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The Casting and Fate of "Older" Women in Nineteenth-Century American Plays

by

Dorothy J. Holland

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

The Casting and Fate of "Older" Women in Nineteenth-Century American Plays

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Chairperson of the Supervisory Committee:
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In this study I apply feminist theory and age theory to the analyze the representations of older women in nineteenth-century American plays. Reading the play scripts against contemporary sources drawn from medical treatises, advice manuals, literature, lithographs, newspapers, diaries and letters, I suggest that the convergence of sexism and ageism evident in the plays reflects an ongoing attempt to regulate female sexuality and to stabilize gender/power relations in the rapidly changing social world of mid-nineteenth-century America--a time when women's demands for legal, economic, educational, and sexual rights were beginning to gain ground.

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I am deeply grateful to Dr. Sarah Bryant-Bertail, Dr. Barry Witham, and Dr. Sue-Ellen Jacobs for their support, careful critique, and friendship; whatever is of value in this study is a direct result of the guidance and inspiration that they so generously provided in over the course of this project. Special thanks go to Professor Jack Wolcott for igniting my interest in the nineteenth-century plays. The knowledge, patience, and good humor of Liz Fugate and her library staff made research a pleasure. I acknowledge the invaluable moral support and critical dialogue provided by my colleagues Sheila McNerney, Mark Farrelly, Dennis Barnett, Irina Rudakova, Terry Smith, and Mark Weitzenkamp, and Ken Cernilgia. Finally, I am grateful for the enduring support of my brother and friend, Ray Hoekstra.

For my foremothers:
Jannetye Ton Einigenberg, who emigrated to America in 1849 and lost three of her four children to cholera on the ocean crossing. They were buried at sea.
Grandmothers Marie and Sally Belle,
My mother Dorothy Winifred,
And for the next generations:
My daughters, Megan and Zoe,
Granddaughters, Brenda and April,
And my son, Seth.

INTRODUCTION

> What do you mean, Prudence? A woman of fashion never grows old! Age is always out of fashion.
>
> Anna Cora Mowatt, *Fashion* (1845)[1]

> Perhaps the next generation, looking deeper into this matter, will find that contempt is put upon old maids, or old women, at all, merely because they do not use the elixir which would keep them young.
>
> Margaret Fuller (1855)[2]

The *aging body* is a discursive construction. In North America, it has been marked by an age ideology which promotes a controlling narrative of decline, as Margaret Gullette observes in Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife.[3] Although "common sense" might tell us that aging is natural, biological and ahistorical, Gullette charges us to look deeper into the matter: "We think we age by nature; we are insistently and precociously being aged by culture."[4] Furthermore, *women* are aged by culture in disproportionately accelerated and visibly demeaning ways compared to the cultural aging of men.

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[1] Anna Cora Mowatt, Fashion (New York: Samuel French, 1854). First produced at the Park Theatre, New York, 1845.

[2] Margaret Fuller, Woman in the Nineteenth Century (New York, 1855), 98.

[3] "Age ideology" is the term that Margaret Gullette uses to signify "the system that keeps a regime of age knowledge circulating ...another field of power and hierarchy, politics and narrative ..." Like gender and, age-ideology is a body-based system (212-213).

[4] Margaret Morganroth Gullette, Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997) 6-7.

My interest in the cultural representations of women is rooted in my experiences as a woman and a professional actor. Having worked as an actor for over thirty years--on Broadway, off-Broadway, in regional theatre, national tours, summer stock, university theatre, film and television--I have long been concerned about the *number* and *nature* of the roles written for women. Not only do women have severely limited work opportunities in a field where there are twice as many roles for males as for females; they are also affected by the ideological force embedded in such a skewed representation of the world. When a culture with a roughly equal number of men and women *consistently* represents itself at a ratio of 2:1 male to female, there is considerable erasure occurring. Obviously the skewed representation is not only in the area of gender but also in the areas of age, race, class, ethnicity, sexual preference, and disability--all the markers of identity and difference.[5]

Males are not only more numerous in cultural representation; they are also represented with more diversity, agency, and autonomy than are female characters. I believe that the stories we tell ourselves, the images we circulate--and the images that we suppress--have a profound

---

[5] For a report on the skewed representation in late twentieth-century mainstream television, see George Gerbner, "Women and Minorities on Television: A Study in Casting and Fate." A Report to the Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Television Artists. (Annenberg School of Communications. University of Pennsylvania. June, 1993.)

impact on the way we see ourselves and others and what we imagine about our individual and collective futures. As a middle-aged female in a culture that so highly values youth and so denigrates and fears female aging, I am troubled by the paucity of images of powerful, adventurous, and wise older women, and the prevalence of depictions of marginalized, enfeebled, foolish, and wicked older women.

Cultural images are meaningful transmitters of what Sandra Bem calls the "lenses of gender" embedded in cultural discourse. Bem identifies three lenses which intertwine to form the enculturation of appropriately gendered individuals: *gender polarization*, which defines "mutually exclusive scripts for being male and female ... and defines any person or behavior that deviates from these scripts as problematic... unnatural... immoral... pathological";[6] *androcentrism*, which defines male as the standard, and female as an inferior deviation whose value is recognized only in terms of functional significance (domestic and sexual) to the male; and *biological essentialism*, which "rationalizes and legitimizes both other lenses by treating them as the natural and inevitable consequences of the intrinsic biological natures of men and women."[7]

---

[6] Sandra Bem, Lenses of Gender, Transforming the Debate on Gender Inequality (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 81.

[7] Bem, 2.

Borrowing Bem's model of gender lenses, I contend that there are similar lenses through which *age ideology* is communicated and perpetuated within our culture. *Age polarization* and *youthcentrism* operate in the same way as gender lenses--as seemingly transparent determinants of age appropriate life scripts and behaviors and assumptions of youthfulness as the norm with old age as abnormal or deviant.[3] *Biological essentialism* undergirds these cultural lenses making the judgments and values seem inevitable and based in "natural" body processes. A subtle alignment between man and youthfulness and woman and age will become clear as we examine various forms of cultural discourse.

By interrogating each of these lenses of age ideology, along with Bem's lenses of gender, as they apply to representation and performance, we might loosen the hold of insidious cultural messages that too often remain clouded, or invisible, because they *seem* so natural, so innocent. "Doing age theory," as Margaret Gullette notes, is to

---

[3]"The ideology's cult of youth has this fixed 'youth' as a name for fun, energy, sexuality, intensity, hope - all the cultural goods now alleged, despite all evidence to the contrary, to have a short shelf life," writes Margaret Gullette (5). Her observations about the cult of youth in the late twentieth century, apply as well to the age ideology of nineteenth-century America. Cultural historians have identified an increase in ageism in American society in the latter half of the nineteenth century. They trace changes in attitudes toward older people moving from respect to more deprecatory attitudes. Women, they note, were targets of these negative attitudes and associations even more so than men. See Andrew Achenbaum, Old Age in the New Land: The American Experience Since 1790 (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978) and Bryan S. Green, Gerontology and the Construction of Old Age (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1993).

question the ordinary: "Theory plants red flags in discursive fields that look innocently (but are ominously) blank."[9] So pervasive and interconnected are the enculturating lenses of gender and age ideology that the representations they spawn can pass as simple reflections, harmless imitations of *the way things are*. However, they can pass as natural only until critical scrutiny reveals the mechanisms of enculturation. Then begins the work that Kathleen Woodward has identified as extirpating the profound gerontophobia in our culture. One of the ways to begin that work is "to examine critically our representations of aging and to work to produce new ones."[10]

Having said this about twentieth-century culture, one might ask why I embarked on a study of nineteenth-century cultural products. There are several reasons: first, American attitudes about aging are rooted in the nineteenth-century industrial revolution, and social historians have identified a decisive shift in the latter half of the nineteenth century regarding attitudes on aging and the aged; second, it was a time of heated discourse on gender roles and decisive action on the part of women to challenge the glaring male hegemony of the time; third, I value the historical distance and the perspective it can

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[9] Gullette 201.

[10] Kathleen Woodward, Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 193.

yield. It is my hope to identify certain cultural beliefs and practices in the field of nineteenth-century drama, in order to suggest their continued application and effects in our own cultural discourse. Finally the choice of material must be credited, in part, to serendipity. The University of Washington has a large collection of nineteenth-century play scripts. Most of the plays in the collection are British; these plays have received considerable attention from both resident and visiting scholars. A smaller collection of nineteenth-century American play scripts (approximately 400) remained largely neglected. My sympathy and curiosity were piqued, and the reading began.

I set up a database for the American play collection and augmented those with anthologized plays in Moses, Quinn, Halline, Matlaw, Kritzer, and the America's Lost Plays series.[11]

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[11] Montrose J. Moses, ed., Representative American Plays 1865-1911 (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1921); Quinn, Arthur Hobson, ed., Representative American Plays 1767 to the Present Day (New York: The Century Co., 1917) and Representative Plays From 1767 to the Present Day, 7th ed., (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1953); Alan Gates Halline, ed., American Plays (New York: American Book Company, 1935); Myron Matlaw, ed, The Black Crook and Other Nineteenth-Century American Plays (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1967); Plays By Early American Women, 1775-1850 ed. Amelia Howe Kritzer (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1995); America's Lost Plays. ed. Barrett H. Clark, vol. 1-20 (Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1963-65).

METHODOLOGY

In the analysis of each play script, I ask several basic questions: What is the ratio of male to female roles? How many older characters are represented in the play? How are they positioned in the moral universe of the play? What are the recurrent character types and what are their attributes? What is the position of the older female in the story? What is her relationship to other characters in the play? How is she delineated in consonance with, or in contradistinction to other characters? Does she play a key role in the story or is she a marginal character? Is she present throughout the play, or does she appear in only part of the plot? Is she active or passive? What is her ultimate fate?

SELECTION OF PLAYS

The choice of plays for detailed discussion was influenced by several factors: 1) As I identified recurring types of characters, I chose plays that represented those broader types as well as major variations. 2) Given the moral polarities of Victorian culture and of the material itself, I wanted to include sympathetic and unsympathetic characters to demonstrate how those values were delineated. 3) I wanted to include plays by both male and female writers to see if the delineation of character and plot differed with the gender of the writer. I must admit that

when I began, I did hope to find that female playwrights wrote female characters that challenged the restrictive gender and age roles of their day; this was not the case. While we do find nineteenth-century female novelists who examine prevailing gender ideology and challenge sex-roles with their female characters, this did not occur in the professional theatre. This should not be surprising, as novels are consumed in the privacy of one's room; many were written by women for women. The performance of a play, on the other hand, was a *public* event. Plays were largely written and produced by men, for men. Women who wrote plays--and had them produced--had to work within a highly conventional, male-dominated commercial field.[12] 4) Personal preference also played a part in the choice of plays--stage-worthiness and interesting characters were factors.

FOCUS

My primary focus is on plays from the middle of the century, although I do include considerations of both earlier and later plays. The two decades before the Civil War offer a particularly compelling cultural landscape: first wave feminism, the abolition movement, the domestic

---

[12] Nonetheless, there were many successful women in the professional theatre--playwrights and theatre managers. While their lives were certainly revolutionary in comparison with the gender ideology and gender hierarchy of the time, their representations of women on the public stage was not overtly feminist. Indeed, some of the more radical representations of women came from Dion Boucicault and John Brougham, both Irish and male playwrights.

revolution, the articulation of American middle class(es) and working class(es). Admittedly the material reflects an urban, northeastern viewpoint, although many of the plays considered in this study also had productions in theatres outside the northeast. My interest is in the popular culture, in the stories that we circulate, and how those representations contribute to the construction of identities and social relations.

Much of this study relies on textual analysis, an approach that has lately come under deserved criticism. Given that current critical view, I need to comment on the play scripts and the way that I approached them. First, I read while imagining the plays *in performance* based on my own experience as an actor and my understanding of nineteenth-century performance practices. Second, these texts were not compiled as literary texts, but were assembled from production notes. They are artifacts of performance. All of the plays discussed were publicly produced, with the possible exception of one of the widow plays for which I could not locate definitive evidence ofpublic performance.

My use of the term "casting" in the title invokes multiple meanings: the notion of a *form* into which something is poured or molded; the notion of *categorizing* or *typing* according to certain qualities or tendencies; and, casting in the sense of *throwing off, rejecting*. The

use of the term "fate" is likewise polysemic; invoking the notion of a *power* that seems to control everything, the notion of one's *lot in life,* and the ultimate *outcome* or *destiny.*

I apply feminist theory and age theory to the analysis of the play scripts and read the play scripts against contemporary sources drawn from medical treatises, advice manuals, literature, lithographs, newspapers, diaries and letters. I suggest that the convergence of sexism and ageism evident in the plays reflects an ongoing attempt to regulate female sexuality and to stabilize gender/power relations in the rapidly changing social world of mid-nineteenth-century America--a time when women's demands for legal, economic, educational, and sexual rights were beginning to gain ground.[13] What was at issue is not simply defining and controlling the female, but the construction of male subjectivity. As Linda Zerilli demonstrates in Signifying Woman: Culture and Chaos in Rousseau, Burke, and Mill,

Woman is not a being but a signification--wholly

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[13] Some highlights of the mid-century include: 1845 Female Labor Reform Association founded with workers in cotton mills in Lowell, Mass.; 1848 Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls; 1848 New York State Married Women's Property Act passed; 1850 first National Women's Rights Convention in Wooster, Mass.; 1850 Female Medical College of Pennsylvania; 1857 Married Women's Property Bill passes in U. S. Congress. The 1840s and 50s saw women make inroads into the previously all-male preserves of medicine, higher education, science, and social reform movements, as well as a proliferation of publications by women which addressed issues of education, labor, legal, and domestic reforms.

> arbitrary and fundamentally unstable because dependent for its meaning on the relational structure of language.... To think about language in this way--as articulation rather than representation, as defined by the principle of difference rather than identity--is to recognize, for example, that the term "woman" has no meaning apart from the term "man," that both derive their meaning from the difference between them and all other terms ... They are unstable since, to paraphrase Saussure, the most precise characteristic of each resides in being what the other is not. [14]

With this in mind, it is necessary for me to discuss not only the older female characters in the plays, but also the young females and males, for it is in the relations and articulations of difference that the constructed identities are revealed.

Plays do not transmit a simple reflection of life "as it is"; the theatrical representation is a complex reflection--or refraction--of the ideals, the conflicts, the tensions and anxieties of the times, showing life as it was *hoped* to be, and life as it was *feared* it *might* be. Plays reflect the social tensions of their time through actual representations and through the *absence of representations*, as well. One of the primary issues of contestation during the nineteenth century concerned gender roles and gender identity.

The development of a market economy, of an industrial, wage-based system in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-

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[14] Linda M. G. Zerilli, Linda M. G. Signifying Women: Culture and Chaos in Rousseau, Burke, and Mill (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994) 2-4.

century America brought enormous social changes. As social historian Jeanne Boydston points out in Home and Work:

> [T]he specific character of the nineteenth-century gender culture was dictated less by transformations in women's experiences than by transformations in men's. ...Social power in the antebellum Northeast rested increasingly on the ability to command the instruments of production and to accumulate and reinvest profits. From these activities wives were legally barred, as they were from the formal processes that established the ground rules for the development of industrial capitalism.[15]

This study will examine the ways in which the cultural images of women, and specifically older women, served to mediate the unsettling effects of that transformation in men's lives and identities. The increased polarization of gender and the ideology of separate spheres can be seen as an effort to stabilize social relations in a period of anxious social flux as well as to mediate the conflicting tensions of the every-man-for-himself, volatile and chaotic landscape of industrial capitalism.

Although this study concerns nineteenth-century material, it will refer to earlier periods as well as to our own time in order to articulate and elucidate the issues involved. Many of the cultural attitudes and conflicts about gender and age in the late twentieth-century reflect beliefs rooted in the nineteenth century. For instance, the irony of Margaret Fuller's 1845 remark

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[15] Jeanne Boydston, Home & Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990) 156.

about older women bearing the brunt of contempt because they don't use "the elixir which would keep them young," rests on the obvious fact that there *is no elixir* which stops the process of growing older; therefore, women were being irrationally condemned by a culture whose idealistic expectations were impossible to meet. Fuller's remark takes on yet another level of irony when read in 1999, as midlife women are actively targeted by medical and pharmaceutical interests that promote Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) as an elixir of youth, a cure-all for the ailments that "naturally" beset middle-aged women.

The construction of the middle-aged female body as a site of deficiency and disorder is as immediate today as it was in the nineteenth century, and the material effects in women's lives are as momentous as those experienced in the flesh and the psyche of nineteenth-century women under the emerging medical authorities of the time. Roe Syllba points out in "Situating Menopause within the Strategies of Power" that:

> Power produces particular bodily qualities with particular personal characteristics: the active, youthful body required by industry, the other bodies that have failed, and the bodies that understand themselves to be self-sufficient and thus see no need for criticism of social, industrial, and medical practices.[16]

---

[16] Roe Sybylla, "Situating Menopause within the Strategies of Power," Reinterpreting Menopause (New York: Routledge, 1997) 214.

