again suggests that the play text’s publishers targeted a middle-class demographic. As Sicherman conveys of this era, “Literary activities permeated middle-class homes. Families read aloud and played word games during long evenings at home;” furthermore, middle-class parents directed their children to appropriate types of reading in order to build “character.”514 Such prominent advertising on *The Drunkard*’s first edition implies that certain drama texts shared this same purpose. William Taylor’s Modern Standard Drama version of *The Drunkard*, published three years later in 1850, repeats the Jones edition’s marketing strategy. An advertisement for *Literary World* magazine on the back cover boasts of its status as a “comprehensive Belles Lettres Newspaper” which features reviews of fine literature and reports of the American Ethnological Society and the New York Historical Society among others.515 An attached *Newark Daily Advertiser* review deems *Literary World* “a journal that ought to be in the hands of every family that would

513 Ibid., back cover.  
514 Sicherman, “Reading and Middle-Class Identity,” 144, 142.  
keep itself informed of the course of literary opinion and intelligence.”516 In later eras, drama text advertising space was reserved exclusively for the publisher’s other drama volumes. However, the ads in this pre-1851 era reveal exactly the type of middle-class family readership that publishers believed the drama texts, especially temperance drama texts, would most appeal.

---

516 Ibid., back cover. Indeed, according to Gregory Pfitzer, the magazine’s publisher E.A. Duyckinck intended *Literary World* to appeal to, in Duyckinck’s words, a “refined and cultivated taste.” This intent seemed aimed directly at both the middle classes and working classes aspiring to rise. . . . It also diverged specifically from the sensationalism of writers like Lippard: “[Duyckinck’s] idea was to elevate the masses through exposure to ‘good’ literature that they could afford rather than by catering to crude appetites . . . Put simply, there was a significant difference in Duyckinck’s mind between the high-minded populism of Irving and the base offerings of Lippard and Frost”; see Pfitzer, *Popular History and the Literary Marketplace 1840-1920* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2008), 59.
Introductory material to temperance play texts also attempts to assure readers of the plays’ ties to the middle-class temperance causes rather than previous working-class ones. Both the Jones (1847) and Taylor (1850) editions of The Drunkard label the play a “moral domestic drama” instead of a melodrama on the text covers. Both editions include an identical, anonymously-penned preface asserting the play’s purposes and effects, in which the preface’s writer describes the play as a “Domestic Drama.” Of the 1844 production, the writer predicts that “no unprejudiced person will attempt to deny that it was the cause of much moral good, and materially aided the Temperance movement it
was meant to advocate.” The emphasis on “moral good” permits respectable readers to feel less guilty about digesting the appalling revelations of urban working-class drinking life. Reference to the larger temperance movement also assures readers of the play’s link to a worthy social cause. However, the writer’s vague phrase, “the Temperance movement,” again points to the departure from any working-class remnants. By the 1847 and 1850 releases of the texts, working-class Washingtonianism had all but disappeared, and no reference to the organization exists in the preface or the play itself. Not specifically a Washingtonian, Edward’s savior Rencelaw is merely a “friend to the unfortunate” who privately administers the pledge of sobriety to the drunken protagonist. Even more than the initial production, the printed play further erases evidence of any working-class elements.

This middle-class co-optation of working-class drunkards’ experiences continued with New-York based publisher John Douglas’s release of The Bottle in its “Minor Drama” series in 1847. Although the play itself concerns a specifically working-class drunkard, the printed text recruits middle-class temperance followers. The anonymous editor writes that the play can serve as a useful tool for the new temperance movements: “If the Sons and Daughters of Temperance are true to their cause, they will search the highways, and take the intemperate to witness it.” By naming two prominent middle-

518 Smith, Drunkard, in Richards, 291.
519 William Taylor was initially a selling agent of John Douglas before acquiring many of Douglas’s plates. In turn, Samuel French was initially a selling agent for William Taylor before French bought out Taylor’s plates in the early 1850s; see Anon., Truly Yours: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Play Publishing & Service to the Theatre (London: Samuel French, 1980), 1.
class outgrowths of Washingtonianism here, the editor claims the play as a specifically middle-class product. Furthermore, the edition only references cast lists and production notes for the 1847 productions at the City of London Theatre and New York’s Park Theatre. The editor singles out the latter, writing that “‘The Bottle’ has been produced at the Park Theatre with great credit to that establishment.” However, The Bottle also played at lower-class melodrama houses such as the Bowery in New York and the Arch St. Theatre in Philadelphia within weeks of the Park production. In fact, the show was a “comparative failure at the Park” and could not sustain a decent run. In releasing these temperance drama texts to the greater public, commercial publishers ignored spectators and potential readers of working-class theatres. Instead, they insisted on framing the plays as reading material only for the middle- or upper-class consumers who had already visited respectable theatres and belonged to middle-class social movements.

Reading plays, and temperance plays especially, functioned in part as a substitute for middle-class theatergoing. One 1841 advertisement for another play text series, Turner’s Dramatic Library, claims that the printed plays can act as a proxy for “those who have neither the opportunity nor inclination to attend” the theatre. The notice adds that for those for “whom dramatic reading is a favorite relaxation, they are invaluable.” While theatergoers constituted part of the readership, publishers acknowledged that reading dramas represented a perfectly respectable, and increasingly common, practice among non-spectators. At times, the editors appear to speak to those who could not see a

521 Ibid., 5.
522 Odell, Annals, V.347.
play in person, but who nonetheless required an imaginative accompaniment to their reading experiences. Besides reporting about certain productions’ most successful actors, the editors present observations about the effects of the play within the audience.\footnote{The Bottle’s editor writes that one actor “rendered [his] part at the Park Theatre with a genuine, life-like humour and drollery, which we have rarely seen equalled, but never surpassed”; see Anon., “Editorial Introduction,” in Taylor, The Bottle (Douglas Publishing), 5. Meanwhile, the writer of The Drunkard’s preface communicates that “Mr. 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;” see Anon., “Preface,” in Smith, The Drunkard (Jones’s Publishing, 1847), 5.}

About the Boston Museum production, The Drunkard’s preface writer shares, “In the representation it was a powerful and living picture, and all that saw it, felt it, for IT WAS TRUE.”\footnote{Ibid., 5.} The line reassures readers that they can be affected by the play’s content and morals, mainly because the original spectators were. More importantly, the writer communicates the spectators’ collective experience and attempts to place the reader in that audience him or herself. Readers can imagine themselves partaking in a larger middle-class community, even though they may have missed the performance itself.

Yet even as they enable readers, these preface writers acknowledge the limitations of reading plays of this nature. The Bottle’s editor writes that a live performance provokes “not only the eye, but the other senses also, [to be] awakened by a living portraiture of the drunkard’s career,”\footnote{Anon., “Editorial Introduction,” in Taylor, The Bottle (Douglas Publishing), 5.} and The Drunkard’s preface repeats, “No one who had not seen it would feel inclined, from the mere reading, to believe the very powerful effect produced.”\footnote{Anon., “Preface,” in Smith, The Drunkard (Jones’s Publishing, 1847), 5.} As much as these play texts can attempt to substitute for the theatergoing experience itself, they inevitably fall short. Thus the texts become,
ironically, an advertisement for theatergoing itself, as the writers assure middle-class readers about the safety of submitting one’s senses to the theatre.

Simultaneously, for those who had already seen the drama, temperance drama texts triggered recollections of their own spectatorial experiences. As much as Turner’s advocated drama texts as a substitute for theatrical spectatorship, its advertisements also claimed that the texts were “an excellent companion to The Theatres.” The distribution patterns of printed dramas indicates that these texts were intended partly as a supplement to theatergoing. While most printed plays were available by mail order, others were marketed and distributed directly by the theatres themselves. Kimball’s Boston Museum, for instance, published The Drunkard in tandem with Jones’ Publishing House. The theatre also sold books of music from its more popular shows at the theatre door. Kimball produced a version of The Bottle two weeks after its premiere at the Park in New York, and a note on the playbill reveals the proprietor’s cross-marketing strategies: “Sets of Engravings of the Eight tableaux of ‘The Bottle,’ at 25 cents, and copies of the Play 12½ cents, are for sale at the door.” The playbill for Barnum’s 1850 production of The Drunkard in New York similarly advertises, “Books of the plays, for one Shilling, can be had at the door.” With the temperance drama, this selling practice had far-reaching ramifications. The largely middle-class audiences could take copies of the play home and

529 For example, a playbill for the 1848 musical spectacle Forty Thieves and the Fairy of the Lake advertises that “Books of the words of the Songs, Duets, Trios and Choruses of the Spectacle may be obtained at the door. Price 6 ¼ cents.” 20 Mar., 1849. Playbill Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
revisit their spectatorial experiences by reading the text. In the 1850s and 60s, the home and specifically the parlor room emerged as an increasingly common space where the middle classes could shield themselves from the public world’s dangers. In obtaining copies of a play about, in The Bottle’s case, a working-class protagonist undone by the evils of drink, middle-class spectators could consume sanitized representations of working-class experience even farther away from the city centers where they might encounter actual working-class drunkards. The theatres advanced print’s supplementary function, venturing (in The Bottle’s case) to reprint excerpts from the printed text’s preface directly on the playbills. In this collaboration with print culture, the museum theatres expanded their efforts to assemble a group of exclusively middle-class consumers.

**Novelizations and Dramatizations**

Nor was the drama text itself the only way that theatres extended their temperance drama successes into the book industry, as an 1844 novelization of The Drunkard demonstrates. Released by Boston publisher E.P. Williams, the novella The Drunkard appeared in August of 1844, six months after the Boston Museum’s premiere of the play. The play’s non-consecutive run of 144 performances at the Museum was ongoing at the time, as an advertisement in Yankee magazine claims that the novella “is founded upon the popular Moral Drama now being performed with such unparalleled success at  

---

532 Boston Museum, playbill. The Bottle! Or Cause & Effect, 1 Dec. 1847.  
533 Anon., The Drunkard or The Fallen Saved (Boston: E.P. Williams, 1844). A copy resides at Princeton’s Rare Books and Special Collections. The cover page specifies that the book is “by the author of the moral drama of the same name, which has been performed nearly one hundred times at the Boston Museum,” but there is no proof that Smith himself actually composed the novelization. For more about this novella, see Mason, Melodrama and the Myth, 208.
the Boston Museum.\textsuperscript{534} Though introductory notes claim the text was available for sale at “all periodical depots,” it is difficult to determine who wrote it or who exactly may have read it.\textsuperscript{535} The text itself reads as a reimagining of the play. Several details are different: William is Edward’s valet, not his foster brother; Miss Spindle is a judgmental member of the village’s upwardly mobile society rather than a harmless spinster; Edward is saved by a farmer whose barn he has drunkenly slept in; and Cribbs and Miss Spindle get married before he is jailed.

The novella remains most interesting for its magnified emphasis on social respectability. Among many conversations about Edward’s declining social stock, Miss Spindle faults him for his wooing of the destitute Mary: “He has degraded himself to the level of the one he is courting.”\textsuperscript{536} Meanwhile, a local landlord claims, “His first step was the ruin of him—the marrying of that beggar girl!”\textsuperscript{537} Nearly each village conversation repeats this same theme of Mary’s lower social status, almost entirely absent in the play. In the novella, Edward’s drinking becomes a secondary problem to his transgressing class boundaries. As in the play, Edward wanders to the city but finally reunites with Mary and Julia within the village. Yet the play’s vision of this restoration remains tied to Edward’s overcoming his alcoholism, whereas the novella sees the reunion as a triumph of unconditional love over social bias. The novella in fact cautions about the pretensions of

\textsuperscript{534} “Advertisements,” \textit{Yankee}, August 24, 1844. Also, ads in the \textit{Boston Daily Atlas} claimed \textit{The Drunkard} hit its 87\textsuperscript{th} performance the next month on September 27, 1844, and its 101\textsuperscript{st} on October 19, 1844.

\textsuperscript{535} Anon., \textit{The Drunkard} (E.P. Williams). The title page also claims that the novella’s author is the same as the play, but Smith very well may not have been the author of the novelization, especially considering the differences in the plots.

\textsuperscript{536} Ibid., 14.

\textsuperscript{537} Ibid., 18.
the rising middle classes. For example, Miss Spindle, who once lectures Mary that she should consider it “great charity” when she is “visited by respectable people,” becomes an impoverished needlewoman.\textsuperscript{538} Though theatres and publishers created new opportunities for middle-class leisure, they also warned these new consumers about becoming too transparent in their aspirations. For as Spindle’s fate proves, such overzealousness and social snobbery—and not alcoholism—drives one permanently to the working class.

Such caution became more pronounced with the 1850s advent of parlor theatrical literature among the middle classes. Drama text publishing escalated in 1854, when publisher Samuel French began issuing his Standard and Minor Drama series after buying out his competitors’ printing plates. By 1856, he was advertising a collection of 100,000 play texts. This boom coincided with a new middle-class hobby. As Karen Halttunen reports, guides to acting and producing amateur performances flooded bookshelves starting in the 1850s, and parlor theatricals became one of the most popular leisure activities among a new class.\textsuperscript{539} Guides assured readers that parlor theatricals were respectable, and the growing middle-class presence in theatres helped remove any lingering taboos. Most private theatricals were burlesques, farces, tableaux vivants, or charades, but guides also instructed amateurs how to emulate melodramatic acting styles and expressions. The appeal of parlor theatricals, contends Halttunen, was self-incriminating. As the middle classes had become increasingly self-conscious of their own social theatricality in areas of dress, cosmetics, and behavior, “the message of parlor

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{538} Ibid., 31.
  \item \textsuperscript{539} Halttunen, \textit{Confidence Men and Painted Women}, 174.
\end{itemize}
theatricals was simply this: middle-class social life was itself a charade.”

Though this claim regarding the participants’ self-mockery will be challenged in the next chapter, parlor theatricals became an critical outlet for the middle classes to develop their social identities.

As the middle classes were solidifying in the early 1850s, home theatre assisted in helping to diagnose and revise middle-class behavior. Taking place in the privacy of the middle-class parlor, theatrical productions were removed from the taint of public theatres, where even minimal class mixing could occur. Temperance dramas sometimes appeared; for instance, William Fowle’s *The Tear* (1857) was published in parlor drama anthologies. Furthermore, Samuel French editions of popular temperance plays such as *The Drunkard, The Bottle, The Drunkard’s Doom,* and *Aunt Dinah’s Pledge* came accompanied by ads for scenery, make-up boxes, costumes, and how-to guides for amateur players throughout the 1860s and 70s. Yet temperance drama’s principal

---

540 Ibid., 185.

541 William B. Fowle, *The Tear,* in Fowle, *Parlor Dramas, or, Dramatic Scenes for Home Amusement* (Boston: Morris Cotton, 1857). Mason claims that several temperance dramas were released as parlor dramas or didactic dialogues, especially after the Civil War; see *Melodrama and the Myth,* 77.


Many play texts from the nineteenth century, especially from the antebellum period, do not have publication dates, and catalogues frequently error in attributing reference to performance dates on inside covers as publication dates. Samuel French dates can be traced according to the addresses on the covers, as I have detailed here. From 1854 to 1878, his publishing headquarters were on Nassau St. in New York. In 1872, French bought out the plates from British play text publisher T.H. Lacy and then founded a second location at 89 Strand in London. In 1878, the New York headquarters moved to 38 14th St. near Union Square, and in 1887, they moved to Washington Square. Hence, dating his publications can only be narrowed down to date ranges, but they provide a more accurate assessment of a text’s origin than many library catalogues. Other prominent drama text publishers during the post-1850 period include Dewitt’s (New York), Charles Spencer (Boston), and William Baker (Boston), all of which include many advertisements about amateur theatricals, but exact dates of these publishers are also uncertain; see Anon., *Truly Yours,* 1-8.
contribution to these parlor theatricals came long before. *The Drunkard*’s astounding success at the Boston Museum and Barnum’s American Museum in 1844 and 1850, respectively, represented the critical first steps in the creation of a middle-class theatergoing population. Only when this distinct middle-class audience began to exist could there be a market for private theatricals and accompanying play texts. Of course, the working classes—often the subjects or inspirations of the parlor dramas—were never invited to participate in the middle class’s newfound home entertainments.

**Conclusion**

As temperance drama continued through its “high-water” age until the Civil War, not all of the genre’s plays excluded the working classes. 543 Two melodramas—*Another Glass, or the Two Mechanics* (1848) and *Hot Corn* (1853)—featured working-class subjects. The latter especially struck a chord with the public. 544 In New York during December of 1853, Barnum’s American Museum, Purdy’s National Theatre, and the Bowery all produced simultaneous versions of *Hot Corn* (or alternately titled *Little Katy, the Hot Corn Girl*), which was based on a series of fictional *New York Tribune* editorials. Though all of the play manuscripts are lost, each adaptation centered on Little Katy, a Five Points “hot corn” girl providing for her drunkard parents. 545 Unlike *The Drunkard* which only found initial traction at Barnum’s, the *Hot Corn* plays maintained long-runs at all their host theatres, ensuring that both working-class and middle-class audiences would

---

543 Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform*, 34
544 Barnum’s version of *Hot Corn* was written by H.J. Conway and entitled *Hot Corn or, Life Scenes in New York*. In April of 1854, Charles Saunders’s *Hot Corn! Or Life Scenes Illustrated* premiers at Kimball’s Boston Museum and notably included an exterior of Barnum’s Museum in the final act.
545 For manuscript history, see Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform*, 219.
have plenty of opportunities to witness a version. The voyeuristic emphasis on locality had not faded since Barnum’s *The Drunkard* three-and-a-half years before. The playbill for Barnum’s version of *Hot Corn* reveals scenes at the “Home of the Drunkard in the Five Points,” “Interior of Cal Jones’ Grocery Store near the Five Points,” “A Cellar in the Five Points,” and multiple scenes at “A Street near the Five Points.”546 Whereas *The Drunkard* presented the Five Points as a temporary nadir in Edward’s journey back to the country home, *Hot Corn* presents Five Points as an inescapable zone of debauchery. Even the play’s most distant locations still border the neighborhood, and its first and last scenes are set deep in its center. Instead of a quaint village cottage bookending the play, *Hot Corn* opens in an urban tenement corrupted by Katy’s father assaulting her mother and ends in one even more tainted: Katy’s cellar apartment as her drunk mother beats her to death. Frick views the play as one not just about Five Points but also about a specific working-class community there: “*Hot Corn* showed thousands of theatre patrons that Irish-Americans not only suffered because of intemperance but that they were acutely aware of the problem and believed that it was resolvable,” a message “disseminated to Irish-Americans and non-Irish alike.”547 Though working- and middle-class audiences likely observed the plays in different theatres, the play’s popularity still allowed for different audiences to share empathic feelings that crossed class lines. The *Hot Corn* phenomenon recalled the inclusive class nature of the early Washingtonian meetings, in


547 Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform*, 141.
which working- and middle-class audiences alike could bond over their mutual pathos of former drunkards’ tales.

The nostalgia would appear to be short-lived, however. Two months after the premiere of *Hot Corn*, Barnum staged another temperance-themed drama entitled *The Old Brewery*. Based on a book of the same name, it depicted crime within the Five Points and the eponymous building there, a headquarters of intemperate activity (45). The book and play portrayed not only the squalor and vice of Five Points but “also the reformation which had been effected.” Indeed, since 1850, women from the Methodist Episcopal Church group had set up an office at the corner of Little-Water and Cross streets and prioritized the elimination of Five Points intemperance. In shifting focus towards a social solution to the Five Points, Barnum abandons the humanness that allowed *Hot Corn* to pierce different theatres and class lines and unite spectators in empathy. *The Old Brewery* may have functioned partly as a tourist guide to the Five Points as did *The Drunkard* and to an extent *Hot Corn*. However, Barnum now presents the neighborhood, and its low-class and working-class figures, as problems that need to be solved or erased. On the playbill, Barnum even clarified that outside the theatre doors would sit a box for “Contributions to the Ladies’ Five Points mission.” Barnum’s shift towards reforming broader social problems, rather than redeeming the fallen individuals

548 Odell, *Annals*, VI.318. The play was evidently quite popular and played “several weeks.”
549 [The Ladies of the Mission], *The Old Brewery, and the New Mission House at The Five Points* (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1854), 45.
551 [Ladies of the Mission], *Old Brewery*, 37, 39. In fact, the Ladies boasted of signing 1,000 Five Points regulars to the abstinence pledge within the first year.
themselves, eliminates any interaction between classes. Instead of empowering his middle-class spectators to visit the Five Points neighborhood, Barnum suggests that they no longer needed to make the trip. Instead, they could observe onstage both a voyeuristic taste of Five Points sensationalism as well as the comfort of its containment. At play’s end, they could contribute money in hopes that the area’s reformations continue, and then retire to their safe parlor rooms. Barnum’s middle-class theatre not only provided strict public boundaries but it also reassured spectators of their own private ones.

In 1848, the *Home Journal* wrote, “The triumph or the failure of the stage . . . never yet was dependent upon the inclinations or habits of the most elevated class of society. They can neither make nor mar the fortunes of a company. Its fate is determined by the countenance or neglect of the middle classes.” Yet if the middle class made theatre, the theatre equally made the middle class. Antebellum theatre inspired new spectator and reader communities apart from the working classes. With *The Drunkard*, the temperance drama triggered this fragmentation, and successive temperance and moral reform plays (*The Drunkard’s Warning, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Rosina Meadows*, among others) helped to sustain it throughout the 1850s. Occasionally, this middle-class theatre would look back towards its working-class roots, such as the direct reference to characters as Washingtonians in John Allen’s temperance drama *Fruits of the Wine Cup* (1858). However, the play’s appearance over a decade after the society’s collapse only underscores the society’s insignificance at that point. More tellingly, William Pratt’s stage adaptation of *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* (1858) became the most commercially

---

successful temperance play since The Drunkard, specifically because it advanced the middle class’s platform of legal prohibition.

As the Civil War approached, however, even temperance drama became less important to the middle classes. The temperance movement itself had begun to wane, and several states had already repealed the Maine Laws prohibiting alcohol sales.\textsuperscript{554} Ten Nights soon found its greatest success among village and uneducated audiences, foreshadowing temperance drama’s post-bellum move to rural, amateur stages. Thus as the chapter closed on the golden age of American temperance drama, the middle classes surrendered the very genre that provoked their formation. With firmly-established theatres, books, and parlor theatricals, the middle classes no longer needed to remember their origins. Having shed all their working-class associations, they now maintained a popular culture all their own.

\textsuperscript{554} Pegram, Battling Demon Rum, 41-42. The temperance movement would not thrive at antebellum levels again until the establishment of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in 1873; see Blocker, American Temperance Movements, 64.
CHAPTER THREE:
Social Stages: Importing Amusements, Recycling Reading, and Performing Middle-Class Culture in Victorian America

Writing in 1902, Louisa May Alcott’s childhood friend Annie Clark could still remember the 1844 birthday celebration for Louisa’s sister Lizzie. At the Alcotts’ Still River, Massachusetts residence, the Alcotts, their neighbors, and other family friends gathered in the sitting room for a night of theatricals. Some of the elders performed an “old English play,” and Louisa’s sister Anna dressed in plaid and a bonnet to imitate a young Scottish boy. But eleven-year-old Louisa was, without mistake, “the star of the evening” (32). Despite the familiar company, the future author took her role quite seriously. Alcott’s mother Abigail “stained Louisa’s face, arms, neck and ankles in the ruddy hue of an Indian girl” (32). Louisa completed the look by draping herself in a feather dress and crowning her head with additional quills. She first sang a popular parlor song about a roaming Native American girl named Alfarata. Then, in an abrupt, “blood-curdlng” tone, Louisa delivered a passage from Ossian’s poem “Carthon” (32). Finally, “in tenderer, softer accents,” she recited a school-reader poem entitled “Geehale—An Indian Lament” concerning a mournful native girl (32). The night proved a grand amusement for the children, instilling a memory of social communion that would remain with Clark for life.

Most revealingly, Clark’s diary hints about parlor theatricals’ primary function in the Victorian American home, namely allowing people of similar social status to

---

congregate and to identify precise leisure activities which were exclusively their own. As a broad American middle class was continuing to distinguish itself from other social groups, parlor theatricals offered a distinct venue and amusement form by which the middle class could express itself. Moreover, private theatre invigorated the class-consolidating leisure activities, such as reading, which the middle classes were already engaging. As evident in Louisa’s “Carthon” and “Geehale” readings, home theatricals prompted performers to absorb, interpret, and stage popular reading material in a live dramatic format. Parlor shows also reproduced some of the exoticism evident in more sensationalistic reading genres, such as story papers and dime novels, as well as popular exhibitions from commercial theatres and curiosity museums. Documentary evidence reveals how some theatricals were actually performed, but detailed accounts like Clark’s are not common. Theatre historians have relied more often on the dozens of parlor theatrical guidebooks issued from the early 1860s through the 1910s.\footnote{See Eileen Moira Curley, “Beyond the Pocket Doors: Amateur Theatricals in Nineteenth-Century New York City” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2006). As Curley notes, records of private stage performance (especially from the immediate post-Civil War era) are not well preserved (4-5). Curley discusses the difficulties of studying parlor theatre, including that most evidence consists of dozens of guidebooks issued from the early 1860s through the 1910s. While Curley cites many newspaper articles reporting non-commercial theatrical performance, particularly later in the century, most cover amateur dramatic companies performing in public venues.} Despite these methodological limitations, guidebooks remain so valuable because they reveal the proposed functions of private theatricals for the developing middle classes. Guide authors’ advice on how to construct a sturdy stage or how to create impromptu stage props coincided with magazine advisors’ instructions about how to pick and read appropriate books. Enacting these leisure activities correctly could signify one’s
belonging to the genteel middle class. The parlor theatrical guides, in essence, prescribed
codes for middle-class performance and socialization.

In the few sustained studies on parlor theatricals, historians emphasize how the
activity allowed the middle classes to express ambivalence about their own social
performativity. Halttunen records the dozens of home theatrical plot lines that covered
the “theatricality of the struggle for middle-class gentility.”557 Similarly Alan Ackerman,
in The Portable Theater, asserts that “middle-class families came increasingly to
recognize their own theatricality,” and he ties the parlor theatrical fad to this communal
self-awareness.558 In her recent Laboring to Play, Melanie Dawson points towards a
series of parlor plays by author Sarah Annie Frost through which the middle classes could
mock their own social posturings.559 According to Dawson, such works “directly
confronted mannered pretension and sought to expose its contradictions, arguing its
unfittedness to middling family life.”560 Indeed, America’s middle classes often strived to
convey a cognizance of their at-times indulgent devotions to fashion through home
theatricals. The parlor, already the site of the most rampant social class performance,
proved a perfect venue. Halttunen writes that, in creating parlor shows, the “American
middle classes openly embraced theatricality for its own sake” as they “laugh[ed] harder

557 Karen Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women: a Study of Middle-Class Culture in America,
558 Alan Ackerman, The Portable Theater: American Literature & the Nineteenth-Century Stage
(Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1999), 155.
559 Similarly, a parlor game called “The Genteel Lady” asked participants to maintain their composures
when vocalizing a series of tongue-twisting phrases. Melanie Dawson, Laboring to Play: Home
Entertainment and the Spectacle of Middle-Class Cultural Life, 1850-1920 (Tuscaloosa, U of Alabama P,
2005), 21.
560 Ibid., 21.
than ever at the theatricality of their social lives.”\(^{561}\) Dawson extends Halttunen’s argument by claiming that parlor theatricals show how “demonstratively ambivalent” the middle classes were about the artificiality of genteel society.\(^{562}\) Each critic offers enlightening views regarding the links between actual parlor dramas and the performances that characterized the middle class’s daily social interactions. Yet these scholars also assign such self-awareness to participants and such importance to metatheatrical aspects that they undervalue parlor theatricals’ simpler goals of class consolidation.

This chapter argues that, in Victorian-era America, private theatricals provided America’s inchoate middle class both a distinctive, class-based form of leisure and a means to further social solidification. To these ends, home theatrical guide authors directed middle-class citizens in two separate ways. First, guide authors coached performers to adapt well-known dramas and museum exhibits within the secure, class-exclusive parlor; in doing so, they insisted that the middle classes could create a private stage that would operate as a viable substitute for the public commercial theatre. Second, guide authors extracted and adapted famed literary works to the parlor stage; this poaching from popular literature capitalized on middle-class Americans’ desires both to distinguish their own literature and to exchange their similar reading experiences with each other. By recycling and reappropriating their own popular culture in an exclusive

\(^{561}\) Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 174. Halttunen adds that the middle classes engaged such theatricality partly as a result of a long-term economic upsurge deemed “the age of capital,” stretching from 1848 to 1875. Women were expected to display their husbands’ earnings by decorating their houses and ornamenting themselves (186-187).

\(^{562}\) Dawson, *Laboring to Play*, 4.
parlor venue, home theatrical participants could finally secure their belonging to the middle class itself.

**Middle-Class Developments and Parlor Reading**

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the middle class continued its evolution as a distinct social group. A growing number of occupations became associated with middle-class status. As Louise Stevenson outlines, men working such varied positions as farmers, professors, doctors, ministers, jewelers, and furniture makers all identified as middle-class. Clerks, arguably the most archetypal middle-class employees, worked at stores, banks, and factories. While records count 101,325 clerks in 1850, the number rose to 444,064 by 1880. As opposed to manual workers who earned merely $250 a year, most men in middle-class vocations netted anywhere from $500 to $2,000 annually. The term “middle-class” also began to appear more often in popular publications. By the 1870s, home decoration authors defined the middle classes as those “who by industry and economy have amassed moderate wealth.” Stevenson writes that, unless employed as writers or teachers, middle-class women identified themselves via their lack of compensated work. After 1860, middle-class women increasingly

---


565 Stevenson, *Victorian Homefront*, xxiii. Stevenson also distinguishes middle- from working-class men in that the former did not have to put their wives or children to work whereas the latter did, especially in economic depressions. Most middle-class families often could also afford at least one live-in servant.

displayed their status via their participation in temperance, antislavery, women’s rights, and Protestant church associations and societies.\textsuperscript{567}

The middle classes also expanded their antebellum efforts to distinguish themselves by moving to neighborhoods away from other social classes. This phenomenon was especially evident in cities and, most prominently, New York City. By 1870, roughly half of New York’s 950,000 residents had been born in foreign countries, and most belonged to the city’s lower orders.\textsuperscript{568} Respectable New Yorkers had been moving to the city’s periphery since the financial Panic of 1837, and the process continued after another Panic (of 1857) and as immigrant populations increased.\textsuperscript{569} According to critic Elizabeth Cromley, “Middle-class New Yorkers, uncertain of their social standing, needed to assure themselves that they were, in fact, rising on the societal ladder and could not afford to risk their new sense of social worth by mixing with people less prosperous than themselves.”\textsuperscript{570} They particularly desired single-family private row houses in which they could isolate themselves from neighbors, even as house sizes shrunk in the 1860s as a result of rising land values.\textsuperscript{571} The middle classes continued the antebellum trend of moving farther away from places of work, and many attempted to relocate to suburbs accessible to the city via horse-drawn carriages.\textsuperscript{572} Meanwhile, the city’s elite upper classes—largely bankers and merchants and their families—were attempting a parallel act of separation, this time from the middle classes. In her influential

\textsuperscript{567} Stevenson, \textit{Victorian Homefront}, xxiv.
\textsuperscript{569} Elizabeth Blackmar, \textit{Manhattan for Rent, 1785-1850} (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989), 179.
\textsuperscript{570} Cromley, \textit{Alone Together}, 41.
\textsuperscript{571} Ibid., 33-35.
\textsuperscript{572} Stevenson, \textit{Victorian Homefront}, xxv.
study of the middle-class parlor, *Culture & Comfort*, Katherine Grier states that the upper class maintained little contact with the growing middle class, and in fact interacted more often with the working class since they employed young laboring women as domestic help.\(^{573}\) Hence through choices of their own and others, the middle classes became more secluded from other social groups. This separation, however, allowed the evolving middle class to further develop its own identity and culture.