FORMAT AND SPELLING

I have chosen to avoid the repeated use of "[sic]" in the quotations from nineteenth-century sources as the insertions would be so numerous as to be intrusive and make the reading choppy and awkward. Therefore, when spelling irregularities do occur in the quoted material, the reader should recognize that the spelling is that of the original. There is one exception to the above: I have standardized the form used for indicating characters' names in the quotation of dialogue from the play scripts. The forms used in the originals vary; for example, a character named Miss Ophelia might appear as "*Miss O.*," "Oph.," "OPHELIA," or MISS OPHELIA, depending on publisher and format. I will use the complete character names and bold capitals for easy identification in block quotes. This choice was motivated by concerns for both consistency and ease of reading.

CHAPTER ONE

MOTHERS LIVE FOR OTHERS

> [H]ome is [woman's] appropriate sphere of action; and... whenever she neglects these duties, or goes out of this sphere ... she is deserting the station which God and nature have assigned to her."[1]

> The *daily* round, the *trivial* task
> Will furnish all we need to ask--
> Room to *deny* ourselves--a road
> To lead us daily nearer to God.[2]

In an address to the 1847 graduating class of the Jefferson Medical College, Dr. Charles Meigs expresses a widely-held belief concerning woman's reason for being:

> She--the female--possesses that strange compound ... ovarian *stroma* ... an organ so small, so unobvious, is endued with the vast responsibility of keeping up the living scheme of the world ... Think of that great power--and ask your own judgments whether such an organ can be of little influence on the constitution of woman; whether *she* was not made in order that *it* should be made ... her ovary is her sex ... she is peculiar because of, and in order that she might have this great, this dominant organ concealed within her body.[3]

---

[1] Mrs. A. J. Graves, Woman in America Being an Examination into the Morals and Intellectual Condition of American Female Society (New York Harper and Brothers, 1841) 156.

[2] A verse quoted by Lydia Maria Child in a letter to Sarah Shaw, November 9, 1856. The context of the letter makes it clear that there is an ironic inflection to the quoting. Child had recently reunited with her husband from whom she had been separated for many years and she was feeling somewhat frustrated with the domestic duties which took so much of her time. Quoted in Kirk Jeffreys, "Marriage, Career, and Feminine Ideology in Nineteenth-Century America: Reconstructing the Marital Experience of Lydia Maria Child, 1828-1874," Feminist Studies, V. 2, no. 2/3 (1975) 116.

[3] Charles Meigs, M.D., "Lecture on the Distinctive Characteristics of the Female," Published by the class (Philadelphia, 1847) 18.

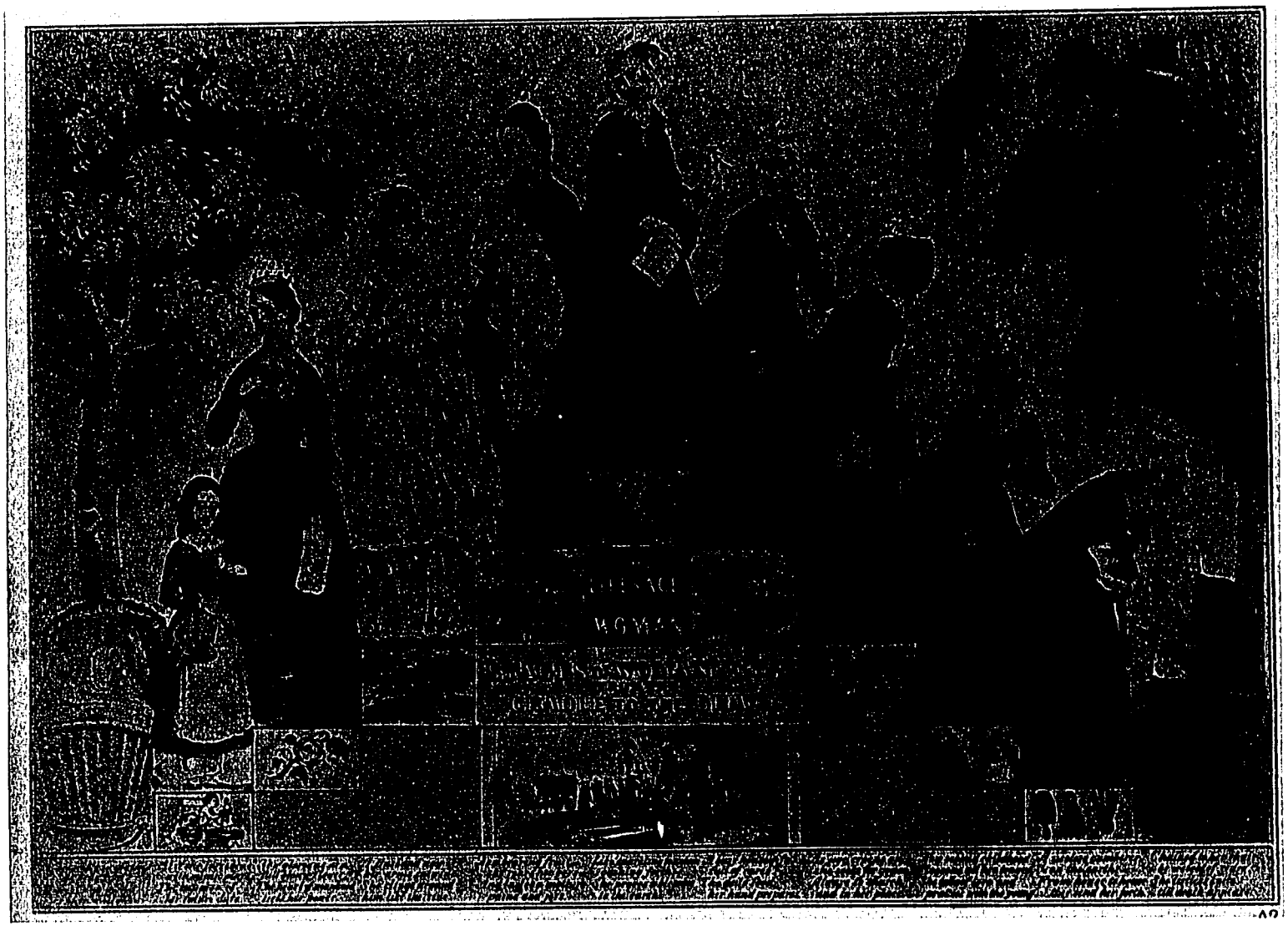

Fig. 2 "Stages of a Woman's Life" (1848) Library of Congress, No. LC-USZ62-2853

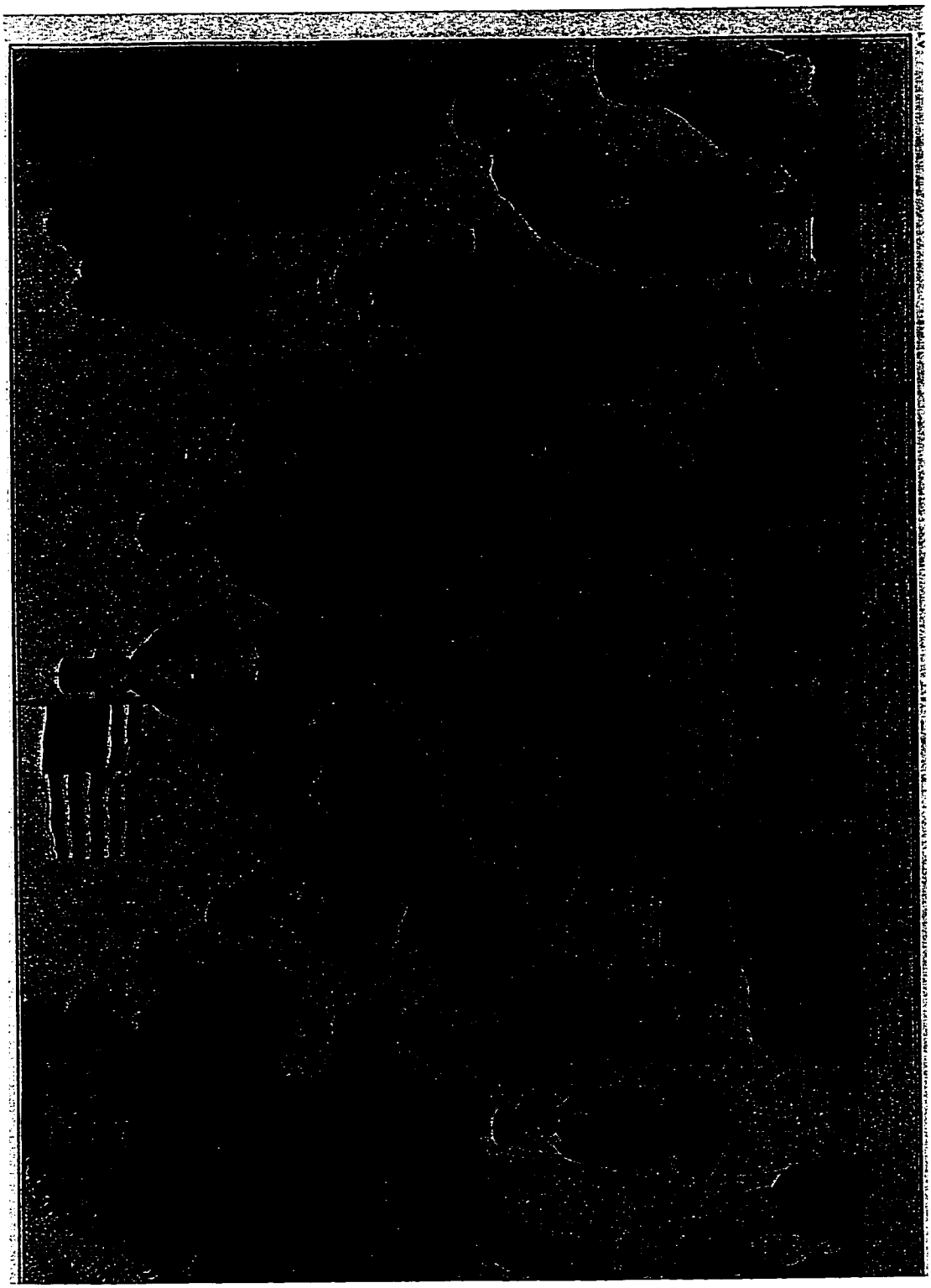

Fig. 2 "Stages of a Man's Life" (1848) Library of Congress, No. LC-USZ62-2852

This idealization of the reproductive female is clearly visible in the lithograph, "The Life and Age of Woman: Stages of a Woman's Life from Cradle to Grave." (Fig.1).[4] Here, gender ideology and age ideology produce a female life-course narrative that is marked by a brief, fertile period and followed by a sudden withering and decline into abject desuetude. The lithograph demonstrates with graphic clarity the cultural definition of woman as reproductive function. The bifurcated nature of the illustration is striking. Notice the abrupt sign of female decay at fifty. The fifty-year-old figure looks more like the grandmother of her forty-year-old self, so intensely is she wrinkled and shriveled. The dark uselessness on the right side of the pyramid serves to amplify, by virtue of the stark contrast, the radiance of the youthful bloom on the left. What is graphically represented in this lithograph is a model of female sexuality *forced* and then *denied*.[5] One of the points that I set forth in this study

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[4] Published by James Baille, New York, 1848. Lithograph (hand colored) Library of Congress, Neg. No. LC-USZ62-2852. In W. Andrew Achenbaum and Peggy Ann Kusnerz. Images of Old Age in America, 1790 to the Present. (Ann Arbor: Institute of Gerontology, 1978).

[5] My use of the term *forced* is meant not only to evoke meanings of something compelled, but also to invoke the metaphor of forcing as it applies to horticulture: "Of plants, a crop, etc.: Made to bear, or produced, out of the proper season" (OED, 2nd ed.). In the case of nineteenth-century female sexuality, the "proper season" itself was constricted to childbearing years. Female sexuality--maternal function, femininity, allure to men--was heightened, glorified, and *hyped*, to use a twentieth-century term. The heterosexual-marriage-and-childbearing scenario was culturally enforced for all young women; alternative choices were ridiculed or demonized. Female compliance and

is that the *denial* of sexuality in older women plays a crucial part in the *forcing* of sexuality in the younger women.

Compare this visual narrative to the image of the male life course in the second lithograph (Fig. 2). The male subject is shown as vigorous and capable right through the sixth decade; it is only in the seventh decade that the shadow of desuetude begins to cloud his confident presence in the world, or to domesticate his animal vitality. Man is represented as being at the apex of his power and dignity in his fifties. *Six* of the ten steps are his in strength and confidence, the seventh is a transition stage, and the last three evidence increasing decay. As Dr. Napheys observes, "Man is man for a longer time than woman is woman, with him it is a life-time matter; with her it is but a score of years or so."[6] Dr. Edward Tilt, explains the more gradual aging in males in this way:

> [T]he impulse ... given [at puberty] to the constitution of man by the sexual apparatus is, in general, fully effective and all-sufficient to insure its permanent activity until extreme old age."[7]

---

sexual availability were secured through diverse social practices and beliefs, not the least of which was the glorification of a submissive, fecund, and youthful womanhood *in contrast to* the specter of older women as invariably *lacking* sexuality, femininity, or attractiveness to men.

[6] Dr. George H. Napheys, The Physical Life of Woman: Advice to the Maiden, Wife and Mother (Philadelphia, 1890) 38.

[7] Tilt 19-20.

Note the details in the delineation of male and female life courses. First of all, the male child *has a mother.* The mother is iconographically aligned with a fruit-bearing tree. She is the fertile ground from which he launches his ascent. At the apex, he is aligned with the American flag, iconographically aligning him with national identity and the power of the state. This pinnacle of power is shared with the lion force of the male figure at forty. The emblems on which the male figures stand all suggest an animal force: goat, calf, bull, lion, fox, wolf, dog, cat, and an ass.

Look then at the female chart and see how her life course is signified. First, she has no mother. She is alone, an isolated female child in a cradle. This is a significant omission. The ground out of which male subjectivity emerges is constant. The female-earth cannot differentiate itself from itself. The emblems upon which she stands are not animals, for she has no animal power; her emblems are domestic and fertile earth images. She plays with dolls at 10, she is a flower blossoming at 20, a tree ready to bear fruit at 30, and she has fully borne her fruit by 40. The accompanying verses reiterate the reproductive theme:

> In swaddling clothes behold *the bud,*
> Of sweet and gentle womanhood.
>
> Next she forshews with mimic plays
> *the business of her future days.* [italics mine]

In her twenties she is "a full-blown flower," at thirty she clings to her husband "like a vine," and, at last, on that most glorious step,

> Now bearing fruit, she rears her boy
> And tastes a mother's pains and joys.

Then comes her rapid decline, which is valued for the service that she renders to others and for her faithful church-going. Finally, as the poem asserts, "death appears."[8] Interestingly, the last stage for the male admits no death; his verse reads:

> If we should reach the hundredth year
> though sick of life the grave we fear.

The lynchpin securing this narrative of rapid female decline in the nineteenth century, as in the twentieth, is menopause[9]--that biological marker purported to automatically usher in an array of physical, emotional, and mental disorders. Nineteenth-century American physicians writing on the subject--Bedford (1855), Tilt (1871), Kellogg (1884), Napheys (1890)--all identified the climacteric as a period of major crisis in a woman's life; they detailed the numerous afflictions that were likely to beset women during "this critical and dangerous time."[10]

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[8] Achenbaum 71.

[9] I use the term menopause throughout although it should be noted that this term was not in use until the 1870s. Earlier terms were the climacteric, the change of life, or the dodging time.

[10] Tilt 24. Additional passages asserting the dangers of menopause can be found in Gunning S. Bedford, Clinical Lectures on the Diseases of

What were the socially sanctioned roles for older women whose *stroma* was no longer "keeping up the living scheme," to borrow Dr. Tilt's phrase? In The Change of Life, Dr. Tilt notes that although "the subsistence of ovarian action deprives one form of love… still love rules paramount in the breast of woman." Love in patriarchal discourse always entails female passivity and service to others. As Dr. Tilt suggested, "failing all other forms and opportunities of love, religion often takes a stronger hold, crowning the evening of life with unanticipated happiness."[11] In sum, the post-menopausal woman was to continue her nurturing, selfless behavior in service to family, community, and church.

The figurations of older mothers in nineteenth-century plays reflect a similar construction. Sympathetically drawn older mothers exhibit the ideals of self-sacrifice, service to others, and piety. They also reflect the conception of the female life-course expressed in the "Stages of a Woman's Life" lithograph and the contemporary medical discourse; that is, they accept their own decline and apply their moral influence to make sure that the succeeding generation accepts their appropriate roles: industry, honesty, self-restraint, and paternal loyalty for

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Women and Children (New York, 1855) 375; Dr. J. H. Kellogg, Ladies' Guide in Health and Disease: Girlhood, Maidenhood, Wifehood, Motherhood (Des Moines, 1884) 371; and Napheys 409-412.

[11] Tilt 26-27.

males, and modesty, submissiveness, and marriage for females. Unsympathetic mothers, on the other hand, are depicted as age-denying, self-serving, standing in the way of love-based marriages, and exerting their own mercenary motives and ambitions.

Following is a discussion of three plays: Ossawatomie Brown; or, The Insurrection at Harper's Ferry by Mrs. J. C. Swayze (1859); Self by Mrs. Sidney F. Bateman (1856); and The Game of Life by John Brougham (1856). The first play offers an example of the idealized, sympathetic mother and demonstrates how this figure is deployed to reflect an idealized, heroic masculine subject. An important pattern is visible in the depiction of the idealized mother: she enacts a maternal sacrifice and secures a young female replacement to care for the father and the family. The second play offers an example of an unsympathetic mother whose moral laxity pollutes her son, nearly bankrupts her husband, and abuses her innocent step-daughter. These unsympathetic mothers teach and warn by negative example as they carry the onus of social disaster. The last play also offers an unsympathetic mother, yet one that is drawn with more complexity and social critique. The performance of gender, age, and maternal roles are foregrounded in this social comedy by John Brougham. In all cases, the mother is marked with the weight of moral influence within the family sphere.

OSSAWATTOMIE[12] BROWN: NO WOMEN TO UNMAN HIM

The most pressing moral and political issue facing the United States in the mid-nineteenth century was the abolition of slavery. Women played important roles in this social movement as writers, speakers, and political activists.[13] They did so in violation of a system of strict gender codes which insisted that man was active and public while woman was passive and private. Public action was the sphere of men; moral influence within the family was the appropriate sphere of women. Thus even today the woman's primary role in the abolition movement is not common knowledge.

Of all the events in the gathering of that most public civil storm, perhaps none galvanized the opposing forces as much as the Insurrection at Harper's Ferry, Oct. 16, 1859, led by the abolitionist, "Old John Brown," aged fifty-nine. Brown commanded an army of twenty-one men in an attack on the Federal Arsenal at Harper's Ferry in order to secure weapons to free slaves in Virginia and to spark a slave

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[12] A note on spelling: as I am discussing Mrs. Swayze's play, I will use her spelling--Ossawattomie--as it appears in the play script published by Samuel French, 1859, although the actual spelling in Kansas is Osawatomie.

[13] Sarah and Angelina Grimké, Lucy Stone (lecturer for the Anti-Slavery Society), Lucretia Mott (founder of the Female Anti-Slavery Society), Sojourner Truth, Abby Kelly Foster, Frances Watkins Harper, Ernestine Rose, Mrs. Maria Stewart, Susan B. Anthony, Maria Weston Chapman, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Fanny Kemble, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet Tubman and Lydia Maria Child are but a few of the women who played active roles in the abolition movement.

uprising throughout the South. Although the insurrection was a failure,[14] Brown and his men became celebrated martyrs to the cause of abolition. The raid on Harper's Ferry was the culmination of escalating confrontations following the Fugitive Slave Act (1850) and the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854). The latter made a battleground of Kansas by determining that settlers in the new territories would decide for themselves whether to support or disallow slavery. Squatter battles ensued in "Bleeding Kansas" as each side tried to outnumber the other, border ruffians from slaveholding Missouri made repeated forays into Kansas to flood ballot boxes and intimidate "free-soil" settlers, and local pro-slavery farmers formed "Annoyance Associations" to dissuade free-soilers from setting up claims.[15]

John Brown became the most notorious opponent of slavery in Kansas through his participation in the brutal massacre of five pro-slavery leaders whose bodies were hacked to death with sabers, then left in the Pottawatomie

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[14] John Brown and nineteen men (14 white and 5 black) captured the Federal Arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia on Oct. 16, 1859 with the intention of sparking an armed slave insurrection. After taking the arsenal, Brown's men captured leading citizens in the area and armed their servants, but slaves did not rise up as Brown had hoped, and over the next two days, troops surrounded the arsenal and ultimately captured Brown. In the fighting ten of Brown's men were killed, including two of his sons. Brown stood trial and was hanged on Dec. 2, 1859.

[15] For accounts of the battle over the Kansas territory see Oates (1970).

Creek as retaliation for recent attacks on free-soilers. [16] Although Brown maintained that he did not commit the murders he did acknowledge that he sanctioned them.[17] While most abolitionists promoted political and moral suasion, Brown escalated his armed attacks on slavery by leading forays into Missouri to liberate slaves and slaveholder property. Brown was the ultimate *man of action*. Fired by evangelical zeal, and armed with Old Testament support for the requisite holy war against the evil of slavery, Brown master-minded the plan to attack the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry in hopes of igniting a massive slave revolt. Both vilified and praised, he became the catalyst for the explosive social tensions running through pre-Civil War America.

As accounts of John Brown's infamy were still blazing across every newspaper in the country, three plays dealing with slavery opened in New York: Dion Boucicault's The Octoroon opened at the Winter Garden on Dec. 6, 1859; Distant Relations; or, A Southerner in New York opened at Laura Keene's Theatre on October 16, and Mrs. J. C. Swayze's Ossawattomie Brown; or the Insurrection at Harper's Ferry[18]

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[16] Brown's nickname, Ossawatomie, is taken from the area in eastern Kansas where the Brown Station, a family compound, was located.

[17] See Oates, 140-141, for a full account of the massacre.

[18] Odell lists the title as Insurrection in Kansas and Harper's Ferry, vol.7, 230.

opened downtown at the Bowery Theatre on December 16.[19] One reporter who questioned the wisdom of "representing slavery on the stage ... in the present excited state of the public mind"[20] feared that any theatrical representation of slavery might spark violent reactions--a play about the infamous John Brown could be particularly dangerous. Mrs. Swayze's representation of Brown was hardly incendiary, as she managed to present Ossawattomie Brown in a way that mitigated the volatile issues surrounding the great national question. She effected this not only through an idealized representation of Brown, but, more importantly, through the representations of the moral women surrounding him. The maternal figures in the play provided both a background to and cover for Brown's actions.

In the following section we will look at these maternal figures, noting the disparities between these characters and the real life women in Brown's family,[21] in order to demonstrate how Swayze used the maternal woman to

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[19] Boucicault's play was decidedly anti-slavery and drew threats of violence from pro-slavery forces, yet, as Myron Matlaw points out, Boucicault's adeptness in presenting the controversial subject "without offending even pro-slavery partisans" averted any violence (Myron Matlaw, The Black Crook and Other Nineteenth-Century American Plays, New York: Dutton, 1967, 203). Distant Relations represented the other side with "a graphic picture of the attachment between MASTER AND SLAVE, as it actually exists in many cases" (advertisement, New York Evening Post, December 19, 1859, 1).

[20] Leslie's Illustrated News, December 17, 1859.

[21] Biographical information has been culled from contemporary news accounts, letters, and biographies.

reflect the ideals of manhood prevalent in middle-class America in the mid-nineteenth-century. In his book Manliness and Morality, E. Anthony Rotundo identifies these masculine ideals as two competing models of American manhood: the Masculine Achiever whose traits are aggressive action, independence, self-reliance, and freedom from emotional dependence, and the Christian Gentleman who demonstrates benevolence, noble deeds, impulse control and self-sacrifice.[22] Brown's life is an exemplary attempt to embody *both* of these masculine ideals. In her dramatization of Brown, Swayze relies on the female characters to provide the surfaces which refract an image of John Brown as a Masculine Achiever and Christian Gentleman. At the same time, Swayze also demonstrates the tensions emerging between the women's movement and the abolition movement which evoked conflicting models of women as moral agents.

Swayze utilized the dramatic conventions of melodrama by relying on helpless, devoted females to provide the background and magnifying surface for male action. Action or *lack* of action are important gender markers in this text. Male strength and male heroism are constructed against a background of female weakness, dependency, and

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[22] Rotundo, E. Anthony, "Learning about manhood: gender ideals and the middle-class family in nineteenth-century America," Manliness and Morality: Middle Class masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940 (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1987) 35-51.

devotion. It should be noted that there are class as well as gender distinctions reflected in Swayze's depiction of male and female characters: the working class housekeeper is allowed to be an active agent within the play, although she is active only in the service of the family and not in any public arena.

Ossawattomie Brown is an episodic account of the events in Kansas and Harper's Ferry. Swayze uses typical melodramatic conventions by making unambiguous delineations between good and evil. In Act I she establishes the villainy of the border ruffians who terrorize innocent Kansas settlers,[23] and John Brown is introduced as a victim when two of his sons are killed by the ruffian leader, Black Jack. Act II shows Brown and his remaining sons being pursued by an angry mob, a mob incited by the villain who has framed Brown and his sons with some "outrage." Although the "outrage" is not named, contemporary audiences would know it to be the Pottawatomie Massacres. Swayze has Brown assert his innocence of any crime except speaking out against slavery. Justice is finally meted out on the villain, Black Jack, when he is caught in an assault on young Alice Brown. Brown arrives just in time to save Alice's virtue and he kills Black Jack. The villain's death is wholly justified and Brown's killing here serves

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[23] "Border ruffians" were hired thugs sent over from slaveholding Missouri to terrorize free-soil settlers in the Kansas Territory.

as a vehicle of divine retribution. The vulnerability of young women to sexual assault is a major motif both on the nineteenth-century stage and off; it is a requisite complement to masculine heroism and protection.

Act Two ends with a scene between Brown and a fellow abolitionist and co-conspirator, John Cook, wherein Brown commits himself to some *great project.*[24] The actual attack on Harper's Ferry and Brown's subsequent imprisonment are depicted in Act III. Throughout the play, Captain Brown is portrayed in an ideal light: he resorts to violence only *after* his sons are killed by border ruffians; he admonishes his men not to shoot innocent women and children; and the Harper Ferry insurrection is shown to fail only because Brown makes a noble, but unfortunate decision to spare innocent lives by allowing a train to pass unharmed as he starts the attack.

The dramatic construction of John Brown is also realized through the women that surround him. They serve to reflect, frame, and magnify an idealized, masculine hero within the traditional sex/gender system that defines male as *active* and dominant, and female as *passive,* self-sacrificing and subservient to paternal authority. They further uphold the nineteenth-century gender divisions of

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[24] Swayze does not identify the project as the raid on Harper's Ferry, nor would she have to, as her audiences would know the details. The Brown insurrection, trial and execution were the most covered and compelling news stories of the time.

separate spheres, with males shown to be active in a public domain and females circumscribed within the domestic, private sphere.

A comparison of the characters in the play with newspaper accounts and biographical material reveals that Swayze made major alterations and omissions in creating the women in her play, adjusting her characters to conform to the idealized "moral women" whose piety and moral suasion remain submissively within the domestic sphere. Swayze's alterations are evident in the depictions of John Brown's wife, his daughter, his daughter-in-law, and in the abolitionist-writer modeled on Lydia Maria Child.

Although Brown did have a wife, Mary Ann,[25] who was very much alive at the time of the raid on Harper's Ferry, Mrs. Swayze opens her play with the supposed death of Mrs. Brown. In actuality, the historic Mrs. Brown was in upstate New York with the youngest of their thirteen children while Brown and his elder sons went off to Kansas. She remained in New York during the attack on Harper's Ferry, although her daughter and daughter-in-law went to Virginia to lend support. Playwright Swayze would certainly have been aware of the existence of Mrs. Brown; she could hardly have missed the sensational, widely

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[25] Mary Ann Brown was the Captain's second wife. The first, Dianthe Lusk, who bore him seven children, died in 1832 from complications following childbirth. The following year, Brown married sixteen-year-old Mary Ann Day. Mary Ann bore him thirteen children. Seven died in childhood. Two sons were killed at Harper's Ferry.

publicized accounts of Mrs. Brown's visit to her husband in jail just before his execution. Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper even had an illustrator on hand at the jail to supply images of the Browns' poignant farewell. Nonetheless, Mrs. Swayze chooses to have Brown's wife die in the first scene of the play. This maternal death serves Swayze in several ways: it removes any criticism that might arise over a man leaving his wife and children to fend for themselves while he went off on a crusade. Mrs. Brown's death also establishes, by negative contrast, the strength and vigor of John Brown's old age. The maternal death also invokes the familiar pattern of replacing older women by younger women; this replacement is effected in the play through the character of Brown's daughter-in-law.

The maternal death establishes a sentimental moral "fog" which overlays all that follows: this is the sweet white fog that obfuscates the anarchic, violent forces at the heart of Brown's real-life actions; it is the sentimental fog of heroic melodrama that served to reassure audiences that there was nothing dangerous, nothing wild, nothing uncontrollable in the play. In fact, Swayze brackets the bold actions of this American-hero-in-the-making with the deaths of *two* maternal figures: the first is the death of his wife at the start of the play, and the

second is the death of his daughter-in-law, at the end of the play.[26]

The play opens with old Mrs. Brown at home bemoaning the fact that she has been too ill to go to her son's wedding, but soon the wedding party comes to her. Amidst the festivity, Mrs. Brown suddenly swoons. With her dying breath she exhorts her children to grant her one last request:

> **MRS.B:** Promise me to obey your father at all times, at any sacrifice. You will show him that devotion that shrinks not at the cost of life.
> **ALL:** We promise. [27]

By introducing the mother's dying request for obedience to the father even unto death, the mother figure ironically becomes complicit in her sons' future deaths. Their deaths are doubly ennobled and John Brown's responsibility is diminished. Not only do these sons fight for the highly moral cause of abolition, but they also fight out of a sworn filial duty and mother-love. Her death also allows Brown to invoke this deathbed promise in order to get his children to follow his orders, a tactic he uses at least twice in the play.

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[26] I refer to both of these as maternal deaths because the daughter-in-law literally takes over the maternal function once old Mrs. Brown dies. The daughter-in-law's assumption of the maternal function also reiterates the replacement pattern: an older woman is replaced by younger woman.

[27] Mrs. J. C. Swayze, Ossawattomie Brown; or, The Insurrection at Harper's Ferry (New York: Samuel French, 1859) 5.

Once the children have made their promise, Mrs. Brown then charges her new daughter-in-law to "take her place." Here is the replacement trope: a younger women taking the place of older an older woman in a paternal order that relies on an unbroken chain of female domestic service.

> **MRS.B:** And you, my daughter, will live to take my place towards my young, my gentle Alice--to bless Frederick with a true wife's love, and soften *his* declining years with watchful care.
> [*Pointing to the bowed form of Brown.*]
> Promise me this.[28]

Julia, the daughter-in-law, responds, "I do, I do." Satisfied, Mrs. Brown utters, "My children--Alice--husband," and she dies. Julia's phrase, "I do, I do," evokes associations with the marriage-vow to which the others in the room are witnesses. In a sense that is just what it is, for, in the course of the play, Julia will lose her own husband and live out her life fulfilling this pledge of service to the family patriarch. Julia's deathbed promise establishes the overall dramatic action of the play, an action that is not complete until Julia has fulfilled all of her offices and mirrored Mrs. Brown's death with her own death in the last scene of the play.

The importance of these maternal deaths, coming as they do at the opening and closing of the play, cannot be underestimated. Maternal devotion to patriarchal authority

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[28] Swayze 5.

and maternal responsibility in facilitating young females in their assumption of the daughter/wife/mother role for the next generation *is* a unifying action in this play. It is the domestic through line that frames and mitigates the aggressive public actions of Old Man Brown. As noted previously, the depiction of the women supports the philosophy of separate spheres. This is glaringly evident in the fact that the female characters never express any interest in, or commitment to, abolition, in itself; their dialogue and their actions are solely focused on family relationships. They unquestioningly support and revere Old Man Brown but they do not take on the cause themselves.