Residential location became so important to the middle class because one’s address was tied to the group’s primary symbol of social status: the home. As Elizabeth Blackmar writes of New York homes during this era, “the dwelling stood at the center of circles of selective socializing that shaped public and private associational life into a class culture.”\(^{574}\) Owning a home, Grier adds, offered both a sense of achievement but also an alternate to the public world of commerce.\(^{575}\) The home became a safe space in which middle-class families could shield themselves from an outside realm of diverse populations and surveillance. In the exterior world, “people encountered fear, violence, and temptation. Inside the walls of the home, it was believed, God’s love was manifest in husbands’ love for their wives, and in parents’ love, especially that of mothers, for their children.”\(^{576}\) The middle classes of the 1860s often rejected notions of separate public and private spheres divided exclusively by gender, which modern critics have also dispelled.\(^{577}\) Instead, middling citizens viewed the home as an inclusive space for all.

\(^{573}\) Grier, *Culture & Comfort*, 22-23.
\(^{574}\) Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent*, 128.
\(^{575}\) Grier, *Culture & Comfort*, 4.
\(^{576}\) Stevenson, *Victorian Homefront*, xxvi.
family members. The walls of the house offered a protected area in which middle-class families and neighbors could engage and socialize away from others. The desire for privacy became paramount, and this priority affected architectural plans. America’s middle classes largely rejected apartment plans modeled after French flats, where all the rooms existed on one floor and passersby could gaze inside the houses.\textsuperscript{578} Instead, they favored layouts that clearly separated rooms for distinct social and familial functions.

Descending from upper-class models in Europe and America, the parlor swiftly became a significant space within the middle-class home and a recognizable symbol of status.\textsuperscript{579} Late eighteenth and early-nineteenth century American parlors were featured only in the wealthiest of Americans’ houses, as meeting places for elite society members.\textsuperscript{580} By the 1840s, however, many middle-class Americans had begun to establish parlors, or “drawing-rooms” as many interchanged the terms, in their own residences.\textsuperscript{581} Architecturally, the room was usually located at the front of the house and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{578} Cromley, \textit{Alone Together}, 38.
\item \textsuperscript{579} Grier, \textit{Culture & Comfort}, 54. The American domestic parlor had several antecedents. Architecturally, the parlor was derived from the “with-drawing rooms” and after-dinner “galleries” for women within eighteenth-century aristocratic French and English houses. Home parlors also were inspired by public parlors in hotels and daguerreotype offices. Often dividing clientele by gender and decorated with rich furniture and tapestries, these public parlors functioned as gathering rooms for middle-class aspirants. Moreover, northeast steamboat lines and railroad cars started to feature luxurious saloons and ladies’ parlors where the middle classes could socialize and share common interests; see Grier, \textit{Culture & Comfort}, 44, 55, 62.
\item \textsuperscript{580} Ibid., 62, 65.
\item \textsuperscript{581} The American parlor hearkened back to the functions of European drawing rooms, the designated spaces for prominent citizens to host company. Grier also reports that mid-century diary and domestic manual writers often used the terms “parlor” and “drawing room” inconsistently and interchangeably; \textit{Culture & Comfort}, 54. Though parlors became a fixation among urban middle classes, Andrew Jackson Downing’s architectural plans for a three-tier hierarchy of country houses—cottages for working classes, farmhouses for successful farmers, and villas for the wealthy—all contained parlors; see Richard Bushman, \textit{The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities} (New York: Knopf, 1992), 273. In America, the phenomenon was not geographically limited to any single region within the country; Northern, Southern, and Midwestern house plans all reveal parlor rooms; Stevenson, \textit{Victorian Homefront}, 1.
\end{itemize}
remained separated from other areas. To reserve parlor space, both the urban and rural middle classes moved beds and work equipment to rooms upstairs or at the back of the house. Parlors were specifically designated for leisure activities, and only delicate work such as light sewing was deemed appropriate within the room. Grier writes that, “Setting aside a specific room for the purposes of social rituals and furnishing it for that use . . . became an activity that denoted membership in, or aspirations to belong to, the respectable middle classes.” Therefore the middle classes measured their own social standing not only through the physical locations of their residences but also via what existed within their houses.

Parlors soon turned into critical sites for the middle classes to solidify their social identities through communal gatherings as well. With the advent of parlors, social “visiting” became a more popular practice among the middle class. As Stuart Blumin points out, the parlor was “the most characteristic and significant meeting place for middling folk,” largely because the private home turned into “the social environment

582 While some houses contained both a front and a back parlor, a single parlor was more common; Grier, *Culture & Comfort*, 71.
583 Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 252.
584 Ibid., 262.
585 Ibid., 60. The public parlors did not disappear but rather adapted to the styles of home parlors. According to Stuart M. Blumin, retailers of home furnishings decorated their stores to resemble the middle- and upper-class home parlor in order to create an “axis of respectability” between public and private parlors. See Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 238. Regarding furnishings, a piano, reception chairs, lace curtains, and luxurious carpets constituted much of the decoration critical to a middle-class parlor. The center table was the room’s principal furnishing, because it held a variety of personal objects including magazines, poetry books, stereoscopes and stereographs, photography albums, and almost always a prominently displayed Bible. Residents would also exhibit statues, travel souvenirs, needlework pictures, and chromolithography reproductions of paintings around the room. Soon, magazine advisers warned against over-decorating parlors. See Grier, *Culture & Comfort*, 23, 82 and Stevenson, *Victorian Homefront*, 2, 4, 23.
586 Ibid., 262.
from which undesirable associations were most easily excluded.”587 Besides serving as a
space for general socializing, the parlor functioned as a forum for women’s club’s
meetings, small weddings, courting rituals, Christmas celebrations, and coffin displays of
dead loved ones.588 Starting during the Civil War, upper-middle-class women founded
study and reading clubs which usually convened in the parlor of one member.589

In the context of a growing national literacy, reading became the central parlor
activity symbolizing middle-class status. American literacy rates hit an unprecedented
high in 1860; more than 93 percent of white men and 91 percent of white women born in
the United States could read, with the highest rates predictably in the Northeast.590 Such
abilities became an essential prerequisite to social rank. Scott Casper writes that “the
middle class defined itself through what scholars have described as an ‘ideology of
literacy’ that would be ideally available to all Americans.”591 Equally important, the
literacy census pinpointed those not qualified for genteel status, including immigrants and
southern farmers, among others.592 Their literacy setting them apart from the lower
orders, the middle classes devoted an increasing amount of time to reading. Diary entries

587 Blumin, Emergence of the Middle Class, 239.
588 Grier, Culture & Comfort, 59; Stevenson, Victorian Homefront, 54.
589 Grier, Culture & Comfort, 22; Stevenson, Victorian Homefront, 53-55. Consisting of at most twenty-
five members, these reading circles studied literature, history, and art. Depending on the club, agendas
could include discussion of a single author’s work or might involve one woman writing and presenting a
research paper on a broad historical subject. Stevenson notes that though each individual club was small,
the national practice of study groups was widespread. Thousands of women belonged to study clubs, and at
least one club existed in each town within New England and the Midwest in the Victorian era. Grier
specifies that most study clubs convened twice a month for ten months of a given year. Most clubs had
constitutions, and members would correct each speaker’s grammar and pronunciation. Some clubs also had
ongoing projects, such as the reading of Dickens’s works.
590 Stevenson, Victorian Homefront, 30.
591 Casper, introduction, 33-34.
Casper, et. al. (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007), 295. Also, evangelicalism’s decreasing influence
after the Civil War inspired the middle classes to pursue previously less respectable leisure activities such
as reading.
and other primary evidence identify the parlor as the primary room for reading sessions, as images of family parlor reading became emblematic of the mid-century middle-class home. Stevenson, *Victorian Homefront*, 24. Stevenson also notes that the lack of photographic proof of bedroom lamps suggests readers gathered in communal spaces such as the parlor. Indeed, light remained an important factor in the middle class’s reading practices. Parlor center tables usually held candles or a kerosene lamp, beside which families would congregate at night to read together. This limited light also made nighttime reading a communal, rather than individual, activity. Stevenson, “Home, Books, and Reading,” in Casper, et. al., *Industrial Book*, 324-325. The parlor center table was the centerpiece of the Victorian parlor in the U.S. Standing about thirty inches high, it usually featured a prominently-displayed book—often the Bible—as well as travel books, cartes-de-visite albums, and stereoscopes and slides. For more on cartes-de-visite albums and cards—essentially luxurious photographs of middle-class families themselves and famous destinations—see Stevenson, *Victorian Homefront*, 15-16, 22. For more on stereoscopes and stereographs during this era, see Shirley Wajda, “A Room with a Viewer: The Parlor Stereoscope, Comic Stereographs, and the Psychic Role of Play in Victorian America,” in *Hard at Play: Leisure in America, 1840-1880*, ed. Kathryn Grover (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P 1992), 112-138, and Katherine Digiulio, “The Representation of Women in 19th and Early 20th-Century Narrative Stereographs,” in *Ideas about Images: Essays on Film and Photography*, ed. Fanny Knapp Allen. (Rochester: Rochester Film and Photo Consortium, 1990) 2-18.

Reading at night allowed all members of the family to participate, most notably the men. In evening “literaries,” husbands would read aloud while women wrote or conducted needlework; other times women read to men or parents read to their children. Such ritualistic reading practices allowed family members to feel both that they were adhering to middle-class codes and that they were paralleling other middle-class families simultaneously partaking in the same activities.

The market offered an increasingly varied selection of printed books and magazines to appeal to different readers. Americans read a myriad of literatures both inside and outside of their homes. Between 1860 and 1880, novels accounted for all but only a handful of the period’s forty-five bestsellers, with libraries struggling to keep them

---

593 Stevenson, *Victorian Homefront*, 24. Stevenson also notes that the lack of photographic proof of bedroom lamps suggests readers gathered in communal spaces such as the parlor. Indeed, light remained an important factor in the middle class’s reading practices. Parlor center tables usually held candles or a kerosene lamp, beside which families would congregate at night to read together. This limited light also made nighttime reading a communal, rather than individual, activity. Stevenson, “Home, Books, and Reading,” in Casper, et. al., *Industrial Book*, 324-325. The parlor center table was the centerpiece of the Victorian parlor in the U.S. Standing about thirty inches high, it usually featured a prominently-displayed book—often the Bible—as well as travel books, cartes-de-visite albums, and stereoscopes and slides. For more on cartes-de-visite albums and cards—essentially luxurious photographs of middle-class families themselves and famous destinations—see Stevenson, *Victorian Homefront*, 15-16, 22. For more on stereoscopes and stereographs during this era, see Shirley Wajda, “A Room with a Viewer: The Parlor Stereoscope, Comic Stereographs, and the Psychic Role of Play in Victorian America,” in *Hard at Play: Leisure in America, 1840-1880*, ed. Kathryn Grover (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P 1992), 112-138, and Katherine Digiulio, “The Representation of Women in 19th and Early 20th-Century Narrative Stereographs,” in *Ideas about Images: Essays on Film and Photography*, ed. Fanny Knapp Allen. (Rochester: Rochester Film and Photo Consortium, 1990) 2-18.

on shelves.\textsuperscript{595} Civil War soldiers influenced demand by consuming English novels by Sir Walter Scott, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, and Charles Dickens, as well as adventure dime novels proliferating after the debut of the popular Beadle and Adams’ series in 1860.\textsuperscript{596} Cheaper printing prices enabled publishers to print and sell books at much lower prices than earlier in the century, with book runs of 10,000 copies not uncommon by 1860.\textsuperscript{597} Daily urban newspapers also found eager audiences among all classes, as circulation of papers increased by forty-three percent from 1860 to 1870.\textsuperscript{598} Story papers, another popular middle-class reading genre, highlighted foreign and local dangers in order to further affirm the safe pleasures of middle-class parlor life. With titles including \textit{Fireside Companion} (1867-1903), \textit{Frank Leslie’s Chimney Corner} (1865-84), and \textit{The Flag of Our Union} (1846-70), story papers included content ranging from adventure stories to housekeeping advice to profiles of successful businessmen to amateur poetry. Of course, the middle class honored no book so much as the Bible, which remained the central text of the parlor and was often read aloud by families at night and after attending Sunday church services.\textsuperscript{599} At least as they were willing to publicly admit, middle-class

\textsuperscript{595} Stevenson, \textit{Victorian Homefront}, 35.
\textsuperscript{596} Ibid., 46. Beadle began the dime novel craze in 1860 with the publication of Ann S. Stephens’s \textit{Malaeska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter}. Competitors soon emerged with similar cheap fiction books, usually about 100 pages in length and encased in brightly-colored wrappers. For instance, story paper publisher Elliott, Thomas & Talbot started a Ten-Cent Novelette series in 1863 and later re-issued Alcott’s \textit{V.V. Plots and Counterplots} (originally published in 1865 in \textit{The Flag of Our Union}) as a dime novel; see Madeleine Stern, “Elliott, Thomas & Talbot,” in \textit{Publishers for Mass Entertainment in Nineteenth-Century America}, ed. Stern (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980), 125.
\textsuperscript{597} Stevenson, \textit{Victorian Homefront}, 31.
\textsuperscript{599} Stevenson, \textit{Victorian Homefront}, 9.
Americans otherwise favored respected fiction, poetry, and histories that displayed their genteel tastes.⁶⁰⁰

Some publishers targeted parlor readers specifically with magazines and advice books that instructed middle-class women on how to comport themselves. Between 1850 and 1865, at least thirty periodicals or weeklies appeared which evaluated middle-class home life. Featuring everything from fashion plates to instructions on reading and handwriting, *Godey’s Lady’s Book* (established in 1830) and *Peterson’s Magazine* (1842) reached their highest circulation numbers just before and just after the Civil War, respectively.⁶⁰¹ Annual books like *The Family Circle and Parlor Annual* or *Our Happy Home* also attempted to educate women about various new interests and technologies. The 1857 edition of *The Family Circle*, for instance, features articles about the functions of microscopes, the process of daguerreotyping, and the secrets to singing well. It also includes a series of “Floral Festival” short stories about young women who overcome imperfect beauty, and a tale entitled “Glad Thanksgiving Day” in which a wife is reunited with her lost-at-sea husband.⁶⁰² *The Family Circle* defines its audience as one fully capable of enlightening itself, as in the column “Female Education”: “To the middle class we may appeal; for it is this large and valuable class that makes up the majority of

⁶⁰⁰ Grier, *Culture & Comfort*, 11. As Stevenson writes, “In the ideal parlor described by reading advisers, people discussed good books exclusively. These books followed nature’s truth in their description of human affairs and character”; *Victorian Homefront*, 34. According to Barbara Sicherman, Victorian-era middle classes also read “often apologetically, what they labeled ‘trash’”; see “Ideologies and Practices,” 297-298.


⁶⁰² *The Family Circle and Parlor Annual* (New York: James C. Reed, 1858). The issues contained within are bi-monthly publications from the year 1857.
society, and sways the destiny of mankind in America.”603 The essay itself promotes women’s physical exercise both in their houses and their gardens; doing so will allow women to know better “the luxury of rest and leisure.”604 Significantly, the article identifies a definitive “middle class,” and asserts that this expanding group has emerged as distinctly influential in American culture. The writer affirms the importance of readers earning their relaxation, as well-planned leisure remains a principal attribute of the middle class.

The Safety of Parlor Plays

With the influx of parlor theatrical guides in the late 1850s and 60s, the genre’s authors continued to affirm white, middle-class lifestyles by promoting the communal practice of home theatricals. In her insightful study of home theatricals during this period, Dawson notes that running throughout both the behavioral advice texts and private entertainment guides is “an insistence that the middling classes should be defined through more than mercantile dominance, more than urban and suburban growth, and more than economic demographics, but primarily via cultural work.”605 Acting or stage managing a home theatrical, much like reading respectable books in the parlor, implied a participation in a larger network of middle-class activity. Through home theatre, the middle classes could further define their own values of education and gentility in a private space shielded from the public world’s dangers.

603 Ibid., 135.
604 Ibid., 135.
605 Dawson, Laboring to Play, 105.
Instructions for home entertainment appeared first as short articles in periodicals addressed to the middle classes at home. *Godey’s* published a seminal piece entitled “Charades in Action” in 1854, and *Forrester’s Playmate* and *Youth’s Casket and Playmate* featured moral dialogues for children in 1858 and 1859, respectively. Soon, book anthologies of at-home dramatic entertainments appeared. From 1859 until the end of the century, dozens of these cheap texts were published, including George Arnold’s *The Sociable; or, One Thousand and One Home Amusements* (1858), Arnold and Frank Cahill’s *Parlor Theatricals; or Winter Evening’s Entertainment* (1859), Tony Denier’s *Amateur’s Guide to Home Theatricals* (1866), and Sarah Annie Frost’s *Amateur Theatricals and Fairy-Tale Dramas . . . Expressly Designed for Drawing-Room Performance* (1868), among other titles. As Halttunen points out, these books appeared as an outgrowth of 1840s and 50s etiquette manuals which instructed aspiring middle-class women how to dress, enter church, and mourn appropriately. The theatrical guides offered advice for a specifically controlled, private setting. Participants appeared in front of an audience of like-minded families and friends, and declared their membership in the middle class through their participation in parlor theatre.

---

606 Smith, “Introducing Parlor Theatricals,” 5-6. These similar dialogues were entitled “Honesty is the Best Policy,” and “Honesty Without Policy,” respectively. For a cataloguing of the significant parlor theatrical publications in popular magazines, see Smith, “Introducing Parlor Theatricals,” 3-11.

607 In turn, excerpts from these books were later published in story papers and other private theatrical books. For instance, *Gleason’s Literary Companion* printed the introduction of George Arnold and Frank Cahill’s *Parlor Theatricals; or Winter Evening’s Entertainment* in their issue on Oct. 14, 1865, 649. Also, Sarah Annie Frost acknowledges that many of the tableaux in her *The Book of Tableaux and Shadow Pantomimes* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1869) are reprinted from George Arnold’s *The Sociable; or, One Thousand and One Home Amusements* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1859).

In their American incarnations, parlor theatricals were both urban and rural phenomenons, and publishers directed their texts mainly towards the white middle class.\(^{609}\) Amateur entertainments had formally existed since the European court masques of the seventeenth century. Some amateur performances of educational theatre can be traced to the American colonies, while non-educational parlor theatre first appeared in England in the early nineteenth century.\(^{610}\) Yet only as the American middle classes began solidifying in the late 1850s did home theatricals find widespread popularity in the United States. Guidebooks indicate that both children and adults took part in private shows, and teenagers frequently comprised the most willing participants. In general and especially in the 1850s and 60s, most participants “were likely white, middling Americans.”\(^{611}\) The location of one’s home did not restrict participation either. In his *Amateur’s Guide* (1866), Tony Denier devotes a section to showing “how you may turn a dull country house, where all are in a melancholy moping state of *ennui*, in to a social little palace of amusement and fun.”\(^{612}\) Denier assumes that country life is inherently boring and claustrophobic as he complains of families being “boxed up in the country, and attacked with that hypochondriac disease, nothing to do.”\(^{613}\) Such guides propose that theatricals can infuse such a space with a spirit of middle-class cosmopolitanism. A rural market certainly existed: in 1858, Albany’s *The Country Gentleman* listed

---

\(^{609}\) Dawson, *Laboring to Play*, 3

\(^{610}\) Curley, “Beyond the Pocket Doors,” 9.

\(^{611}\) Dawson, *Laboring to Play*, 3. Dawson also notes that the working classes attended fairs, festivals, and public theatres instead of participating in private amusements (30). Again, the middle classes had the luxury of being able to gather in each other’s parlors while the working orders did not have such spaces in their homes. Hence, laborers to seek entertainments in shared, commercial venues.


\(^{613}\) Ibid.
advertisements for Arnold’s *Parlor Theatricals; or Winter Evenings’ Entertainment*, and Alcott’s family famously performed country barn dramas. Still more evidence exists about performances in urban areas. *The New York Clipper* regularly reviewed theatricals by amateur dramatic associations, groups which often took shape and initially performed in parlors. City newspapers like Philadelphia’s *Public Ledger* and Boston’s *Banner of Light* advertised and reviewed various parlor theatrical guides. Additionally, for six months in 1860, *Godey’s* published “Ella Moore’s Letters from the City,” a series of documentary reports from a real New York City teenager about her family’s private theatrical performances.

The guides not only crossed regional boundaries but also contained many different genres of performances. Dramatic Charades were one of the more popular dramatic activities. In these games, a performer first acted out a single word in scenes.

---

617 Moore’s letters were presented as the writings of an actual teenager, but critics differ in their opinions regarding her identity. Dawson suggests that Moore’s reported theatrical sessions, and similar first-person accounts, “could well have been rooted in actual events, but are greatly and obviously enhanced by their wealth of expository detail” (7). In her *Christmas in America: A History* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), Penne Restad treats Moore’s letters as non-fiction and never suggests that an editor may have embellished or even invented the writings. My study favors Restad’s assessment of Moore as a real person. At a time when newspapers regularly pirated and reprinted sections of theatrical guidebooks, Moore’s letters stand out as a detailed, unduplicated anomaly. Contradicting the notion that “Moore” may have been merely a marketing ploy, the editors did not tie Moore’s letters to any advertisements for home theatrical guides or paraphernalia. Also, Moore’s “expository detail” is the very quality that sets her tales apart tonally from the instructional guidebooks from which Dawson suggests it may have been adapted. Dawson points out that the letters were reprinted in Sarah Annie Frost’s *Book of Tableaux and Shadow Pantomimes* (30-45) without mention of Moore. However, Frost admits that they are letters which were originally printed in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, “introduced here in their original form, as they were written from actual tableaux, which the writer had seen performed” (30). Though “the writer” is not named to be Moore, Frost tellingly introduces the letters as legitimate first-person accounts.
that corresponded to parts of a single word, and then he or she would enact the entire word itself. For example, Arnold and Cahill’s charade “Phan-tom” contains three short scenes in six pages: scene one displays respectable young woman Ellen losing her “fan” in a theatre; scene two shows wall street clerk “Tom” returning her fan but being rejected by the mother after asking for Ellen’s hand in marriage; and the final scene follows Tom dressing as a ghost (i.e. a “phantom”) to fool the house servant and reach Ellen to propose.618 Pantomime Charades mimicked the structure of Dramatic Charades but were conducted in dumb show, while Charades in Tableaux required actors to embody the word in successive still pictures. Sometimes, guides encouraged performers to withdraw to another room, determine a word not published in the books, and create their own charade based on the new word.619 Several other genres filled the guides’ pages: Shadow Acts and Pantomimes played short farces behind a curtain, Fairy Tale Tableaux adapted famous tales like Aladdin, Blue Beard or Sleeping Beauty into a series of still poses, and Proverbs in Tableaux dramatized famous proverbs in pictures.620 One of the most popular genres, Tableaux Vivants, asked performers to imitate a famous statue, painting, or historical or literary scene in a sustained pose. Guide authors would also write original

618 George Arnold and Frank Cahill, Parlor Theatricals; or, Winter Evening’s Entertainment (New York, Dick & Fitzgerald, 1859), 64-72.
619 Anon., Parlor and Playground Amusements: Entertainment and Instruction for the Family Circle or Evening Parties (Boston: Locke & Bubier, 1875), 5-6.
620 Several books were devoted exclusively to some of these genres. See, for instance, Tony Denier, The Great Secret of Shadow Pantomimes; or, Harlequin in the Shades (New York: Samuel French, 1868) and Sarah Annie Frost, Amateur Theatricals and Fairy-Tale Dramas (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1868).
short plays ideal for home performance, or suggest how to adapt popular commercial plays to convenient parlor versions.  

I. Privatizing the Public Theatre

Ostensibly home theatricals were a distinct entertainment from commercial theatrical shows, allowing middle-class participants to avoid the dangers of the public sphere. Yet simultaneously, private theatricals relied on the models and programming of commercial theatre for their success. By constructing homemade sets and producing complicated stage effects, the middle classes created a private stage that directly imitated the public theatre. Furthermore, through adapting specific theatrical and museum attractions to the parlor stage, the middle classes could negotiate their previous spectatorial experiences and their understandings of the at-times hazardous public world. The cumulative goal was to privatize the typically public theatrical experience and package parlor theatricals as a genteel middle-class substitute for commercial shows.

Upending the Parlor, Producing a Stage

In the face of long-standing concerns that commercial theatre was not a reputable medium, guide authors suggested that middle-class gentility could be reinforced expressly through private theatre. In the 1830s, reformer William Alcott “began to delineate a respectable middle class by designating playgoing as immoral,” and claiming

---

621 For a variety of these titles, see especially, William Fearing Gill, Parlor Tableaux and Amateur Theatricals (Boston: J.E. Tilton, 1867), 293-348.
that theatre advocated “manly, natural passions.” Alcott and others steered genteel society members away from the mainstream theatres that they portrayed as harboring lower-class spectators and prostitutes. Rosemarie Bank points to an 1857 article in the notably bourgeois *Harper’s Weekly* magazine decrying that new theatres only bred intemperance and sexual immorality. Theatrical professions also proved troubling to some observers. Critic Eileen Curley states that, “The largest threat to propriety in the guidebooks stems from an association with the commercial theatre and with professional actors specifically.” Already part of a social group that had not yet achieved a firm identity, middle-class citizens simply did not want themselves or their children linked to lowly working-class positions. Continuing through the post-bellum era, many middle-class citizens still harbored such prejudices and may have initially hesitated to engage in home theatricals because of them. To contradict these concerns, guide authors constantly assert the respectability of at-home theatre. One preface for a collection of short plays relates the editor’s efforts “to omit all sentences, words, or allusions, such as could be in the remotest way objectionable” and “to retain the plot, the passion, and the moral of each play.” These claims echo those of museum proprietors Kimball and Barnum in their attempts to attract new middle-class spectators to their museum theatres in the 1840s. Parlor theatricals maintained an advantage over public theatres, however, in that the middle classes could believe that they were establishing their roles as genteel society

---

623 Ibid
members in a parlor venue that they already considered safe. If, as guide authors suggest, children were learning memory skills and adults were cultivating morals, then parlor performances were an ideal vehicle for class expression and reassurance.

A significant element of middle-class gentility, and a central purpose of home theatricals, remained education. According to the guides, engaging skills of memory, stagecraft, and embodiment all helped to nurture one’s intellect. Theatricals complemented rather than replaced school instruction. The introduction for the anonymously-penned Parlor and Playground Amusements (1875) reads, “Amusement, when properly regulated, is a grand help-mate to study.”627 Guide authors rarely explained exactly how the theatricals assisted intellect beyond such declarations. Vague promises of “innocent, harmless” fun appeared to satisfy readers who were worried about any impropriety concerning the activity.628 Authors’ references to schools as alternate performance venues also imply the potential for learning. Education becomes so paramount to the conception of private theatre that the authors sometimes present fun itself as a kind of ruse. In the introduction for their Parlor Theatricals: or Winter Evening’s Entertainment (1859), Arnold and Cahill state that theatricals serve “a higher purpose than mere amusement. They stimulate the faculties, arouse the wit, and, under the guise of amusement, develop and exercise the mental functions.”629 Defying adults who might dismiss parlor dramas as frivolous game-playing, guide authors recast private theatricals as a means of intellectual advancement. Though most of these introductory

627 Anon., Parlor and Playground Amusements, 3.
628 Arnold and Cahill, Parlor Theatricals; or, Winter Evening’s Entertainment, 5.
assurances seem to be directed at parents concerned about their children’s participation, the principles apply equally to adults who engaged in private theatre.

Guide authors promoted home theatricals as safe alternatives to the larger public sphere’s dangers of intemperance and class mixing. In his introduction to *Amateur’s Guide to Home Theatricals* (1866), Tony Denier writes, “Gaming and intoxication have disappeared from rational society. Home Acting can supply the interest of the one, and the exhilaration of the other, without their concomitant evils.” The specification that gambling and drunkenness still exist, just not in “rational” culture, indicates that the middle classes separated themselves from the lower classes via their self-control. That home theatricals could somehow replicate the thrills of such outdoor amusements may have seemed like an absurd notion to some. Yet the middle classes were trying to determine their own cultural outlets and entertainments while maintaining values consistent with their work in temperance and other benevolent associations. They denounced gambling, drinking, and even walking in unfamiliar neighborhoods, but they also needed to offer a valid substitute for these hazardous activities. Staging home theatricals was a seemingly innocuous entertainment that did not require leaving the house. Therefore it circumvented many concerns about citizens’ safety in the public world. As Dawson writes, “parlor entertainments alleviated discord, ennui, and a longing for the unwholesome pleasures lurking outside the home by turning attention to the relatively ‘safe’ diversions already associated with a domestically sanctified

---

If the readers believed the guides, then parlor games, charades, and plays lessened desires to leave the house. Instead, the guides offered all performers—regardless of age—a state of suspended adolescence in contrast to a public sphere reserved for drunkards and deadbeats.

Despite the conveniences of parlor theatre, the middle classes still attended commercial theatres, at least partly to find inspiration for their controlled parlor stages. The middle classes’ patronage largely changed the complexion of popular American theatre in the 1850s and 60s. After Kimball and Barnum’s moral lecture rooms found willing audiences in the 1840s, the middle class sought additional theatres, “playhouses distinct from working-class theatres but less elitist than the opera houses.” As many entrepreneurs built theatres in the next two decades, they attempted to cut the working class entirely out of theatres by eliminating the pit. Established theatres like Philadelphia’s Walnut and Arch Street theatres and New York’s Broadway Theatre added a parquette space in order to cultivate additional, and often exclusively, middle-class viewers. Laura Keene’s Theatre, which opened in 1856, priced the parquette and dress circle at the same price of fifty cents, further encouraging socially homogenous audiences. Furthermore Keene’s Theatre and the Boston Theatre drastically reduced their number of high-priced private boxes. Theatrical content shifted according to audience tastes as well. In Philadelphia from 1856 to 1878, for instance, Shakespeare’s works remained the most popular programs, but were only outdrawing melodramatist Dion

---

633 Ibid., 200-203.
Boucicault’s plays by a small margin. As the number of middle-class female playgoers rapidly increased in the 1850s and 60s, genteel comedies and domestic melodramas became dominant genres. Keene drew in women (and usually their attendant men) with British playwright Tom Taylor’s popular domestic comedy *Our American Cousin* (produced in 1858) and heroine-centric melodramas like *The Marble Heart* (1856) and a stage adaptation of Ellen Wood’s British sensation novel *East Lynne* (1860). When playwright and manager Augustin Daly founded his middle-class New York theatres in 1869 and 1873, he created an architecturally egalitarian theatre like the previous models and emphasized a program of, in Bruce McConachie’s words, “conventional morality.”