If we look at Swayze's delineation of Brown's daughter, she might have modeled the young Alice Brown on Brown's real-life, sixteen-year-old daughter Anne, although the obstacle to marriage that Alice faces in the play was not applicable to Brown's real-life daughter, Anne. In the play, the domestic plot revolves around the obstacles to young Alice marrying her beloved, Ralph Dearborn. The elder Dearborn has forbidden his son to marry "the daughter of an outlaw and a murderer."[29] The domestic marriage plot is not complete until this obstacle is removed. Now, John Brown *did* have a young son, Oliver (age 19), whose girlfriend, Martha Brewster (age 17), had a father who

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[29] Swayze 14.

strongly opposed his daughter's marriage to the son of an infamous abolitionist, but the young Martha defied her father's wishes and married Oliver Brown anyway. Martha (Brewster) Brown was not included in Mrs. Swayze's play; such a figure of female defiance and action would not provide the appropriately passive, domestic, moral, female background against which to foreground the aggressive action that characterized the Masculine Achiever, Brown. Omitted, too, is the historical fact that this defiant young daughter-in-law, whose nineteen-year-old husband would be killed in the Harper's Ferry raid, and Brown's sixteen-year-old daughter Anne, were both at Harper's Ferry serving as cover for Brown's militia throughout the summer of 1859. Martha and Anne watched for intruders, deflected curious neighbors, and fed the men who were in hiding at the Kennedy Farm across the river from Harper's Ferry. The real-life Anne later reported on her duties as watchwoman:

> I was there to keep the outside world from discovering that John Brown and his men were in their neighborhood. I used to help Martha with the cooking all she would let me. Father would often tell me that I *must* not let any work interfere with my *constant watchfulness.* That others could help do the housework, but he *depended* on me to watch ... I was constantly on the look-out while carrying victuals across the porch, from the kitchen ... and always at my post while the men ate their meals ... My evenings were spent on the porch or sitting on the stairs, watching, and listening.[30]

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[30] Oswald Garrison Villard, John Brown, 1800-1859: A Biography Fifty Years Later (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910) 418.

John Brown had originally asked his wife, Mary Ann, to be the one to join him to provide the feminine cover. Using the name "I. Smith," the pseudonym he used to rent the Kennedy Farmhouse, Brown wrote a letter to his wife requesting her presence immediately:

> I find it will be indispensable to have some women of our own family with us for [a] short time ... You will have no more exposure here than at North Elba; & can return after a short visit. I would not have you fail to come on by any means ... I want you to come right off. It will be *likely to prove* the most valuable service you can ever render to the world. Do *not* consult your neighbors at all about it. Oliver can explain the reason why we want you now.[31]

But Mary Ann refused. Young Anne and Martha went instead.

In Swayze's play, daring daughters and disobedient wives do not appear. The figuration of perfect masculine authority and heroic action is best delineated against a complimentary female passivity and adoration; rebellious and active female characters challenge the heroic male figure, so Swayze drew more from the conventions of melodrama than from life in her construction of Brown's family relationships. Her female characters follow culturally prescribed roles, not historically accurate roles.

Also missing from Swayze's dramatization are the active female reformers who were friends and supporters of John Brown in real life, including Harriet Tubman, whom

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[31] Villard 405.

Brown described as "the most of a man naturally" that he ever met.[32] So firmly fixed in mid-nineteenth-century gender ideology was the association of action with the masculine that a female who engaged in aggressive action was deemed masculine, "woman of action" being a contradiction in terms. John Brown met with Tubman hoping that she might give him information about the Virginia terrain and help him lead his raiders into the South to liberate slaves. Another female activist omitted from Mrs. Swayze's play was Mrs. Russell of Boston who helped conceal Brown in a third-floor bedroom against arrest by U.S. Marshals. Yet another was Mary Stearns of Medford, Massachusetts, who was one of Brown's faithful contributors and supporters.

The one active female abolitionist who *is* included in Swayze's Ossawattomie Brown is a character modeled on the noted writer, Lydia Maria Child. By including this character, Swayze draws on the highly publicized effort of Mrs. Child to visit with John Brown while he was in prison. Although Mrs. Child never actually met Brown she did correspond with him; her letter to Governor Wise of Virginia requesting a visit with Brown in prison, out of "sisterly sympathy with a brave and suffering man," sparked

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[32] An escaped slave herself, Tubman made nineteen trips in ten years into slave territory to conduct over 300 slaves to freedom in the North. Dubbed the "Moses" of her people, slave owners offered a $40,000 reward for her capture, but she was never caught.

a well-known controversy. Governor Wise allowed Mrs. Child's letter to be published in the New York Tribune and a flood of angry responses poured in that were critical of Mrs. Child. One letter was from Mrs. Mason, the wife of Senator Mason of Virginia who was the author of the Fugitive Slave Bill. Mrs. Mason's letter was published in Southern newspapers and Mrs. Child's lengthy reply was published, along with Mrs. Mason's letter, in the New York Tribune. Pro-slavery forces were anxious to condemn Brown as a fiendish anarchist and murderer, while anti-slavery forces promoted Brown as a martyr to a noble cause. Thus, when Mrs. Child publicly pursued as audience with Brown, she drew criticism on two counts: pro-slavery factions blasted her sympathy for Brown and they also blasted her as a woman seeking a public platform. Ultimately, all the Child-Wise-Mason letters were printed by the American Anti-Slavery Society in a pamphlet that sold 300,000 copies.[33]

Mrs. Sligo, the character based on Mrs. Child, appears in Ossawattomie Brown only briefly. She is not a sympathetic character. Swayze shows John Brown receiving three visitors in jail while awaiting his execution: the first is a male reporter from New York, the second is Mrs. Sligo, and the third is John Brown's dutiful daughter-in-law, Julia. To the male reporter, this welcome:

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[33] Copies of this correspondence may be found in Lydia Maria Child Selected Letters, 1817-1880 (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1982).

> **BROWN:** I am glad to see you ... there are so many false reports and misstatements regarding our undertaking, or rather its failure, that I can but look to you to set it right. I know your superior education and cosmopolitan habits render you freer from prejudice than most men, and I always look for truth from your hands. [34]

Of the second visitor, Mrs. Sligo, Brown has this to say:

> **BROWN:** And so I am to have a visit from a lady, Mrs. Sligo, I know her well by name. It is generous and kind of the good soul to come to me. But I fancy it is not so much the sympathizing woman feeling for one in my desolate position, as the strong minded lady claiming sympathy with the cause. Good soul! *She had better leave the cause alone, and claim no sympathy but what her heart teaches.*[35] [italics mine]

This was the prevailing rhetoric leveled at female activists: they were also criticized for being *strong-minded* (anathema for proper femininity!) and they were advised to stay home and *listen to their hearts*. The home and the heart were asserted to be the female's proper domain. Not only was the female activist's femininity questioned, but her virtue was also thrown into doubt if she should speak in public; indeed, many abolitionists felt that women were a liability to the cause.

It is doubly ironic that Mrs. Swayze has her John Brown character denounce women in public life: first, because Swayze was herself a woman who created a play for

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[34] Swayze 24.

[35] Swayze 25.

public performance, and second because so many active abolitionists were women. In real life, John Brown relied on the support of these female activists; still, Swayze has Brown utter a critique of female reformers that most of her Bowery audience would have endorsed.

The character of Mrs. Sligo is presented as vacuous and hypocritical. On her entrance, she gushes, "Oh, my poor, dear, persecuted man ..." and then she immediately "takes out tablet" and begins "writing his words down."[36] Sligo is shown to be more interested in gathering quotes for her future publications than in caring for the "persecuted man." As soon as the dutiful daughter-in-law, Julia, appears and "sinks to her knees" at Brown's bedside, Mrs. Sligo simply exits. It is obvious that the Sligo character appears only to allow Swayze to humorously slam female activists and then she is immediately disposed of, never to appear again. Mid-nineteenth-century social relations were still operating under pervasive social pressure for women *not* to speak out and *not* to be involved in public policy issues. Social standards of female silence reflected the following biblical passages: "Let the women learn in silence with all subjection ... I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence" and "Let your women keep silent in the

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[36] Swayze 25.

churches, for it not permitted unto them to speak."[37] With the exception of the Quakers, most Christian-informed social attitudes hobbled women's efforts at serious social activism and reform.

In real life, Lydia Maria Child did *not* visit Brown, although she offered to do so. Nervousness over the controversial nature of women's political activism prompted Brown's lawyer, George H. Hoyt, to advise Brown against the meeting with Mrs. Child. Hoyt also wrote to his contacts in Boston warning them:

> Do not allow Mrs. Child to visit Brown. He does not wish it because the infuriated populace will have new suspicions aroused & great excitement and injurious results are certain ... *He don't want women there to unman his heroic determination to maintain a firm and consistent composure.* KEEP MRS. CHILD away at all hazards. *Brown* and *associates* will certainly be lynched if she goes there.[38] [italics mine]

This missive, which the writer admonished should receive "*no public exhibition,*" speaks directly to the growing tension at the intersection of abolition and the women's rights movement, wherein the unfeminine behavior of female activists speaking publicly, organizing, and championing social/political causes was increasingly seen as a liability to the abolitionist cause. That oxymoron, the

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[37] I Timothy 2:11-12, I Corinthians 14:34-35. Although these restraints on female speech are attributed to Paul, recent feminist scholarship has suggested that they were added by later church authors.

[38] Villard 479.

public woman, the woman who spoke out and mixed in public affairs was thought to be dangerous; she was a transgressive female, open to attack by men and women alike.

John Brown's execution is not represented in Swayze's play. The last that we see of Brown is his meeting with his devoted daughter-in-law, Julia. The final scene of the play returns to the marriage plot--the resolution of young Alice Brown's blocked marriage. As noted earlier, the daughter-in-law's fulfillment of her deathbed promise to the elder Mrs. Brown in scene one forms the through line of the play. There, Mrs. Brown exacted a three-fold promise from her new daughter-in-law: 1) take Mrs. Brown's place as mother to Alice; 2) be a true wife to her son, Frederick; and, 3) take her place in providing "watchful care" for old John Brown. It is another version of the replacement trope[39] whereby younger women replace older women in the service of the men.

Daughter-in-law Julia has now fulfilled two of her three offices; she has one more: ushering Alice safely into marriage. This maternal function is pervasive throughout the nineteenth-century plays: the older woman helps facilitate the young woman's passage into marriage.[40]

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[39] This trope is common in theatrical representation and is also lived out in real life, as well.

[40] In this way, the older woman participates in what Carole Pateman calls the "sexual contract" underlying the social contract. The sexual

How does Julia overcome Mr. Dearborn's objection to the marriage of his son to a "known killer"? The servant girl, Jeptha, comes to the rescue. We can see class ideology undergirding this playwright choice. In a middle-class world where men are active and take initiative, and most women are passive and dependent, Julia cannot act without compromising her respectability and essential virtue. Such are the gender constructs in middle class social economy. Middle class women are discouraged from working and then are portrayed as incapable of providing help for themselves. Helplessness is a sacred attribute in this middle-class, gender economy. The working class servant, on the other hand, can act, since she has little respectability to protect. Swayze has Jeptha take action earlier in the play, as well; when the villain is about to attack Alice, it is Jeptha who runs for help and brings back John Brown to rescue his daughter Alice. Again, when the angry Kansas mobs burn down the cabin in which the Brown family is hiding, it is Jeptha who knows about a secret tunnel that will take them all to safety in the woods. Now, at the end of the play, Jeptha steps forward to resolve the marriage problem. Jeptha, an orphan who had grown up in the Brown household, has special knowledge regarding Alice's parentage: Alice is not really the

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contract is an unwritten guarantee of male access to females. see Carol Pateman, The Sexual Contract (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988).

daughter of John Brown. Jeptha explains that Alice was adopted and therefore not a blood-relation to Brown. This having been revealed, Dearborn agrees to his son's marriage to Alice. It is remarkable that this play about the heroic John Brown finds its resolution in his daughter's severing her relationship to him.

Now that Julia's promises have all been fulfilled, the dutiful daughter-in-law can die, and in dying be reunited with her husband.

> **JULIA:** Do not grieve for me. I am happy--oh, how happy--for I soon shall be with *him*. Farewell, my sister. Frederick, my husband. I come--I come. (*Dies. ALICE and RALPH join hands in prayer. DEARBORN turns away. JEPTHA and BILLY weep. Slow music.*)
>
> THE END.[41]

Just as the real-life Brown used females to cover his military activities at Harper's Ferry, playwright Swayze used moral and pious maternal characters to provide a female cover for Brown's violent and revolutionary actions. This moral cover served to mollify any potential audience hostility. By splitting the action of the play into separate spheres--the active-male-abolition sphere and the domestic-moral-female sphere--Swayze reassured her audience with images of traditional gender roles and a portrait of Ossawattomie Brown as a thoroughly "manned" hero whose

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[41] Swayze 27.

goodness was confirmed by the moral goodness of the women around him.

The Brown women in Mrs. Swayze's play embody the ideals of maternal self-sacrifice, moral influence, and complete devotion to the family patriarch. The mother in the next play embodies the opposite characteristics: vanity, extravagance, willfulness, and moral laxity characterize Mrs. Apex in Self by Mrs. Sidney Bateman;[42]

MRS. APEX; OR, MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN OUT OF CONTROL

Self is a social comedy which satirizes the extravagance of fashionable society.[43] Mr. Apex is a wealthy New York merchant brought to the brink of financial ruin by the extravagant spending of his wife.[44] Mrs. Apex

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[42] Published in Moses, 697-764. Mrs. Sidney Bateman (1823-1881) was born into a theatrical family; her father was actor-manager Joseph Cowell. Mrs. Bateman was an actress for a short time before turning to writing plays. At sixteen, Sidney married actor-director, Hezekiah (Henry) L. Bateman in St. Louis. She had 8 children; several of her daughters went on the stage: Kate, Ellen, Virginia, and Isabel Bateman. Kate become quite famous; her signature part was Leah in Augustin Daly's Leah, the Forsaken. In the early 70s, the Batemans took over the management of the Lyceum Theatre in London. Henry Irving did The Bells under the Batemans' management. Following her husband's death, Mrs. Bateman managed the Sadler Wells theatre in London.

[43] Other plays of this type include, Richard W. Mead's Wall Street; or, Ten Minutes Before Ten, Anna Cora Mowatt's Fashion, J. P. Wilkin's Young in New York, John Brougham's The Game of Life, and Bronson Howard's Saratoga.

[44] The significance of the name is that they are--or strive to maintain the appearance of being--at the top of the social world. Apex is identified as the most successful merchant in the city and Mrs. Apex aspires to a lavish life-style "more sumptuous and elegant than the hereditary palaces of a foreign aristocracy." (I,ii)

is the mother of two grown children: her own reprobate son by a previous marriage and her virtuous step-daughter. The play opened at Burton's Chambers Street Theatre on October 27, 1856.[45] As this theatre catered to business class audiences we can presume that the spectators would be familiar with the social world that Mrs. Bateman was satirizing.[46] A significant characteristic of this genre of plays is that the characters who bear the inordinately large share of responsibility for extravagance and parvenueism are older females. They are unsympathetic mothers who jeopardize the moral welfare of their children as well as the economic stability of their families. On the other hand, the characters that signify stability and restraint within the fictional world are elder males.

Why are *older* women chosen to represent extravagance and the dangers of uncontrolled spending? What cultural work is done by repeatedly characterizing older females as a threat to their grown children and their husbands? Which alliances are forced and which are discouraged by this constellation of relationships? And what is it about the

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[45] Laurence Hutton notes that "Self was frequently repeated in New York, notably at Wallack's Theatre" (Curiosities of the Stage, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1891, 79). It ran for three weeks in 1869 with John E. Owens starring in the role of Mr. Unit.

[46] For a discussion of theatre audiences and class, see Bruce McConachie, Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre & Society, 1820-1870 (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1992); McConachie, Theatre for Working Class Audiences in the United States, 1830-1980 (Westwood: Greenwood Press, 1985); and Ben Graf Henneke, "The Playgoer in America (1752-1952)," diss., University of Illinois at Urbana, 1956.

social construction of the middle-aged, middle-class woman that invites this association with lack of control?

In an 1871 study of five hundred climacteric women, Dr. Edward John Tilt reports:

> After having lived in a most exemplary manner up to the change of life, some, for a scamp, desert husband and children ... Some, in the midst of affluence, indulge in a propensity for stealing, and four women confessed to me that they were obliged to have their children removed, for fear they should murder them; while others are tempted to commit suicide.[47]

According to many medical experts, this propensity of menopausal women to moral failing and emotional excess was *biologically determined.* If "[d]read, goes under the name of the disorderly woman, [and] solace as proper femininity,"[48] as Zerilli suggests, then dread is particularly associated with the middle-aged, climacteric woman. Restoring her to a proper femininity is a difficult challenge.

Mrs. Apex figures this dread in the extreme; she also, thanks to the intervention of a wise old businessman, Mr. Unit, eventually reforms her disorderly ways and embodies the solace of a proper middle-aged femininity. Mrs. Apex is the extravagant second wife of the successful New York merchant, Mr. Apex. She and her profligate son bring Apex to the brink of bankruptcy and drive a wedge between him

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[47] Tilt 26.

[48] Zerilli 5.

and the daughter of his first marriage, the faithful and honest Mary Apex. Mrs. Apex indulges her own son's gambling and idle ways; she fabricates stories about her step-daughter while exploiting Mary's generous nature by extracting loans from her. Mrs. Apex is a woman out of control, insatiably demanding money for debts that never seem to get paid, and ignoring her husband's commands to economize. Determined to get the money that she needs to have her gala party, Mrs. Apex forces her son to forge a signature on a bank note from her step-daughter's account.

In his book, The Emergence of the Middle Class, social historian Stuart Blumin notes that, "as women assumed responsibility for the management of the home, the purchase of those goods that helped define the middle-class household (and refined male behavior) became a female function and prerogative." A woman's moral influence was enacted in the consumption of goods and the redefinition of the domestic space environment. Blumin also notes that

> if a woman played the role of consumer too aggressively and in service to the wrong ambitions, her moral superiority ... could be squandered. The fear of extravagance was expressed often in this age of expanding consumption and social aspiration, and was often dramatized in tales of free-spending wives who ruined their hardworking husbands. [49]

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[49] Stuart Blumin, The Emergence of the Middle Class (Cambridge; Cambridge UP, 1989) 185-86. Blumin raises an important question as to how much autonomy women actually had in their spending. He refers to the sales records of a piano company which show that purchases were primarily made by men. Nonetheless, it was women who were known as extravagant spenders.

Mrs. Apex embodies this fear. By locating the opening scene in a fashionable dry goods store that caters to wealthy and fashionable women, Bateman signals that the dramatic field is a gendered field of excess--excess unchecked desire. It is a woman's space, a space where women spend money earned by men. It is a precarious and treacherous terrain: merchandize is misrepresented, prices fluctuate, females compete in a spending frenzy, credit extended goes unpaid, and social hierarchies tumble overnight. The voracious consumption of Mrs. Apex has brought Mr. Apex, New York's leading merchant, "to the brink of failure"[50] and polluted his domestic relations as well.

The economic metaphor invoked here is remarkably like Rev. John Todd's nineteenth-century axiom that men *earn* and women *spend*. In Great Cities, Todd writes that "the vast amount of extravagant expenditure is the horse-leech which continually cries, Give, give, and which never says enough."[51] Unchecked female desire undermines that sacred nineteenth-century middle-class imperative for the accumulation and management of capital.

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[50] Bateman 719.

[51] Dr. John Todd, Great Cities 14-15, quoted in G. J. Barker-Benfield, The Horrors of a Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Harper & Row, 1976) 194.

Barker-Benfield notes that Todd "construed a man's whole being as an economic system, whose fundamental orientation was the accumulation of resources."

> A woman's spending of what an American democrat got from other men in the marketplace was a fundamental assault on all he was ... .[and] if a man gave in to such demands he would be drained of his life's blood and enslaved by woman's appetite, and he would fail in business.[52]

Playwright Bateman does not lay the crisis solely on Mrs. Apex, however. At first, Mr. Apex appears to be the put-upon, honest, hard-working husband, but his *culpability* in this economy of extravagance is soon made evident. He is vain about his wife's beauty and social success and is admittedly complicit in his own downfall, as he confesses to Mr. Unit:

> **MR. APEX:** I am proud of her with all her extravagance. When I see her drive down Broadway, with her elegant equipage, and her stately figure, and hear passers-by exclaim: "Look at Mrs. Apex, the beautiful wife of the great merchant--is that not a fine carriage and horses --and is she not a splendid woman!"--I feel as proud, ay, prouder than you do, Unit, when stocks rise, and all the world know that you have made a lucky speculation.[53]

The sexual associations are evident: her display confirms both his wealth, his power and his manhood. It takes the mercantile wisdom of old Mr. Unit to set things right in the Apex family. Unit reconciles father

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[52] Barker-Benfield 195-196.

[53] Bateman 721.

and daughter, corrects the extravagant wife and profligate stepson, and he reforms the gossiping, fashion-crazed women who surround the Apex family. It should be noted that the disorderly women are middle-aged: Mrs. Apex, Mrs. Radius, Mrs. Codliver. They are in direct contrast to the innocent young daughter, Mary, who exhibits financial restraint, honesty, and complete devotion to her father, despite his misguided mistreatment of her.

Although Mrs. Apex's behavior becomes increasingly reprehensible throughout the play, the playwright does invite us to empathize with her and the pressures that she is under. In a soliloquy Mrs. Apex moans that no one loves her, that she has "bartered health, content, affection" to get her high station, and she now lives a "false life."[54] Despite this awareness and her occasional pangs of conscience, however, Mrs. Apex cannot stop herself.

In a recent study of early American women playwrights, Zoe Desti-Diamonte suggests the possibility that Mrs. Apex constitutes a *mimicry* of middle-class femininity, meant to foreground the construction of gender roles, and that Self "manage[s] to signify the emergence of a new system of egalitarian values, embracing women as well..." I disagree with that reading. First, the resolution of Self does not

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[54] Bateman 717.

challenge traditional gender constructs, rather, it *reiterates* them.[55]

Mr. Unit bails out Mr. Apex, and he punishes the profligate son by sending him out to work. Mrs. Apex is directed to conform:

> **MR. UNIT:** Will you give up parties, balls, dress, and extravagance? ... will you cut your fashionable connections, darn your husband's stockings, nurse your grand-children, when you have any, and live as a middle-aged woman should do?[56]

She agrees and he offers a back-handed compliment:

> **MR. UNIT:** You have had a hard lesson, but you wanted it--look ten years older since yesterday! [*Mrs. APEX goes up to the sofa.*] Don't go to the glass--a very good sign!

This middle-aged female is to be the self-denying, husband-serving, maternal matron that Nature intends her be. Unit affirms an economy in which females contribute to the conservation of male resources rather than depleting them.

If we read the character alliances within the moral universe of this play, we see that the union of virtuous characters is between the elder paternal male, Mr. Unit, and the innocent young female, Mary Apex. This pattern of

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[55] Detsi-Diamanti 122. In all fairness, I must add that Zoe Desti-Diamonte couples Self with Anna Cora Mowatt's Fashion in offering this assessment. I would agree with this assessment of Fashion, but not Self. This does not lessen the import of Bateman's play at all, however; in many ways it offers a more profound social critique than Mowatt's play. I simply suggest that it is not a *feminist* or *proto-feminist* critique.

[56] Bateman 761.

alignment between a young heroine and an older male is repeated so often in the plays of the period that it assumes a mythic significance. It is a triangle in which the older female is Other to both the male and the young female. This triangulation--one in which the older female is often trivialized and vilified--undercuts female-female alliances and reinscribes the androcentric lens of gender. When power (wisdom, authority, and material control) is invariably represented as situated in male figures, then the only power source for the young female is in an alliance or identification with the male.

The morally reprehensible and ridiculed characters in Self are the three older women, the male the idler, Cynosure, and the profligate son. Men who do not work and females who do not offer affection and selfless service to others are clearly censured. It is noteworthy that the son is designated a stepson, which underscores the negative genetic (and behavioral) influence of his mother and leaves Mr. Apex's genetic (and moral) strength untainted.

AUNT CHLOE; OR, "AIN'T I A *SELF*?"

The ideal maternal figure in Self is the "old colored nurse," Chloe, whom Mary calls, "my dear old mammy."[57] Ageism, sexism, and racism all intersect in the figuration

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[57] Bateman 704, 763.

of this character. Chloe cared for Mary since she was a baby. Where Mrs. Apex is money-focused in the extreme, Chloe is wholly without any regard for money. She is openly critical of the maids who threaten to leave the Apex service because back wages have not been paid. "Dem maids you hire for money care nuffin for you but to get dere wages, but I love dat little white chile dat I raised ..."[58] Chloe's disregard for money is reiterated when Mary is thrown out of her home by her duped father and Mary decides that she must go to work teaching music.

> **CHLOE:** Now, Miss Ma'y, don't talk dat way 'cept you want to break your old mammy's heart! You sit down to teach de pianner, and her de little gals tum, tum, tum, till your head gits most busted? I'll never give my 'sent to you doin' no such thing! I's rather sell myself to Georgia! Sakes! I's rather sell myself to the debbil![59]

Aunt Chloe is appalled at the thought of Mary's debasing herself and her family by working for wages. For a white, bourgeois woman to go to work was "a sign of social and economic disaster." As Elizabeth Fee explains, "Her social importance lay in her very idleness. Nonproductivity was a major indicator of class standing."[60] Chloe understands the rules at work in this social world, a world in which Chloe's own standing and identity are also at stake.

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[58] Bateman 716.

[59] Bateman 746.

[60] Elizabeth Fee, "Science and the Woman Problem: Historical Perspectives," in Sex Difference: Social and Biological Perspectives, ed. Michael S. Teitelbaum (New York: Doubleday, 1976) 176.

Chloe, too, has her pride, her honor, an honor based on a worldview that constructs white, middle-class females as *non-workers*--inherently, *naturally*, biologically--while it constructs black females as working bodies with child-like hearts full of love and loyalty for their naturally superior, 'good' white folks and their children.

> **CHLOE:** I kin be more help dan you s'pose. I ain't quite a broke down old nigga yet, and I will go and see some coloured ladies what does up clothes, and git work from them.[61]

Chloe offers Mary the money she has saved: "I jus' kep it tied up in dis hea' old handkercher. I never had not use for money, and I'm rite glad to git shut of it," says Chloe; but Mary refuses.

> **CHLOE:** Den, if you's so mighty stuffy, I'll hunt up a nigga trader dis blessed night, and sell myself souf! What I gwine to do wid money, chile? I 'spect you is crazy, makin' such a fuss about dese dimes. You done give 'em to me, and if I can't do what I chooses wid 'em, it's time to leave! I see what's de matter: you 'spises my mite, kase I is coloured!
> **MARY:** You, too, suspect me? [*Weeps.*]
> **CHLOE:** Bles de Lord! no, chile; I just 'tend so, to make you take de old nigga's money![62]

There is no indication in Bateman's text that this figuration is in any way a *mimicry* whose intent is to expose the construction of race in mid-nineteenth-century America. The glorification of this selfless black woman

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[61] Bateman 747.

[62] Ibid.

continues right through the epilogue where the "old darkey" is first praised for being better than all the rest of them because she is completely without selfishness; and then, three lines later, she is rhetorically obliterated as the actor playing Mr. Unit asserts to the audience that "all human beings are selfish ... our labours are prompted by that great motive of human nature--*Self!*"[63] The old, black woman, not being fully human, is not a self, and thus is not included in the curtain speech disclosure of character and actor selfishness. The old black woman is depicted as the epitome of selfless maternity--all agency, identity, and sexuality are effaced.

MRS. SMILER; OR, KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

The last mother character that I will discuss is Mrs. Smiler in John Brougham's The Game of Life. Brougham's play is also a social comedy satirizing fashionable society; however, his delineation of the mother and his critique of bourgeois society are more complexly drawn than Mrs. Bateman's. Brougham foregrounds the performance of gender, delineates characters in unexpectedly gendered and age-determined ways, uses cross-gender casting, and depicts the marriage of the unusually *young* and the unusually *old*

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[63] Bateman 764.

in order to critique the bourgeois marriage-*market* mentality and age-determined life scripts.

In Brougham's The Game of Life, the merchant, Mr. Smiler, is also on the brink of financial ruin due to extravagance except that in this play it is both husband and wife who spend carelessly. Smiler's credit is overextended and his business nearing collapse, and rumors are spreading about his impending doom. Unlike the gossiping women in Mrs. Bateman's play, the gossip mongers who swarm around the Smiler family are *male*, and they are more aggressive and scurrilous in their tattle than Bateman's female gossips.

Mr. Smiler relies on two events to save him from ruin: the marriage of his adolescent daughter, Tilly, to a wealthy husband, and the inheritance that Smiler expects to receive from his rich uncle, Adam Greenleaf. The inheritance becomes less certain when old uncle Greenleaf arrives from the country with a new, and young wife, Rose May. Fearing that the new bride will devour his inheritance, Mr. Smiler devises a plan to break up "the old dotard and his toy wife"[64] by tarnishing her reputation: "Age is credulous and exacting, she is young and unsuspecting ... there is always a way of warping the most innocent actions!"[65]

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[64] Brougham 12.

Meanwhile, to forestall disaster, Mr. Smiler insists that his wife stop giving her expensive parties. Mrs. Smiler refuses:

> **MRS. SMILER:** Don't be an idiot, Smiler! They are now more important than ever! Tilly must be provided for; besides, this is no time for you to compromise your respectability.[66]

Unlike Mrs. Apex in Self, whose refusal to economize was driven by willfulness and frivolity, Mrs. Smiler's refusal is strategic: appearances are everything in the marriage market and the speculative business world. She knows that they must keep up appearances in order to secure further credit for him and a proper husband for Tilly. The Smilers are completely aware of the facades that they employ, and Brougham has them continually assuming and dropping social masks--honest when alone, and artful in public. In this, the play reflects the contemporary crisis of bourgeois authenticity. As Bruce McConachie notes in Melodramatic Formations, "one of the central concerns of the midcentury bourgeoisie [was] the authenticity of the self." McConachie describes the double bind which troubled the respectable business class: "[B]ourgeois propriety mandated rigorous self-control in public but it also enjoined its initiates to represent themselves sincerely and naturally.[67]

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[65] Brougham 8.

[66] Brougham 6.

[67] McConachie 209-210.

This code is evident in the scenes where Mrs. Smiler is coaching Tilly on how to secure a wealthy husband. In the following passage, Mrs. Smiler is upset because Tilly has been dancing with the wrong young man:

> **MRS. SMILER:** He hasn't a sixpence in the world, and you are now of an age to know that you shouldn't look, act, or speak, without a motive! ... Look at your face! quite flushed, I declare: and your hair all in disorder! and for whom? A nobody! I'm ashamed of you![68]

Tilly explains that the young man was handsome and suggests the possibility that her heart might be touched. Mrs. Smiler vehemently dismisses that idea. There is a continual play of contraries in her response. Not only is Mrs. Smiler's behavior duplicitous; her dialogue expresses the relentless double bind:

> **MRS. SMILER:** *Heart*, my dear! there's no such thing, except in books, and very young people. You must really be above such childishness. Here are the beaux! Go, love, to your room; be a good child; put a little white on your face, and come in naturally.[69]

Don't be a child. *Do* be a child. Put make-up on (to cover the natural flushing); behave *naturally*. Mrs. Smiler even contravenes her own abject dismissal of *heart* by conceding that, "Were society differently constituted, we might talk of *hearts,* but everything is artificial here, love, and we must regulate our notions accordingly!"[70]

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[68] Brougham 8.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid.

Everything is not yet artificial for Tilly; she is young and does not fully control her feelings or appetites for romance or for food. Hungrily, she yearns for supper to be served.

> **MRS. SMILER:** Why, you wouldn't think of eating before people. Fie! fie! Go and satisfy your appetite now, and at supper-time, you will be able to dally with the side-bone of a partridge ... never let anyone see you eat! Ladies should never be suspected of anything so gross.[71]

Brougham endows this middle-class mother, Mrs. Smiler, with an agile mind and a quick wit--she is not the willful, superannuated beauty that we see in Sidney Bateman's Mrs. Apex, nor the befuddled, Malapropian matron that is evident in other plays.[72] Mrs. Smiler is fully aware of her dilemma and the social imperatives bearing upon her. She can proffer the most satirically exaggerated advice on the one hand, and then a succinct social critique on the other. The following words to her daughter may sound harsh, but they are remarkably realistic. If one of the primary responsibilities of a mother is to help prepare her child to successfully function and survive in her environment, then this advice to Tilly is direct and useful.

> **MRS. SMILER:** You have been trained to become a rich man's wife, purposely. What useful thing in the world

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[71] Ibid.

[72] Examples can be found in Samuel Woodworth's The Deed of Gift, Sidney Bateman's Self (Mrs. Codliver, who will be discussed in chapter three of this study), and Mrs. Tiffany in Mowatt's Fashion.

> can you do? Positively nothing! Therefore you see it's absolutely impossible for you to think of a position in life wherein you may called upon to assist yourself in anyway.[73]

Mrs. Smiler is as caught as is Tilly in a system that she cannot change. We can empathize with her dilemma when she complains, "What a heavy responsibility rests upon the mother of an unmarried daughter of limited means." Mrs. Smiler chooses the adolescent, Littell Wyndham, to be Tilly's husband.

> **MRS. SMILER:** Here comes five thousand a year, embellishing an exquisite specimen of baby manhood. The down scarcely on his lip--yet he affects the follies and vices of adolescence! Apropos--he and Tilly are nearly of an age--it never occurred to me before. That must be seen to.[74]

The part of Wyndham is a breeches role, played in the original production at Wallack's Theatre by Mrs. Stephens.[75]

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[73] Brougham 8.

[74] Brougham 9.