The middle class drew directly from public theatres’ programs in order to create their own parlor theatre. Curley astutely points out that most scholarship surrounding private theatricals focuses too heavily on plays written specifically for parlor performance. She notes the significance (and irony) of upper tier commercial theatres trying to recruit audiences from middle- and upper-class circles when these populations were in fact trying to stage their own home dramas. Indeed, though many original parlor dramas paraded the joys of gentility and middle-class life, home performers also restaged plays that they knew from the commercial theatre. Alcott and her sisters

---

634 Ibid. 241-242. Reports indicate that there were 2,314 performances of Shakespeare’s plays during this period as opposed to 1,587 by Boucicault. McConachie writes that in the decades before 1856, Shakespeare’s works were produced at least three times as often as any contemporary playwright. Thus the rise of melodrama and domestic drama playwrights like Boucicault and the British Tom Taylor and J.B. Buckstone represented a marked shift away from Shakespeare’s dominance.


637 Curley, “Beyond the Pocket Doors,” 1.
performed, among other titles, J.R. Planché’s dramedy *The Jacobite* and J.M. Morton’s farce *The Two Bonnycastles* in their amateur theatre company in New Hampshire.638 Gill devotes an entire section of his guide *Parlor Tableaux and Amateur Theatricals* (1867) to listing commercial stage plays ideal for private presentation, including Thomas Morton’s comic drama *All that Glitters is Not Gold*, Bulwer-Lytton’s comedy *Money*, and the French-originating drama *Dreams of Delusion*.639 He singles out such works because their small cast sizes and limited location changes can be replicated easily in the home setting. Of course the commercial theatre and parlor theatre were never mutually exclusive venues. In fact, it benefitted the middle classes to have a thriving commercial theatre because they could import into their homes and revise the new shows that they had witnessed in theatres.

As evident in their persistent references to the public stage, guide authors did not eschew commercial theatre so much as they attempted to imitate and even surpass it, particularly through stagecraft. Despite their aversions to the potentially mixed company and unseemly professional actors in public theatres, authors insist that amateurs should aim for commercial theatres’ standards.640 In his introduction to his *Amateur’s Guide to Home Theatricals* (1866), Denier states that it must “be distinctly understood that the aim is . . . to aid those ambitious aspirants who are satisfied with nothing less than a ‘real theatre,’ with all its mysteries of flies, flats, borders, sets and wings.”641 These “aspirants” include not only the performers but also the audiences who seek an equivalent

---

640 For more on guide authors’ wariness of professional actors, see Curley, “Beyond the Pocket Doors,” 27.
to their commercial theatre experiences. In their *Parlor Theatricals; or, Winter Evening’s Entertainment* (1859), Arnold and Cahill highly recommend green curtains because this “classic color” has “long [been] considered sacred to stage-curtains.” They also advocate a drop curtain (as opposed to a draw curtain) for its ease of construction and its superior abilities to shield backstage action. As Denier writes, “In fact, in everything connected with private theatricals it is required to conceal the stage trickery, in order to convey as complete an idea of reality as is possible.” In these constructions, the goal was not to contradict the standards of morally suspect public stage shows, but rather to diagnostically absorb spectators into transfixing stage scenes in the same ways as did commercial theatres. Guide authors emphasize these backstage practices in order to reassure middle-class performers that they are reproducing activities from a worthwhile professional theatre. Since exclusively middle-class theatres recently emerged in the 1850s and 60s, then the middle classes could celebrate their simulation of popular shows immediately. If these citizens fostered old prejudices and did not attend commercial theatre, they still could produce the plays in an environment protected from public theatre’s unwanted influences. Regardless, home theatricals enabled the middle class to retain the essence of the commercial theatre but also to sanitize the theatrical environment.

Refashioning and in some cases upending the parlor itself became the important first step in creating a home theatrical that successfully replicated a commercial one. While a few city houses had permanently converted certain rooms into theatres, most

---

performance spaces were makeshift constructions designed to fit the house’s layout. Both Denier in his *Amateur’s Guide* (1866) and Leger Mayne in *What Shall We Do Tonight?* (1873) assert that two parlors separated by folding doors are ideal, with the door frame serving as the proscenium. In this set-up, the audience should sit in the larger parlor and view the actors perform in the smaller parlor. Otherwise, participants can divide spectators’ and performers’ spaces within a single parlor or, according to James Head in his guide *Home Pastimes* (1860), perform in the entryway while using the parlor as the spectators’ sitting area. In the latter case, “a parlor with folding doors is undoubtedly the best place, as the doors can be slowly opened, which will give a better effect to the scene.” In each architectural formulation, the restructuring of the parlor serves to create a convincing stage illusion. Directions also underline the importance of distancing the audience from the stage by at least eight to twelve feet; this separation lends “enchantment to the view” according to a contemporary British guide. Thus parlor theatricals often sought, like many commercial theatres, to convincingly transport audiences to another time and place. Participants and audiences did not want to feel that

---

644 Most notably Curley states, Wall Street speculator Leonard Jerome outfitted a theatre within his mansion at the corner of Madison and 26th street. But his venue was used more often for charitable events and seated between 400 and 600 people. The events there were a separate phenomenon from the private, unannounced theatricals within middle-class homes. The Amateur Dramatic Club imported France’s Juignet and Drivet’s acting troupe to Jerome’s house in 1866, and proceeds benefited the Children’s Aid Society and the Women’s Employment Society, among other recipients. Jerome’s theatre was also used for amateur tableaux and opera in order to raise funds for the Ladies’ Southern Relief fund in 1867. The theatricals at Jerome’s house were publicized in *The New York Times* and likely appealed to upper-class spectators—or as the newspaper puts it, “the most dainty audiences;” “Amusements,” *New York Times*, March 11, 1867, 4, quoted in Curley, “Beyond the Pocket Doors,” 121. The space eventually transformed into the Union League Club Theatre and later the University Club Theatre. See Curley, “Beyond the Pocket Doors,” esp. 6, 121-123, 167-176.


they were simply sitting in a parlor, but rather that they were attending an event akin to a professional show. Home theatricals offered the pleasures of public theatres’ foreign lands while confirming the parlor as a secure space to enjoy such visions.

In an effort to convince middle-class consumers that home theatre could eventually supplant public theatergoing, guide authors instructed participants to undertake substantial physical labor in constructing their home stages. Even the most basic platforms required some intensive labor. Many guides instruct participants to gather three to four stout floor boards and place them on top of muslin-covered boxes of thick plank. In several cases, guide authors tell readers to mortise the platform to an underlying frame of small joist. Some stage platforms would measure fourteen feet square, while others would run twelve feet long, eight feet wide, and anywhere from two and a half to four feet high. Attaining sufficient construction materials would almost certainly require readers to visit a hardware store. Guide authors often encouraged home theatre participants to use already existent furniture in the home. One author reports watching a successful series of theatricals performed on top of a dining room table and two kitchen tables tied together. In Parlor Tableaux and Amateur Theatricals (1867), William Fearing Gill offers perhaps the most creative method to construct a platform: “[Q]uite a respectable temporary stage may be made by unhinging two closet or any interior doors, removing the knobs, if they have them, and mounting them . . . upon boxes: of course the doors are not injured, being covered by some carpet, and are strong enough to bear six or

647 Head, Home Pastimes, 17-18.
648 Gill, Parlor Tableaux and Amateur Theatricals, 7.
eight persons." Whether moving household furniture or temporarily deconstructing
doors, performers found new uses for materials within the middle-class home. The guides
encouraged participants to charge these everyday objects with new meaning within the
domestic theatrical space. For younger family members, part of the thrill no doubt existed
in the disassembling and possible destruction of tables or doorways. The guides
continuously instructed performers to summon public amusements in order to enjoy their
home environments anew.

Guide authors presented increasingly elaborate instructions for creating public theatre elements, including prosceniums and curtains, that helped the middle class
understand parlor theatre’s substitutive appeal. In their guide, Arnold and Cahill advocate
the “ease with which the ‘tinseled fascination of the stage’ may be mimicked by the home
fireside.” Their distinct aim is to reproduce, as closely as possible, the elements and
effects of the commercial theatre in the convenience of one’s home. Woodworking
remained central to this goal. While some texts advocated using the parlor door frame as
a proscenium, others insisted on constructing an independent frame. In their Model Book
of Dreams, Fortune Teller, and Epitome of Parlor Entertainments (1861), Henry Temple
and Cordelia Ottley propose creating a frame “about seven or eight feet high, and as wide
as the size of the room will permit.” Most frames should be assembled by nailing
together three to four long pieces of small joist or wood—each piece one to two feet

---

650 Gill, Parlor Tableaux and Amateur Theatricals, 8.
651 Arnold and Cahill, Parlor Theatricals; or, Winter Evening’s Entertainment, 12.
652 Henry Temple and Cordelia M. Ottley, The Model Book of Dreams, Fortune Teller, and Epitome of
Parlor Entertainments (Philadelphia: Duane Rulison, 1861), 231.
wide—and then attaching the finished frame to the platform. The few extant accounts of actual parlor shows confirm these practices. In a summary of her family’s theatricals, Ella Moore appears to have followed these instructions, as she and her adolescent peers fit their frame within a doorway dividing two parlors. Arnold and Cahill specify that the curtain should be nailed to the top of the frame, and they especially endorse a drop curtain which can conveniently be lifted for the unveilings of scenes (Fig. 3.1). For curtain material, several guides suggest green muslin, and Arnold and Cahill recommend “some soft stuff—the heavier the better” for dramatic scene breaks. In practice, Moore diverged slightly from the guides, opting for a crimson draw curtain. Yet she followed their instructions for staging tableaux vivants by dropping lace and gauze from the top frame in order to add a numinous effect for tableaux scenes. If participants cannot mimic the scale of a public theatre, authors suggest at least replicating its standards. The proscenium constructions and curtain varieties produced a miniature version of what many commercial theatre spectators would observe. Hence, the complex processes of stage construction and presentation served participants’ aims to reproduce a public thea tergoing experience. Audiences doubtfully pretended that they were in a public theatre. But the more ambitious the carpentry and stage preparation, the more the middle class could accept home theatre as an equivalent entertainment.

655 Arnold and Cahill, Parlor Theatricals; or, Winter Evening’s Entertainment, 10-11.
656 Ibid., 11.
Approaches to stage scenery also reveal the middle class’s aspirations to mount a professional theatre at home. Participants could trace and paint their own diagrams on calico or, as appeared to be more popular, purchase preconfigured sets from play text publishers like Samuel French. French sold fully-painted scenes of gardens, woods, drawing rooms, and cottage interiors—with most backdrops spanning twenty feet wide, eleven and a half feet high—for $12.50 each (Fig. 3.2).\(^{658}\) For curious consumers, French kept his drawing-room scenery and set on fully-mounted display at his publishing headquarters on East 14\(^{th}\) Street.\(^{659}\) French’s scenes did not offer the middle classes the same do-it-yourself satisfaction of constructing their own sets or painting their own scenes. Yet these pre-set scenes, which could be purchased with additional stage wings to obscure costume changes and entrances and exits, brought home theatricals closer to the professional theatre model. If participants could reach the goals of public theatre “fascination” that Arnold and Cahill outline, then they might altogether eliminate the impulse to leave the parlor for entertainment.

\(^{658}\) Douglas Jerrold, *The Rent-Day* (New York: Samuel French, [1878-1887]).

\(^{659}\) French moved its headquarters from various locations on Nassau Street (which it had occupied since 1850) to 38 East 14\(^{th}\) St. in 1878, where it remained until 1887.
Fig. 3.1: The home-made drop curtain, which authors George Arnold and Frank Cahill recommend constructing instead of a draw curtain. *Parlor Theatricals; or, Winter Evening's Entertainment* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1859), 11.
Fig. 3.2: Various room-size scenery for sale by publisher Samuel French. Though these specific illustrations derive from late-nineteenth-century play texts, the identical scenes were available and advertised in American parlor guides of the 1860s and 70s. French kept several scenes on display at his publication headquarters (both in London and in New York), and large versions of the scenes could stretch thirteen feet long by nine feet high. Optional borders and wings would expand the scenes to twenty feet long by eleven and a half feet high. The advertisements specify that the painted scenes could either be purchased as one large mount or unmounted in thirty separate pieces and reconfigured within the home. Eden Phillpotts and Charles Groves, *A Golden Wedding* (New York: Samuel French, 1899).
In their descriptions of make-up and props, guide authors further emphasized that the middle-class participants should aspire to professional, rather than amateur, productions. Denier states that in order to make a young person look old, participants should use sepia or Indian ink with a camel’s hair brush. They must also pay special attention to crow’s feet around the eyes and chin lines. He warns about the “most delicate operation” of this make-up, because “if the lines are too strongly marked, they will look like what they really are—paint.” Though spectators sat quite close to parlor stages and almost always knew the participants personally, the guide authors suggest that performers should still aim to convince viewers otherwise. In order for middle-class parlor theatre to approach the success of commercial venues, participants must actively refuse any acknowledgement of their stage secrets. Props operated in a similar fashion. One author recommends decorating broom handles to make them appear like spear shafts for fight scenes. In the tableau vivant “The Parting,” which depicts a knight leaving his wife and child for war, boxes covered with white marble paper serve as stairs, and a newly-painted earthen jar substitutes as a period vase. By recasting the objects which already filled their decorated parlors, participants craftily embellished their many theatrical worlds. The stage trick—and performative success—lay in making these familiar objects seem temporarily unfamiliar.

Guide authors also provided intricate instructions about how to create theatrical special effects, revealing the middle class’s ambitions to duplicate commercial stage

---

660 Ibid., 35-36.
661 Ibid., 36.
662 Mayne, *What Shall We Do To-Night?*, 299.
magic in the home. To simulate thunder, authors recommend standing out of view and shaking an iron sheet, three and a half feet long by twenty inches wide. 664 Performers can imitate the sound of pouring rain by constructing a narrow box with different partitions, filling it with peas, and turning it to one side; alternately, they can stretch a piece of brown paper across a frame and throw the peas against it. 665 To mimic the sound of a broken window, authors tell participants to gather broken pieces of china in a basket and dash it against the floor. 666 Guide authors endorse the transformation, and even destruction, of domestic objects in the service of producing a compelling home theatre. In his guide *The Art of Amusing* (1866), Frank Bellew outlines one scene in which the audience sees a girl seeking shelter; she is “struggling against the blast, her shawl and dress . . . violently agitated by the wind.” 667 The success of the effect depends upon carefully timed choreography and coordination: “To produce this effect attach two or three strong threads to the garments named, and at the proper time jerk and pull them with a tremulous motion, to impart the natural action” (Fig. 3.3). 668 Lacking faith in fans to produce convincing gale winds, Bellew turns potential actresses into human puppets. He remains most interested in creating a “natural” effect that at least temporarily resists inquiry regarding its stagecraft. The goal is to conceal the machinations that produce the effects and absorb spectators into the scene, just as would a commercial drama featuring such stage tricks. Like the parlor magic instructions that frequently were included in home theatrical guidebooks, the spectatorial pleasure lies in the sleight of hand. If the

664 Denier, *Parlor Tableaux; or, Animated Pictures*, viii.
668 Ibid., 236-237.
middle-class participants can produce captivating special effects, then they can advance home stage-play beyond a pleasant diversion and offer it as a rival entertainment to the public theatre.

Fig. 3.3: For special effects, guide authors encouraged parlor theatre participants to rely on crude stage trickery, such as this endeavor to simulate a high wind by pulling strings attached to a performer. Mayne, *What Shall We Do To-Night?*, 300.
With elaborate recipes for stage lighting and fires, guide authors sought to show that even the most sophisticated of theatrical effects could be reproduced in the home. In many guidebooks, writers include recipes for creating variously colored fires to light scenes. Participants transformed into amateur chemists, and drawing-room experiments produced genuine danger. In the easiest conceptions, such as Arnold and Cahills’ instructions for ghostly scenes when a “sepulchral unearthly effect is desired,” performers can mix salt with wine in a metal cup and suspend it on a wire frame over a lamp; the heated cup then presents a delicate, flickering light. However, most instructions contain long lists of druggists’ ingredients and often require hazardous preparations. In order to create a “brilliant red fire,” William Fearing Gill advises readers to mix one ounce of dry nitrate of strontian, three drams and six grams of sulphur, one dram and twelve grams of oxymuriate of potash, two drams of sulphuret of antimony, and one dram and one scruple of charcoal. Thereafter, someone should light the compound, but Gill warns that the oxymuriate must be powdered first or else “it will explode, to the imminent danger of the operator.” The guide authors expect parlor dwellers to go to extreme lengths in order to replicate commercial theatre effects. As Gill assures readers, “these recipes for producing red fire have been repeatedly tried, and are generally used at the best theatres in England and America.” Whether true or mere puffery, he sells the notion of imitating real theatrical practices, even at the risk of damaging the parlor venue itself. This alchemy contradicted the very safety that parlor theatre (and parlor life)

669 Arnold and Cahill, Parlor Theatricals; or, Winter Evening’s Entertainment, 156.
670 Gill, Parlor Tableaux and Amateur Theatricals, 284, 296.
671 Ibid.
672 Ibid., 284.
sought to advance. Yet it provided performers the satisfaction of creating a genuine theatrical event and the subversive thrill of partaking in an activity that was not entirely safe. The guide authors imply that by literally playing with fire, home theatre participants will be more fulfilled than merely by attending an effect-laden commercial drama.

Each guidebook suggested different variations on similar fire effects, but all guides reinforced the middle-class aim to reproduce public stage wonders within the private sphere. Lightning scenes could be quite rudimentary to simulate; Bellew advises participants to place a lamp in a box and simply open the box whenever necessary. Yet more often guide authors appeared to take enjoyment in complicating the procedure. For the same effect, Denier recommends flashing light through powder Lycopoedium, while Leger Mayne proposes mixing “a little gunpowder—very little . . . with sulphur, so as to give it a blue tinge” and then throwing the solution “through the flame of a candle [to] give a flash.” In *The Sociable*, George Arnold’s recipe for green fire requires a mixture of sulphur, oxymuriate of potassa, metallic arsenic, charcoal, and baryta lit afire in a pan. In his recipe for red light, Mayne shares a similar formula which, when combined with wine and lighted, “adds greatly to the beauty of martial, heroic, or fairy scenes.” For a guidebook genre often marketed to teenagers, the recipes strangely encouraged performers to play with treacherous chemicals. Not only were the fires

---

675 Mayne, *What Shall We Do To-Night?*, 300.
677 Mayne, *What Shall We Do To-Night?*, 184. Curley adds that two guidebooks—F.C. Burnand’s *How We Managed Our Private Theatricals* (1872) and C.E. Burton’s *Amateur Actor* (1876)—advised participants on how to create their own calcium light. It was a particularly dangerous technique, requiring not only some of the chemicals found in pan fire recipes but also hydrogen and oxygen gases; see “Beyond the Pocket Doors,” 51-52.
themselves reason for concern, but many of the individual ingredients were poisonous if ingested. Still, authors implied, such dangers were of secondary concern to recreating an authentic theatrical experience. At one point, Gill tells readers to “dissolve nitrate of copper in alcohol” and “light the solution” for a fantastical coloring effect. Referring to popular theatre practices, he continues, “Pieces of sponge suspended, and strips of flannel dipped in the [same] solution, wound around various articles, and lighted, are used for incantation-scenes on the stage.” While Gill does not explicitly recommend that home theatre pupils drape their sets in burning sponges and cloths, he provides the recipe for the fire and cites professional theatre customs. He passively implies how far amateurs can take their endeavors to simulate commercial stage effects. The persistent allusions to the practices of public theatre legitimizes, rather than dismisses, the commercial stage. Consumers may previously have believed that special effects could only be viewed in professional venues, but Gill stresses the potential of such attractions in a controlled parlor environment. By emphasizing the sheer complexity of producing special effects, Gill and other guide authors push home practitioners to create genuine theatrical events that can substitute for public theategoing’s pleasures.

With other non-theatrical effects, guide authors offered readers a taste of the public sphere within the convenience of their private confines. For example, the anonymous author of Parlor and Playground Amusements (1875) presents detailed instructions for creating “artificial volcanoes”: “Mix equal parts of pounded sulphur and

---

678 Gill, Parlor Tableaux and Amateur Theatricals, 288. Writers not infrequently recommended removing the fire from pans, such as when Mayne suggests burning fire on an iron shovel at the stage wings to imitate a burning building; What Shall We Do To-Night?, 301.
iron fillings, and having formed the whole into a paste with water, bury a certain quantity of it . . . at the depth of about a foot below the surface of the earth. In ten or twelve hours after, the earth will swell up and burst, the flames will issue out, which will enlarge the aperture, scattering around a yellow and blackish dust.\(^{679}\) Obviously, this experiment is intended for an outdoor garden, and appears in an “Experiments” section entirely disconnected from any narrative plays or tableaux vivant instructions. Yet just as other guide writers refer continuously to the models of public theatre, *Parlor and Playground*’s author refers to the naturally occurring thrills of the larger world: “It is not impossible that what is here seen in miniature, takes place on a grand scale in volcanoes.”\(^{680}\) The author conveys the widely-known knowledge that real volcanoes “always furnish abundance of sulphur,” and thus “it may easily be conceived, from the effect of a small quantity of the above mixture, what thousands of millions of pounds of it would produce.”\(^{681}\) If home participants can imagine the volcano effects on an exponentially larger scale, then they can comprehend nature’s bounty at least in their own minds. They can learn about the public world through creative engagement with private materials.

Public theatre precedents for volcanoes and explosions also inform this home experiment. As early as 1840, when machinists at McAran’s Garden Theatre built and erupted a thirty-foot high replica volcano in Philadelphia, audiences had flocked to see theatricalized spectacles of nature.\(^{682}\) *Parlor and Playground*’s writer at once extends and privatizes this type of performance. By miniaturizing the McAran’s volcano and setting

\(^{680}\) Ibid.
\(^{681}\) Ibid.
\(^{682}\) “At McAran’s Garden,” *The North American and Daily Advertiser*, June 8, 1840.
the scene in a backyard or garden, the anonymous author assures participants that they can produce their own versions of such an attraction. Such homemade experiments were undoubtedly limited reproductions and could not have approached the dynamism of viewing a real-life volcano eruption or even a garden theatre version. Yet these parlor shows allowed the middle classes to practice a thrilling alternative to the public forms of spectatorship to which they might not otherwise have access.

**Home Museums and Performative Consumers**

By performing comic and often unthreatening versions of public museum spectacles within their parlors, the middle classes further complemented their attendance of commercial entertainments with private parlor shows. As established in chapter two, curiosity museums’ moral lecture rooms cultivated new theatrical audiences of middle-class families and “Christian respectables” in the 1840s and 50s.683 P.T. Barnum’s museum hall attractions also maintained a pervasive influence throughout middle-class culture. Barnum temporarily owned museums in Baltimore and Philadelphia in the antebellum period, but he established his principal museum in downtown New York.684 When Barnum obtained the American Museum on Broadway and Ann Street in 1841, he erected various displays within four 100-foot halls. He gradually expanded into adjacent

---


684 Barnum’s agent Fordyce Hitchcock bought the Baltimore Museum for Barnum in 1845, but then Barnum sold it in 1846. He opened a Philadelphia Museum in 1849 at the corner of Chestnut and Seventh Streets—a “first-class establishment” according to Barnum—but he sold it in 1851, and it burned down later that year; Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs: or Forty Years’ Recollections of P.T. Barnum written by himself* (London: Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, 1869), 264-265.
buildings and doubled his exhibition space by 1854.\textsuperscript{685} Combining his extensive collection of curiosities with those he seized from rivals, Barnum filled his halls with relics of natural history, stuffed birds, automata, rare coins, fossils, autographs, weapons, cosmoramas, daguerreotypes, waxworks, and live animals, among other features.\textsuperscript{686} He also recruited special acts and freak attractions such as the dwarf Tom Thumb, giants from abroad, the “What is It?” missing link, and albino families. Patrician New Yorkers always looked down on Barnum’s venue and in the late 1860s distinguished their own highbrow museums such as the American Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Barnum initially cultivated a middle-class patronage in the 1840s, but he took in lower-ranked social groups as the years progressed. He appeared to characterize his Museum’s consumers according to convenience. In his first autobiography entitled \textit{The Life of P.T. Barnum} (1854), he writes “our countrymen, of the middling classes, inherit in too great a degree a capacity only for the most valueless and irrational enjoyments.”\textsuperscript{687} He goes on to claim that intemperance and other crimes are “a natural result of the lamentable deficiency among us of innocent and rational amusements.”\textsuperscript{688} He strives to amend this issue by inviting diverse audiences to his Museum. By his second autobiography, \textit{Struggles and Triumphs, or, Forty Years’ Recollections} (1869), Barnum

\begin{footnotes}
688 Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
asserts, “I worked for the million,” and a Knickerbocker article from 1863 states, “all citizens and strangers, clergy, judges, and all classes, visit the Museum.” In truth, Barnum appeared to have wanted only respectable middle-class citizens, as evident in the moral-reform dramas like The Drunkard that alienated the working classes and his pricing out of lower classes for special engagements such as Swedish singer Jenny Lind in 1850. Yet as middlebrow and high-end theatres moved uptown during the late 1850s and 1860s to accommodate their relocating clientele, Barnum’s downtown American Museum was forced to rely partly upon the local working classes for business. Barnum could no longer claim that he offered a haven for middle-class respectables; in fact, he faced growing problems with pickpockets and crime just outside of his Museum’s doors as the bourgeois moved uptown.

Thus with a more diverse audience in the late 1850s and 60s, Barnum changed priorities and sought to cultivate a genteel behavior in his patrons. Since he had to expand his audience base beyond the middle class, he specifically targeted working-class audiences of white, native-born Protestants and attempted to group them with his more respectable clients. In Struggles and Triumphs, Barnum argues that he offered only “wholesome attractions” which enlightened patrons, and he boasts of the “greater

---

689 Barnum, Struggles and Triumphs, 473.
690 “Editor’s Table” Knickerbocker Monthly, November, 1863, 473.
691 Adams, E Pluribus Barnum, 26. The working classes, in return, disrupted her performances. According to Adams, gunfire rang outside of Lind’s Cincinnati concert sponsored by Barnum, and thousands of protestors disrupted one of her Pittsburgh performances (201).
692 Ibid., 112-113. Notably, even after a fire burned down the Museum in 1865, Barnum rebuilt it downtown. He moved to 539 and 541 Broadway until this theatre burned down too in 1868.
693 Ibid.
694 Ibid., 25, 90, 95.
decorum which characterized my audiences.” Barnum-sponsored literature, such as *Sights and Wonders in New York* (1849), portrayed the out-of-towner “Uncle Findout” taking his nephews to the Museum and educating them about each attraction, room by room. Though these publications excised any working-class presence in their representation of Barnum’s Museum, they still laid out Barnum’s aspirational goal for his audience that persisted through the decade. In Adams’s words, Barnum “taught the middle class what it meant to be a class.” More accurately, by advertising ostensible values of education and morality, he attempted to gather the upwardly mobile lower classes and the middle classes under his Museum’s roof. Then he instilled in them the codes of genteel respectability.

Beyond providing instructions for traditional parlor dramas and tableaux, guide authors taught consumers how to produce socially-exclusive exotic museums in their own parlors. In appropriating and restaging attractions from popular museums like Barnum’s, the middle classes demonstrated more control over their environments than Barnum could himself. Because parlor performers did not need to concern themselves with determining clientele, admission prices, or geographical locations as did Barnum, they never had to compromise programming to please the working classes. Middle-class producers of home theatricals effectively rid themselves of any lingering working classes

---

697 Adams draws attention to illustrations in guidebooks which represented Barnum’s clientele as exclusively “well-dressed white couples, often accompanied by children.” According to Adams, such pictures did not take into account any of Barnum’s working-class patrons, but they did accurately depict the large numbers of families who attended the Museum; *E Pluribus Barnum*, 98.
698 Ibid., 2.
within (or criminals and wantons just outside) Barnum’s downtown Museum. They
created instead a secure mimic museum that catered to only those invited. Hosting not
only working classes but also various freaks, strange animals, foreign creatures, and
racial others, Barnum’s American Museum was, according to critic Eric Fretz, “a site of
cultural exchange and conflict, and the public display of theatrical selfhood both
confirmed and challenged middle-class values.”699 While the educational elements of
museum culture aligned with middle-class principles, many of the grotesqueries did
not—even though the middle class was likely quite intrigued by them. To continue their
negotiations with the strange sights that they witnessed at public museums, the middle
classes staged makeshift versions of museum attractions at home. Because it excluded the
mixed classes who performed in and patronized commercial curiosity museums, the
parlor became a secure forum for exclusively middle-class productions.

Staging impromptu museums at home allowed the middle classes to assure each
other of their shared cynical attitudes towards Barnum’s attractions. In his home
amusement guidebook What Shall We Do To-Night? (1873), Mayne describes one parlor
entertainment entitled “The Museum.” The game asks a participant to jump up
spontaneously from the audience and jokingly sell some of his collected curiosities. He
then proceeds to throw a handkerchief over a gentleman’s face and explains, “Here . . .
you may see a stuffed alligator from the banks of the Nile. . . . During our voyage home,
while I endeavored to keep him alive, he devoured seventeen negro babies every day, and

---

699 Eric Fretz, “P.T. Barnum’s Theatrical Selfhood and the Nineteenth-Century Culture of Exhibition,” in
Thompson, Freakery, 105.
washed them down with nine gallons of the best Eau de Cologne.” 700 Whereas many parlor shows draw clear lines between audience and performer, Mayne’s home museum erases them. Not only does the primary performer emerge from the audience himself, but he turns other spectators into his specimens. Later, he casts a “pretty blushing girl” as a casket of jewels, and Mayne recommends casting others as Egyptian mummies or Cleopatra’s needle. 701 The show replicates the spontaneity of walking through Barnum’s halls and encountering unexpected sights, while it also self-consciously mocks Barnum’s attempts to fool patrons. The middle-class participants in Mayne’s home museum can express that they see through Barnum’s sensational lies to customers. As James W. Cook writes about the public museums, “Barnum feigned ignorance on his own behalf” about the factuality of his attractions like the “Fejee Mermaid” (1842) and the “What Is It?” missing link (1860) and “deferred to viewers for answers.” 702 Through staging a home museum, Barnum’s middle-class patrons can declare to each another that they were never fooled by Barnum’s tricks. They can bond specifically over this shared interpretation. In essence, they import their own versions of Barnum’s attractions only to perform their knowledge of the exhibits’ falseness.