[75] A breeches role is a male role played by an actress in tights or "breeches." Breeches roles were popular from the time women took to the stage in the Restoration. There are many reasons for their popularity: playing male characters increased actresses' opportunities for work as well as providing opportunities to play strong leading characters. For example, it was as Romeo that the most famous American actress of the day, Charlotte Cushman, became an international star following her 1848 performances in London. Michael Moore notes that "Many actresses performing in mid-nineteenth-century New York chose to play male roles in benefit performances" (Drag! Male and Female Impersonators on Stage, Screen and Television, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 1994, 18-19). That actresses would choose these roles for their benefit performance (the one night when they receive a large share of the box office proceeds) testifies to the draw of the breeches role. Obviously, the greatest appeal of breeches roles for the largely male audiences was that of seeing a woman's legs in public display. In Game of Life the casting of Wyndham as a breeches role also served to signify the boy's young age; this casting practice was common throughout much of the nineteenth-century. Playwright Brougham

The cross-gender casting signifies not only how young the lad is supposed to be; it also provides for polysemic readings, in performance, particularly when Wyndham *enacts* the husband-is-boss role and makes pronouncements about proper female behavior.

The breeches role foregrounds *the performance* of gender and sets up multiple contrary readings of the play, disrupting notions of the *natural* in gender roles and hierarchy. In a discussion of one nineteenth-century actress who used breeches roles to great artistic and social advantage, Faye Dudden observes:

> Charlotte Cushman in breeches took the central problematic of the theatre for women--its insistence on their bodies and its consequent tendency to reduce them to sexual beings--and turned it inside out, making gender identity itself subject to reflection. The stage was the one place in nineteenth-century culture where such identity was open to question or was at least "in play."... Her Romeo undermined the assumption that gender was natural, inborn, undeniable, and suggested instead that it was something assumed, learned, performed.[76]

Breeches will give way to unadulterated "leg shows" in the latter decades of the nineteenth century and breeches roles will be relegated to vaudeville and burlesque, but in Game of Life, playwright and social satirist, John Brougham exploits the performance of gender.

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reflected the British performance traditions in his frequent use of cross-gender casting with breeches roles and pantomime Dames (older female roles played by a male actor).

[76] Faye E. Dudden, Women in the American Theatre (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994) 99.

If we read the following exchange while remaining mindful of Little Wyndham's being played by a woman, we can sense the ironic play of signifiers that circulate throughout The Game of Life. The following exchange is between Mrs. Smiler, young Wyndham, and the gossip, Mr. Shadow, who is also is interested in young Tilly.

> **SHADOW:** I thought Miss Matilda was with you!
> **MRS. SMILER:** She'll be here in a few moments; she's so delicate and ethereal! Poor fragile flower! how she will ever be able to combat with the world, I really don't know!
> **WYNDHAM** [played by Mrs. Stephens]: Don't be alarmed, my dear madam! What are we creatures of the sterner sex intended for, except to interpose the shield of protection between the assaults of the rude world and those earth-angels!
> **MRS. SMILER:** And yet, in this progressive age, some of those earth-angels, as you call them, would fain bear the shield themselves! What do you think, Mr. Shadow?
> **SHADOW::** Think, my dear madam? That they strangely overrate their own strength, or underrate the world's roughness.[77]

The several references to women's rights in the play are in contexts that leave them open to diverse readings and ironic by-play in performance. Brougham, like Boucicault, had a talent for raising contemporary issues in a theatrical way, without seriously violating the values of his audience.

Brougham gets a great deal of comic mileage out of the adolescent newlyweds, Tilly and Little Wyndham, as they play like children at courting, fighting, and marriage the

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[77] Brougham 9.

same way they play at ball. Here, the performance of gender roles is heightened not only by the cross-gender casting of Wyndham, but because the ages of the characters has them literally *playing* at courtship and marriage.

> **WYNDHAM:** So we're going to be married.
> **MATILDA:** So Ma says....
> **WYNDHAM:** You'll have to obey a fella when you're his wife, you know!
> **MATILDA:** Indeed I don't know anything of the kind. My Ma's a wife, and I'm sure she don't obey Pa, a bit!
> **WYNDHAM:** But she ought to, I think!
> **MATILDA:** But she don't, I know--and I won't, I'm sure!
> **WYNDHAM:** You're a little fool, Tilda!
> **MATILDA:** And you're a big brute, Wyndham!
> **WYNDHAM:** If it were a man who said that, I should know how to chastise him--as it is, I can only say--you shall never see me again--there!
> **MATILDA:** I don't care a bit--not a bit--there!
> *[They make faces at, and laugh at each other.]*
> **WYNDHAM:** [*Takes up battledore.*] Do you like this kind of fun, Til?
> **MATILDA:** Umph!
> **WYNDHAM:** Let's have a game!
> **MATILDA:** *Oh, yes, let's!*
> [*They play away like bricks.*][78]

Ultimately, however, Tilly will succumb, in earnest, to the rules of the marriage game, and learn to yield to Wydham's authority. The influence of two older females will eventually lead Tilly to accept a submissive position.

There are three generations of women represented in Brougham's play: Widow Joybell (60s), Mrs. Smiler (40s), and two young women, Tilly (teens), and Rose May (early 20s). Mrs. Smiler is a central character in the early part

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[78] Brougham 15.

of the play, but she disappears after the beginning of the third act. She makes a brief appearance in the fifth act where her manipulation of Rose backfires and results in Greenleaf overhearing Mr. Smiler reveal his scheme. Mrs. Smiler is curiously absent from the resolution of the play.

Once the main plot is launched--Mr. Smiler's deceiving his uncle and ruining the reputation of the uncle's young bride--Mrs. Smiler increasingly fades from view. The main action that drives the play belongs to Mr. Smiler: the plot to deceive the old man and break up his marriage. The only place where the mother is allowed an active role is in the sub-plot: the securing of a husband for Tilly. Mrs. Smiler has no authority or independence of action in the plot to break up old Uncle Greenleaf's marriage and get his money. Initially she tries to dissuade her husband from discrediting Rose, but she soon acquiesces and helps him by insinuating herself into Rose's confidence only to obtain information about Rose's former suitor. Mrs. Smiler also offers devious advice which prolongs the misunderstanding between Rose and Greenleaf. Hers is the reverse of the advice which is offered by the straightforward Widow Joybell.

In the moral universe of The Game of Life, both older and younger generations are figured positively; it is the middle-aged Smilers that fare badly on the moral scale.

Interestingly, Brougham does not punish the mother as he does the scheming father. The mother is absent from the resolution scene. Her omission from the final scene actually prevents her being held accountable at the moment when the slander scheme is revealed. Mr. Smiler is soundly punished at play's end: he loses control of his heretofore impenetrable social façade and, in a fit of temper, gloats about the genius of his scheme, all within earshot of Rose and Greenleaf. Other misfortunes befall the guilty Mr. Smiler: his creditors send a sheriff to arrest him and his business partner announces that "The house of Smiler, Grimm, and Co. is added up, and carried over to the account of smash!" Nonetheless, Mr. Smiler is unruffled in defeat: "I played the Game of Life, boldly, and have lost!" He exits, reveling that he tainted the old man's happiness with the "poison of suspicion."[79]

Mrs. Smiler is not a part of the resolution. The unambiguous ending where villainy is punished and virtue rewarded, would be marred by Mrs. Smiler's ambiguous state. Not fully culpable in Smiler's plot to bring false witness against his uncle's young wife, she does not require visible punishment. We can only imagine this mother's fate: her husband is going to jail, the inheritance that would have saved them from bankruptcy is no longer forthcoming. She will probably be forced to live with her

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[79] Brougham 43.

daughter Tilly, since, as a woman of the respectable middle class, there is no useful thing in the world she can do, to borrow the words she herself used to describe daughter Tilly's situation.

Upon reflection, it can be seen that Mrs. Smiler actually succeeds in fulfilling her domestic duties: Tilly is well-married financially speaking, and, thanks to the wise counsel of the elder widow, Mrs. Joybell, Tilly learns to be content in her marriage, as well.

> **MATILDA:** I've taken your advice, widow, and see the result! We're never going to quarrel anymore! I intend, for the future, to like whatever he likes, and hate whatever he hates! I won't scold anymore, and he may smoke, whenever, and wherever he pleases!
> **WYNDHAM:** And therefore I have given it up altogether. I find widow that you, women, have a stronger weapon than opposition; and that mildness, gentleness, and persuasion, can make us men do just as you please.
> **WIDOW:** Now that's as it should be.[80]

That woman *rules* despite the rights of man, was a well-worn argument offered by opponents of women's rights, and this is the lesson the elder widow teaches Tilly. I will discuss the Widow Joybell more fully in Chapter Three, but for the present, suffice it to say that, in the end, traditional gender relations prevail, and an image of social stability is presented.

There *is* no resolution for Mrs. Smiler, because it is not her story; she is a supporting player in the male drama

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[80] Brougham 44.

reenacted in the play. The resolution to this drama involves the ritual exchange of a woman between two men. The social stability that is represented at the end of the play is reflected in the relations between the men who finally occupy center stage at play's end. The reconciliation is between two generations and two classes of men: the upper-class old Uncle Greenleaf and young working-class Rupert Wolfe. The latter first slanders Rose's purity, then with a guilty conscience recanted his testimony and verifies that Rose was indeed virtuous and pure when she married Greenleaf.

As Linda Zerilli observes:

> A woman's chastity was the most precious form of property ... it was the male sex-right that ensured the orderly transmission and inheritance of economic and political power. ... Without it, ... the whole museum of masculinist symbolic representations--was a collection of meaningless artifacts."[81]

Rupert Wolfe is figured as a working-class villain turned hero: he is a former suitor to Greenleaf's young bride, Rose, was beset by a series of misfortunes, lost his beloved to an older and richer man, and grows desperate and despondent and is tempted into wrongdoing by the unscrupulous Mr. Smiler. At the last minute, Rupert tearfully recants, and is forgiven by both Rose and Greenleaf. There is even the representation of rural and

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[81] Zerilli 84-85.

urban tensions here: Greenleaf is a wealthy gentleman farmer; Rose is an innocent from the country; Rupert was a poor young man from the country. Rupert comes to the city and is tempted into wrongdoing by the middle-class Mr. Smiler. Rupert's country conscience prompts him to recant and he is forgiven.

> **GREENLEAF:** The great good which you have just done, most amply atones for all of evil that has gone before! ... You have restored to me my wife--her purity and truth established beyond a doubt.[82]

Rose, too, forgives him.

> **RUPERT:** A few moments since, and the world to me, as naught; the miserably-wasted past, and he all-dreaded time to come, quenched in the mad extinction of the passing hour. But now ... *I have a future!* [83]

Rupert now has *"Hope!"*

The hope is not only Rupert's--the hope of the working man for a future amidst the turbulent social and economic forces that seem to inevitably weigh him down: the hope that is figured in this reconciliation is also the hope of the emergent middle class. Virtue, restraint, and a virile, paternal authority triumph over the unsavory, mercenary, and capricious forces at work in the marketplace. An alliance is struck between the penitent Ruperts of the world, who, for the promise of a brighter future, let go of the battles over women lost to men of

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[82] Brougham 41.

[83] Brougham 41.

means. It is the stable, hierarchical relationship between *men* of different generations and classes that is figured in this final scene.

CHAPTER TWO

A SPINSTER BY ANY OTHER NAME

> Beginning in about 1780, women of the middle and upper classes, the cradle of bourgeois individualism, manifested a dramatic new form of female independence. In increasing numbers, the daughters of northeastern manufacturers, merchants, farmers, and "poor professionals" rejected the "tie that binds."[1]

Single women had much to gain by staying single in the nineteenth century. They also had much to lose. Unmarried women retained a legal identity lost to married women under the laws of coverture. A single woman could own property in her own name, whereas her married sister could not. A single woman could sue on her own behalf and sign a contract, whereas her married sister could not. The single woman could keep her own wages; she could even engage in business. Of course her employment and business opportunities would be severely limited by her lack of access to education, training, and male-controlled business networks, but *legally*, she could engage in commercial activities whereas her married sister could not do so without a husband's approval. On the other hand, the position of a single woman was economically and socially precarious: women who chose roles other than wife and mother were likely to face a life of poverty and ongoing

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[1] Lee Chambers-Schiller, Liberty a Better Husband Single Women in America- The Generations of 1780-1840 (New Haven: Yale UP 1984) 1.

social approbation. The rewards, however, were attractive: a single woman would avoid legal death, domestic confinement, unwanted pregnancies, and perpetual servitude. Little wonder that there was an increase in spinsterhood throughout the nineteenth century. In Liberty a Better Husband, Lee Chambers-Schiller notes that the trend toward spinsterhood increased and reached a height of "some 11 percent of American women ... born between 1865 and 1875."[2] Along with increasing numbers of single women during the nineteenth century, Chambers-Schiller notes that there was also a perceptible shift in the attitudes about a single life for females. "Generally speaking, from British settlement to the Civil War, America viewed spinsters as first sinful, then supercilious, and finally blessed." Her assessment is based on antebellum advice manuals, ladies' magazines, sermons that "defined spinsterhood as a socially and personally useful state, *provided that the spinster dedicated herself to the welfare of others.*"[3] [Italics mine.] In other words, the Cult of Single Blessedness was an extension of the Cult of Domesticity in

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She notes this rise in the rate of unmarried women: "7.3 percent for women born between 1835-38, 8.0 percent for those born between 1845-49, 8.9 percnet for 1855-1859" (3).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., 35.

which women were construed to be caretakers, nurturers, and guardians of morality. The "competent spinster" figure so popular in antebellum women's literature often depicted the maiden aunt as a more appropriate, that is, a more distanced and rational, mother figure.[4] Miss Ophelia in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin, is a good example of the competent, rational, *maternal* single woman. Building on the biological essentialism of the time, female writers emphasized the maternal aspects of the single woman, thereby attempting to reclaim spinsterhood from its traditionally stigmatized position.

Although there was an improvement in the public attitudes towards single women in the mid-nineteenth century, this change did not herald widespread cultural acceptance of a single life for women, nor did the Cult of Single Blessedness last for long. As Chambers-Schiller admits,

> the increasing instability of sex roles and the growing feminist agitation against the exploitation of women in marriage focused attention on the 'independent,' or unmarried, woman. Women living outside the control of men threatened a gender structure which had subordinated women ... [and] the pursuit of female autonomy comprised an attack on male hegemony.[5]

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[4] See Lee Chambers-Schiller's "'Woman is Born to Love': The Maiden Aunt as Maternal Figure in Ante-bellum Literature," Frontiers 10.1 (1988): 34-43.

[5] Chambers-Schiller, Liberty, 191.

That many female authors and female readers envisioned new, relatively autonomous roles for women does not mean that those roles were accepted by the society at large. Derogatory stereotyping and ridicule of spinsters still abounded, particularly in the theatre. The stage spinster was a popular comic figure for the predominantly male audiences of the early half of the century; her popularity did not wane even though audience demographics shifted to include increasing numbers of females at mid-century and beyond. The *spinster* served as a cultural lighting rod, attracting the crackle of gender discourse at its most openly contentious.

According to the OED, *spinster* signifies either a woman's work or her marital status. The earlier meaning, derived from the Middle Dutch (c. 14th century), referred to "a woman (or, rarely, a man) who spins, esp. one who practices spinning as a regular occupation"; the later meaning, "a woman still unmarried; esp. one beyond the usual age for marriage, an old maid," derives from the use of the term from the seventeenth century on as the official title, "appended to the names of women ... as the proper legal designation of one still unmarried."

> I write myself spinster because the laws
> of my country call me so.
> -- J. Roberts, *Spinster* 1719[6]

In their study, Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America, John Démilio and Estelle Freedman also note that *spinster* was originally a neutral term simply meaning a female spinner, "a task which held some status and which everyone was required to do whether woman, girl, or boy." The seventeenth-century shift from a neutral or valued term to a more derogatory one was influenced, in part, by economics.

> Gradually, spinning was done in small manufacturies and became a task primarily performed by unmarried, adolescent girls, intended to occupy idle hands. Just as homespun became less and less popular over the course of the eighteenth century ... so the word *spinster* came increasingly to have negative connotations. *Both were deemed second-rate goods.*[7] [italics mine]

By the nineteenth century, "spinster" and its variant "old maid" were highly-charged terms. The implied horrors of spinsterhood impelled females into marriage. As Lydia Maria Child observed, "Many a girl has formed an injudicious marriage, in consequence of hearing sneering remarks, or vulgar jokes, about 'old maids.'"[8]

The appellation carries a dreadful pejorative significance, implying loneliness, failure and doom.

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[6] Quoted in OED, 1933 ed.

[7] John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, Intimate matters: A History of Sexuality in America (New York: Harper & Row, 1989) 219.

[8] Lydia Maria Child, "Moral Hints," Looking Toward Sunset (Boston, 1865) 179.

Spinster implies unwanted goods; it signifies, as Webster's (10^{th} ed.) puts it, "a woman who seems unlikely to marry." *Spinster*, in language and in cultural representation, serves to reinscribe what Sandra Bem identifies as "the social reproduction of male power."[9] The figure of the spinster constructs the *male* as the desiring subject with the *female* as object of desire. The male is the arbiter of value/beauty, the active subject, while the female is object of selection or rejection. The mockery of spinsterish behavior and characteristics served to *en*gender culturally desirable feminine submissiveness in young women. In short, the specter of the *spinster* served to reinforce the androcentric, gender-polarizing ideology of Western culture.

As the term *spinster* creates a particular status for women, it creates, by implication, a completely different status for men. What *is* the comparable term for an unmarried man? *Bachelor* hardly carries the same pejorative meaning as *spinster*. Bachelor implies *choice;* it implies that the man has managed to escape being tied down while he still has the probability of exercising his marriage choice in the future.

Nineteenth-century medical discourse joined with spinster-phobia to suggest that a female's physical and

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[9] Bem 139.

emotional health depended on her being married. The withered, fussy, and disgruntled characteristics of the spinster were attributed to her lack of conjugal blessing. As Dr. George Napheys warned "Too often the history of those sisterhoods who assume vows of singleness ... presents to the physician the sad spectacle of prolonged nervous maladies."[10] Doctors presented clinical evidence that a woman's physical and emotional health were at stake, should she choose a single life. Further, they warned that time was of the essence, and she must not delay, as marrying too late also presented dangers. For an *old* maid to marry in later life, is *dangerous*, as Dr. Tilt affirms in his treatise, The Change of Life: a Practical Treatise on the Nervous System and Other Affectations Incidental to Women in the Decline of Life. Tilt presents case studies of women who married for the first time in their forties or fifties and suffered serious physical and mental afflictions.

> In one case a sensible lady, whose family was not tainted by insanity, had a flooding on the wedding night, very violent abdominal pains during the following days, and went out of her mind for many months.... At all events, I deem it imprudent for women to marry at this epoch without having obtained the sanction of a medical advisor.[11]

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[10] Napheys 404.

[11] Tilt 96, 120.

The figure of the wizened old maid was a powerful impetus for young women to marry. "[N]o greater disgrace could be attached to [a girl's] reputation than to live beyond a certain age UNMARRIED," writes Louisa Humphrey in an article entitled "Old Maids and Marriages." The fear of "being an old maid" compels girls to "barter their birthright on the matrimonial altar" and to accept the first offer of marriage that they receive for fear of not getting another chance.[12]

American plays contributed to the odium attached to the old maid throughout the nineteenth century. The stage spinster is depicted as fussy, set in her ways, gullible, humorless, desperate for a husband, and ludicrous in her pursuit of same. Above all, she is unattractive. She is prematurely dubbed as *old*. Age itself becomes aberrant, pathological in her person. Cultural historians Andrew Achenbaum and Bryan Green have identified an increase in ageism in American society in the latter half of the nineteenth century. They trace changes in attitudes toward older people moving from respect to more deprecatory attitudes. Women, they note, were targets of these negative attitudes and associations even more so than men.[13]

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[12] The Sybil, Vol. II, No. 6, (September 15, 1857): 234. Quoted in Russo, 92-93.

[13] See Andrew Achenbaum, Old Age in the New Land: The American Experience Since 1790 (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1978) and Bryan S.

The association of women with rapid aging and decay can be seen in the "Stages of a Woman's Life" lithograph, discussed in the last chapter. The model represented is particularly difficult for single women. Woman is shown to be vibrant and valued in only three steps out of ten. Her prime is past by the end of her forties. The glory of a woman's life is to be found in the three steps on the left side of the pyramid: her twenties, where she is most powerful because of the effect she has then on a man's heart; her thirties, in the wedding gown which signals her passage to the glory of *motherhood*, while it also signals the erasure of her legal existence under the laws of coverture; and her forties, with an infant in her arms (hopefully the *last* of what has likely been seven or more children). Where, in this graphic representation, does the single woman, the *spinster,* fit in? Withered on the second step, mocked on the third with no wedding gown (she *is* particularly problematic here, as her legal existence is not subsumed under a husband), shunned and with no infant, the *spinster* is early cast as an "old tabby," like Miss Obsolete in James Kirke Paulding's Bucktails: or, Americans in England (1814).

Miss Obsolete is depicted as an over-zealous and misguided humanitarian. Jokes, at her expense, are based

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Green, Gerontology and the Construction of Old Age (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1993).

on her age and her unattractiveness to men, as when kidnappers surround Miss Obsolete and Jane, a pretty, young woman, in the woods: the men grab Jane and depart, saying, "Leave the Old Tabby alone. There's no danger anybody will run away with her." When Miss Obsolete's brother finds her distraught and complaining, "I've been like to be run away with," he retorts, "What mortal man undertook that feat?" When she weeps that the ruffians called her an Old Tabby, her own brother orders her to stop whimpering, and adds, "D--n old Tabby--I beg your pardon, sister. I didn't mean any personal reflection."[14] Of course not. The discourse is not personal; it is institutional. The comic mockery of the non-conforming female is part the application and transmission of what Sandra Bem calls the lenses of gender that are embedded in cultural discourse.[15] In other words, life script for females demanded marriage; any deviation was construed to be unnatural, immoral, and pathological. Culturally, the female was valued for behaviors that were of service (sexual and domestic) to men. Both the woman's life script and her functional significance were deemed to be the inevitable consequences of her innate biological nature.

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[14] James Kirke Paulding, Bucktails: or, Americans in England (New York, 1814).

[15] Gender polarization, androcentrism, and biological essentialism. Bem, 2.

We can see a vivid example of the mid-century discourse on spinsters by looking at the figuration of the spinster, Miss Ophelia, in the literary and theatrical sensations of the century: Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin; or Life Among the Lowly (1851), and George L. Aiken's dramatic adaptation, Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852).[16] Harriet Beecher Stowe's depiction of Miss Ophelia as a strong, highly moral, *rational*, *active*, maternal, happily-single, middle-aged woman reflects the competent maiden aunts of ante-bellum fiction identified by Lee Chambers-Schiller.[17]

George Aiken's "Aunt Ophelia," on the other hand, draws on the stock spinster-as-the-brunt-of-jokes so popular on the nineteenth-century stage. To fully realize the magnitude of his re-working of Stowe's Miss Ophelia, Aiken's depiction must be seen in the context of his overall treatment of the women in Stowe's story. Miss Ophelia is not the only female character who undergoes a drastic change in Aiken's adaptation for the stage. Stowe's novel is populated by over thirty female characters, with particularly strong middle-aged females

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[16] The "Aiken-Howard adaptation" would be more accurate, as the play was written and re-written under the supervision of Aiken's cousin, George C. Howard, then the manager of the Troy Museum and head of the Howard acting company. (For an account of this collaboration, see Birdoff, 1947.)

[17] Chambers-Schiller (1988).

represented. Miss Ophelia is retained but significantly re-written in Aiken's play; other female characters are eliminated or severely undercut in terms of their power and agency. The magnitude of erasure of female power in Aiken's dramatization is remarkable: gone is Mrs. Shelby, "a woman of high class both intellectually and morally,"[18] who conspired to delay the slave-trader's pursuit of Eliza and young Harry, in order to give Eliza time to get away; gone is the hostess at the tavern whose motherly sympathies moved her to offer Eliza and Harry a room to rest in; gone is Mrs. Bird, whose passionate convictions persuaded her Senator husband to break the Fugitive Slave Law he had just voted for, so as to help Eliza and little Harry get to a safe haven; gone, too, is the remarkable Quaker matriarch, Rachel Halliday, who adroitly managed a fugitive-slave sanctuary on the underground railroad; gone is the respectable, middle-aged Canadian woman, Mrs. Smythe, who helped Eliza, George, and Harry disguise themselves so that they could all board the boat to Canada right under the nose of the slave hunters.

In Stowe's novel, Eliza's escape to freedom is fostered and propelled by the moral convictions and the actions of *women*. Actor-playwright George Aiken, however,

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[18] Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly 1850 (New York: Collier, 1962) 64.

assigns all of the heroic helping tasks to one *man*: Phineas, a white Kentucky woodsman who "used to own a grist of niggers," but set them free because he fell in love with "the teetotalist pretty girl."[19] As an Ohio Quaker this pretty gal wouldn't talk to him if he owned slaves. Romance, not moral conviction, rules the stage and is his motivation. In this small phrase can be read the dominant gender ideology of the time: she is deemed a *girl*, not a woman, and her power is in her affect on him--through her physical appearance and her moralizing influence. She is depicted as a diminutive child whose beauty and purity exercise a civilizing affect on him, thus inspiring him to heroic action.

Unlike Stowe's novel, which depicts numerous heroic women, action and heroics in the Aiken play are ascribed to a male character. Instead of the mistress of the tavern, it is Phineas who pays for a room where Eliza and little Harry can rest; instead of Mrs. Selby, it is Phineas who stalls the slave hunters; instead of George escaping through his own resolve, and reuniting with his wife and child, it is Phineas who goes out *to* find Eliza's husband; and, finally, it is Phineas who fights off the slave

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[19] George Aiken, Uncle Tom's Cabin, American Melodrama, ed. Daniel C. Gerould (New York: PAJ, 1983) 83.

hunters to save the day. Act Two ends with the following tableau:

> George and Eliza kneel in an attitude of thanksgiving, with the Child between them. Phineas stands over them exulting. Tableau.[20]

Aiken rendered the harrowing story of Eliza's escape to freedom from novel to stage by writing out all these substantive women and replacing them with a rural, white male who is modeled after the popular stage figure of the Yankee. Far from chastising the white American male for complicity in and acceptance of the brutal slave system, as Stowe's novel does, Aiken's play manages to glorify him. Again, Phineas is not driven to action out of any *moral* opposition to slavery, but because he is smitten by a pretty face and the pretty gal who insists on his helping the runaway slaves. Phineas comes off as a common-man hero in the play while re-inscribing the cultural position that a woman's only power is in her beauty and attractiveness to men. Spinsters, lacking these features, are rendered powerless indeed.

In his dramatization of the sale and death of Uncle Tom, Aiken continued to eliminate or diminish the women that populate Stowe's novel.[21] The powerful and anguished

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[20] Aiken 101.

[21] Whereas Stowe's novel is comprised of close to an even number of male and female characters, Aiken's play is comprised of eight female

Aunt Chloe, Tom's wife, is reduced to a brief scene of passive acceptance of Tom's loyal decision not to run away from his master or the immanent sale that will send him into the deep South; gone are Chloe's biting protestations which are so moving in the novel; gone is her desperate move to have herself hired out for wages to help buy her husband back, only to give up those hard-earned bills when news of Tom's death makes the cash an unbearably bitter mockery. The erasure of Aunt Chloe from Aiken's dramatization exemplifies the theatrical marginalization and diminishment of women, in number, strength and complexity of character, and in importance within the narrative.

As Sandra Bem points out, the androcentric cultural lens diminishes women, using them only to provide a backdrop for the male drama. Women are constructed as supporting players to male heroes, never heroes themselves. Woman is constructed as the passive term against which the active male term is articulated.

The ingenuity and daring of Cassy[22] when she outwits

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characters and eighteen male characters. Again, the venue for the novel was private and plays were public events. The conventions of the commercial theatre have consistently maintained a gender disparity in the representation of the social world that has male characters, on average, out-numbering females 2-to-1.

[22] Cassy is the slave who Legree took into his house as his concubine. Stowe describes her as "a woman, tall and slenderly formed, with remarkably delicate hands and feet ... There was a fierce pride and defiance in every line of her face ... but in her eye was a deep,

the cruel Legree and saves Emmeline[23] is also omitted from Aiken's dramatization; likewise, omitted is the determination of Cassy and George Harris' mother, Madame de Thoux, as they join forces to search for their children, children sold as babes, now grown and with children of their own. All of these female-driven, heroic dramas are excluded from Aiken's play.[24] Female heroes cannot provide the passive background against which the heroic male figure finds its articulation.

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settled night of anguish, an expression so hopeless and unchanging as to contrast fearfully with the scorn and pride expressed by her whole demeanor"(410). Cassy is around forty years old and has a grown son with whom she is later re-united in Stowe's novel.

[23] Emmeline is the beautiful teenage slave that Legree buys at the same auction that he buys Uncle Tom. Emmeline is destined to become Legree's new concubine, but Cassy saves the girl and masterminds a clever escape.

[24] In Representative Plays by American Dramatists (1925) Montrose Moses notes in his preface to Uncle Tom's Cabin, that Aiken, as a writer, favored "broad strokes of sensation to what admirers of the book designate as its 'lowly' side" (608). The Cassy episode is filled with opportunities for sensation, as Cassy masterminds a plan of escape from the horrifically squalid and brutalizing world of Legree's Red River plantation. She unsettles Legree's mind with supposed hauntings of a former female victim of Legree atrocities; she builds and stocks a shelter in the attic right above Legree in which to hide while he vainly searches the swamps with attack dogs; she sneaks out of the shelter to care for the brutally beaten Uncle Tom, and finally, she and Emmeline escape in ghost-like shrouds, and they make it into town disguised as an elegant lady and her maid and slip onto a boat to freedom. Cassy's story is harrowing and exciting and filled with pathos; she reclaims herself from the hell of years of abject hopelessness and degradation with Legree, and she rescues the newly-bought, and newly-sullied teenager, Emmeline. As a female, and as a black woman, Cassy could not occupy center stage in Aiken's play. The world of the play was governed by the same cultural values and rules as the larger society, which dictated passive, secondary positions for females and active, central positions for (white) males.

Aiken's elimination of another female character directly alters the centrality, import, and meaning of Miss Ophelia in the story. The missing woman is Old Prue, the rusk-woman who is whipped to death by her master, and left in the cellar to die. In the novel, Old Prue's death signals a turning-point in the lives of the St. Clare family: it thrusts the empathetic Little Eva closer to death, it prompts Augustine to an uncharacteristic degree of self-revelation and character development, it ignites Miss Ophelia's moral outrage, and it provides a crucial background for the introduction of Topsy into the story. Unfortunately, however, Old Prue joins the list of strong middle-aged female characters *cast out* by playwright Aiken.

It is within this context of pervasive female erasure that Aiken scripts the part of Miss Ophelia. Aiken's Ophelia is a jerry-rigged figure, assembled less from Stowe's novel that from the popular stage conventions of the spinster from Miss Obsolete in James Paulding's The Bucktails; or, Americans in England (1814) to Miss Spindle in W. H. Smith's The Drunkard (1844) to Tabitha Stork in Lester Wallack's Rosedale; or, The Rifle Ball (1863) to Aunty Susannah in James McCloskey's Across the Continent (1870), and beyond. She is a caricatured figure of ridicule and comic effect.

How does Harriet Beecher Stowe's Miss Ophelia differ from the stage-spinster stereotype? What are Ophelia's

defining characteristics in Stowe's novel? What is her part in the story? Stowe describes Miss Ophelia as being

> tall, square-formed and angular. Her face was thin, and rather sharp in its outlines; the lips compressed like those of a person who is in the habit of making up her mind definitely on all subjects; while the keen, dark eyes had a peculiarly searching, advised movement, and traveled over everything, as if they were looking for something to take care of.[25]

She has a "clear, strong, active mind" and is well-read. She is not "much of a talker" but speaks in a purposeful and direct manner when she does speak. An energetic person, she is "the living impersonation of order, method, exactness....[the] strongest principle of her being, conscientiousness ... Miss Ophelia was the absolute bond-slave of the '*ought.*' " The eldest of a large family, Miss Ophelia St. Clare grew up on a New England farm where mother and daughters managed an impeccable house with seemingly effortless precision and without benefit of servants. At forty-five, Ophelia still lives at home, her "quiet existence" altered when her cousin, Augustine, begs her to go with him to New Orleans to help him care for little Eva and to "keep everything from going to wreck and ruin during the frequent illnesses of his wife."[26]

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[25] Stowe 213-214.

[26] Stowe 214-215.

Ophelia is drawn as the foil to her Southern cousin, Augustine St. Clare. She is punctual, efficient, determined, plain-speaking and rational where Augustine is lackadaisical, ironic in disposition, emotional, and prefers joking to straight talk. In childhood,

> he was remarkable for an extreme and marked sensitiveness of character, more akin to the softness of woman than the ordinary hardness of his own sex. Time, however, overgrew this softness with the rough bark of manhood and but few knew how living and fresh it still lay at the core.[27]

Ophelia, by contrast, exhibits what might traditionally be seen as masculine qualities: she is clearheaded, rational, purposeful, and active. She is not a figure of ridicule. She is not caricatured. Stowe's Miss Ophelia is a very intelligent and capable single woman who also expresses maternal feelings and care. There is no deprecation of her appearance, no references to marriage possibilities, past, present, or future. Stowe does not use the term "spinster"; Miss Ophelia's marital status is not an issue at all in Stowe's novel. Ophelia belongs to that group of "Happy Women" identified by Louisa May Alcott: "all the busy, useful, independent spinsters [for whom] liberty is a better husband than love."[28] This is not to say that

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[27] Stowe 208.