This crucial dynamic, in which the middle classes mutually denied their gullibility for Barnum’s tricks, becomes even more exaggerated as participants dressed as various museum freaks or impossibilities. Mayne outlines how readers can create a mythological “Centaur” in the parlor: one performer crouches behind another whose face and torso

---

700 Mayne, What Shall We Do To-Night?, 33.
701 Ibid., 33-34.
remain visible, while an assistant drapes a “rich fabric” over the back of the trailing performer, and attaches a tail made from strips of paper and cloth (Fig. 3.4).\textsuperscript{703} A bow and arrow, helmet, and beard on the visible actor completes the picture. The performance itself consists of rapid, flailing motions: “The prancing, curveting, cantering, and the various attitudes assumed by the principal figure, shooting the arrow, throwing the spear, flinging the arms about, swaying the body, . . . can, in good and intelligent hands, be made very effective and diverting.”\textsuperscript{704} The show alternates between horror—as the performers should yell out “ejaculations of fierceness, defiance, terror”—and comedy—as Mayne recommends staging “very amusing scenes” of two centaurs jousting.\textsuperscript{705} Another invented creature, the “Midnight Screecher,” requires the performer to cover him or herself in a black railway blanket, walk on all fours with boots on one’s hands, and let out “unearthly groans, screams, and whistles.”\textsuperscript{706} Performers contorted their bodies and ran wildly around the living room, with Mayne even recommending that the centaur rest occasionally so that the rear performer could catch his or her breath.\textsuperscript{707} Much of the spectatorial pleasure surely derives from witnessing a familiar neighbor or family member transform into a wild creature. In all these home freak shows, the middle classes could continue to negotiate their understanding of popular museum culture. The makeshift, cheap production values only exaggerate the phoniness of the exhibition. As with the stuffed alligator auction, spectators can bond in their refusal to “buy” the feature on display. Viewers relate over the fact that they remain smarter than Barnum believes

\textsuperscript{703} Mayne, \textit{What Shall We Do To-Night?}, 41-42.
\textsuperscript{704} Ibid., 44.
\textsuperscript{705} Ibid., 44.
\textsuperscript{706} Ibid., 172.
\textsuperscript{707} Ibid., 44.
them. Moreover, if all of Barnum’s freaks are fake, then a homemade one can offer just as much appeal, while eliminating the audience’s fear of being hoodwinked.

Barnum offered very real exoticisms as well, mainly in the form of foreign animals. From the inception of his American Museum, Barnum featured a variety of animals—both stuffed (as he retained an on-site taxidermist) and live specimens.\textsuperscript{708} In 1844, he hung five-foot-high signs of one hundred species of animals outside of his building.\textsuperscript{709} A generation before the Central Park Zoo was established in the mid-1860s, Barnum’s collection of live animals remained among the most impressive in the nation, including a rotating lineup of tigers, crocodiles, anacondas, grizzly bears, manatees, and hippopotamuses, among others.\textsuperscript{710} The Museum operated as, in Jane Goodall’s words, “effectively a major zoo.”\textsuperscript{711} When opening his second New York Museum in 1866 following a fire at his original one, he combined his vast collection of animals with another large collection from the Van Amburgh Menagerie Company. In \textit{Struggles and Triumphs}, Barnum recalls this new joint venture: “The menagerie of living animals was superior in extent to any other similar collection in America, embracing, as it did, almost every description of wild animal ever exhibited.”\textsuperscript{712} The merger added lions, Bengal

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{709} Peter Buckley, “To The Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1820-1860” (PhD diss., SUNY Stonybrook, 1984), 489-490.
\textsuperscript{710} Adams, \textit{E Pluribus Barnum}, 78. Barnum emphasized live menagerie, a notable shift from earlier museum practices. For instance, Charles Peale established his Philadelphia Museum in 1786 and also featured live animals, but he focused more on arranging stuffed animals in positions replicating their roles in nature. Barnum eventually bought out Peale’s vast collection of taxidermy and natural history artifacts in 1850; see Goodall, \textit{Performance and Evolution}, 38-40. For more on Peale and Barnum’s eventual absorption of his museum’s collections, see Fretz, “P.T. Barnum’s Theatrical Selfhood,” 101-102.
\textsuperscript{711} Goodall, \textit{Performance and Evolution}, 40.
\textsuperscript{712} Barnum, \textit{Struggles and Triumphs}, 696.
\end{flushright}
tigers, an elephant, and (according to Barnum) the country’s only live giraffe. The middle classes could not reproduce these animals in any realistic way within their parlors, but amateur theatrical guides outlined home versions nonetheless.

When guide authors instruct readers to dress up as literal animals in parlors, they offer the middle classes an opportunity to perform safe, comical versions of curiosity museums’ wide-ranging menageries. According to guides, middle-class performers would frequently dress up as animals and parade through the parlor in front of guests. Mayne’s giraffe exhibition was an especially elaborate production, involving two performers hidden inside of a draped, spotted cloth resembling the animal’s body, with one actor holding a five-foot pole attached to a homemade giraffe head (Fig. 3.5). Mayne states that performers should wear tight pants to match the cloth, while devoting careful detail to crafting the head: “A grocer’s paper bag may easily be wrought into a tolerable resemblance by a little trimming with the scissors, and fastening with pins or thread; some holes cut out for the eyes, and the nostrils and mouth the same . . . the whole marked with ink or watercolor to imitate the spots of the animal.” As opposed to the fire concoctions which were intended to accurately simulate theatrical effects, the homemade giraffe serves a primarily comical function. The construction is crude and the effect seemingly clumsy. Mayne specifies that the slapdash presentation “cannot fail to be amusing” and suggests that an accompanying lecturer might “show off [the giraffe’s] paces in the most amusing manner he can think of.” These home giraffes corresponded

---

713 Ibid.
714 Mayne, *What Shall We Do To-Night?*, 67-68.
715 Ibid., 70.
to the real-life animal displays at Barnum’s Museum and other curiosity venues. But Mayne implies that the middle classes can replace their disempowered roles as awestruck patrons in public museums. Instead, they can create the private exhibit themselves and laugh at it, removing any fear they may have experienced upon witnessing Barnum’s alien creatures in person. Suggesting that participants imitate a giraffe (and a goat and duck-billed platypus at other points), Mayne avoids the predatory species that may have discomforted middle-class spectators. In essence, he removes the danger of curiosity museums’ displays and replaces it with the safety of comical dress-up exhibitions.
Home museum shows allowed performers to imitate creatures both real and mythical with the help of creative costuming, rudimentary construction skills, and willing performers.

**Fig. 3.4:** (top): “The Centaur,” in Leger D. Mayne, *What Shall We Do To-Night? Or Social Amusements for Evening Parties* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen, & Haffelfinger, 1873), 41-42.

**Fig. 3.5:** (bottom): “The Giraffe,” in Mayne, *What Shall We Do To-Night?,* 68-69.
Other times, as with home dwarf stagings, the middle classes attempt to prove that they can produce an attraction just as mockingly amusing as Barnum did. To create a “German Dwarf,” the anonymous author of How to Amuse an Evening Party (1869) instructs two performers to stand inside a deep window with curtains. The speaking player—whose face is visible—outfits his arms as legs, and places them into a pair of boots on a table in front of him. The second player—whose face is concealed—puts his arms through a jacket worn by the speaking player. The final effect combines a giant head with small limbs. Once the audience arrives, the dwarf “begins an harangue, interlacing it copiously with foreign words and expressions. While he speaks, the actor performs the gestures. . . . The actor always tries to make his gestures wholly inappropriate to the language of the speaker, and indulges in all kinds of practical jokes.”

Mayne’s similar Table Orator “selects some deeply tragic or sensational speech, while the acting orator makes the gestures” (Fig. 3.6). As the authors suggest, the amusement derives from the uneasy juxtaposition between the dwarf’s physicality and language. The German dwarf, of course, approximates one of Barnum’s most famous attractions, General Tom Thumb (birth name Charles Sherwood Stratton). A dwarf whom Barnum obtained as a child in the early 1840s, Stratton possessed only a paucity of talent by most accounts. Barnum turned the boy into a theatrical draw by training him in vaudeville routines and directing him to pose as historical heroes, usually for comic effect. He would dance jigs or pose as mythological heroes to the laughter of audiences.

717 Mayne, What Shall We Do To-Night?, 102.
Thumb swiftly became a phenomenon, selling out museum and traveling engagements and finding immense popularity overseas where he performed for Great Britain’s royal family in 1844. In constructing a fake dwarf, parlor performers create a substitute Tom Thumb from homemade materials and clever disguising. Boasting that the act “is a most comical entertainment,” How to Amuse’s author asserts that this imitation Tom Thumb is as humorous as the real thing. Instead of stripping Barnum’s exhibits of their fear-inducing properties as with the giraffe, the middle classes could amplify the comic qualities that they found so amusing about Tom Thumb in the first place. The home version preserves the absurdity of Thumb’s comical routines and, via two performers’ clever stagecraft, ridicules his physical condition. In doing so, the middle classes deem Thumb not as special as Barnum proposes, since they can reproduce all of Thumb’s comical effects without having to employ the prized dwarf himself.

In a “jolly companion” piece entitled “The Kentucky Giant,” the same author presents a home version of Barnum’s famous oversized attractions, allowing the middle classes yet again to declare their comic interpretations. Outlined in several guides, the illusion requires one boy to perch himself on the shoulders of another one, as they cover themselves with a long cloak. The boy on top carries a cane and “if he wears a stovepipe hat, with a feather in it, it will greatly heighten the effect” (Fig. 3.7). With its costumes and accompanying props, the effect “never fails to produce roars of laughter.” The author emphasizes the comic ingenuity of the production. The sheer ridiculousness of the

---

720 Anon., How to Amuse, 46.
721 Ibid.
722 Ibid.
723 Ibid.
oversized sight, specifically in the context of the parlor, represents a distinct appeal from analogous public exhibitions. Just as Tom Thumb corresponds to the German Dwarf, Barnum’s stable of real-life giants appear to have inspired the Kentucky Giant. Barnum staged the marriage of Mr. Robert Hales and Miss Eliza Simpson, otherwise known as the Quaker Giant and Giantess, on the stage of the American Museum in February of 1849. In the ensuing decades, he hosted or represented various other Brobdingnagian-like figures. Ruth Goshan, the “Great Arabian Giant” who measured seven feet, eight inches and weighed 450 pounds, toured America in the 1860s under Barnum’s banner (Figs. 3.8, 3.9, & 3.10). Barnum also managed Miss Anna Swan—whom broadsides boasted was an “immense specimen of humanity” over eight feet tall—on the same bill as the dwarf Gen. Grant Jr.—“the least of all little men, throwing Gen. Tom Thumb . . . and all other Lilliputians in the shade.” Because the middle class often gathered at museums, restaging the spectacles at home allowed the class to produce its own newfound culture to itself. By presenting the Kentucky Giant alongside the German Dwarf at home, the middle classes created a theatrical program for maximum comic effect. While dwarves and giants were most often played for comedy in Barnum’s Museum, sometimes (as in the marriages and some songs) they were not. By contrast, the parlor allows home performers to discard any seriousness and play Barnum’s attractions

strictly for laughs. Hence the middle classes were able to further consolidate as a social group around these restructured stagings of their own public spectatorial experiences.
Guide authors frequently encouraged home museum performers to experiment with scale, usually by combining and contorting bodies to provide the illusion of various freakery.

**Fig. 3.6** (top). “The Table Orator,” Leger D. Mayne, *What Shall We Do To-Night? Or Social Amusements for Evening Parties* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen, & Haffelfinger, 1873), 102.

**Fig. 3.7** (bottom). “How to Make a Giant,” Frank Bellew, *The Art of Amusing* (New York: Carleton, 1866), 113.
(Clockwise from left)


Temperance Tableaux and Performing the Working Class

In their homemade temperance tableaux also adapted from museum features, the middle classes emphasize the terror of working-class life in order to highlight their more respectable living conditions. The temperance movement had shifted to a primarily middle-class cause by the time that private theatrical books arrived in the late 1850s and 60s. Men and women frequently defined themselves as middle-class through their personal temperance practices or via participation in temperance associations. Home theatricals contributed to the cause by providing visual warnings of the intemperate life. The middle classes dressed up as degraded working-class figures in order to reinforce their distinctions from them. In Denier’s tableau vivant “The Drunkard’s Home,” actors costume themselves according to their ideas of the intemperate lower classes. The drunkard sits in a chair, half-asleep, with matted hair, a “bloated and red” face, and “arms hanging loosely at his side.” His older daughter cries at the sewing machine and two “ragged” children eat the last remnants of bread on the floor. The drunkard’s wife lies on the bed, “sickly from want of proper food and nourishment. . . . Her eyes are sunken, and her cheeks hollow.” Instead of de-fanging the scene of its horror, Denier highlights the physical grotesqueries of the drunkard’s world. He features the drunkard’s entire family to show both a complete picture of lower-class existence and the far-reaching effects of non-genteel values. By inhabiting these roles, middle-class performers enacted stereotypes of working-class life that they could contrast with their own. They could define themselves as a separate social class by performing exactly who they were not.

---
727 Denier, Parlor Tableaux; or, Animated Pictures, 12.
Instead of rendering the analogous museum exhibits comical or harmless, Denier’s tableau of the drunkard reproduces the revulsion of its commercial analogs. The tableau resembles temperance plays like W.H. Smith’s *The Drunkard* (1844) or W.P. Pratt’s stage version of *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* (1858) that proprietors like Moses Kimball and Barnum utilized to recruit the middle classes to their museum theatres in the 1840s and 50s. Even more accurately, the tableau replicates waxwork tableaux from museum halls. Barnum boasted about his wax displays of the “Temperate Family” and the “Intemperate Family” within his Philadelphia and New York Museums. The latter exhibit revealed two drunkards, a father and son, wasting away in a wretched apartment. In *Sights and Wonders*, Uncle Findout stops at the very same display to explain a lesson about the negative consequences of intemperance. He warns his nephews to “touch not, taste not, handle not, the contents of the intoxicating bottle, lest your condition should be as unfortunate as the one you are now gazing upon,” after which the boys “shuddered and passed to the other side.” Here, the working classes become a freakish spectacle that the middle classes can visually consume and reproduce, just as they did the Museum’s animals, dwarves, and giants. The tableau’s subjects appear as exotic creatures not emanating from some strange land but rather residing just downtown. As Denier’s tableau description reads, “The scene represents the garret home of one of the many starving families that may be found in all large cities where vice and intemperance reign.

---

728 Barnum reports featuring “The Temperate Family” and “The Intemperate Family” waxworks, along with a wax tableaux depicting the Last Supper, in his Philadelphia Museum during his proprietorship there from 1849 to 1851; *Struggles and Triumphs*, 264. Also, Uncle Findout describes all three waxworks in the New York Museum; Anon., *Sights and Wonders*, 6. In both cases, the works are attributed to “Mrs. Pelby” (Boston-based actress and artist Rosalie French Pelby).

almost supreme.” Denier does not stray from Barnum’s models but instead focuses in on the most terrifying aspects to espouse similar social morals. Both Barnum and Denier use the ghastly visions of the drunkard in order to paint pictures of lower-class life they insist is nearby. They specifically remind their respectable consumers of the dangers in straying from their principles (and their neighborhoods) because social demotion is always possible. At the same time, Denier and Barnum assure the middle classes that their self-restraint stabilizes one’s position as the voyeuristic subject of such scenes instead of the degraded object of them.

As similar as the private and public versions of temperance-related fare were, the parlor tableaux affirmed the safety of middle-class spaces in a way that Barnum’s exhibits could not. In Denier’s “Drunkard’s Home,” “the furniture is meager and almost valueless, or would have been sold long ago by the husband to satisfy his craving for drink.” In their similar tableau also titled “The Drunkard’s Home,” Arnold and Cahill depict a parallel scene: in “A dilapidated room, with an empty grate, and an empty saucepan lying on its side,” two children sit on a straw bed, and the drunkard sleeps in the corner: “Everything is to denote . . . misery and want.” Viewing public museums’ temperance plays and waxworks, middle-class visitors could become temporary witnesses of supposed lower-class sights but return to their secure homes afterwards. As discussed in chapter two and evident here, museum-going became a relatively safe way for middle classes to engage in slumming. Yet a significantly safer method was staging

---

730 Denier, Parlor Tableaux; or, Animated Pictures, 11.
731 Ibid.
732 Arnold and Cahill, Parlor Theatricals; or, Winter Evening’s Entertainment, 164.
these same scenes in the comfort of one’s own home. The spare décor in both Denier’s and Arnold and Cahill’s tableaux contrast with the lushly decorated parlors in which the tableaux were typically performed. By dressing up their refined parlors as downtown tenement homes, the middle classes forced themselves—even if only momentarily—to conceive of their home spaces as devoid of material possessions. Through the temperance-themed tableaux, performers brought lower-class life into their homes presumably in order to appreciate more viscerally their middle-class homes. As most single tableaux lasted only thirty seconds before being replaced with a new stage picture, the format allowed the middle classes to replace these temporary scenes of degradation with more comforting ones.

Showing the gradual devolution of physical space over eight tableaux, Denier’s “The Bottle” temporarily complicates this fleetingness. Based upon George Cruikshank’s serial illustrations and T.P. Taylor’s play adaptation, Denier’s home tableaux take on different meanings because performers stage several progressively destitute scenes in their own parlors. Denier’s series begins with the “happy home of the industrious mechanic,” and specifically a room displaying cupboards “full of useful crockery and provisions,” ornaments on top of a fireplace mantle, and bureaus displaying books and flowers.733 Though the tableau’s principal figure, Richard Thornley, remains part of the working class, the iconography nearly resembles a middle-class parlor. As the scenes proceed, however, the space becomes more corrupted according to Thornley’s growing drinking habit. By the second scene, the room looks “dirty and uncomfortable,” the table-

---

733 Denier, Parlor Tableaux; or, Animated Pictures, 42.
objects which defined their act. In scenes five through seven, the drunkard and his family occupy a garret with boxes replacing furniture, and the last scene takes place in a cell, revealing Thornley as a “confirmed lunatic.” In his illustrations upon which the tableaux are based, Cruikshank specifies location changes as well but all are reconfigurations of the same room. The entryway in the first scene’s domestic kitchen, for instance, becomes a cell door within the last scene’s asylum. The hearth, which once was an area for family gathering and love, has transformed into a restricted, barren space symbolic of the drunkard’s ruin (Fig. 3.11). In his tableau description, Denier duplicates this recasting of the space. By the last scene, he reveals the first scene’s wood stove as a “fireplace and grate, with an iron cage around it to keep the lunatics from the fire.” Because they were staged in a single room, parlor tableaux could easily replicate this transformation of a single space. While some participants may have opted to recreate the room upon a makeshift stage, the middle-class parlor itself provided all the necessary details for the scene. For the first tableau, performers might use their own parlor furniture and decorations. Yet as the series proceeds, they would retain the parlor-wall background but discard all of the material objects which defined their actual homes. The progressively spartan space provided the

734 Ibid., 43.
735 Ibid., 49. In both Cruikshank’s plates and Denier’s tableaux, scene four represents the only exterior scene: it features Thornley and his family outside a public house begging for money. In Cruikshank’s original drawings, the family members do not move addresses in scene five, but rather is relegated to occupying the old apartment deprived of all its previous furniture and decorations. However, Denier alters this model. He suggests that the Thornleys have, in fact, moved houses (beginning in scene five): “The scene represents a dilapidated old garret, where the family have been compelled to go to for shelter, the curse of drunkenness still pursuing them” (46).
737 Denier, Parlor Tableaux; or, Animated Pictures, 49.
middle classes with a sustained, frightening picture of a lower-class existence. Such a sequence compromised the notion of the middle-class home as a safe haven from lower-class poverty, and imparted to viewers how quickly one can fall from respectability to destitution. Only when the evening ended could performers restore the parlor to its former luxuriance and resume their comfortable lives as temperate citizens. For the middle classes, however, it was this very convenience that rendered parlor theatre such an advancement over commercial theatre. The immediate release from an imagined lower-class world—without any dangers of encountering actual degraded figures in the public streets—rendered private parlor theatre an ideal outlet for middle-class consolidation.
Fig. 3.11: The first (I) and last (VIII) plates in George Cruikshank’s serial illustration *The Bottle*. Though the plates represent two different spaces (a kitchen and an asylum), Cruikshank replicates the architecture of a single room, including the doorway on the left and the fireplace on the right of both scenes. Cruikshank, *The Bottle* (1847; rpt. London: National Temperance Publication Depot, 1881), n.p.
II. Claiming a Middle-Class Literature

The Victorian-era American middle classes often staged theatricals about popular literature in order to display their mutual consumption practices and hence reaffirm their middle-class status. Their choices to dramatize specific scenes or moments—often via the genre of tableaux vivants—reveal the genteel values that the group wanted to highlight from each text. By adapting poems, novels, and plays to the parlor in this manner, the middle classes achieved two goals: they claimed an ownership over texts that other classes also consumed, and they further defined a middle-class canon of literature for themselves.

The Middle Classes and Literary Fanfare

By mid-century in the United States, the book itself became an important material object in signifying middle-class status. As stated earlier, certain reading material like story papers, illustrated newspapers, and parlor annuals aimed to confirm the parlor as a safe space for the middle classes. More permanent books also held an important place in the home. As Barbara Sicherman states of Victorian-era America, “Books became symbols of the intangible cultural aspirations of the broad middle class,” and their display in parlors as “tokens of leisure” proved just as important as pianos and lithographs.738 Most hardback books cost between 75 cents and $1.50, and elegantly-bound versions of the Bible could cost as much as $75.739 Isabelle Lehuu suggests that book culture, “next

---

739 Stevenson, Victorian Homefront, 131; Stevenson, “Homes, Books, and Reading,” 319.
to work, residence, and [other] consumption patterns[,] might have contributed to the
distinction of the middle class,” even in the antebellum years. Such appreciation of the
book only expanded during and after the war, particularly as the novel gained in
popularity and domestic architects foregrounded drawing-rooms and parlors in their home designs.

At times, short parlor plays or tableaux vivants dramatized the importance of book culture within middle-class life. The five-page play “A Happy Christmas” from Lewis Monroe’s collection Public and Parlor Readings (1875) begins with teenager Amelia Woodley unwrapping gifts on Christmas morning. Her merchant father gives her an elegant book with reproductions of Raphael’s and Corregio’s paintings. “Ah! A book,” Amelia exclaims, “What a beauty!—filled with exquisite pictures! Father couldn’t have given me anything that would have pleased me half so much.” After Amelia’s brother Oswald tells her of his impoverished artist friend Edwin who could use the book for drawing inspirations, Amelia anonymously gifts the book to the lower-class boy. Yet when Edwin discovers an inscription to Amelia in the book, he immediately returns it to the Woodleys. Impressed with the young man’s refusal of the book and his eloquent note, Mr. Woodley invites Edwin over to the family parlor, where he offers Edwin’s unemployed father a job. Then Woodley instructs Amelia to give the book to Edwin again: “Come here, my little girl. (To Amelia. He holds out the book to her.) Take this and give it the second time to Oswald’s young friend, and our friend . . . with my

---

sanction.” Mr. Woodley makes Amelia re-perform her original gifting of the book to charge the act with its true social significance. A class arbiter of sorts, Woodley recasts the book itself as a formal invitation to the middle class. Taken in its entirety, the play conveys the middle-class cult of the book. After all, Amelia cannot imagine a better present than the intricately designed volume. The book serves as a means of social mobility since Edwin is rewarded a higher status for returning the object to its rightful place: the middle-class parlor. By understanding the book’s appropriate home, Edwin demonstrates his appreciation of middle-class culture and proves his worthiness of belonging to it.

Though most theatrical scenes of reading were unironic, occasional home dramas suggested a slight rebellion against middle-class book culture. In Sarah Annie Frost’s tableau “The Stupid Book,” a girl has an “immense book open before her.” Yawning, she reads with one hand “over her forehead, while with the thumb and forefinger she is holding her eyelids open.” The scene carries distinct implications regarding gender, as the character represents many girls who were expected to read religious works, etiquette manuals, and advice books that confirmed their genteel status. It also reveals what the period’s readers might have recognized as a typical scene of middle-class parlor posturing. While the giant book could represent an expensive version of the Bible or the art books that often sat on parlor tables, Frost hints that the very performance of middle-class status can sometimes be wearying for parlor dwellers.

---

742 Ibid., 199.
744 Ibid.
Beyond such table books, the novel emerged as the period’s dominant genre among the middle classes. Nina Baym reports that while some magazines expressed occasional hesitancy about the novel, many gave into public pressure to embrace the form, with publications like the *North American Review* admitting in 1859, “fiction has become more and more an art.” By the postbellum years, novels dominated best sellerlists, represented two-thirds of the books borrowed from libraries, and, according to one reviewer in the 1870s, accounted for three-fourths of Americans’ total reading. From 1840 onward when cheap sensation pamphlets and story papers began emerging, middle-class magazines directed readers towards appropriate novels instead of writing fiction off entirely. Literary advisers and critics recommended that their refined readers pick up the works of Stowe, Hawthorne, Sir Walter Scott, George Eliot, Louisa May Alcott, and Charlotte Brontë, among others. In addition, some parents tried to control their children’s reading via gift books like the one in “A Happy Christmas,” namely fine editions of fiction, history, biography, or poetry texts that promised edification.

Yet different classes often read the same texts, which could undermine the middle classes’ desires for exclusivity. Lehuu declares that, at least in nineteenth-century

---

748 See Gail Hamilton (Mary Abigail Dodge), *Skirmishes and Sketches*, 2d. ed (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1866), 45, and Amelie V. Petit, *How to Read: Hints in Choosing the Best Books* (New York: S.R. Wells, 1880), 194-97, cited in Stevenson, *Victorian Homefront*, 35-36, 208. These recommendations, of course, varied from family to family. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s father prevented her from reading any fiction except for Walter Scott. Teenage reader M. Carey Thomas wrote in her mid-century journal that her mother forbade her from reading *Jane Eyre* until she turned fifteen and that her father threw Byron’s “Don Juan” into fireplace; Sicherman, “Reading and Middle-Class Identity,” 143, 146, 158.
America, “literary genres are not easily identified with social classes.”\textsuperscript{749} Unlike the theatre which increasingly designated certain venues for different classes, books were portable and printed in a variety of formats. Sicherman confirms that scholars cannot assume that “certain genres are read exclusively by a particular class,” and the sheer number of books in mid-century America indicates a plethora of reading practices.\textsuperscript{750} British novels by Dickens, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and others poured into the mid-century marketplace as part of an influx of imported and pirated books. Some publishers issued flimsy paperbacks of British novels for only five cents, while story papers serialized the same works at five to six cents a issue. Though they may not have possessed the expensive editions obtained by the middle or upper classes, workers maintained the same access to texts as these groups. Sicherman reports that mill worker Lucy Larcom, for instance, read Dickens’s \textit{The Old Curiosity Shop} in a Philadelphia paper, and that one foreign tourist observed cheap editions of works by such authors as Eliot, Carlyle, Scott, Dante, and Shakespeare in the Arkansas countryside and Colorado mining camps.\textsuperscript{751} Middle-class citizens habitually collected books—with frequent reports of schoolteachers, professors, lawyers, and ministers owning more books than even those in upper-class professions.\textsuperscript{752} However, they could not control who else consumed or discussed these texts.

The middle classes thus found ways to distinguish their appreciation from others, often through special exhibitions of their literary fanfare and knowledge. Sometimes,

\textsuperscript{749} Lehui, \textit{Carnival on the Page}, 30.
\textsuperscript{750} Sicherman, “Reading and Middle-Class Identity,” 147.
\textsuperscript{751} Both reports from Sicherman, “Reading and Middle-Class Identity,” 147.
\textsuperscript{752} Stevenson, \textit{Victorian Homefront}, xxiii.
such expressions occurred publically. Dickens was greeted with unprecedented enthusiasm during his American tours of 1842 and 1867, for example.\textsuperscript{753} Scott Casper also shows that publishers such as J.B. Lippincott and Porter & Coates displayed busts of Shakespeare, Milton, Byron, and Walter Scott at the 1876 convention of the American Book Trade Association (ABTA).\textsuperscript{754} Various cities such as Philadelphia, Boston, and Chicago held Carnival of Authors festivals in the late 1870s. For these events, citizens would rent out halls and dress as characters from famous novels and poems (Figs. 3.12 & 3.13). In character, they participated in grand marches and set up booths representing scenes from celebrated works of literature. Though the upper classes occasionally held these events, the middle classes more often staged Carnivals of Authors festivals for the benefit of charities such as the Pennsylvania Society or Boston’s Old South Church.\textsuperscript{755} In a Philadelphia carnival staged by the Women’s Executive Committee for the 1876 Centennial celebration, women from each city ward would impersonate characters, either in frozen tableaux or dramatic re-enactments, from various authors’ works. One ward chose Longfellow’s poems and included scenery from the “Falls of Minnehaha” alongside a tableau from “The Courtship of Miles Standish.”\textsuperscript{756} A primary account of a Chicago Carnival of Authors festival in 1879 reports nearly seventy-five costumed citizens performing as Dickens’s characters, along with others representing figures from

\textsuperscript{753} Casper, introduction, 28-29.
\textsuperscript{754} Ibid., 1-2, 28.
\textsuperscript{756} “A Carnival of Authors,” \textit{Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper}, March 11, 1876, 6.
the works of Shakespeare, Thackeray, Scott, and Hugo.757 The reporter reinforces that the purpose of these author-centered carnivals appeals only to those interested in educational amusement: the event “is crowded nightly with a throng of people to whom a ‘Carnival,’ resorting to color and costume and brilliant stage effects, would prove no attraction whatever; but being established on an intellectual basis, beside being vastly entertaining, it is teaching a score of things worth the knowing.”758 Alcott’s Concord Dramatic Union co-star George Bartlett even released a guidebook, *The Carnival of Authors* (c. 1876), in which he instructed amateurs on how to rent out a hall, construct booths, and stage tableaux from the works of Dickens, Tennyson, Whittier, Goethe, and others.759

---

757 “Correspondence,” *The American Bookseller*, May 1, 1879, 343.
758 Ibid.
Carnival of Authors festivals

**Fig. 3.12:** Top, Academy of Music and Horticultural Hall, Philadelphia, produced by the Women’s Centennial Executive Committee. “A Carnival of Authors,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, March 11, 1876, 5-6.

**Fig. 3.13:** Bottom, Hartford, Connecticut for the Union of Home Work. “Hartford’s Carnival of Authors,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, December 15, 1883, 261-263.
Still, most of the middle-class worship of reading occurred in the private sphere, as home theatricals and related drawing-room amusements further validated the middle class’s reading preferences and their fetishization of specific authors. In their parlors, the middle classes hung pictures and kept stereographs of famous authors and characters in order to demonstrate their subscriptions to leisure and reading. Advice books suggested that middle-class readers must possess a working knowledge of authors in order to keep up in peer discussions. Parlor games sought to nurture such literary recollection. Books like the anonymously-authored *Poetical Fortune Teller* (1861) or Temple and Ottley’s *The Model Book of Dreams, Fortune Teller, and Epitome of Parlor Entertainments* (1864) predicted participants’ futures through famous literary quotes. The former collection included diversions such as “Will You Be Married?” In this literary game, one person would read a question aloud to the other players, and then each player would pick a number from one to ten, which corresponded to a quotation from the book revealing her fate. The answers could range from a promising Longfellow quote—“A cavalier from court, handsome and tall, And rich, shall come one day to marry you”; to a discouraging Shakespeare extract—“Thou wilt never get thee a husband, If thou be so shrewd of thy tongue.” The works ensured literary education by intertwining famous quotes with genuine concerns about middle-class participants’ social lives. In the anonymously-penned *Parlor and Playground Amusements* (1875), the author outlines a game called “Quotations” in which one person would offer a quotation from a work by Shakespeare or Lessing for instance, and the person who correctly guesses the source text

---

would then introduce a new literary quotation to the group. Stevenson discusses a more formal 1860s game called “Authors” that displayed the portrait of an author on one side of a card and quizzed participants to recite all the author’s works, which were conveniently listed on the reverse side. With these games, guide authors bolstered their claims that such parlor activities promoted education and “refresh[ed] the memory.” Participants were essentially testing each other’s commitments to esteemed literature. As Stevenson declares, “reading was both an edifying pastime and one crucial to social bonding. . . . By borrowing phrases and lines, readers borrowed an author’s authority, made their own ideas sound less ordinary, and reminded others of common experiences.” Literary recall became a type of social currency. Parlor dwellers could exchange reading experiences and, in so doing, further ensure their belonging to an evolving middle class.

Occasionally, this literary fandom appeared as short skits adapted from certain novels or poems. The press often viewed this sub-genre as an evolution of earlier private theatrical forms. Praising Silas Steele’s Book of Plays for Home Amusement (1859) for its literature-based scenes, a Sunday Atlas reviewer claims, “The insipid trash, and nonsensical charades, and drawing-room dramas, which we have seen and heard, must now yield in something more elegant, refined, interesting and amusing.” Among other adaptations, Steele writes an eight-page, two act drama entitled “Blanche of Devan; or

---

762 Anon., Parlor and Playground Amusements, 68.
764 Anon., Parlor and Playground Amusements, 68.
The Death of Roderick Dhu,” a play based upon Sir Walter Scott’s poem “Lady of the Lake” and which culminates in a mountain-side fight scene.767 In his What Shall We Do To-night? (1873), author Leger Mayne recommends dramatizing a single interior-set scene from a popular novel; as an example, he provides Sam Weller visiting his mother-in-law in Dickens’s The Pickwick Papers.768 In perhaps the most comprehensive collection of plays based on literature, Public and Parlor Readings (1875), Lewis Monroe includes short plays adapted from Dickens’s Nicholas Nickleby, Martin Chuzzlewit, and Oliver Twist, as well as scenes from Douglas Jerrold’s fiction series “Mrs. Caudle’s Curtain Lectures” (1845) and George Eliot’s poem “The Spanish Gipsy” (1868). Monroe specifies in his book’s subtitle that the plays are “For the Use of Dramatic and Reading Clubs,” and accordingly, the text appeals to those with literary and dramatic knowledge.769 Monroe includes one scene entitled “Idle Hands,” adapted from a short story by T.S. Arthur, the author who endeared himself to middle-class readers with such temperance novels as Six Nights with the Washingtonians (1842) and Ten Nights in a Bar-Room (1854). In Monroe’s scenario, which pulls dialogue verbatim from the story, middle-class patriarch Mr. Thornton comes home to see his wife exhausted from her sewing and his daughter bored from her day of rest. The father instructs his wife to let the daughter help more at household tasks, and by the end, the daughter praises her father’s advice, stating “I already begin to feel a new self-respect at the thought of being useful to

767 Silas Steele, Book of Plays for Home Amusement (Philadelphia: George G. Evans, 1859), 16-23.
768 Mayne, What Shall We Do To-Night?, 304-309.
769 Monroe, Public and Parlor Readings, front cover.
mother, to you, and to myself." The play self-consciously expresses the middle classes’ negotiations between work and leisure within the parlor space specifically. Monroe continues the theme in “The Little Women’s Pickwick Club,” a play adapted from chapter ten of Alcott’s Little Women. The short play depicts Jo (assuming the loosely-inspired role of Snodgrass from Dickens’s Pickwick Papers) asking her sisters (posing as fellow club members) to admit her friend Laurie to their club. The scene shows Jo and her sisters redefining the domestic space as a private club. Laurie even contributes to this reconstruction, informing the girls that he has constructed a “post-office in the hedge in the lower corner of the garden” to express his gratitude. He proves that he is a worthy club member by expanding the girls’ theatrical world. The layers of metatheatricality reveal Laurie and the middle-class March family as staging their own consumption of Dickens’s novel. By choosing such a scene and setting the March sisters as examples, guide author Monroe shows that the middle classes can claim cultural ownership over a literary text precisely through their performance of it.

Tableaux Vivants and Literary Poses

Beyond these short dramatic scenes, tableaux vivants remained the home theatrical genre most closely tied to middle-class literature. In their incarnation within nineteenth-century middle-class homes, tableaux vivants were—as Florence Hartley reports in her Ladies’ Book of Etiquette (1860)—a series of “living pictures” imitating

---

770 Ibid., 10.
771 Ibid., 6.
“some well-known subject in history or fiction” or “some celebrated picture.”

The tableau technique dates to as early as the Middle Ages, but actor Carlo Antonio Bertinazzi (1710-1773) popularized the public stage practice in the eighteenth century. In 1757, dramatist Denis Diderot asserted that an ideal play would contain a series of successive still pictures. He defines the stage tableau or picture as “an arrangement of those characters on the stage, so natural and so true that, if faithfully rendered by a painter, it would please me on the canvas.” In this formulation, the actors are captured in a natural moment, fully absorbed into their characters and unaware that spectators are observing them. Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs assert that the tableaux from popular nineteenth-century melodramas, by contrast, assisted the spectators’ experience. In melodramas, actors periodically froze in their positions at climactic moments in order to make explicit the dramatic situation. A prime example occurs at the end of the “happy version” of Dion Boucicault’s The Octoroon (1867): on a New Orleans wharf side, noble Indian Wahnotee has just stabbed the play’s villain McClosky, hero George holds the unconscious octoroon (and love interest) Zoe in his arms, and then “all the characters rush on—noise increasing—The steam vessel blows up—grand Tableau.” Within the

---

776 Brewster and Jacobs, Theatre to Cinema, 13; see also 10-14 for a thorough history of stage pictures and tableaux.
777 Dion Boucicault, The Octoroon, 1867, in Selected Plays of Dion Boucicault, ed. Andrew Parkin (Washington: Catholic UP, 1987), 190. Boucicault famously wrote two endings for The Octoroon. In this
commercial theatre, these types of sensational tableaux were far more common than either Diderot’s ideas or tableaux vivants. Melodrama tableaux not only allowed producers to present complicated stage pyrotechnics but also highlighted the emotional catharsis so central to the genre. Only on occasion would stage plays represent Diderot’s theoretical tableaux, or at least physically recreate actual paintings. The Comédie-Italienne’s Paris production of Les Noces d’Arlequin (1761) staged Greuze’s canvas “L’Accordée de Village,” and Douglas Jerrold’s social melodrama The Rent Day (1822) featured David Wilkie’s painting “Distraining for Rent” before the play began. A British actress performed tableaux vivants of Ary Scheffer’s print “The Soldier’s Widow” at New York’s Park Theatre earlier in the century, and occasionally amateurs would perform programs at local halls. But most tableaux vivants in America remained a parlor phenomenon.

The tableaux vivants which became popular in middle-class homes relied heavily on artistic and literary knowledge. Some guide authors included tableaux vivants as chapters within their larger anthologies of parlor theatricals. However, several published guide books featured tableaux vivants as an independent and headlining genre, including James Head’s Home Pastimes or Tableaux Vivants (1860), William Fearing Gill’s Parlor Theatricals; or, Winter Evening’s Entertainment, 153.

---

778 As we have seen, Lippard often imitated these melodrama tableaux, which froze characters in action and, according to Peter Brooks, displayed “emotions and moral states in clear visible signs”; Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination (1976, repr., New Haven: Yale UP, 1995), 62.

779 Brewster and Jacobs, Theatre to Cinema, 14. Arnold and Cahill assert that tableaux vivants were sometimes performed at the ends of melodramas, pantomimes, and extravaganzas. However, it remains unclear if these pictures were related to the show’s content or not. See Arnold and Cahill, Parlor Theatricals; or, Winter Evening’s Entertainment, 153.

Tableaux and Amateur Theatricals (1867), Tony Denier’s Parlor Tableaux; or, Animated Pictures (1868), and Sarah Annie Frost’s The Book of Tableaux and Shadow Pantomimes (1869), among others.\textsuperscript{781} An evening’s program would consist of ten to twelve tableaux which, in content, would range from famous paintings to historical re-enactments, from fairy tale and folklore scenes to recognizable literary moments. In each tableau, performers would hold still poses for roughly thirty seconds until the curtain descended and they prepared for the next one.\textsuperscript{782} Sometimes music or narration would accompany the pictures, and colored fires often provided lighting effects. Most guide authors offered precise instructions about how performers should arrange their bodies in order to represent the given scene. The supposedly civilized genre of tableaux vivants appealed to a narrow but well-defined market in America. As Mary Chapman writes, “Buyers of tableau vivant manuals were often white rural middle-class hostesses aspiring to be more cosmopolitan or more refined.”\textsuperscript{783} Many guide introductions indeed imply that performers can imitate higher culture by participating in tableaux vivants.\textsuperscript{784}

Staging a successful program of tableaux vivants often required performers and spectators who were knowledgeable in the fields of art and art history. Since the late...


\textsuperscript{782} Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women, 176. Head describes an alternate practice in which each tableau would be shown two to three times before moving to the next tableau; see Home Pastimes, 20.

\textsuperscript{783} Chapman, “‘Living Pictures,’” 28.

\textsuperscript{784} For example, see Arnold, The Sociable, iii.
antebellum era, the middle classes had begun to appreciate and collect art at higher rates. Advertised in story papers or parlor magazines like *Banner of Light* (1857-1907) or *Gleason’s Literary Companion* (1860-1870), tableaux vivant guidebooks sought to engage performers’ artistic familiarities. In his manual’s introduction, Gill cautions readers that “To originate and produce fine tableaux undoubtedly requires considerable taste, and some knowledge of art.” Hartley writes in her *Ladies’ Book of Etiquette* that a tableau should be a “copy, as exact as circumstances will permit, of some celebrated picture,” but warns that “it is not probable that persons who are not artists should succeed in making good impromptu pictures.” The tableaux guide authors ask of participants both an artistic sensibility and an acquaintance with renowned artworks. For example, Denier models his “Napoleon at St. Helena” tableau after a “celebrated and well-known painting” of the emperor’s exile in 1815. Gill’s tableau “Consolation” replicates a painting by artist Constant Meyer which depicts a Sister of Charity reading to a wounded Union soldier. According to Gill, Meyer’s portrait “excited warm attention” during a Boston exhibition in 1865. The entire success of an evening depends most importantly upon the audience’s recognition of the scene. Thus the tableaux vivants double as a quiz of artistic knowledge. As much as guide authors wanted to advance an appreciation of art through the home, participants still had to engage with the public world in order to confirm their middle-class status.

788 Denier, *Parlor Tableaux; or, Animated Pictures*, 12. The picture may have been modeled after one of the contemporaneous paintings of the same scene, including portraits by Paul Hippolyte Delaroche and Horace Vernet.
Similarly, recognition becomes essential when tableaux performers stage scenes from literature. In home guides, pictures from historical episodes, fiction, drama, and poetry far outnumber entries about specific artworks. In his *What Shall We Do To-Night?* (1873), Mayne states that Scott’s and Dickens’s novels are especially filled with ideal scenes for tableaux vivants.\(^{790}\) Similarly, Temple and Ottley in *The Model Book of Dreams* define tableaux vivants as “copies of well-known pictures or scenes from popular dramas or poems” that can “afford most pleasure to an intelligent audience.”\(^{791}\) Novels, historical books, and poetry collections constituted the preferred texts of the middle class. For years, the middle classes had gathered to discuss literature in order to affirm their participation in class-based leisure.\(^{792}\) In the words of one nineteenth-century reader, “it is delightful to read the same books as our friends and be able to compare our thoughts with theirs.”\(^{793}\) Tableaux vivants offered a similar opportunity for the middle classes to bond over books, but replaced conversations about individual interpretation with performances of communal appreciation.

For individual tableaux vivants, guide authors expect readers to recognize literary scenes before even reaching the stage directions. In his “Corsair’s Bride,” a tableau of two lovers adapted from Byron’s poem “The Corsair,” Gill prefaces his scene description by claiming that the poem “is probably well known to many readers.”\(^{794}\) Shakespeare remained just as popular in mid-century print as he did in theatres, and middle-class

---

\(^{790}\) Mayne, *What Shall We Do To-Night?*, 189.  
\(^{792}\) As Stevenson reports, “Describing what reading mattered to distant friends helped correspondents share knowledge of one another’s thoughts;” “Home, Books, and Reading,” 328.  
Americans often displayed copies of his folios within their parlors. So when Mayne suggests several of Shakespeare’s scenes for tableaux—including “Ophelia’s Madness,” “Lady Macbeth washing her hands in sleep,” and “Hamlet and the Queen when the ghost interrupts them”—he assumes readers were familiar enough with the texts that he need not provide specific direction for staging. In their assumptions that readers already know such scenes, the guide authors imply that successfully staged tableaux will be instantly recognizable to audiences as well. At the moment when spectators identify a famous scene, performers and viewers can form an affinity over their mutual reading experiences. Staging stills from such poems and plays allows the middle classes to silently acknowledge their shared consumptions of the texts and affirm their participation in genteel book culture.

Tableaux vivant authors pointed readers to extracts from many different literary genres and formats, but they only selected works of which the middle classes already approved. Guide authors suggest other scenes from Shakespeare’s plays including King Lear wandering in the storm, the trial scene from Merchant of Venice, and Paulina’s unveiling of the marble statue in The Winter’s Tale. Moments from the 1859 opera Faust or Dante’s epic poem Paradise appeared in guides, as did various scenes from

---

795 Mayne, What Shall We Do To-Night?, 188. One game called “Characters; or, Who Am I?” suggests that one player leave the room and return, at which point the rest of the players will speak to him as if he were a Shakespearean or Dickensian character that they have designated in his absence. Then the player “must reply in such a manner as to elicit more information, as to the character he has unconsciously assumed”; Anon, Parlor and Playground Amusements, 88.

796 See, respectively, Gill, Parlor Tableaux and Amateur Theatricals, 179-183, 183-188, and Head, Home Pastimes, 30.
Oliver Goldsmith’s 1761 novel *Vicar of Wakefield*. Guide authors frequently configured tableaux from the poetry and fiction of Sir Walter Scott, who found regular approbation in literary magazines like *Harper’s Monthly* and was the only author of fiction that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s father permitted her to read as a child. Of contemporary works, Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and poems such as Alfred Tennyson’s “Enoch Arden” and John Whittier’s “Angels of Buena Vista” found entries in tableaux guides. The last featured a representation of recent history as well, portraying Mexican women providing water to fallen soldiers in the U.S.-Mexican War of 1848. The most cherished of parlor books, the Bible, also motivated Mayne to compose a tableau vivant around Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, pausing on the moment that Abraham raises his knife above Isaac’s body. Though middle-class Americans also read dime novels and sensational story paper tales, they carefully chose only respectable works to perform. In this sense, tableaux vivants extended earlier middle-class displays of literary knowledge, such as when children memorized and recited poems by Scott, MacAulay, Longfellow, and Tennyson—authors all of whose works would eventually inspire tableaux vivants. At a time when the middle classes defined themselves largely via their knowledge of books, such live representations allowed them to interact with the texts in ways that lower classes could not. While workers might be able to read Dickens’s or Eliot’s novels in

---


798 Sicherman, “Reading and Middle-Class Identity,” 143.

799 Gill’s tableau “Enoch Arden’s Return” portrays the formerly shipwrecked title character returning and staring into the window of his old home; *Parlor Tableaux and Amateur Theatricals*, 132-133. For Whittier’s poem see Gill, *Parlor Tableaux and Amateur Theatricals*, 70-73.

800 Mayne, *What Shall We Do To-Night?*, 191.

801 Barbara Sicherman, “Reading and Middle-Class Identity,” 144.
cheap paperback editions or illustrated newspapers, they neither possessed the time nor
the parlor venues that middle classes could afford. Hence parlor theatricals, and tableaux
vivants especially, fostered a middle-class community devoted to their mutual
appreciation of canonical texts. In suggesting such congregation, the guide authors
provided the middle classes a method to claim cultural ownership over respectable works
of literature.

The tableaux vivants for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, for instance, allowed home
performers to inhabit Stowe’s wildly popular novel. Stevenson reports that, more than
any other novel in the nineteenth century, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* produced the largest
amount of material culture artifacts after its release in 1852. Scenes from the novel were
printed on mugs, plates, vases, and other home furnishings.802 Stowe’s text spawned
numerous stage adaptations, including most prominently George Aiken’s 1852 *Uncle
Tom’s Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly*, which premiered at the Troy Museum in Troy,
New York just months after Stowe’s final installment of the novel was published.803 The

---

Culture Project*, online archive, ed. University of Virginia. Aiken’s was actually the third production since
the release of the novel in March 1852. Professor Hewitt’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, as it is; or the Southern
Uncle Tom* premiered in January of 1852 at the Baltimore Museum, and C.W. Taylor’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*
debuted in August of 1852 at Alexander Purdy’s Museum in New York. According to Frick, both were
quite short adaptations, with Taylor’s especially resembling, in the words of one contemporary, “a typical
sensation melodrama.” Aiken premiered a four-act version of his adaptation, entitled *Life Among the Lowly*,
on September 27, 1852 in Troy, New York and then added two more acts by November. It ran 100
performances, and the next summer Purdy imported Aiken’s version, complete with the theatrical company
from Troy to his National Theatre on July 18, 1853—where it ran for 325 performances. Purdy’s closest
competition came from P.T. Barnum, who imported Moses Kimball’s production of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*
(also subtitled *Life Among the Lowly*) composed by Boston playwright H.C. Conway. This version notably
“temper[ed] the ‘crude points’ and ‘objectionable features’ of Mrs. Stowe’s novel” and allowed Tom and
Eva to live at the end of the play. It premiered at Barnum’s Museum on November 7, 1853 and
immediately drew criticism from abolitionists, who viewed its idyllic view of plantation life as an apology
home tableaux gravitated towards the novel’s domestic scenes set at the St. Clare plantation. Denier’s comic tableau “Topsey and Eva,” for example, features Eva chastising Topsey for cutting the strings off of her hat. Yet the most common Uncle Tom tableau restaged one of the most famous pictures from Stowe’s book: “Little Eva Reading the Bible to Uncle Tom in Arbor” (Fig. 3.14). According to critic Jo-Ann Morgan, illustrator Charles Billings’s engraving of this scene—one of only six in publisher John Jewett’s first edition of Stowe’s text—instantly became the most recognizable image from the book. The image juxtaposing a fully-grown black man and a diminutive blond-haired girl touched a public chord, inspiring paintings, fine art prints, sheet music covers, needlework patterns, and theatre posters (Fig. 3.15). The scene’s influence would extend into private theatricals as well. In their respective tableaux “Little Eva and Uncle Tom” and “Uncle Tom,” both James Head (in his Home Pastimes or Tableaux Vivants [1860]) and Tony Denier (in his Parlor Tableaux; or Animated Pictures [1869]) outline similar scenes of Little Eva reading the Bible to Uncle Tom. Both tableaux call for extensive garden details, including artificial vines, flowers, and trees. Both also require the performer playing Tom to wear a wig—in Denier’s description, a “black curley negro wig”—and to shade his skin. Head instructs performers to “color the exposed parts of the body black, the lips red,” while Denier writes, “His hands must be colored with burnt cork, mixed with water, and rubbed on

---

804 Denier, Parlor Tableaux; or, Animated Pictures, 41.
806 Denier, Parlor Tableaux; or, Animated Pictures, 32.
807 Head, Home Pastimes, 223.
until it assumes the required shade.  

The actors in public stage versions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* similarly performed in blackface, in line with the period’s theatrical genre of minstrelsy. The blackface requirements within the home tableaux, though misguided from a modern viewpoint, function to prompt amateur performers to feel a more intimate relationship with the text. Through applying the make-up on the face and extremities, participants can enter the novel’s settings and further empathize with its titular tragic figure. Doing so also allows them to declare elements of the text that they find most important.

Instead of imitating the commercial theatrical versions, the Tom and Eva tableaux reveal how the middle classes wished to visualize Stowe’s novel as reflective of their own genteel values. The public stage plays gained notoriety for their minstrelsy and sensation scenes. Eliza crossing the ice with little Harry became a featured set piece within theatrical versions. Even though Stowe devotes relatively little space to the scene in the novel, producers of several theatrical versions soon added real bloodhounds and mastiffs to thrill audiences. Some productions even required the actress playing Eliza to throw meat at the dogs to make them appear more voracious.  

Marketing materials such as posters and trade cards also centered on Eliza’s escape and the canines in pursuit. In contrast, home tableaux eschewed this sensationalism for docile scenes of reading. Both Denier and Head depict the same moment, in which Eva points at the Bible while Tom reads along with her. Head prescribes a precise body position for Tom: “Uncle Tom is seated on one side of the seat, his legs crossed, body bent forward slightly, hands placed

---

808 Denier, *Parlor Tableaux; or, Animated Pictures*, 32.
on his knees, his head turned towards Eva, and eyes fixed on the Bible with an expression of pleasure, and earnestness.”\textsuperscript{810} Both Stowe and the playwrights highlight the abuse and commoditized nature of the African-American body. Aiken’s commercial play dramatizes this abuse most prominently by including a slave auction scene in which African-American bodies are inspected and bought. Legree spits on one slave, then “seizes Tom by the jaw and opens his mouth” while asking Tom to flex his muscles.\textsuperscript{811} Tom retains no command over his own body. Robbed of free will, he only moves his limbs according to Legree’s orders. In contrast, Head’s home tableau exhibits Tom’s body as controlled and his mannerisms sophisticated. Denier, too, features Tom with his legs crossed, “his body bent forward a trifle . . . and his eyes directed on [Eva’s] face, as if he is assenting to the remarks she is making, and fully believing them.”\textsuperscript{812} By choosing a domestic scene, both guide authors promote the refined scenes of Stowe’s work over its sensational elements, thus appealing to supposedly tempered middle-class consumers.

The corporeal discipline in the tableaux descriptions follows advice texts’ instructions for social composure. Moreover, the tableaux writers freeze on a moment when Eva attempts to initiate Tom into a Christian religion, which so often guided middle-class values. Partaking in the respectable act of reading, Tom and Eva appear as direct reflections of the American middle classes themselves. Despite the black make-up, the scene casts Tom as a middle-class Bible reader, just like middle-class parlor dwellers themselves. As performers and audience members no doubt knew Tom’s ultimate fate, the scene unites

\textsuperscript{810} Head, \textit{Home Pastimes}, 223.  
\textsuperscript{812} Denier, \textit{Parlor Tableaux; or, Animated Pictures}, 32.
the middle classes in their sympathy for the character and allows them to celebrate the novel’s most genteel elements. Between their home decorations and their private theatricals, the middle classes compiled a collective iconography displaying their devotions to respectable reading.
Fig. 3.14: (top) Charles Howland Hammatt Billings, “Little Eva Reading the Bible to Uncle Tom in the Arbor,” in Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1852).

Fig. 3.15: (left) “Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Berlin work pattern.” This needlework canvas was created in Berlin and then imported to the United States, likely by middle- to upper-class consumers who had the time and could afford the materials to complete it. Eva looks directly at the viewer and a young Tom appears to stare simultaneously at Eva and the heavenly sky above, rendering the reading activity nearly insignificant. The arbor itself, with jagged tree leaves and background mountains, resembles not so much a plantation garden but rather a Caribbean island or African landscape. Louise L. Stevenson, “Virtue Displayed: The Tie-Ins of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin,*” n.p. *Uncle Tom's Cabin & American Culture Project,* online archive, University of Virginia.
Despite guide authors’ attempts to distinguish their home tableaux vivants from commercial theatrical productions of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, some pictures recalled theatergoing experiences directly. In his Parlor Tableaux and Amateur Theatricals (1867), Gill proposes a tableau vivant from the popular mid-century play The Sea of Ice. The plot follows a mutiny onboard the sea vessel Urania, which leads to an Arctic shipwreck. The tableau opens on the only survivor, a young girl, sitting among boxes covered with cotton sheets to resemble icebergs; she “kneels, with her hands clasped, her face turned upward with an appealing expression.” In another tableau vivant from the melodrama The Angel of Midnight, Gill depicts the aftermath of a duel, in which a military captain “has just received a fatal wound”; “his right hand, holding his sword, is lowered to the hip” and “his head is inclined backwards upon the shoulder of the gentleman who supports him.” Though a Boston Museum playbill for an 1857 production of Sea of Ice promises a scene of the “Terrible Breaking of the Ice,” and the Museum’s 1861 bill for the “sensational play” Angel of Midnight boasts about “The Touch of Death!” during “The Duel in the Snow,” Gill’s tableaux portray the moments of emotional release after each play’s climax. Like the bucolic scene of Uncle Tom and Eva reading together, these tranquil scenes have the potential to unite parlor audiences via a genteel empathy instead of a populist sensationalism. Both The Sea of Ice and The Angel of Midnight should have been familiar to bourgeois audiences, having played at such middle-class theatre venues as the Boston Museum and Laura Keene’s New York

813 Gill, Parlor Tableaux and Amateur Theatricals, 48.
814 Ibid., 63.
Theatre among others. Referring to *The Sea of Ice* as “well-known” and *The Angel of Midnight* as a “popular melo-drama,” Gill expects viewers to know the images and bond over that recognition in the same way they would over a beloved novel or poem.\(^{816}\) If parlor spectators had separately witnessed these scenes in commercial theatres, then the tableaux provide them an opportunity to appreciate the plays communally. Furthermore, in his selections of these two quiet scenes, Gill instructs viewers how to “read” a theatrical show according to its most respectable moments. Spectators can look forward to the featured sensation scenes. But in remembering and re-enacting the plays at home, they must fixate not on the climactic violence but rather on the characters’ resulting pathos.

The extent to which the real middle classes followed tableaux vivant guides and scene recommendations remains largely unknown. But the issuing of at least twelve tableaux vivant books between 1860 and 1877 suggests that an eager audience existed.\(^{817}\) In her autobiographical letters to *Godey’s*, teenager Ella Moore provides insight into some tableaux vivant practices as they actually took place. She reports staging tableaux including Byron’s “Corsair,” in which Conrad leaves Medora as well as “The Dying Brigand,” a picture portraying an Italian brigand felled by the military.\(^{818}\) Additionally, while boarding at seminary in 1858, sixteen-year-old diarist Caroline Cowles Richards wrote about witnessing a biblical tableau of Abraham sacrificing Isaac.\(^{819}\) Nearly


\(^{817}\) The aforementioned works of Head, Gill, Denier, and Frost are the centerpieces of this study. However, see bibliography for more complete list of parlor tableaux books.


\(^{819}\) Caroline Cowles Richards Clarke, *Diary of Caroline Cowles Richards, 1852-1872* (Canandaigua, NY: 1908), 86.
identical versions of all these tableaux appear within the guides, indicating that private
performers consulted the books to some extent.\textsuperscript{820} An 1863 program for Cabot Hall in
Chicopee, Massachusetts lists an evening of fourteen tableaux vivants, including the
captivity scene “Brigands” and comical picture “Country Cousins,”\textsuperscript{821} tableaux
specifically described in Tony Denier’s \textit{Parlor Tableaux}.\textsuperscript{822} The program also includes
“Hiawatha and His Bride’s Arrival Home” (described in Head’s guide \textit{Home Pastimes
[1860]) and “Trial of Constance de Beverly” (adapted from the Walter Scott poem
“Marmion” and also staged by Moore).\textsuperscript{823} The repetition of scenes across productions
and guides indicate two possibilities: performers read and adhered to descriptions in
home-theatrical guidebooks, or the pictures themselves were common knowledge and
thoroughly embedded into the iconography of middle-class culture. Either way, middle-
class audiences could easily bond over their shared admiration of such recognizable
scenes.

Besides outlining specific tableaux vivants, the guide authors remain just as
notable for directing performers about how to read literature. Sometimes, guide authors
suggest scenes for tableaux but neglect to include any instructions for bodily
arrangement, such as when Temple and Ottley point readers towards specific scenes such
as \textit{Macbeth}’s “The Sleep Walker” or \textit{Vicar of Wakefield}’s “Dressing Moses for the

\textsuperscript{820} See “Isaac and Abraham,” in Mayne, \textit{What Shall We Do To-Night?}, 191; “The Brigand’s Death,” in
Denier, \textit{Parlor Tableaux; or, Animated Pictures}, 51; and “Corsair’s Bride” in Gill, \textit{Parlor Tableaux and

\textsuperscript{821} Cabot Hall (Chicopee, Mass.), playbill, \textit{Tableaux Vivants, Accompanied by Vocal and Instrumental

\textsuperscript{822} Denier, \textit{Parlor Tableaux; or, Animated Pictures}, 27, 38.

\textsuperscript{823} Cabot Hall (Chicopee), playbill, \textit{Tableaux Vivants}.
The authors list the scene or chapter numbers but, in Temple and Ottley’s words, “leave the reader the task of finding them, and adapting his company to the groups described.” Instead of providing specific staging directions, the authors trust readers to stage an effective tableau. They send performers on a scavenger hunt through books. Asking participants to read selectively for these scenes, authors identify texts’ most important scenes for readers. Other times, authors often ask performers themselves to determine moments particularly worthy of dramatic representation. Mayne lists Scott’s novels *Ivanhoe*, *Woodstock*, and the *Heart of Mid Lothian* as containing potential for tableaux vivants, yet he trusts readers to identify the scenes worthy of representation. He also points towards Shakespeare’s works as affording “scene after scene for beautiful tableaux” as many offer “unlimited scope for beautiful dresses,” but only suggests a couple of specific pictures from Shakespeare’s texts. Through these opaque suggestions, authors wanted performers to engage more closely with texts and to read with a specifically theatrical eye. Hence the guides changed the ways that amateur performers consumed literature and how audiences understood it. If followed, the guides encouraged readers to claim the texts via their performance of valued scenes—yet another process by which the middle classes wrested control of the texts from working-class readers.

Teenager Ella Moore’s accounts show how tableaux vivant productions could expand the middle class’s claims upon specific literary texts. She reports finding a poem

---

825 Ibid.
826 Mayne, *What Shall We Do To-Night?*, 188-189.
827 Ibid.
about Joan of Arc’s Trial in a parlor annual. Written by amateur poet Albert Taylor, “Joan of Arc” appears to be relatively unknown, as was much of the original writing in parlor and family circle books. Moore stages the poem as a series of tableaux, charging the text with a newfound significance. In the first tableau, Moore describes “falling to the knees . . . with my head uncovered, my hair falling in the greatest confusion all over my shoulders, and my hands chained together.”828 The second scene involves Moore reciting a defense and the judges leaving her alone, at which point she pauses in a pose again. In the final scene just before the execution, she kneels, “facing the audience, my hands crossed on my breast, and my eyes raised . . . and the curtain fell.”829 During these scenes, a company member reads Taylor’s poem aloud. Between this recitation, Moore’s own spoken lines, and her changing poses in full view of the audience, Moore’s performance resembles traditional melodrama tableaux which highlighted climactic situations at the ends of acts. By contrast, most home tableaux remained detached from the staging (or speaking) of any such contextual narrative. Even moving tableaux vivants, which exhibited numerous poses from a single scene, dropped the curtain between tableau poses and rarely included any vocalization. However, Moore’s staging also reveals telling details about the interplay of performance and text.

Instead of trying to prompt recognition of a famous literary work, Moore introduces a new text that she wants to submit into the middle-class canon. Because Moore combines a reading of the poem with live images, the company highlights a text audiences might otherwise not have known. Thus performers and audiences can bond in

---

829 Ibid.
real time over their shared appreciation for the poem. Furthermore, in her letters, Moore reproduces Taylor’s poem upon which her tableaux were based, re-circulating the poem to Godey’s readers who may not have otherwise encountered it. Then guidebook author Sarah Annie Frost reprinted both Moore’s letters and the poem itself within her own *Book of Tableaux and Shadow Pantomimes* (1869). In all these forums, Moore’s description of the tableaux performance validates the poem’s significance and informs readers how to read the poem visually. She triggers both a circulation of the poem and her distinct interpretation of it. Similar to Moore’s strategy, guide authors often preceded their tableaux vivant instructions with poem or novel extracts. Gill, for instance, introduced his “Dante and Beatrice” tableau directions with thirteen lines from *Paradiso’s* canto vii, and Head prefaced his “Haidee and Don Juan in the Cave” description with two verses from Byron’s poem “Don Juan.” In doing so, guide authors coached readers on how to distinguish the most theatrically viable moments of a literary text. In a more general sense, the guide authors also promoted a series of canonical authors whose works performers could further consult.

Yet as much as tableaux vivants encouraged the middle classes to take ownership over texts central to the new middle-class American lifestyle, the guidebooks paradoxically advocated transcending such a culture. In their introductions, tableaux vivant authors never missed an opportunity to link the theatrical form to higher European culture. George Arnold writes that tableaux vivants are popular, in “polite society, both in

---

831 Head, *Home Pastimes*, 111.
Europe and this country,"\(^832\) and James Head similarly writes that tableaux vivants “have been produced and have been quite popular in Europe.”\(^833\) In his *Book of Drawing Room Plays* (c. 1860), Henry Dalton reports of tableaux vivants being performed in German courts where “the most famous artists do not disdain to lend their aid in arranging *tableaux vivants*.”\(^834\) Even though home theatricals ostensibly instilled the middle classes with their own cultural identity, the guides continuously linked tableaux vivant participants with European aristocrats and American upper classes. The authors made unspoken promises to their middle-class readers: if consumers could successfully interpret and stage tableaux vivants, then they too could climb the social ranks even higher. Yet these aspirations were themselves faulty. According to the guides and most accounts, tableaux vivants peaked in European aristocratic circles decades (if not a century) before,\(^835\) and little evidence exists that the American upper classes widely performed the living pictures before the 1890s.\(^836\) Any middle-class attempts to vault into a higher social tier by performing tableaux vivants contradicted guidebook goals of solidifying the middle classes. So in the hopes of entering some imaginary higher culture, the American middle classes may very well have sacrificed an uncompromised celebration of their own.

**Conclusion**

In December of 1857, family magazine *The Advocate and Family Guardian* published an article entitled “Going to Barnum’s,” which revealed a fictional but

\(^{832}\) Arnold, *The Sociable*, iii


\(^{835}\) Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre*, 377.

\(^{836}\) See Dawson, *Laboring to Play*, 136-140.
presumably representative trip to the public theatre. A young girl, Carrie, asks her uncle to bring her to Barnum’s American Museum in New York. Though the uncle states that the venue still “is classed among innocent amusements,” he wonders aloud whether it has “become greatly vitiated in late years.” But Carrie wants to see the mummies, boa-constrictor, and Tom Thumb’s carriage, among other attractions, and her uncle abides. Once there, she absorbs all of the museum artifacts, but even Uncle concedes that the stage performances have become the chief draw recently. So among many “strangers of the city,” Carrie and her uncle watch a young actress in a “denuded appearance” perform “immodest, and absurd gyrations” (247). Disappointed by the indecency, the pair return home, where Carrie’s Aunt Mary tells her a revealing story about Barnum’s Museum.

Aunt Mary recalls a friend, who was neighbors with a misguided young girl named Ellen. As a teenager, Ellen began loitering backstage at Barnum’s lecture room. Before long, she had designs to become a professional actress, and Barnum’s performers proved willing mentors. Ellen continually ran away from home in attempts to “join some company of traveling actors, and once, her father found her on the boards of a common theatre” (248). Yet this discovery could not contain Ellen. While conducting charitable visits to the city prisons, Aunt Mary’s friend discovered the girl in a cell one day. Ellen had turned into a boarding-house prostitute in order to “pay her way, and prosecute her favorite plan, to fit herself for the stage” (248). On the day of this encounter, Ellen was awaiting transport to the House of Refuge, where her father had her committed as a last resort. Before she leaves Ellen to an uncertain fate, Aunt Mary’s friend asks, “Tell me,
Ellen, what do you think has had the most influence in bringing you here?” and Ellen replies plainly, “Going to Barnum’s” (248). Uncertain that her niece has absorbed the moral of the tale, Aunt Mary finally claims, “Yes, Carrie! Barnum’s to Ellen was the gateway to prison and life-long-disgrace, and it may be, to a heavier punishment, for ‘Sin kills beyond the tomb’” (248).

The article proves telling about the public and private sites of leisure in mid-nineteenth century America. The uncle’s hesitancy to embrace Barnum’s Museum reflects both the middle classes’ suspicions of Barnum’s curiosities and their abilities to see through the showman’s puffery about innocuous theatrical shows. Observing the unnamed play, the uncle can only conclude that mainstream “theatrical exhibitions, are really less objectionable, than these bungling imitations in the Museum” (247). Like the rest of Barnum’s museum displays, his theatrical productions seem disingenuous except to those naïve tourists from outside the city. Even the child Carrie can detect something awry on the stage, and maintains no interest in exploring the Museum afterwards. In the safety of the home, Carrie and her uncle become invested in Aunt Mary’s tale specifically because it confirms their distaste for the public theatre. Among a “happy group . . . gathered in the parlor that evening,” Carrie and her uncle typify the middle-class’s mid-century retreat into private space (247). Neighbor Mr. Lane reads a newspaper under a “shaded gas light . . . suspended over the centre table,” Aunt Mary engages in needlework, and Carrie and her cousin peruse a portfolio of engravings (247). For many middle-class citizens, these class-exclusive activities in the parlor soon could substitute for public entertainment. Just like the Advocate’s domestic scene with Aunt Mary and
others huddled around the center table, the American middle class began to discover its own potential for creating satisfying amusements within the private home. Aunt Mary’s story about the unfortunate Ellen forewarns that attending public entertainments can lead to a loss of middle-class status. Aunt Mary implies that Ellen’s spectatorship specifically dooms her. Simply by witnessing actors on a stage, she covets their vocation, and sacrifices her reputation to be a working-class stock actress. Aunt Mary leaves little room for misinterpretation, and the article ends with Carrie proclaiming her understanding of the story: “Oh! Aunt Mary! I am sure if I had known this before, I would not have wanted to go. I never shall wish to go again to the Museum” (248). Thus innocent Carrie will not repeat the mistakes of the wretched Ellen. She will only venture on to city streets when absolutely necessary and to commercial theatres perhaps never again.

Carrie’s flirtation with the public world comes on the eve of parlor theatres’ heyday, in which guide authors encouraged the importation of public entertainments. The first major home theatrical guide, George Arnold’s *The Sociable*, would be released the next year in 1858 and dozens followed soon thereafter. If aspiring to be an actress, little Carrie could perform plays at home among her own social group and not risk the class mixing and social demotions associated with the public stage. If she wanted to observe foreign curiosities and stage thrills, then she could attend a neighbor’s or a cousin’s parlor theatricals or she might read the sensational story papers littering the middle-class home. Parlor theatrical guidebook authors especially gave middle-class consumers excuses to stay in the home. By adapting and revising museum exhibits, theatrical shows, and popular works of literature, guide authors continuously negated the need for public
entertainment. These writers, unlike Barnum or the professional actors who misled the stage-struck Ellen, provided consumers a gateway to respectability by dissuading them from the public world.

As the century unfolded and leisure tastes changed, not everyone subscribed to the guide authors’ sanctification of the home. Curley reports that from the 1870s to the 1890s, amateur performers gradually moved their private shows into public venues. While these often charity-related productions allowed performers, especially women, to “gain a public voice and power,” they also invited harsh press criticism and a paying audience not always unified by class status.838 In the 1880s, amateur performers would hire professional actors as coaches, and even acted alongside them for some charity productions. The middle classes, either willingly or not, surrendered their private leisure activities by century’s end. Charity and amateur public shows, for example, resulted partly from middle-class performers’ eagerness for larger audiences. On the other hand, the upper classes co-opted middle-class entertainments such as tableaux vivants. High-society publications including Cosmopolitan began publishing tableaux scenarios in the 1890s.839 At the turn of the century, the Metropolitan Opera House actually presented tableaux vivants for their upper-class patrons, and wealthy New Yorkers performed living pictures to raise funds for their own private clubs.840 Parlor theatrical guides were still published roughly through the 1920s, and home theatricals were certainly performed in private homes after 1900, but not nearly to the extent that they were during 1860s and

838 Curley, “Beyond the Pocket Doors,” x.
839 Dawson, Laboring to Play, 8, 137-138.
70s. Silent films, first viewable in public kinetoscope parlors in 1894 and later in various public theatres, supplanted private dramas and tableaux vivants largely by capitalizing upon the earlier forms’ voyeurism.

Yet during their post-bellum prime, parlor theatricals allowed the middle classes a critical social outlet. By adapting and performing commercial theatrical shows, museum exhibits, and books to the domestic stage, participants created an exclusive, shared language with one another. At a time when the middle class was trying to further affirm its identity, such a convenient activity of class assurance became essential. Even if the middle classes’ enthusiasm for the parlor stage waned by the turn of the century, home theatricals’ influence on American class formation persisted long beyond.
CHAPTER FOUR:
Estate Theatre and Class Invasion in Alcott’s Behind a Mask

Perhaps it is acting, and not writing, I’m meant for. Nature must have a vent somehow . . . –Louisa May Alcott; Journal Entry, June 1858

In her sensation novella Behind a Mask; or, A Woman’s Power (1866), Louisa May Alcott demonstrates her keen awareness of Victorian-era private theatricals and their purported social functions. As an experienced amateur actress herself, Alcott appears familiar with parlor theatrical guides and seeks to expose their many paradoxes. Alcott’s tale centers on Jean Muir, a governess working for the Coventrys, an English family of aristocrats, at their country estate. Ostensibly a helpmate for the daughter Bella, the thirty-year-old former stage actress Jean poses as a nineteen-year-old Scotch governess. She seduces Bella’s two brothers Ned and Gerald and plots to marry their elderly uncle Sir John for his title. Despite some obstacles, she ultimately succeeds in her plot to become Lady Coventry. Ultimately, Jean’s triumph lies in both her versatile theatrical skills and her seamless navigation of the estate space.

As Elizabeth Schewe concisely outlines, most critics have focused their analyses on the novella’s attention to gender as theatre. Mary Elliott and Alan Ackerman dissect Jean’s performance of “true womanhood,” scrutinizing how Jean’s theatricality counters popular notions about women’s transparency and authenticity. Elliott specifically pinpoints how Jean’s “social survival deploys exaggeratedly parodic (‘masked’)

841 Alcott, journal entry, June 1858, in Life, Letters, and Journals of Louisa May Alcott, ed. Ednah D. Cheney (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1889), 99.
performances of female virtue and crime.” Other critics examine Jean’s enactments as a victimized “little woman.” Teresa Goddu writes that Jean’s frequent sobbing and claims of exploitation allow her to access a Coventry household “which operates by the laws of sentiment.” After all, the other characters frequently pity Jean, condescendingly referring to her as “little Muir.” While still prioritizing gender, some critics consider Jean’s efforts in terms of financial necessity. Judith Fetterley views Jean herself as a “white middle-class woman” who must perform various versions of femininity “in order to survive economically,” and Mary Chapman reads the story as “a radical analysis of the economic plight of unmarried middle-class women in late nineteenth-century America.” In focusing on Jean’s role as a governess, Schewe presents a more nuanced reading, suggesting that the occupation offers Jean a liminal status which does not fit tidily into either working- or middle-class definitions. In this context, Jean’s theatricality further exposes the upper class’s social theatre, serving “as a natural extension of the performativity of leisure society.” Melanie Dawson especially advances this conversation by placing the story in the context of middle-class, home theatrical practices which Jean simulates.

845 Bella says “We’ll stand by poor little Muir, won’t we?” before Jean’s arrival (BM 4). Gerald also calls her “little Muir” multiple times in conversations with Lucia (BM 26-27).
848 Schewe, “Domestic Conspiracy.” 582.
All of these studies prove enlightening about Jean’s machinations as an actress and confirm her endgame of upward mobility. Yet even the critics who address home theatre such as Chapman or Dawson do not take into full account the class-based goals of home theatre itself or Jean’s geographical mastery of the estate. Nor do they analyze Jean’s role as a worker—both as an employed governess within the house and as a professional actress arriving from a public sphere. This chapter argues that Alcott challenges the notion—espoused in parlor drama literature—that private theatrical performance remains a safe activity which reinforces class status. As the public, working-class actress Jean infiltrates the novel’s private, aristocratic spaces, Alcott shows how class boundaries are permeable specifically through parlor theatre. Successfully marrying into the Coventry family and thus advancing her social rank, Jean exposes both the higher class’s disregard for the lower classes and its self-celebratory devotions to leisure.

**Alcott’s Theatre Histories**

Throughout her youth and adult life, Alcott remained an ardent participant and spectator of the theatre. Even at their youngest ages, Alcott and her sisters performed fables, fairy tales, and other innocent amusements within their homes, often at their father’s prompting. In addition to describing Louisa’s performance as the Native American girl Alfarata, childhood friend Annie Clark also remembers an 1843 dramatization of Lydia Maria Child’s novel *Philothea: A Grecian Romance* (1836), which Louisa and her sisters performed under trees in their yard. When the family moved to Concord in 1848, Ann and Louisa wrote and starred in Gothic-set melodramas which they staged in the family’s barn. With titles like *Norna; or, the Witch’s Curse* or *The
Captive of Castile; or, the Moorish Maiden’s Vow, these shows featured Louisa playing, in her sister Anna’s words, “the villains, ghosts, bandits, and disdainful queens; for her tragedy-loving soul delighted in the lurid parts.” The Alcotts performed mainly for small audiences of family and friends, but they built towers and boats to imitate large-scale scenery from professional plays. The family moved to numerous New England locations in the next several years, most notably Walpole, New Hampshire where Louisa organized the Walpole Amateur Dramatic Company in the summer of 1855, and Concord, Massachusetts where she helped found the Concord Dramatic Union in the fall of 1857. She programmed and starred in several farces and comedies in both locations, but often left her family to live in Boston during the winters.

While in the city during the 1850s, she experienced additional brushes with the professional theatre. She developed a working relationship with Thomas Barry, the manager of the Boston Theatre. He wanted to produce her stage adaptation of “The Rival Prima Donnas,” a story about two rival actresses that Alcott published in the Saturday Evening Gazette in 1854. The show never materialized, but Barry provided Alcott a pass to attend the theatre whenever she liked. Her diary entries and letters reveal her as a discerning spectator who disliked famed actor Edwin Forrest’s histrionic performances of

---

850 Anna Bronson Alcott Pratt and Louisa May Alcott, Comic Tragedies, written by ‘Jo’ and ‘Meg’ and acted by the ‘Little Women’ (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1893), 7. Anna collected and compiled a series of the Alcott girls’ childhood plays into this collection, referring to her sister Louisa and herself by their respective Little Women alter egos, Jo and Meg, in the preface. Stern reports that these same plays were indeed performed in the Hillside Barn in Concord in 1848; “Louisa Alcott: Trouper,” 175.

851 The Concord company, composed of siblings and schoolmates, staged most if not all of their performances in the vestry-room of the town’s Unitarian church; for more on their specific performances and Louisa’s roles, see Madeleine Stern, Louisa May Alcott: A Biography (Lebanon: Northeastern UP, 1996), 80-83.
Shakespeare’s plays yet became inspired by several leading actresses. She praised a November, 1856 performance of Anna de La Grange in the opera *Norma*, expressing in her journal, “[I] imagined myself in her place, with white robes and oak-leaf crown.” Similarly, in June of 1858, she writes about one of the era’s most famous actresses, “Saw Charlotte Cushman and had a stage-struck fit.” Alcott became convinced of her own potential as an actress and briefly considered a professional career. In the 1860s and 70s, she acted in amateur productions for fund-raising events such as the Concord Anti-Slavery Society, the New England Women’s Hospital, the Concord Lyceum, the Sanitary Fair, and the Old South Church. She continued performing at home as well. Her nephew John Alcott also remembered how his mother Anna and his aunt Louisa were “always having theatricals” in his family’s living room throughout the 1870s.

According to him, the two sisters “were an everflowing source of plots” and frequently staged scenes from Dickens’ *Martin Chuzzlewit* in the 1870s.

As her flirtations with acting never materialized into a professional career, Alcott channeled her theatrical ambitions directly into her writing, particularly her pseudonymously-authored sensation tales. Tellingly, her most professional theatrical

---

852 Alcott wrote her father circa 1855, “I go to the theatre once or twice a week & tho [sic] Forrest does not act Shakespeare well the beauty of the play shines thro the badly represented parts, & imagining what I should like to see, I can make up a better Macbeth & Hamlet for myself than Forrest with his gaspings & shoutings can give me.” Alcott, journal entry, Nov. 28 [1855], in *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*, eds. Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1995), 14.


855 Stern, “Louisa Alcott, Trouper,” 191-192. Other institutions benefitting from Alcott’s performances included the Parker Fraternity and Mr. Clarke’s Church Fair.

856 John S.P. Alcott, “The ‘Little Women’ of Long Ago,” *Good Housekeeping*, February, 1913, 188. The son of Louisa’s sister Anna, John specifies that Louisa and Anna played Sairey Gimp and Betsy Prig and would “act out long scenes from the novel” (188). They used Anna’s living room to seat spectators and the dining room served as the stage.

857 Ibid.
accomplishment would be as a writer and not an actress. In May of 1860, Mrs. William Smith—the wife of the Boston Museum stage manager (and *Drunkard* playwright) William H. Smith—performed Alcott’s farce *Nat Bachelor’s Pleasure Trip* as an afterpiece at Boston’s Howard Athenaeum. Modern critics often have noted the recurring scenes of home theatricals in Alcott’s domestic novels, from the March girls’ homemade melodramas in *Little Women* (1868-69) to the charades and proverbs in *Eight Cousins* (1875) to the re-enactments of Romeo and Juliet in *Jo’s Boys* (1886). Though she wrote poems and family-friendly fiction for more respectable magazines such as the *Atlantic Monthly* (1857-), Alcott spent much of the late 1850s and 1860s composing blood-and-thunder tales for cheaply-priced story papers like Boston’s *American Union* (1848-1876) and *The Flag of Our Union* (1846-1870). The prolific New York publisher Frank Leslie also provided Alcott several opportunities. Her “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment” won Leslie’s first contest for fiction and appeared in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* (1855-91) in 1863. Soon she became a regular contributor to *Frank Leslie’s Chimney Corner* (1865-84), with her sensation tale “A Double Tragedy:

---


859 See especially Alan Ackerman, *The Portable Theater: American Literature & the Nineteenth-Century Stage* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1999), 155-180, for analysis of theatre scenes in these and other Alcott novels.


861 “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment” was published over two consecutive issues of *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, January 3 and January 10, 1863.
or an Actor’s Story” gracing the covers of the paper’s very first issue in June of 1865. Published weekly, the story papers usually serialized Alcott’s stories over two to four installments. Though all classes read story papers, the publishers styled their papers as material specifically for middle-class families. The frontispiece of *Chimney Corner*, for instance, pictured a family gathered around the fireplace for a nighttime parlor reading session, and most story papers published respectable domestic articles alongside sensation fiction and non-fiction. As Alcott’s tales and similar ones prove, the story paper format allowed publishers to appeal to middle-class readers’ lascivious interests while simultaneously promoting genteel lifestyles.

To some extent, Alcott relished writing tales that allowed her to incorporate her own valuations of the theatre. Economic necessity often drove her to write potboilers;

---


863 Stevenson asserts that the fireplace operated as a “second focal point” within the parlor after the center table; *Victorian Homefront*, 2. Richard Brodhead identifies most of the story paper (and similar pamphlet novel) authors as “hundreds of writers whose names have been lost to memory”; Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: U Of Chicago P, 1993), 82.

864 *The American Union* specifically bragged that it was a “fireside journal”; Stern, introduction, *Freaks of Genius*, 2.
though she called them “rubbishy tales,”\textsuperscript{865} she also admitted, “I can’t afford to starve on praise when sensation stories are written in half the time & keep the family cosy [sic].”\textsuperscript{866} In the 1850s, her American Union stories paid her only $6 to $10 each. Yet she earned an average of $25 to $100 for her later submissions to other story papers, and The Flag of Our Union paid her $75 for Behind a Mask in 1866.\textsuperscript{867} Alcott never expressed shame in writing thrillers. In her journal from the summer of 1862, Alcott records, “Wrote two tales for L[eslie]. I enjoy romancing to suit myself, and though my tales are silly, they are not bad, and my sinners always have a good spot somewhere. I hope it is good drill for fancy and language, for I can do it fast; and Mr. L. says my tales are so ‘dramatic, vivid, and full of plot,’ they are just what he wants.”\textsuperscript{868} Alcott’s “sinners” often were actresses with secretive backgrounds. Though not a literal actress, Pauline of “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment” constructs a false version of her life in order to ensnare her ex-lover Gilbert Redmond, who recently has left Pauline for a rich heiress. “A Double Tragedy’s” Clotilde is a divorced professional actress who, in the climax, kills her ex-husband (and soon after herself) upon a Paris stage. Some of Alcott’s actresses, such as the titular character of “La Jeune; or Actress and Woman” (1868) or Mabel Vaughn in “A Laugh and a Look” (1868), appear to be hiding love affairs but are only withholding harmless secrets. Regardless, Alcott continuously explores how actresses’ double lives can threaten an established order. Its first installment appearing within The

\textsuperscript{865} Alcott, journal entry, Jan., 1865, in The Journals of Louisa May Alcott, eds. Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy (Athens: U of George P, 1997), 139.
\textsuperscript{866} Alcott, journal entry, June, July, August, 1862, Journals, 109.
\textsuperscript{867} Stern, introduction, Freaks of Genius, 3-4. Alcott’s pay largely depended upon length, but the Illustrated Newspaper contest netted her an automatic $100 for “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment” (16).
\textsuperscript{868} Alcott, journal entry, June, July, August, 1862, Journals, 109.
Flag of Our Union on August 11th, 1866, Behind a Mask introduces perhaps the most enigmatic of all Alcott’s actress antiheroes in Jean Muir. Whereas her early actresses fail in their revenge plots and her later ones only appear to harbor ulterior motives, Jean succeeds in a sensation plot worthy of the melodrama stage.

Louisa’s Complicated Classes

More than Alcott’s other theatre-centered stories, Behind a Mask presents a convoluted social class structure. Initially, the American middle class appears entirely absent from the novella. Reclining at their ancestral country estate, the English Coventrys represent an aristocracy not quite equivalent with either an American middle or upper class. However, even without literal representation in the story, the middle classes maintain a central presence. As Dawson reinforces, readers of Behind a Mask must remember that “Alcott writes as a populous American middle class is exercising its influence professionally, commercially, and socially.”869 The story’s first appearance in The Flag of Our Union, a paper which specifically targeted middle-class readers, also proves telling. Schewe asserts that “although ‘Behind a Mask’ is set among the British aristocracy and focuses on the disguise and unmasking of a con-woman femme fatale, this unlikely story exposes American class related anxieties about sentimental womanhood, domestic theatricality, and women’s labor and sexuality.”870 Though readers can interpret these “anxieties” working in several directions within the text, Alcott establishes the Coventrys as an insular unit averse to lower-class outsiders. Elder

869 Dawson, Laboring to Play, 115.
870 Schewe, “Domestic Conspiracy,” 578.
son Gerald is engaged to his cousin Lucia who also lives at the house, and the family members’ boredom derives from having only each other to entertain themselves. The Coventrys’ attractions to theatre—both via their social performances in the parlor and through their literal stagings of tableaux vivants—reveal Alcott’s substitution of the English family for an American middle class defining itself through home theatricality. Because the Coventrys (and, by extension, the American middle classes) so eagerly subscribe to theatrical plots, a talented actress like Jean can pierce their sacred spaces with her varied performances.

Alcott features Jean’s work as a governess specifically to emphasize the character’s indeterminate social status. Critics often assign Jean a middle-class standing, whether defining her literally as belonging to the middle class (Chapman) or simply performing the ideals of the class in order to survive (Goddu, Fetterley, Elliott). Only Schewe devotes concentrated attention to Jean’s tasks as a governess, suggesting that Alcott emphasizes Jean’s “liminal status” in order to show that “virtue and class distinction are not natural but learned.”871 However, most governesses partly shared the class associations of the families they served. M. Jeanne Peterson reports that the Victorian governess in England most often was a middle-class “woman of birth and education [who] found herself in financial distress, and had no relatives who could support her or give her a home.”872 She was often “born and bred in comfort and gentility” but was forced to turn her manners into a trade in middle-class and upper-class

871 Ibid., 579.
homes. By 1851, over 25,000 women were employed as governesses in England. The duties of most private governesses consisted of educating and chaperoning adolescent girls, activities for which the Coventrys ostensibly hire Jean. The occupation allowed those suddenly deprived middle-class women to maintain their social status by avoiding public work. Still, there was an uneasiness to the position. The governess “was a lady, and therefore not a servant, but she was an employee, and therefore not of equal status with the wife and daughters of the house.” Governesses performed genteel domestic tasks that, in better circumstances, they would be executing in their own homes. Thus the English middle classes became anxious that the well-bred governesses maintained goals of upward social mobility. An embodiment of this fear, Jean gains entry into the Coventry household as someone with equivalent biological and social pedigrees as the family members. She remains so dangerous because the family cannot simply dismiss her as a working-class employee or servant. Jean’s role as governess implies her displacement from a naturally higher social position and promises that she can be restored to her original rank.

Nonetheless, several of the Coventrys exercise their prejudices against governesses and initially treat Jean as a lower-class employee. Before Jean’s arrival, Gerald refuses to send a carriage to pick her up from the station due to his general

873 Ibid.
874 Ibid., 4.
875 Ibid., 11.
876 Ibid., 7.
distaste for governesses. “I have an inveterate aversion to the whole tribe,” he declares.\footnote{Louisa May Alcott, *Behind a Mask; or, A Woman’s Power*, in *Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. and intro. Madeleine Stern (1866; repr., New York: William Morrow & Co., 1975), 3 (hereafter cited in text as BM).} Echoing Peterson, Schewe explains that the governess historically “is not quite equal to the family she serves but not quite a servant either,” a definition which might explain Gerald’s opinion.\footnote{Schewe, “Domestic Conspiracy,” 579.} However, the Coventrys view her strictly as an employee, someone significantly below them in rank and always at their disposal. Jean’s tasks as governess may be more refined than those of the house servants, but the Coventrys make sure to demarcate clear lines between their lives of leisure and hers of duty. The matriarch Mrs. Coventry immediately lectures Jean about her responsibilities of walking and educating Bella and, upon learning that Jean teaches music, commands Jean to “go and play an air or two” as Bella begs too (BM 6). Indeed, the Coventrys value Jean as an on-call entertainer of sorts. Before long, her duties expand to family members beyond Bella. Besides performing a Scotch melody on demand, she later reads to Sir John and sings lullabies to Gerald. After drinking tea that Jean makes, Mrs. Coventry remarks, “Whatever you do you seem to do well, and that is such a comfort” (BM 8). The comment underscores not only the family’s view of her as a lower-ranked source of entertainment but also Jean’s versatile abilities. She remains a skilled worker, even if a domestic laborer is simply one of her many roles. Though “constant supervision of pupils . . . would have kept [governesses] busy all day,” Jean manages to ingratiate herself to the other family members.\footnote{Peterson, “Victorian Governess,” 8.} Jean’s ability to excel at her requested jobs, and perform ones
not necessarily required, combats the family’s attempts to distinguish themselves from her.

Alcott positions Jean as a shrewd actress who exploits the Coventrys’ casting of her as an unfortunate governess. Before she arrives, Gerald’s younger brother Ned begs his family to treat Jean with courtesy: “As for the governess . . . I should say a little extra kindness wouldn’t be amiss . . . because she is poor, and a stranger” (BM 4). Jean’s lack of capital defines her for the Coventrys and explains why they believe putting her to work provides her a much-needed purpose. In turn, Jean manipulates the family by recognizing their condescension and playing the role of a loyal employee. In her secret letters revealed later, Jean shares that she could instantly read the family’s demeaning opinion of her: “The younger son, the mother, and the girl received me patronizingly, and I understood the simple souls at once” (BM 98). Contrary to Elliott’s reading that Jean is performing the middle class’s “sentimental typology” of inner states and outer dress and attitude” detailed in women’s magazines like Godey’s Lady’s Book, Jean actually embraces her role as a poor but well-mannered governess.880 She carefully tailors her first appearance to imitate someone who has fallen from a better social position. As the narrator relates, “Small, thin, and colorless she was . . . Poverty seemed to have set its bond stamp on her, and life to have had for her more frost than sunshine” (BM 6). She inscribes the tragedy of a governess’s life on to her countenance. At chapter’s end when Jean undresses, cleans her face, and removes fake teeth, readers learn that Jean’s plain dress and make-up are part of her ongoing stage performance as a pitiful orphan. Dawson

---

reports that American parlor dramas frequently cast middle-class performers in working-class roles such as butchers, fish merchants, or coachmen in order to dramatize “middling ambitions.” Jean activates the same type of performance but carefully conceals any self-motivation to climb in social status. Instead, she packages herself as an undeserved cast-off, forced by necessity into governess’s work, and redeemable through the help of others.

In an effort to present herself as a viable love interest to the Coventry men, Jean amplifies her dramatic part as a governess displaced from her aristocratic upbringing. In her letters, she divulges her plan to convince Sir John that she is the daughter of Lady Grace Howard, the latter a titled woman who ran off with a poor minister and orphaned her daughter. The strategy works well, as her lies quickly spread. Once learning about Jean’s presumed lineage, Gerald “felt his interest in his sister’s governess much increased; . . . for like all wellborn Englishmen, he valued rank and gentle blood even more than he cared to own” (BM 48). In order to present herself as a legitimate romantic option to Ned and Gerald, Jean must cast herself as an esteemed lady who, by biological entitlement, deserves to be relieved from her labor. Alcott affirms that the Coventry men value Jean most explicitly as a social project, as a member of their own class that they can philanthropically restore to her natural birthright.

Alcott attributes Jean’s success in penetrating the Coventry family directly to the character’s experience as a professional, public actress. The revelation of Jean’s former life on the stage leads to her termination from her previous governess job within the

---

881 Dawson, Laboring to Play, 29.
house of Gerald’s friend, Sydney. Jean writes to her friend Hortense about Sydney’s discovery: “All was going well, when one day my old fault beset me, I took too much wine, and I carelessly owned that I had been an actress. He was shocked, and retreated” (BM 97). Pretending to stab herself, Jean nevertheless reports that Sydney “coolly left me to my fate” (BM 97). Despite their own predilections for theatricality, Alcott’s English aristocrats (and the analogous American middle classes) view actresses as lower than governesses and even servants. Sydney’s romantic feelings for Jean entirely disappear when he learns about her working-class status. When the Coventrys discover her secret letters in the final chapter, they too are disgusted to learn of her former vocation. As Ned summarizes, “She married an actor, led a reckless life for some years; quarreled with her husband, was divorced, and went to Paris” (BM 102). By “reckless life,” Ned specifically refers to her degraded career as a professional actress. Save for traveling stars like Fanny Kemble or Charlotte Cushman, mid-nineteenth-century actresses were widely considered unmannered women who placed themselves precariously on display for spectators. They remained public, exposed women as opposed to private modest ones. Alcott opens the novella with the chattering Coventrys in their parlor, a private space of which Jean is not yet a part. Jean’s arrival directly from the city defines her as a singularly public figure. Accustomed to the public gaze, Jean utilizes her stage experience in order to infiltrate the private sphere.

Jean’s Stageplay: Public and Private Spheres

Alcott constructs her novella like a stage play, with a handful of recurring locations or sets, each with a precise dramatic significance. Jean’s command of physical
space—and specifically her gradual move from the estate’s public to its private spaces—proves just as important as her acting skills. Most discussions of the novella’s theatricality focus on Jean’s versatile talents as an actress. Critic Dawn Keetley asserts that “Jean manipulates all three of the men’s persistent scrutiny of her, performing the parts that she knows will seduce each of them.” Meanwhile, Dawson claims that Jean’s dramatic skills allow her to “marry and join the elite social ranks.” These insights emphasize how Jean tailors her performance to the different family members in order to gain access to the household. Yet critics neglect Alcott’s reconfiguration of theatrical space and specifically Jean’s utilization of certain sites as impromptu stages. Gerald, Ned, Bella, Lucia, and her mother all reside in the main house, which contains a dining room, a drawing-room/parlor, and numerous hallways and bedrooms. Jean’s sought-after prize Sir John lives in his own Hall, accessible via a walk through the outdoor garden and an adjoining park. Among other rooms, the Hall contains a study and a “great saloon” where home theatricals are performed (BM 50). Jean navigates and enacts scenes across all these sites, calculating which spaces to occupy based on the family member she is engaging. In this respect, Jean follows the advice of private theatrical guides; as Sarah Annie Frost affirms in her Book of Tableaux and Shadow Pantomime (1869), “The more scenery and a larger space that can be allotted to the performance the better the effect will be.” Instead of attempting to occupy private spaces immediately, Jean migrates from

---

883 Dawson, Laboring to Play, 116, 123.
the home’s exterior areas to its interior spaces as her status progressively changes. Soon, she transforms domestic areas into theatrical stages where she can overturn the home’s traditional rules.

Alcott establishes the garden and adjoining park as Jean’s theatrical base; given Jean’s past as a stage actress, this most public of the estate’s sites permits her a special performative power. On her first morning, she walks through the garden to Sir John’s park. She admires the Coventrys’ main house but looks more enviously upon Sir John’s Hall, a “stately old place, rich in oaks, well-kept shrubberies, gay gardens, and every luxury befitting the ancestral home of a rich and honorable race” (BM 13). The outdoor garden and park become the symbolic spaces she must traverse in order to change her status from the main house’s governess to the Lady of the Hall. The Hall’s resplendent foliage offers Jean a small preview of her final prize beyond the building edifice. In Alcott’s figurative construction of the Coventry estate, permanent entry into the Hall equates to a rise in social rank and access to higher bloodlines. The garden and park lawns also remain unclaimed spaces in which she can publically display herself. She begins her exhibitions simply. After introducing herself to Sir John, she returns back to the main house’s garden, pulls daisies, and sings to seduce Ned’s wild horse Hector: “[S]he offered the clover, uttering caressing words and making soothing sounds. . . . It was a pretty sight—the slender figure in the grass, the high-spirited horse bending his proud head to her hand” (BM 15-16). The taming of the creature arouses the observing Ned who “found it impossible to restrain himself any longer” (BM 16). He marvels at her befriending a horse who has rejected everyone except himself. Jean starts her seductions
with the most naïve family member, but more importantly does so by making a living picture of herself. Without words, she invites Ned to engage with her in a performative space of her own design.

Jean soon claims the garden as a theatrical platform in which she can recruit the glares of all the house’s men. For instance, she later calls for Gerald in the garden, where she pretends to seek his advice after Ned declares his love for her. She provides the illusion of a private discussion, but the garden’s public location broadcasts this intimacy to any onlookers. Watching the scene and believing Gerald to be a love rival, Ned enters and nearly stabs his brother to death. Jean again stages a public scene for Ned to see and, in this case, draw false conclusions. All the while, Jean controls the garden space, literally entering the fight “with unexpected courage and strength” to wrest the knife from Ned after he slashes Gerald (BM 35). Jean reconstructs the garden as a public stage, in which she can spark a spontaneous drama but also direct the course of action herself. She creates a climactic confrontation between the brothers and interferes at the most advantageous point, sparing Gerald’s life and earning hard-sought respect from him in the process. Presenting Jean as a character who produces and performs this dramatic scene, Alcott characterizes the Coventrys as utterly ineffective costars within Jean’s theatrical space.

Alcott also pinpoints liminal spaces such as the Coventrys’ terrace as opportune sites for performance and class negotiation. Even when not physically occupying the terrace, Jean still claims power over it by projecting her voice outside. While Ned proves easy prey, the distrustful Gerald often leaves the room whenever the governess enters.
Knowing Gerald’s weakness for music, she sings from the drawing room into the garden while he ambles along the terrace. When Ned inquires about the purpose of Gerald’s nightly terrace walks, the latter responds, “I like the music and don’t care for the society of the singer, that’s why I walk there” (BM 37). Avoiding the parlor, Gerald maintains the illusion that he can separate Jean’s performance from his reception of it. Yet she continually draws him from inside the house’s other rooms to the outside terrace with her Italian airs: “Stepping out of the French window, Coventry strolled along the sunny terrace, enjoying the song with the relish of a connoisseur” (BM 20). Afterwards, he even “involuntarily applauded” (BM 20). The terrace represents a distinct space from the garden; while still outside, it remains physically a part of the house and not entirely public. Yet Jean overtakes this area as well by converting it into a theatrical space and casting Gerald as a willing audience member. Still restrained as an on-call drawing-room entertainer for the Coventrys, Jean subverts this role by simultaneously colonizing outdoor space and the figures within it. Alcott suggests that Jean’s performative role as a worker does not contradict her plots to marry into the family, but rather disguises them.

In another terrace scene, Jean turns the lighted window to Bella’s study into a makeshift proscenium to attract Sir John. Walking home along the terrace to his Hall, Sir John comes across the window and “half pushed aside the curtain and looked in,” only to find a solitary Jean in “a passion of tears” (BM 24). For the rest of “the night[,] the kindhearted gentleman puzzled his brains with conjectures about his niece’s interesting young governess, quite unconscious that she intended he should do so” (BM 24). By providing Sir John isolated scenes of mysterious distress, Jean activates his spectatorial
desires to understand the missing acts of her domestic drama. Casting Jean’s efforts in terms of male curiosity, Fetterley writes, “Jean knows that in a world inherently suspicious of women the most successful impressions are those made when the observer thinks the observed is not aware of being seen.”885 Alcott hearkens to traditional parlor theatricals here as well, with Jean presenting herself as a proverb or charade to be solved. Unlike the private parlor theatricals, however, Alcott blurs the line between private and public. A supposedly intimate moment suddenly becomes material for Sir John’s consumption. Though Jean physically works inside the house as a governess, she does not inhabit this private space as a true family member as she wishes. Still, she sees opportunities to lay claim to more sites while serving the Coventrys. Between her evening concerts for Gerald and her window theatre for Sir John, she turns the terrace into an audience pit and attains power within a space previously belonging to the family. Moving from the garden to the terrace, Jean steadily converts areas of the property into theatrical stages that she can control. Alcott reveals an aristocratic Coventry family all too willing to surrender their reserved spaces (and unconsciously their class stability) for stray opportunities of spectatorship.

Alcott proposes that Jean’s power derives from her abilities to traverse public and private spheres. Though Jean initially operates in or around outdoor locations, she concurrently redefines several interior spaces and her roles within them. At one point, she slips on the terrace, and the family brings her inside to rest on the couch in Bella’s room (BM 23). Later on, she enters Gerald’s chamber as he recovers from the fight with Ned,

tending to his wounds and singing a lullaby “which soothed the listener like a spell” (BM 40). Each time she goes outside to her base of theatrical power, she returns inside with a different dramatic part. Transforming from a governess to an injured victim to a nurse, Jean gains access to more intimate rooms within the house, culminating with her later entrance into Sir John’s Hall. Alcott paints Jean as an actress who not only takes on different parts but also uses her new roles to cross the estate’s many borders.

Following her first afternoon performance as a loyal entertainer, Jean soon gains power in the inherently theatrical parlor space. If the parlor was historically the center of middle-class social ceremony and posturing as Katherine Grier suggests, then Jean utilizes it as a theatrical platform herself. Throughout the story, the Coventrys use the parlor to ostentatiously display their wealth and education. They frequently demonstrate their leisured lives, devoting their afternoons to reading and their evenings to listening to music. Most importantly, they utilize the room to recite upper-class manners. In the first scene before Jean’s arrival, Ned declares that the governess “is a woman, and should be treated with common civility”; soon after, Mrs. Coventry adds, “Punctuality is such a virtue” (BM 4). The Coventrys rehearse these lines like they are lessons from contemporaneous etiquette manuals. Yet Jean exploits the family’s natural inclinations of theatricality, out-performing their social performances with her own. Instead of continuing her initial musical performances and tea-making duties, she begins to hypnotize the family with her reading of novels. Of one session, Gerald reports, “[T]here

[Ned] is, devouring her with his eyes, while she reads a fascinating novel in the most fascinating style. Bella and Mamma are absorbed in the tale. . . . Ned makes himself the hero, Miss Muir the heroine, and lives the love scene with all the ardor of a man whose heart has just waked up” (BM 26). Jean remains at the family’s service, but she influences the family members by distracting them from seeing her as a mere employee within the parlor. Ned forgets about Jean’s role as a governess and sees her as an equal, as Jean transports him to a romantic world in which they share the same status.

Within this highly theatrical parlor room, Jean presents herself as an additional family member instead of a governess. She assumes roles of absent or uncast family members almost immediately. As the Coventrys are missing a father who traditionally enacted parlor reading tasks, Jean takes on the role of the patriarch and accordingly commands attention with her readings. In a later parlor episode displaying a reclining Lucia and Ned’s prostrate hound, Jean blends seamlessly into the family: “Bella now lay on the sofa, half asleep, a rosy little creature. . . Miss Muir sat in the recess of a deep window, in a low lounging chair, working at an embroidery frame with a graceful industry pleasant to see” (BM 70-71). Suggesting an older sister or cousin figure, Jean presents herself in a tableau to demonstrate her natural comfort within the parlor. She partakes in the family’s leisure space as an equal and not a servant. The passage continues, “Jean said nothing, but silently appealed to eye and ear by the pretty picture she made of herself” (BM 71). Jean installs herself as a permanent fixture within the Coventry household. As she did with the garden and terrace, she declares another theatrical space over which she reigns. Since the parlor was already the center for the
family’s social theatre, Jean is able to control it so easily. Alcott shows how a site previously reserved for class reinforcement can, in fact, be claimed by someone as adept at performance as Jean. By simply pretending to be a member of the family, she is accepted as one.

Similarly, Alcott affirms that through merely imitating leisured classes’ signature activities such as reading, other classes can pierce even the most sacred of private spaces. Having observed Jean’s talents for reading to Bella, Sir John recruits her to read history books to him. Mere days after Jean’s tending to him, Gerald travels to the Hall’s study and eavesdrops on Jean’s tasks: “The door was ajar, and looking in, he saw a scene of tranquil comfort, very pleasant to watch. Sir John leaned in his easy chair with one foot on a cushion. . . . He was smiling as he listened, and his eyes rested complacently on Jean Muir, who sat near him reading in her musical voice” (BM 46-47). Earlier when Sir John views Jean reading to Bella through the window, he conceives of her as a possessable object. The narrator even specifies that Sir John “envied Bella her new acquisition” (BM 24). Now, in employing her as his reader, Sir John believes that he has purchased a home governess of his own. But by elevating her work to a mesmerizing spectacle, Jean actually erases the class boundaries that often accompany such reading sessions. Both Gerald and Sir John fix their eyes on her as well instead of merely listening to her words. They fall for the same hypnotic reading skills that transfixed Ned earlier. Now, however, she conducts the activity in Sir John’s Hall, arguably a more private location than any other in the house. According to Dawson, the American middle class valued books because they marked one as belonging to a respectable circle: “[T]he act of reading was
legitimated as transformative, rendering entertainment an important new arena for remaking personal identity. Yet by inviting Jean as a reader and into the supremely private venue of his study, Sir John inadvertently places her on the same social level as himself. Alcott shows that the higher classes do not know how to negotiate their own space or even their own leisure activities. Such ignorance makes them particularly susceptible to penetration from outside forces.

**Jean’s Home Theatre**

Alcott proposes that the Coventrys’ naïve concepts of theatre, both regarding their own social performances and their actual parlor theatricals, ultimately lead to their rank’s dilution. In Alcott’s formulation, the upper-class Coventrys quell their social anxieties by performing stereotypical class activities. Beyond their parlor leisure activities and their recitations of refined manners, the Coventrys’ penchant for gossip also denotes their intrinsic theatricality. In the opening scene, for example, the Coventrys prattle about their yet-to-arrive governess. Gerald remarks, “I’ll give her a three day’s trial; if she proves unendurable I shall not disturb myself” (*BM 3*), while even the more welcoming Mrs. Coventry states, “I dread the coming of a stranger more than you possibly can” (*BM 4*). According to Peterson’s work on the governess, this posturing was typical of those Victorian middle classes concerned with their status: “[T]here were ways in which the family could . . . display [the governess] as a symbol of economic power, breeding, and station”; Peterson adds that “Even complaining about a governess was a way of

---

887 Dawson, *Laboring to Play*, 103.
'showing her off.'\(^{888}\) Although only talking among themselves, the Coventrys reassert their social positions by speaking derisively of other social classes. The family’s reading sessions, tea drinking rituals, discussions about other aristocratic families, and dismissals of governesses all demonstrate the family’s inherent theatricality. They believe that if they \textit{act} like the upper class, then they must necessarily belong to the group. Yet by focusing so much on affirming their own social profiles, the Coventrys render themselves vulnerable to invasion by a theatre professional. As a skilled actress among amateur performers and spectators, Jean always controls the dramatic situation. She exposes the Coventrys’ incompetent spectatorship skills and forces different family members into theatrical parts that they are uncomfortable playing. Often lacking allies, Jean becomes a one-person stage company herself. She operates as an actress, director, playwright, stage manager, and costumer who repeatedly draws the Coventrys into watching and performing with her.

She inhabits all of these roles in her various estate interactions, but the Coventrys’ literal parlor dramas particularly enable her to exploit the family’s predilections for theatre. The Coventrys’ careless invitation of Jean to join their entertainments becomes Jean’s gateway to higher class status. Before serving as his private reader, Jean first pierces Sir John’s sacred Hall when he hosts an evening of home theatricals. Speaking to Gerald, Sir John claims that he is “Comfortable, but dull, so I want you to bring the girls over this evening, to amuse the old gentleman” (\textit{BM 47}). With an audience of family and “a party of young friends,” the idea seems harmless (\textit{BM 50}). Even Gerald echoes Sir

\(^{888}\) Peterson, “Victorian Governess,” 5.
John’s sentiment, claiming “We’ve all been out of sorts since [Ned] left, and a little jollity will do us good” (BM 47). Middle-class theatrical guidebooks circulating during the 1860s confirm Gerald’s assumption of private theatre’s innocuousness. In her introduction to *Parlor Charades and Proverbs* (1859), Sarah Annie Frost assures readers that theatricals, when performed “by small circles of friends, in private parlors or saloons . . . are a most innocent and improving form of dramatic entertainment.” Similarly, George Arnold, who authored *The Sociable; or, One Thousand and One Home Amusements* (1858), devises his guide as “a hand-book of interesting and agreeable amusement for family circles, for schools, for pic-nic parties, for social clubs, and, in short, for all occasions where diversion is appropriate.” When the performers and the spectators all derive from the same social group, then such theatricals can solidify class-based bonds. However, Sir John invites the governess Jean along with aristocrats Bella and Lucia. In one sense, he treats her as equal to his other relatives by asking her to perform; believing she really is the displaced daughter of Lady Grace Howard, he provides her the opportunity to step out of her role as governess. Yet he also views all his family members, especially the women, as workers employed to amuse him. He orders “antique costumes and trumpery” at the same time that he summons the girls as performers (BM 47). All serve as objects which satisfy his desires for entertainment. By inviting a former public actress to enter his saloon, Sir John inadvertently assists Jean in her ongoing quest to access the Coventrys’ sacred private spaces.

---

890 George Arnold, *The Sociable; or, One Thousand and One Home Amusements* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1859), iii.
In selecting tableaux vivants as the Coventrys’ home theatrical genre, Alcott expresses the middle class’s fetishization of foreign cultures and reveals Jean’s manipulations of these sensibilities. The American middle classes appeared especially drawn to the tableaux vivant genre because it allowed them to engage with a high-cult appreciation of art. Guide authors repeatedly referenced the genre’s potential for self-improvement as well as the European practices of tableaux vivants within aristocratic circles. According to James Head in his *Home Pastimes* (1860), the tableaux vivant (or “living picture”) “tends to improve the mind, assimilates the real with the ideal, conforms taste to the noblest standard, [and] overflows the heart with pure and holy thoughts.”

Unlike parlor charades or proverbs which critics often mocked for their triviality, tableaux vivants promised both education and social prestige. Chapman reads between the lines, suggesting that the middle-class readers of tableaux vivant guides seemed more interested in “learning the subtle manners that distinguish members of the upper classes than with acquiring the virtues this popular entertainment is intended to instill.” Alcott remains especially attuned to these class-based goals. Setting the tale in England and among aristocrats, she suggests that even the upper class’s devotions to supposedly more refined home theatricals are flawed. By extension, Alcott asserts that the American middle classes imitate a European model which itself remains a sham.

Alcott uses Jean’s first tableau vivant—as Judith beheading Holofernes from the deuterocanonical book of Judith—to highlight Jean’s exposure of this middle-class

---

893 Chapman, “‘Living Pictures,’” 29.
hypocrisy via her acting skills. The scene freezes on the moment before the Jewish
c villager Judith decapitates the sleeping Assyrian general Holofernes, who has threatened
to sack her town of Bethulia (BM 41). Following guide authors’ instructions that tableaux
can, and should, replicate well-known artworks, Alcott’s Judith tableau likely derives
from Horace Vernet’s 1831 painting “Judith and Holofernes” (Fig. 4.1). Alcott
presents the scene with as much scenic and corporeal detail as readers would find in
tableaux vivant guides of the period:

A swarthy, darkly bearded man lay asleep on a tiger skin, in the shadow of a tent. Oriental arms and drapery surrounded him; an antique silver lamp burned dimly on a table where fruit lay heaped in costly dishes, and wine shone redly in half-emptied goblets. Bending over the sleeper was a woman robed with barbaric splendor. One hand turned back the embroidered sleeve from the arm which held a scimitar; one slender foot in a scarlet sandal was visible under the white tunic; her purple mantle swept down from snowy shoulders; fillets of gold bound her hair, and jewels shone on neck and arms. BM 50

The “Oriental arms and drapery,” sandals, and jewels all align with the American middle class’s fascination with the Middle and Far East during the period. Dawson notes that many of the era’s private theatrics featured roles of “feminine exoticism” and “Oriental women,” including not just Judith but also Cleopatra, Sultanas, and Biblical queens.

For instance, in their manual The Model Book of Dreams, Fortune Teller, and the
Epitome of Parlor Entertainments (1861), Temple and Ottley compose a tableau, “The

ELAINE SHOWALTER, in her introduction to Alternative Alcott (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1988), asserts that Alcott’s portrayal of Judith and Holofernes is “clearly” from the Vernet painting (xxx). For more on the Vernet painting, see Eric Zafran and Sydney Resendez, French Paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: Artists Born Before 1790 (Boston: MFA, 1998), 201. But Chapman also suggests that Christofano Allori’s and Guido Reni’s paintings of Judith (both of which appeared at the Boston Athenaeum in the 1850s) or William Wetmore’s sculpture of Judith may have been Alcott’s inspiration. Additionally, Chapman writes that the Judith and Holofernes scene was a popular one in commercial tableaux performances in 1850s New York, and that Alcott may have portrayed Judith herself in a home tableau vivant based on a manual published by George Bradford Bartlett, her Concord Dramatic Union co-star. See footnote 59 in Chapman, “Living Pictures,” 29.

Dawson, Laboring to Play, 96.
Fortune Teller,” featuring a brunette woman in a “gorgeous Eastern costume” and covered in jewels. In staging this particular scene, the Coventrys express their admiration for fine art but, more overtly, an imperialist inclination as well.

Jean can “play” a threatening dark-skinned foreigner but, at least as the Coventrys believe, she poses no real danger. Like the story papers, the tableaux vivants allow the leisure classes to import and safeguard the mysteries and curiosities of lands abroad. Of course, Jean remains a real threat and, in the case of the Judith and Holofernes tableau, hides her intentions in plain view. Most critical analyses of this particular tableau focus on Jean’s telegraphed beheading of the patriarchal Coventrys. Keetley argues that here “Jean reveals her underlying hatred of the men who control her fate and who would consign women over thirty to oblivion,” while Chapman writes that “Jean’s performance as Judith allows her to subvert the sexist aesthetic implicit in many tableau vivants.” Indeed, holding a scimitar and dressed in “barbaric splendor,” Jean metaphorically previews her conquests of Gerald and Sir John. Pausing on the moment just before the decapitation instead of the grotesque aftermath, the tableau conveys that both Judith and Jean have plotted but not yet completed their missions.

---

897 See Dawson, *Laboring to Play*, 96.
899 Chapman, “‘Living Pictures,’” 39.
Fig. 4.1: *Judith and Holofernes* (1831) by Horace Vernet (from the author’s personal collection)
Just as importantly, Alcott presents the tableau in terms of class; utilizing her skills as a stage costumer and make-up artist, Jean forces the Coventrys to view her as more exotic than a simple governess. Throughout the novella, Jean stages unofficial tableaux in which she tames Ned’s horse or reclines in the family parlor. In the literal Hall theatricals, however, Jean stages herself as a parlor object up for auction. Private theatricals’ success often depended upon making familiar household materials appear unfamiliar. By converting ordinary house wares and wardrobes into magisterial stage props and costumes, middle-class participants could appreciate their indoor environments anew. If, as Denier states, private theatricals can “awaken a quicker sense of the grace and elegance of familiar objects,” then Jean exploits the Coventrys’ opinion of her as such.900 When Jean appears as Judith, almost no one recognizes her; only Gerald, with an “absorbed look” can spot the transformation (BM 51). While Lucia exclaims, “Impossible! [Jean] is small and fair,” the narrator interjects, “Impossible as it seemed, he was right nevertheless; for Jean Muir it was. She had darkened her skin, painted her eyebrows . . . and thrown such an intensity of expression into her eyes that they darkened and dilated till they were as fierce as any southern eyes that ever flashed” (BM 51).

Though no actual middle-class theatre manuals appear in Alcott’s text, Jean adheres to their instructions for theatrical disguise. She stains her skin dark, just as tableaux guides asserted was essential to parlor performance and as simple as mixing brown paints with cold creams or olive oil.901 She places on a wig of “wild black locks” (BM 51), which some authors recommended could be formed of “curled horse-hair” or bought separately.

900 Tony Denier, *Parlor Tableaux; or, Animated Pictures* (New York: Samuel French, 1868), v.
901 Ibid., viii.
Among all the costumes and props, Jean herself remains the most valued stage object. Comprehending Sir John’s alignment of her with various stage properties and the Coventrys’ frequent objectification of her, Jean extends this display of herself. Most manuals advocated casting performers according to body type. In reports of her actual tableaux performances, Ella Moore even recalls taking on the role of a sorceress “in virtue of [her] gipsey-like complexion and hair.” Yet here Jean defies guide rules by transforming from a meek, fair-haired governess into a raven-like enchantress. Accustomed to the commercial stage, Jean magnifies her role as a public exhibit because it remains her primary value to the family. She plays an exotic possession akin to the rest of the saloon decorations. Alcott highlights both the family’s desires to possess the foreign Jean and Jean’s subversion of this imperialism. Thus Alcott diagnoses the home theatrical as a precarious activity for the middle and upper classes to engage. The tableau permits Jean to literally remake herself under the guise of innocent amusement. Alcott suggests that such spectatorial gullibility finally accounts for the upper-class family enabling Jean’s infiltration of their home.

A shrewd actress above all, Jean injects her tableau performance of Judith with new layers of her estate performance as a pitiful governess. While Jean’s posing as an exotic possession might attract Sir John, her barely-contained emotions during the performance trigger Gerald’s curiosity about her background. Having just learned of her supposed aristocratic lineage as the daughter of Lady Grace Howard, Gerald reads Jean’s performance according to this new knowledge: “[H]aving the key to a part of her story,

---

Coventry felt as if he caught a glimpse of the truth. It was but a glimpse, however, for the curtain dropped before he had half analyzed the significance of that strange face” (BM 51). Possessing “the key” to her background, he longs to understand from where her anger derives. He sees her primarily through the lens of her social demotion, and Jean’s theatrical performance allows her to layer this impression of herself. Unlike the scenes in Alcott’s “La Jeune” or “A Laugh and a Look” where male spectators secretly spy on actress characters to discover the “real” woman underneath, Jean actively solicits the male spectator’s gaze and speculation. As Chapman writes, “Whenever she is looked at, Jean prepares a view of herself that gives her power over her opponents . . . and consequently pretend that the observer is seeing her ‘as she really is.’”⁹⁰⁴ In the case of the Judith and Holofernes tableau, Gerald detects the real Jean for a moment, as the narrator admits, “It was not all art: the intense detestation mingled with a savage joy that the object of her hatred was in her power was too perfect to be feigned” (BM 51). Even if Jean cannot fully hide her rage at serving the self-centered Coventrys, the private theatrical allows her to conceal this anger beneath a wig and make-up. Gerald does demonstrate some rudimentary skills of seeing beyond Jean’s performative exterior. Yet his preoccupation with her class displacement as Lady Grace’s daughter—a secret which he inquires about immediately after the performance—obstructs him from truly comprehending her. He becomes swept up in Jean’s theatrical enchantment, if not as a spectator then as an aristocrat curious about her secret social rank. Alcott conveys that the

⁹⁰⁴ Chapman, “‘Living Pictures,’” 40.
higher classes’ fixations on class reinforcement and impermeability ultimately make them inept viewers.

In the next Hall tableau, which portrays two fugitive lovers, Jean plays into the Coventrys’ simultaneous desire to cast her as an obedient employee. Based on a portrait hanging in the Hall, the tableau features a desperate love scene: “[F]or the picture was of two lovers, the young cavalier kneeling, with his arm around the waist of the girl, who tries to hide him with her little mantle, and presses his head to her bosom in an ecstasy of fear, as she glances back at the approaching pursuers” (*BM* 52). As aggressive as her performance was of Judith, the Cavalier tableau allows Jean to display a vulnerability more closely aligned with the Coventrys’ pre-existent typecasting of her. Such roles of “passive femininity,” especially amid battling men, were certainly common among tableaux vivant performances. Gill’s home tableau entitled “The Interrupted Duel,” for instance, features two men pointing pistols at one another while “the lady stands in the centre of the stage . . . ; her body erect; the left hand holding up her habit, and the right arm raised across her breast.” In both Alcott’s and Gill’s tableaux, the fair maiden seeks to blunt the men determined for a violent clash. The thrill centers on the gendered juxtaposition of war and peace, on the uncertainty of which force ultimately prevails. Yet in Alcott’s tableau, the audience attempts to continue the narrative based on Jean’s performance: “‘Again! Again!!’ called Sir John . . . ‘A rustle has betrayed you, we have fired and shot the brave girl, and she lies dying, you know. That will be effective; try it,“

905 Ibid., 43.
Miss Muir,’ said one. And with a long breath, Jean complied” (BM 53). Because Jean remains such a skilled actress from the public stage, she entirely overturns the dynamics of the Coventrys’ private theatre. She converts the audience into active participants, exposing their views of her as a working-class governess whom they can remold at will. She complies with their demands and poses in a second Cavalier tableau. But she provides the Coventrys a false sense of control over her, just as she does while singing and making tea when first meeting the family. She playacts various working-class figures while fostering loftier social goals. Alcott suggests that Jean remains so dangerous specifically because she is a professional actress among amateur, classist spectators.

In the second Cavalier tableau, Jean exploits home theatricals about dying women in order to further entrance the observing men. As Alcott describes, “The curtain went up, showing the lover still on his knees, unmindful of the captors who clutched him by the shoulder, for at his feet the girl lay dying. Her head was on his breast, now, her eyes looked full into his, no longer wild with fear, but eloquent with the love which even death could not conquer” (BM 53). The tableau activates a subversive male fantasy of women’s passivity and subservience. Though dying, the woman remains devoted to reflecting her lover’s emotions back to him. Her immobility only heightens her appeal to male spectators. Here Alcott summons iconography from several genres within the mid-century cult of sensation. Story papers like Frank Leslie’s Chimney Corner or Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper—both in which Alcott regularly published—would similarly feature pictures of a sickly or bludgeoned woman and an awestruck man staring upon her. In June of 1867, Chimney Corner published a story entitled “A Life’s Cross,”
in which a young artist finds his new bride dead after she sits in a cursed mountainside throne (Fig. 4.2). The issue’s cover illustrates her rigid corpse at the moment her lover makes the ghastly discovery. The very next week, Chimney Corner’s cover displayed an engraving of a mentally-challenged brute throwing an arrow-pierced woman off of a building—the climactic highlight of the accompanying sensation story “The Red Ivy; or, Philip the Fool” (Fig. 4.3).

In addition, Alcott recalls an equally common trope within middle-class amateur theatre guides, which similarly dramatized male spectators gazing upon women in danger. Chapman explains that male characters in tableaux vivants “often appear at the borders as dreamers, observers, and voyeurs of framed inner scenes of women.” This motif mirrored the activities of the male parlor spectators as well. More often than not, the women within tableaux vivants were endangered, prostrate, or dead. In his Home Pastimes guide (1860), James Head dramatizes Longfellow’s poem “Death of Minnehaha” and freezes on the moment that Hiawatha “draws back the door of the wigwam, and there beholds his lovely Minnehaha lying dead and cold before him.” Specifying that Minnehaha’s “body should be propped up so that she can be easily seen” and lingering on her “calm, resigned look” and hands “folded on her breast,” Head relishes in the exhibition of the woman’s inert body. The tableau centralizes her lifelessness instead of Hiawatha’s emotional reaction. In The Sociable (1858), author George Arnold depicts a tableau dramatizing the male spectator’s gaze itself.

907 Chapman, “‘Living Pictures,’” 30.
908 Head, Home Pastimes, 118.
909 Ibid., 118-119.
“Cagliostro’s Magic Mirror” presents the titular magician showing a young courtier the image of his dead “lady-love” in a mirror: “On the left of the frame, in shadow, stands Count Cagliostro, pointing towards the vision. On the right, the young nobleman stands in an attitude of fear and wonder.”  

Through the mirror, viewers see a “young girl, extremely pale, in a long, sweeping, white robe with her hands crossed upon her bosom, and her eyes turned upwards.”  

Versions of the tableau were listed on programs for amateur American tableaux vivant shows and illustrated in at least one British theatrical guide (Fig. 4.4). Like the Minnehaha scene, the Cagliostro tableau fixates on the passive woman. Yet it also holds a distinct metatheatrical promise underlining many home theatricals: that the man can somehow revive the dead woman through his gaze.

---

910 Arnold, *The Sociable*, 162.
911 Ibid.
Fig. 4.2: “A Life’s Cross,” Frank Leslie’s Chimney Corner, June 29, 1867.

Fig. 4.3: “The Red Ivy; or, Philip the Fool,” Frank Leslie’s Chimney Corner, July 6, 1867.
Fig. 4.4: Illustration for the tableaux vivant “Cagliostrò’s Magic Mirror,” in which the young hero views his dead lover through Cagliostrò’s wizardry. Several Victorian-era private theatrical guidebooks as well as amateur theatre broadsides list variations on this tableau. This picture derives from a contemporaneous guide issued in Great Britain. Henry Dalton, The Book of Drawing-Room Plays and Evening Amusements (London: James Hogg, ca. 1860), 147.
Accordingly, Alcott presents Jean as undermining the middle- and upper-class men who use theatricals in order to enact these fantasies. Jean willingly plays a corpse in the second Cavalier tableau because it allows her male spectators a voyeurism upon a helpless female subject. Gerald notably plays the Cavalier and becomes immediately enraptured when looking upon her: “The power of those tender eyes thrilled Coventry with a strange delight. . . . She felt his hands tremble, saw the color flash into his cheek, knew that she had touched him at last” (*BM* 53). Converting him into a participant-spectator, Jean mesmerizes Gerald with her role as an undeserving victim. He daydreams that he could, in some universe, look into her eyes yearningly as she lay dying. In Alcott’s formulation, this male gaze remains inextricably tied to social class. Specifically, Jean detects the Coventry men’s desires to revitalize her and provide her a safe upper-class existence. Having already planted the story of her aristocratic roots, she now provides a visual preview of her supposed obeisance. Again, Alcott emphasizes the significance of location. Jean exhibits her limp body specifically within the context of Sir John’s Hall—the most esteemed and private site on the property. She presents herself as the old man’s to claim, first as a theatrical object and then later as a wife. As Jean converts a sacred private room into a theatricalized space with her own rules, Alcott conveys that Jean has further pierced the aristocracy’s corridors through her performativity.

Alcott also reveals the Coventrys to be inexperienced actors, which allows Jean to further erase class boundaries through her skills as a director. Jean at first curses the
casting of Gerald in the Cavalier tableau, asking Bella, “Why did you ask him? I begged you not” (BM 52). Jean feigns disapproval in order to further entice Gerald. Already the star of the evening for her Judith tableau, she assumes a newfound directorial power in the backstage space. The established social divisions temporarily do not apply in this makeshift green room, and Jean immediately seizes authority. She “disheveled his hair, pulled his lace collar awry, threw away his gloves and sword, and half untied the cloak that hung about his shoulders” (BM 52). Here, away from the eyes of the upper-class crowd, the empowered Jean can command her social superior without consequence. She recasts Gerald from a gallant cavalier to a weary, ragged fugitive. In undressing him, she strips Gerald of his social rank. He cannot hide behind a royal costume and instead becomes immersed in theatrical illusion. When experiencing Jean’s “slender waist yielding to his touch, and a maiden hearth throbbing against his cheek, for the first time in his life he felt the indescribable spell of womanhood, and looked the ardent lover to perfection” (BM 53). As a co-star, Jean mesmerizes Gerald by drawing him fully into her theatrical space. This performative area—like her other spontaneous stages across the property—nearly hypnotizes those who step into it. Though Gerald could distinguish Jean behind her Judith costume earlier, he loses sight of the actress here because he no longer maintains a spectatorial distance. Alcott suggests that with a plotting figure like Jean at the helm, private theatre obscures the line between fiction and reality. Such indistinctness, Alcott implies, can temporarily neutralize social prejudices. Jean recruits Gerald into a romantic scene with no social distance between them, and hence presents herself as his viable lover in real life. With Gerald beginning to soften towards the
governess once he learns of her aristocratic lineage, the theatrical scene accelerates his attraction to her. Alcott stresses the scene’s irony throughout. Gerald may be experiencing his first genuine feelings of love, but he does so while performing in a theatrical scenario that is inherently artificial.

Alcott shows that Jean remains a skilled stage director of her own dramas once she exits the Hall’s literal theatrical stage. Jean continues to force the Coventry men to perform with her despite their ignorance that they are participating in fictional scenes. Though she dresses up as Queen Bess for another tableau, she leaves the Hall before the performance. She retreats to the main house’s drawing room/parlor, and poses in this family space for the newly mesmerized Gerald who has followed her there. Wearing elaborate jewelry, decked in “royal robes,” and leaning in a large chair which “serve[s] as a throne,” Jean recasts herself as royalty for Gerald’s sake (BM 55). When Gerald expresses his newfound admiration for her, she acknowledges her own performance: “Ah, you forget! This dress, the borrowed splendor of these jewels, the freedom of this gay evening . . . all blind you to the reality. For a moment I cease to be a servant, and for a moment you treat me as an equal” (BM 55). Knowing that Gerald has received word of her supposedly noble blood, she wants to confirm his belief of it. Continuing to work as a stage director beyond the Hall’s tableaux theatre, she literally prompts Gerald’s lines and guides his emotions. As if following a script, Gerald admits his knowledge of her noble birth and exclaims his support “not to my sister’s governess alone, but to Lady Howard’s daughter” (BM 56). Gerald admits his initial prejudice against Jean as a governess of uncertain social stock. Yet he has already begun to develop a mental image of Jean as
aristocratic via the rumors of her birth. Instead of acting threatened by her indeterminate status, he pursues his attraction to her once he confirms that she is a governess (as many historically were) of respectable bloodlines.

Already evident in her tableaux performances, Jean’s adept skills as a costumer are crucial to convincing Gerald of her aristocratic status. By moving to the drawing room in regal garb, Jean projects a physical picture of nobility in order to build upon her image of displaced nobility. Amateur guides like Charles William Smith’s *The Art of Acting, or Guide to the Stage* (1855) emphasized the importance of costume to theatrical illusion, insisting that an actress’s “dress is of so much consequence, that the moment she appears her character should be visible.”912 As Queen Bess the parlor statue, Jean presents a snapshot of herself that triggers an instant reaction from Gerald before he can separate the character from the woman. At the same time, she wants him to meditate on the image of her against the parlor backdrop and consider her as a worthy wife. Alcott depicts a home theatre which Jean can repeatedly transplant from site to site and relocate her chosen co-stars at will.

Alcott attributes Jean’s success largely to this hyper-mobility across the estate’s many spaces; as both playwright and director, she mesmerizes the Coventry men upon all her impromptu stages. After her drawing-room scene as Queen Bess, Jean steals away to the garden and brings Gerald with her. Hiding in the bushes from party-goers, she remarks to him, “we are acting our parts in reality now” (*BM* 61). Jean spontaneously composes a script of forbidden love and forces Gerald to engage within yet another

---

drama. Drawing on the cavalier tableau for inspiration, she creates a stage scenario in which she and Gerald are lovers fleeing from pursuers. She writes and acts the scene so swiftly that the entranced Gerald can only follow her assured lead. Furthermore, Jean obscures the borders of the stage yet again. Combined with her confusions of class lines, this spontaneous theatricality dazzles Gerald. Jean later boasts in her diary about this “moonlight episode behind a rose hedge” which “sent the young gentleman home in a half-dazed condition” (BM 101). She shrewdly returns to the garden—her theatrical base on the estate—to captivate Gerald. She does so through convincing him that they share a private corner within an otherwise public area. While Jean controls Gerald, as Schewe writes, by drawing him “into various romantic conventions that force him to play the part she assigns him,” her continual creation of new theatrical space remains her greatest weapon.913 She regularly relocates the geographical spot of the performance to disarm her pursuers. Not only do the different locations allow her to tailor performances to different family members, but they also permit her to dictate the rules of the given site. As a stage director, she leads Gerald around as if he were a malleable actor in her company. Whether performing literal tableaux of fallen women or discovering garden coves to whisper secrets, Jean transfixes the Coventrys through her control of physical space. Therefore, Alcott unveiling the safe private theatricals as inherently dangerous if an experienced performer like Jean participates. Whereas guide authors convey that amateur middle-class performers can entirely control their private theatrical environments,

913 Schewe, “Domestic Conspiracy,” 583.
Alcott’s public, working-class actress Jean redefines and eventually usurps such spaces for her own purposes.

Jean later returns to Sir John’s Hall and stages a final, unrehearsed tableau that ensures her social ascent. During one of their reading sessions, Jean looks for a way to convince Sir John that she loves him in order to elicit a marriage proposal. Yet she must do so without, in her words, “overstepp[ping] the bounds of maiden modesty” (*BM* 80). When he leaves the room, she sees a miniature of him on the wall which offers her a theatrical opportunity: “[S]he took it down, looked long and fondly at it, then, shaking her curls about her face, as if to hide the act, pressed it to her lips and seemed to weep over it in an uncontrollable paroxysm of tender grief” (*BM* 80-81). Sir John soon enters, witnesses Jean’s posed tableau, and concludes that she loves him. Jean manages an act both active and passive. She declares her affection but stages it as a private moment upon which Sir John has stumbled. Such displays of raw, often unobserved sincerity were popular on the contemporaneous melodrama stage. When Mary Middleton and her daughter Julia struggle through poverty in *The Drunkard* (1844), Mary cries alone as her daughter sleeps nearby; soon after, Julia wakes up and begs her mom not to “cry so much.”914 In Dion Boucicault’s *After Dark* (1867), heroine Eliza sobs to herself upon a villain’s insistence that she annul her marriage to her husband George. In the next scene, she throws herself off a bridge into the Thames River.915 By imitating these intimate scenes of heroines’ despair, the professional actress Jean easily convinces the naïve

---

theatre enthusiast Sir John of her genuine feelings for him. He is pre-programmed to protect the supposed heroine from emotional turmoil.

More specific to her previous estate performances, Jean repeats her role from the Cavalier tableau as a helpless woman and casts Sir John as the only one who can save her. This illusion of voyeurism, and the spectatorial power it carries, ultimately ensnares Sir John. If he maintained a competent spectatorship, he might have perceived Jean’s stock emotion. Halttunen reports that amateur home actors often expressed love by interacting with a physical object such as “kissing a miniature or embracing a lock of hair.”916 Even Jean seems to acknowledge the desperation of her acting talents, asking herself just before posing, “Has all my skill deserted me when I need it most?” (BM 80). Yet she persuades Sir John of her false feelings because he simply cannot tell the difference between performative emotions and real ones. He demonstrates his gullibility both when observing a crying Jean in Bella’s window and when fetishizing her exotic presentations on the tableaux stage. Blindly assuming the innocence of home theatricals, Sir John emerges as the most incompetent spectator of all the Coventrys and thus the most prone to Jean’s plotting.

Alcott suggests that all of the estate’s sites are available for a skilled performer to claim; accordingly, Jean accumulates theatrical power, and real estate, as the story proceeds. By the time she captures Sir John, Jean moves freely between the estate’s public and private spaces, in essence marking each location with her theatrical spell. Her chosen spectators (and unaware co-stars) such as Gerald and Sir John unknowingly

surrender these sites to Jean because they remain entranced by their sense memories of her performances there. Even Jean’s panicked, subpar performance of kissing John’s miniature succeeds, mainly because she established her theatrical influence in the Hall during the saloon tableaux. Whether gossiping in the parlor, gallivanting in the garden, or staging theatricals in the Hall, the Coventrys already partake in a social theatre across their estate. They insist that these activities denote their membership to a higher class. However, because Jean is a much more experienced, cunning performer in her own right, she usurps all of these spaces. Preoccupied with their own imitations of high-class gentility, the Coventrys cannot recognize that Jean herself is merely performing as a legitimate aristocrat. The most versatile stage player on the property, Jean finally becomes an upper-class citizen simply by pretending to be one. As Sir John embraces Jean and they plan to marry, Alcott affirms that home theatre does not solidify class status as much as it exposes the permeability of social boundaries.

The Perils of Fireside Reading

As the last chapter retells the novella’s events from the perspective of Jean’s secret letters, Alcott defines Jean’s triumph as a rise specifically in social rank. Ned has procured the letters from Jean’s confidant Hortense and proceeds to read Jean’s musings aloud to Gerald, Bella, Lucia, and Mrs. Coventry. The letters narrate the events of the novella entirely from Jean’s perspective. Among other revelations, Jean shares how she lied about her true lineage in order to entrap the sympathetic Coventry men. Writing that her “dissipated father” married the “lady of rank” Grace Howard as a second wife, Jean divulges that she took on the false identity of Lady Howard’s biological daughter who
had previously died (BM 100). Since Sir John knew of Lady Howard, the falsehood was especially effective: “It worked like a charm; he told Monsieur [Gerald], and both felt the most chivalrous compassion for Lady Howard’s daughter, though before they had secretly looked down on me, and my real poverty and my lowliness” (BM 100). Again, Alcott categorizes Jean’s job as governess as akin to other lower-class professions. She exposes the aristocratic Coventrys, and by analogy an insular American middle class, as prejudiced against the working orders and fixated on social eminence. Particularly biased against governesses and servants, Gerald typifies the class pretension that Jean attempts to subvert. Though Gerald and Sir John treat the governess Jean as lower-class in the beginning, they reverse their opinions when they believe that she occupies a station not befitting her bloodlines. She activates the men’s pity in order to gain access to their hearts. Alcott also demonstrates the lousy social performances of the aristocratic Coventrys; as an enlightened spectator herself, Jean demonstrates just how easily she can detect their secret contempt for her low status.

The letters reveal Jean’s ambitions for the highest social rise possible. Though she prefers the “passionate” Ned and claims “if the title had been nearer [she] would have married him,” Sir John offers her the easiest pathway to a higher class status and its accompanying securities (BM 99). Jean does not merely want to gain access to the Coventrys as a governess or even as a social equal. She wants to rule the family by becoming the highest ranking member. Undistracted by any emotional preferences, Jean views the men only in terms of social hierarchy. After Gerald expresses his love for her, Jean writes with unmitigated excitement: “The enemy has surrendered! Give me joy,
Hortense; I can be the wife of this proud monsieur, if I will. Think what an honor for the divorced wife of a disreputable actor. I laugh at the farce and enjoy it” (BM 101). Above all other aspects, Alcott frames Jean’s victory in terms of Jean’s rise in class. Jean has completed her migration from the public stage to the private home, from the working ranks to aristocratic society. Alcott’s use of theatrical language only underscores Jean’s climb to a life of leisure. Amused at the “farce” she has created, Jean shifts from being an exclusive performer to a spectator who now has the luxury of viewing her own dramas. Her ability to draw others into her theatrical world, and to withdraw herself at will, proves her command of the estate.

Alcott ultimately implies that the middle and upper classes need to change not only their social prejudices but also their moral hypocrisies. Reading the final scene in terms of class, Schewe writes that Alcott “unmasks the Coventry family, demonstrating that all virtue and social class is performative and that external markers fail to correspond to internal substance.” While Alcott characterizes the Coventrys as a particularly shallow brood, she resists such a nihilistic diagnosis of them. Jean tells Hortense that she looks forward to her marriage with Sir John in part to “turn and reject this lover [Gerald] who has proved himself false to brother, mistress, and his own conscience” (BM 101). She excoriates him because “he cast off the beautiful woman [Lucia] who truly loved him” and “he forgot his promise to his brother” (BM 101). Thus Jean does not wish to enter the family in order to destroy it but rather to change the Coventrys’ moral codes. The climax of her self-made drama will occur when she can—under the safety of Sir

---

917 Schewe, “Domestic Conspiracy,” 579.
John’s rank—expose the Coventrys for their mistreatments of herself and each other. Alan Ackerman writes that contrary to plotting a destruction of the family, Jean “wants the family to survive, and she wants to be part of it.” More precisely, she wants to improve it. By accessing the family from an outside position, Jean now can revise the family from the inside out.

In the final scene, Alcott displays how the Coventrys’ misguided devotions to leisure continue to render them socially vulnerable. The Coventrys reveal themselves to be barely more competent readers than they are spectators. Ned reads the first letter, in which Jean boasts, “They are an intensely proud family, but I can humble them all, I think, by captivating the sons, and when they have committed themselves, cast them off, and marry the old uncle whose title takes my fancy” (BM 98). Lucia promptly responds, “She never wrote that! It is impossible. A woman could not do it” (BM 98). Just as many of the family members could not recognize Jean when she enacted Judith, Lucia cannot accept Jean’s abilities to change roles. The Coventrys subscribe to such limited gender and social class definitions that they initially refuse the concrete evidence of paper and ink. Moreover, Jean outlines an entire plan which, to everyone’s knowledge, has been entirely fulfilled except for her marriage to Sir John. Yet instead of seeking out the “old uncle” to warn him, they become so consumed with reading the letters that they fail to prevent his secret marriage to Jean in the adjacent Hall. Once Sir John and the newly-minted Lady Coventry arrive and, in Ackerman’s words, “enter the family circle, literally (for they come into the parlor) and figuratively,” the Coventrys do not read the letters to

918 Ackerman, Portable Theater, 165.
Sir John. Instead, they beg Sir John to read the letters himself, at which point Jean throws them into the fire. She scores the scene with her “mocking laugh” upon the “sudden blaze” (BM 103). Here Alcott parodies the same type of disposable middle-class reading that she writes herself. Just as story-paper publishers envisioned families consuming sensational tales by the fireside, the Coventrys eagerly consume Jean’s shocking letters in their comfortable parlor. Instead of reading about the dangers of a distant public world, however, the Coventrys consume a metafictional narrative about the invasion of their own private one. The Coventrys remain as spellbound by Jean’s words as they were by her many theatrical performances. Once Jean enters the parlor in this final scene not as the traveling governess Jean Muir but as the Hall-born Lady Coventry, Alcott asserts that the borders between the public and the private can never be entirely secured.

In June 1858, Alcott composed a diary entry revealing that Thomas Barry cast her as Widow Pottle for a Boston Theatre production of J.R. Planché’s *The Jacobite*. Of the opportunity, Alcott wrote, “It was all a secret, and I had hopes of trying a new life; —the old one changed now, I felt as if I must find interest in something absorbing.” The production never came to be, as Barry, who was set to co-star, broke his leg and the show was canceled. Though Alcott had played Widow Pottle in home theatricals and in amateur venues like the Walpole Town Hall earlier in the decade, the professional Boston stage offered her a distinctly public venue. The new career which she sought was one extricated from her family and the home. Jean Muir seeks to make the opposite move,

---

919 Ibid.
from the public sphere to the private one. Her success becomes a testament to the power of theatre to erase the boundaries between the two worlds. As Jean walks away under Sir John’s protection in the last moments, she has both overturned the family and rewritten her social status there. Jean does not fundamentally change her vocation; she simply relocates it. In her first night at the estate, she retreats to her room and soliloquizes, “Come, the curtain is down, so I may be myself for a few hours, if actresses ever are themselves” (BM 11). Her constant theatricality initially appears tragic. Even as Lady Coventry, she will have to remain an actress in front of Sir John and the other family members. But now she is an aristocratic private performer instead of a lowly public one. With Jean Muir, Alcott finally debunks any outmoded class associations with the theatre and submits actors as socially respectable workers. Alcott’s “new life” may never have materialized like Jean’s. After her flirtation with the commercial stage, Alcott returned to acting in private theatricals and charity shows including, most famously, her famed performance of Dickens’s Mrs. Jarley. Yet performance perseveres in both Alcott’s and Jean’s lives because, regardless of its venue, theatre holds an eternal promise for the actress: if one identity does not work, she can always try another.
APPENDIX

Temperance Plays, Produced in the United States (through 1851):

The following plays listed (in chronological order by first production date) represent the confirmed temperance-themed plays through 1851, the year that the Maine Law shifted the temperance platform towards legal prohibition. Relying on both primary and secondary sources, the list catalogs productions in major metropolitan areas covered by the press and recorded by theatre historians. Specific theatres can be traced via the footnotes. There are doubtless other plays and productions which are not represented here, but the list is an attempt to condense several previous histories together.

Note: Several plays sometimes categorized as temperance plays—notably Richard Brinsley Peake’s The Bottle Imp [1828],* Douglas Jerrold’s The Rent Day [1832],* and Frederic Stanhope Hill’s Six Degrees of Crime (1834)—had numerous American productions in the 1830s and 40s. However, they are not included in this list, as they fit a broader genre of social play in which intemperance is one of only many problems critiqued.

John Blake White, The Forgers. Charleston (1825-1826)
Anonymous, “The Drunkard.” Nashville (1830)
William E. Burton, The Intemperate, or a Sister’s Love (1835)
*G.D Pitt. The Drunkard’s Doom; or the Last Nail. Philadelphia (1836, 1839, 1845, 1850); New York (1837, 1846)
Anonymous, “The Drunkard.” St. Louis (1838)
Anonymous, The Drunkard’s Warning. New York (1838)
*Douglas Jerrold, Fifteen Years of a Drunkard’s Life. New York (1841)
Anonymous, One Glass More. Philadelphia (1841, 1844), New York (1850)
Anonymous, The Drunkard’s Progress. Philadelphia (1842)

---

921 Frick, Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform, 78-79. Technically, The Forgers is a “dramatic poem” written in blank verse, but it is considered the first dramatized play with a distinct temperance message.
924 Frick, Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform, 92; Wilson, History, 570. Odell, Annals, IV.28; Spirit of the Times, May 16, 1846.
925 Moody, Dramas 280.
926 Meserve, Heralds of Promise, 152.
927 Frick, Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform, 79, 86; Odell IV, 489.
928 Wilson, History, 627; Charles Durang, The Philadelphia Stage: 1830-131 to 1851, 4 vol. (Library Company of Philadelphia), 478; Odell, Annals, V.569-570. Odell notes that in the wake of the popularity of The Drunkard, One Glass More was retitled The Drunkard for a Niblo’s Garden production in New York
Anonymous, *One Cup More, or the Doom of the Drunkard*. Boston (1844) 930

W.H. Smith, *The Drunkard*. Boston (1844, 1845, 1849, 1850); New York (1844, 1850, 1851); New Orleans (1844); Philadelphia (1849, 1850, 1851) 931


*Thomas Morton, Another Glass; or, The Horrors of Intemperance/The Two Mechanics*. Boston (1845). New York (1845, 1846, 1850) 933

Charles H. Saunders, *The First and Last Pledge*. Boston (1845) 934


*T.P. Taylor, The Bottle*. Philadelphia (1847, 1848); New York (1847, 1848, 1849); Boston (1847) 937

I. Courtney, *Life; or, Scenes of Early Vice*. New York. (1848) 938

Anonymous, *Retribution; or The Drunkard’s Wife*. Philadelphia (1850) 939

Anonymous, *The Last Glass, or, the Reclaimed Drunkard*. New York (1850) 940

Temperance Exhibitions

“Moral Exhibition of the Reformed Drunkard.” [New Hampshire] (1843) 941

“The Drunkard’s Reform, or, the Lost Saved?” New York (1844) 942

“The Family of the Drunkard.” Boston (1844) 943

“Three Scenes in a Drunkard’s Life.” Boston (c. 1845) 944

“The Intemperate Family.” New York (1849) 945

929 Wilson, *History*, 570.


937 Wilson, *History*, 555; Odell V, 325, 347, 352, 475, 509; Playbill—Boston Museum, December 1, 1847.

938 Meserve, *Heralds of Promise*, 152; *Spirit of the Times*, November 4, 1848.

939 Wilson, *History*, 637.

940 Odell, *Annals*, VI.34.


942 Odell, *Annals*, V.143.


BIBLIOGRAPHY

Newspapers/Magazines

Unless noted as a print version or online archive, all of the newspaper and magazine sources were accessed via the following online databases: 19th Century U.S. Newspapers (Gale Digital Collections), American Periodicals Series (Proquest), and America’s Historical Newspapers (Readex).


“At McAran’s Garden.” *The North American and Daily Advertiser* 8 June 1840.


*Boston Evening Transcript* 18 Sep. 1844.


“Correspondence.” *The American Bookseller* 1 May 1879: 343.

*Country Gentleman: A Journal for the Farm, the Garden, and the Fireside* 3 Nov. 1858: 292.


“Editor’s Table” *Knickerbocker Monthly* Nov. 1863: 473.

*Frank Leslie’s Budget of Fun.* Jan. 1862: 15.


“Hartford’s Carnival of Authors.” Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper 15 Dec. 1883: 261-263.


Hudson River Chronicle 2 July 1850: 3.


Journal of the American Temperance Union 1 July 1850.


*New York Herald* 4 June 1850: 2

*New York Herald* 16 Mar. 1845: 3.


“Prospects of the Drama.” *Home Journal* 9 Sep. 1848: 2

“The Red Ivy; or Philip the Fool.” *Frank Leslie’s Chimney Corner* 6 July 1867: 81-83. Print.


“Things Theatrical.” *Spirit of the Times* 18 Jan 1845.


**Archives and Manuscripts**


**Playbills**


Barnum’s American Museum, playbill, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 16 Nov. 1853. Playbill Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.


Boston Museum, playbill, *The Drunkard*, 20 Nov. 1849. Playbill Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.


Bowery Theatre, playbill, *Pirate’s Signal or, the Bridge of Death!!!*, 14 July 1840. Playbill Collection, Princeton University Rare Books and Special Collections.

Bowery Theatre, playbill, *Yankees in China*, 23 July 1840. Playbill Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.


**Home Entertainment Guidebooks**


**Articles and Books**


Aiken, George L. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly*. 1852. Richards 368-443.


Anon. The Record of the Madison Literary Club of Madison, Wisconsin 1877-1887. Madison: David Atwood 1887.


------. *Struggles and Triumphs: or Forty Years’ Recollections of P.T. Barnum Written by Himself*. London: Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, 1869. Print.


------. “Residential Mobility Within the Nineteenth-Century City.” Davis and Haller 37-52.


-------. “Urbanization as a Cause of Violence: Philadelphia as a Test Case.” Davis and Haller 53-70.


Johnson, David R. “Crime Patterns in Philadelphia, 1840-70.” Davis and Haller 89-110.


Laurie, Bruce. “Fire Companies and Gangs in Southwark: The 1840s.” Davis and Haller 71-88.


Pratt, Anna Bronson Alcott and Louisa May Alcott. *Comic Tragedies, written by 'Jo' and 'Meg' and acted by the 'Little Women.'* Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1893. Print.


CURRICULUM VITAE

MICHAEL F. D’ALESSANDRO

14 Cedar Lane Way
Boston, MA 02108
(617) 821-3533
mdalessa@bu.edu

Boston University
American Studies Department
226 Bay State Rd.
Boston, MA 02215

EDUCATION:

Boston University  Ph.D., American Studies (expected Spring 2014)

Yale University  M.F.A., Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism (2006)

Hamilton College  B.A., English, cum laude and with honors in the major (2002)

DISSERTATION:

“Staged Readings: Sensationalism and Class in Popular American Literature and Theatre, 1835-1875”

Advisors: Laura Korobkin, English, Boston University
Matthew Smith, Theater and Performance Studies, Stanford University

ACADEMIC HONORS AND FELLOWSHIPS:

2013  Mellon Foundation Research Fellowship, Library Company of Philadelphia

2013  Graduate Certificate in Teaching Writing, Boston University

2012  Jay and Deborah Last Research Fellowship, American Antiquarian Society

2012  Friends of Princeton Library Dissertation Grant, Princeton University

2011  Graduate Writing Teacher of the Year, Boston University

2011  Alice M. Brennan Humanities Award, BU Humanities Foundation

2011  Angela and James J. Rallis Memorial Award, BU Humanities Foundation

2011  American and New England Studies Senior Fellowship, Boston University

2009  BU Student Employee of the Year (for tutoring work), Boston University

2009  Graduate Writing Fellowship, Boston University

2007  American and New England Studies Graduate Fellowship, Boston University

2002  Arthur Levitt Scholarship (for distinction in lecturing), Hamilton College

2002  Frederick Reese Wagner Prize Scholarship, English Dept., Hamilton College

2002  F.H. Ristine Prize Scholarship, English Dept., Hamilton College

2002  Psi Chi Honors Society, Psychology Dept., Hamilton College
PUBLICATIONS


UNDER CONSIDERATION


CONFERENCE PAPERS & INVITED TALKS


TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Senior Teaching Fellow, Department of American Studies, Boston University (sole responsibility for course design, teaching, and grading)

AM200: Visions of Modern America in Literature and Film  Summer 2012
AM 301: Topics in American Studies. American Spectacle: Melodramatic Theatre and Early Silent Film  Fall 2011
Graduate Writing Fellow and Lecturer, The Writing Program, Boston University (sole responsibility for course design, teaching, and grading)

WR100/150: The City in Modern American Drama  
Spring 2012, Spring 2010, Fall 2009

WR100/150: American Romantic Fiction and the Occult, 1820-1855  
Spring 2011, Fall 2010

Teaching Fellow, Yale School of Drama, Yale University

DR6: Survey of Dramatic Literature and Theater History  
Fall 2006, Spring 2007

Teaching Fellow, Theater Studies Department, Yale University

THST 110: Survey of Theater and Drama  
Fall 2004

TEACHING INTERESTS
American Fiction, 1800-1920; Nineteenth-Century American Drama; Modern American Drama and Performance; Native-American Literature; Nineteenth-Century Occultism; Sensationalism and Literature; Urban Studies.

ACADEMIC SERVICE
Boston University, College of Arts and Sciences
Graduate Writing Fellow Search Committee  
Spring 2011
Graduate Writing Fellow Curriculum Committee  
Fall 2010
Writing Portfolio Assessment Committee  
Fall 2010
Writing Program Curriculum Committee  
Spring 2010

RELATED PROFESSIONAL WORK
Boston University, College of Arts and Sciences Writing Center
Graduate Writing Tutor, ESL and Non-ESL  
Fall 2006-Spring 2013

Yale University, Yale Repertory Theatre
Dramaturg and Literary Advisor  
Spring 2004-Spring 2006

Manhattan Theatre Club (MTC)
Development Intern/Grant Writer  
Fall 2002-Spring 2003

Hamilton College, James B. Nesbitt Writing Center
Writing Tutor/Head Tutor  
Fall 2000-Spring 2002
REFERENCES

Laura Korobkin  Joseph Bizup
Associate Professor of English  Associate Professor of English and
Boston University  Director of CAS Writing Program
korobkin@bu.edu  Boston University
(617)-358-2543  jbizup@bu.edu

Matthew Wilson Smith  Marc Robinson
Associate Professor of Theater and Performance  Professor of English and Theater
Studies and German Studies  Studies
Stanford University  Yale University
mwsmith1@stanford.edu  marc.robinson@yale.edu
(978)-604-5635  (203)-432-0748

William Huntting Howell  Dossier:
Assistant Professor of English  interfolio.com
Boston University
whowell@bu.edu
(617)-358-2523