[28] Louisa May Alcott Diary, February 14, 1868. Quoted in Chambers-Schiller (1984) xi.

Stowe's novel is lacking in *humor* where Miss Ophelia is concerned; there is a great deal of humor, but the humor is not based on *physical appearance* nor *age* nor *lack of male suitors*. The humor involving Miss Ophelia arises out of differing life styles, differing points of view and expectations. The differences are largely based on regional distinctions, in which the exacting and driven Northerner misconstrues southern tempo and manners as signs if willful resistance or incompetence. There are also class and racial distinctions involved as underclass black characters outwit the dominant middle-class character, as when Ophelia tries to institute some order in the kitchen and the black cook, Old Dinah, craftily resists all her efforts at organization. Miss Ophelia's sense of her own superiority is one of the defects of character addressed in Stowe's novel.

Miss Ophelia possesses special knowledge: "Miss Ophelia was old, and skilled in the tactics of nursing." It was Miss Ophelia who was the first to recognize a troublesome cough in little Eva. As Eva's illness waxes and wanes, Miss Ophelia's special knowledge is aligned with that of the doctor. As Stowe writes, "Miss Ophelia and the physician alone felt no encouragement from this illusive

truce."[29] When Eva's illness takes its inevitable turn for the worse, it is Miss Ophelia who ably cares for the child.

> With so well-trained a hand and eye, such perfect adroitness and practice in every art which could promote neatness and comfort ... such a perfect accuracy in remembering every prescription and direction of the doctor's.... [Miss Ophelia's] little peculiarities and setness, so unlike the careless freedom of southern manners, fade to unimportance, as she earned her the respect of all.[30]

Most importantly, Miss Ophelia occupies a crucial place in Stowe's novel. Stowe uses Ophelia to express one of the central themes of the book: Northerners are complicit in the propagation of the slave system. Northern *Christians* are particularly targeted in her critique and challenged to understand and amend the error of their ways. Miss Ophelia, as the principle Northern character, embodies both the moral failing *and* its solution.

In one of the most direct and sustained discussions of slavery in the novel, Augustine St. Clare asks Ophelia what is to become of slaves *if* they were to be liberated? Miss Ophelia insists that *education* can reclaim the masses who have been unjustly appropriated and subjugated by Southern slavery. But St. Clare suggests that Northerners are only in favor of education for blacks when those blacks are far off in a mission field somewhere; were freed black slaves

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[29] Stowe 318,331.

[30] Stowe 349.

to head north, he insists, they would find themselves unwelcome and shunned. St. Clare accuses Northerners of being hypocritical regarding slavery. Miss Ophelia disagrees, and soon St. Clare challenges Ophelia to act on her convictions; he purchases Topsy, a feisty young black girl, and gives her to Ophelia to *educate*. At first, Ophelia does not want the child, but when St. Clare reminds Ophelia of her advocacy for education, rather than beatings, Ophelia accepts her duty without further resistance.

To return to my earlier discussion of Aiken's deletion of Old Prue from the story, affecting the introduction of Topsy: Stowe prepares the way for Topsy's arrival into the story by preceding it with the harrowing story of Old Prue, a grumbling old black woman who delivered bread to the St. Clare's. Prue is sullen, out-spoken, and a heavy drinker. When one of the young, light-skinned house servants taunts her, Prue strikes back. Here is Stowe's account:

> Ye think ye're mighty fine ... frolickin' and tossin' yer head, and lookin' down on everybody. Well, never mind - you may live to be a poor, old, cut-up crittur, like me. Hope to the Lord you do; then see if ye won't drink-drink-drink-yerself into torment; and sarve ye right, too, -ugh!" and, with a malignant howl, the woman left the room.[31]

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[31] Stowe 271.

We learn that this defiant old woman, whose back is so scarred from cutting that "she can't never get a dress together over it," was raised in Kentucky:

> A man kept me to breed chil'en for market, and sold 'em as fast as they got big enough; last of all, he sold me to a speculator, and my Mas'r got me o' him.[32]

Prue gave birth to one last child on the new plantation, and she had hoped to be able to keep it, but when her mistress fell ill, Prue, who tended the ailing woman, also fell ill.

> I tuck the fever, and my milk all left me, and the child it pined to skin and bone, and Missis wouldn't buy milk for it. She wouldn't hear to me when I telled her I had't milk. She said she knowed I could feed it on what other folks eat; and the child kinder pined and pined, and cried, and cried, and cried, day and night, and got all skin and bones, and Missis got sot agin it, and she said 'twarn't nothin' but crossness ... she wouldn't let me have it o' nights, 'cause she said, it kept me awake, and made me good for nothin. She made me sleep in her room; and I had to put it away off in a little kind o' garret, and thar it cried itself to death, one night.
> It did; and I tuck to drinkin' to keep its cryin' out of my ears! I did, - and I will drink! I will, if I go to torment for it! Mas'r says I shall go to torment, and I tell him I've got thar now![33]

When, a few days later, a different woman delivers the bread, it is clear that something has happened to Old Prue.

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[32] Stowe 273.

[33] Ibid.

One of the slaves reports that Prue got drunk again "and they had her down cellar," meaning she was beaten senseless once again, "and thar they left her all day, - and I hern 'em saying that the *flies had got to her,* " and *she's dead!*"[34]

When Miss Ophelia hears this news about Old Prue, she is outraged and appalled; Prue's death marks a major turning point in the novel. By placing Topsy's arrival *after* this disturbing episode, the reader has seen Ophelia's outrage at the injustice and brutality of slavery; Ophelia's position on education and her critique of the slave system have been established; therefore, the stakes are high for Ophelia when she does take on the mission of educating Topsy. It turns out that Topsy, too, has been beaten by *her* master, as Ophelia discovers are scars on the young girl's back when she bathes the child.

Miss Ophelia's efforts at educating Topsy are frustrated time and time again as the grinning Topsy continues to steal and tell lies. Ophelia's problem is how to correct Topsy without whipping her. "Children always have to be whipped ... I never heard of bringing them up without," Ophelia confides to St. Clare.[35] Stowe's Miss Ophelia is not a caricature, she is a multi-faceted

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[34] Stowe 275.

[35] Stowe 303.

character--a good person, but certainly not a perfect one. She is often perplexed and challenged to re-evaluate her *own* methods, thinking, and behavior.

It is through the character of Miss Ophelia that Stowe demonstrates that brutality is not only realized in the form of *physical blows*, but also in more subtle, equally dehumanizing assaults, as well. Miss Ophelia comes to this humbling realization when, at her wit's end over the latest Topsy prank, she is ready to give up on the child for good and send her away. Young Eva, weakened by illness and by despair over the fate of poor slaves like Old Prue and Topsy, intercedes and takes the rebellious Topsy aside for Stowe's famous "What's makes you so bad?" scene:

> "What does make you so bad, Topsy? Why won't you try to be good? Don't you love *anybody*, Topsy?" "Donno nothing 'bout love; I love candy and sich, that's all," said Topsy.... "But, Topsy, if you'd only try to be good, you might-" "Couldn't never be nothun' but a nigger, if I was ever so good," said Topsy." "If I could be skinned, and come white, I'd try then." "But people can love you, if you are black, Topsy. Miss Ophelia would love you, if you were good."... "No; she can't bar me, 'cause I'm a nigger!- she'd soon have a toad touch her! There can't be nobody love niggers, and niggers can't do nothin'! I don't care," said Topsy whistling.[36]

When Eva touches her and declares her love for Topsy, "The round, keen eyes of the black child were overcast with tears; - large, bright drops rolled heavily down, one by

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[36] Stowe 339.

one..." It is a turning point for Topsy and for Miss Ophelia, who observes the scene from a distance. Miss Ophelia admits her prejudice to St. Clare: "it's a fact, I never could bear to have that child touch me, but I didn't think she knew it."[37]

In Stowe's novel, Miss Ophelia embodies the criticism that Stowe aims at her fellow New Englanders as well as her proscription for change. Stowe voiced this criticism of New Englanders more directly in her explicating book, The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin(1853):

> In New England the negro has been treated as belonging to an inferior race of beings; forced to sit apart by himself in the place of worship; his children excluded from the schools; himself excluded from the railroad-car and omnibus, and the peculiarities of his race made the subject of bitter contempt and ridicule.... The effect of this has been directly to degrade and depress the race; and then this very degradation and depression has been pleaded as the reason for continuing this course.[38]

For Stowe, Miss Ophelia stands for New Englanders--capable, forthright and practical. She also stands for Northern Christians ignorantly (or not so ignorantly) caught in a web of hypocrisy. In many respects, Ophelia carries hope in the novel, the possibility of change, the possibility of learning how to educate each other and to foster tolerance

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[37] Stowe 340.

[38] Harriet Beecher Stowe, The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin (Boston, 1853) 52.

and respect between white and black Americans.[39] She also figures the strength and power that women possess in solidarity.

Playwright-actor George Aiken, on the other hand, uses Miss Ophelia as the focal point of comic relief. In order to expand the comic possibilities of her character, Aiken oversimplifies Ophelia, decentralizes her position in the story, and eliminates any character growth; in other words, Aiken's Ophelia conforms to the stereotypical stage spinster. Furthermore, in order to fully capitalize on the stereotype, Aiken adds new comic scenes and two new characters not appearing in the novel--Gumption Cute and Deacon Perry--to interact with Ophelia. Gumption Cute is a reprobate Yankee-type who "speculates" in anything that might bring him easy money; he claims to be Ophelia's distant nephew and hopes to cash in on her supposed fortune. Deacon Perry is a recent widower, who provides comic diversion in the requisite aged-spinster-acts-coy-at-the-prospect-of-marriage scene.

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[39] It should be noted that, while Stowe promoted a strong liberal, or even radical Christian philosophy regarding relationship between the races, her language regarding citizenship in the novel indicates that she did not grant the status of American citizen to blacks. Not only do her leading black characters, once freed, emigrate to Africa (Liberia), but Stowe repeatedly refers to Africa as *their* country. Near the end of the novel, Stowe reveals what subsequently happened to the major characters; here she notes that Topsy became a missionary to Africa, where she is "teaching the children of her own country"(497). Topsy was born in Louisiana and raised in Vermont!

How is the character of Aiken's Ophelia rendered differently from Harriet Beecher Stowe's Miss Ophelia? Aiken's Ophelia is drawn as a one-dimensional, disapproving spinster, reduced to a perpetual litany of "How shiftless!" --no doubt accompanied by some exaggerated facial expression calculated to draw laughter. There is no sense of personal competence, intelligence, or serious moral convictions in this Ophelia. There are no discussions of slavery, no soul-searching, no new insights reached by this character. Aiken's stage Ophelia also has no special medical knowledge; the male doctor is the sole arbiter of Little Eva's illness.

Since Ophelia's function is wholly a comic one in the play, Aiken eliminated the Old Prue episode which preceded the entrance of Topsy into the novel. Aiken has St. Clare give Topsy to Ophelia in her first scene, without the benefit of the Old Prue episode or Ophelia's tirade on the injustice of the system which in the novel prompts St. Clare's purchase of the girl. Instead, Aiken simply has Augustine make a passing remark to Ophelia as they arrive at the New Orleans estate about her "always preaching about educating," then has him present her with someone to educate.[40] Ophelia's supposed concern with education is not evidenced in the play, however; this Ophelia is depicted as

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[40] Aiken 91.

a disapproving old prude, endlessly intoning, "How shiftless!" The arrival of Topsy, in the play, becomes a set-up for the comic business that is to follow, rather than the primary vehicle for thematic and character development. Without the Old Prue episode and the effect it has on Miss Ophelia (and on the reader- audience), the Ophelia-Topsy relationship is shallow, reduced to innocuous capering and other sight gags. The weight of the moral dilemma is missing. Topsy is a humorous imp, rather than an abused child. Any element of real abuse is missing from the stage version. The horrors of slavery are mitigated as is the complexity of the social problem of how American society thus embroiled in this violent and brutal system, can possibly extricate itself from its dehumanization.

Ophelia's agency in the story itself is also greatly diminished. For example, Aiken does not have her recognize the error of her ways in dealing with Topsy, but rather has St. Clare point out the problem to her, following a highly condensed version of the Eva-Topsy scene. Initiative and action are assigned to male characters in the play, to Phineas and St. Clare, while female characters are assigned passive, reactive roles. Another example of this elimination of agency is Aiken's omission of an important moment in the book where Miss Ophelia asks St. Clare for written ownership papers for Topsy so that she would have the legal right to take the girl to Vermont and, once

there, to give the child her freedom. In the novel, this is a decisive move on Miss Ophelia's part; it is her firm insistence on taking charge of the situation promptly that secures Topsy's freedom. The ever-practical Miss Ophelia understands the caprices of the slave institution, as well as St. Clare's habits of procrastination, and she refuses to jeopardize the child she has learned to love. Ophelia also warns St. Clare that if he should die unexpectedly, all of his slaves could be sold at auction; she chastises him for his lack of responsibility in not making provisions for them, especially for Uncle Tom, as St. Clare had already promised Tom his freedom. St. Clare agrees, but his procrastination inevitably leads to Uncle Tom's tragic end. The prophetic Miss Ophelia of Stowe's novel is silenced in Aiken's play. There is no scene with Ophelia's request on behalf of Topsy, nor her warning on behalf of Uncle Tom. Aiken eliminates Ophelia's decisive action to secure Topsy's future; rather, he makes the transfer of ownership of the child *St. Clare's* idea. Concern for Uncle Tom's future is also solely St. Clare's, as can be seen here in Aiken's rendition of the scene where St. Clare is carried in after being shot:

> **ST. CLARE:** (*Raising himself feebly.*) Tom--poor fellow! ... I have received my death wound ... Tom, one thing preys on my mind--I have forgotten to sign your freedom papers. What will become of you when I am gone?
> **TOM:** Don't think of that, mas'r.

> **ST. CLARE:** I was wrong, Tom, very wrong, to neglect it. I may be the cause of much suffering to you hereafter.[41]

Any action or moral power that exists in Stowe's Miss Ophelia, is eliminated by Aiken or re-assigned to St. Clare. In a choice that further disempowers Ophelia, Aiken renders Topsy's move to Vermont as being up to the child herself, and somehow contingent on the girl's affection for Ophelia, which is a reversal of their relationship in Stowe's novel. Aiken's version plays like this:

> **OPHELIA:** Mr. St. Clare has given you to me ... Topsy, I am going to leave this place; I am going many miles away--to my own home in Vermont.
> **TOPSY:** Den what's to become of dis chile?
> **OPHELIA:** If you wish to go, I will take you with me.
> **TOPSY:** Miss Feely, I doesn't want to leave you no how, I loves you I does.
> **OPHELIA:** Then you shall share my home for the rest of your days.[42]

In addition to marginalizing Ophelia and eliminating her decisiveness and power, Aiken also ridicules the spinster in the scenes with his creations, Deacon Perry and Gumption Cute. Needless to say, these scenes have *no* foundation in Stowe's novel. The added scenes, which take place at Ophelia's house in Vermont, serve as comic relief to the Uncle Tom/Legree episodes in Act V. Here Aiken relies on

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[41] Aiken 114.

[42] Aiken 113.

the stock scenario of the desperate spinster and her supposedly ludicrous courtship.

Deacon Perry tells Ophelia that his wife has died eighteen months ago: "she had a severe attack of the lockjaw ... When she found she couldn't use her tongue, she took it so much to heart that it struck her stomach and killed her." As the comic stage spinster is ever poised to broach marriage possibilities, Aiken has Ophelia coyly hinting:

> **OPHELIA:** Why, Deacon, by this time you ought to be setting your cap for another wife.... Have you no thoughts of choosing another partner?
> **DEACON:** Well, to tell you the truth, I have.
> **OPHELIA:** Who is she?
> **DEACON:** She is not far distant. (*Looks at Ophelia in an anguishing manner.*) I have her in my eye at this present moment.
> **OPHELIA:** (*Aside.*) Really, I believe he's going to pop. Why, surely, Deacon, you don't mean to -
> **DEACON:** Yes, Miss Ophelia, I do mean; and believe me when I say - (*Looking off.*) The Lord be good to us, but I do believe there is a devil coming!

To the comical courtship Aiken adds some miscegenation humor: Topsy runs on carrying flowers for Ophelia.

> **DEACON:** Miss Ophelia, who is this young person?
> **OPHELIA:** She is my daughter.
> **DEACON:** (*Aside.*) Her daughter! Then she must have married a colored man off South. I was not aware that you had been married, Miss Ophelia?
> **OPHELIA:** Married! Sakes alive! What made you think I had been married?
> **DEACON:** Good gracious, I'm getting confused. Didn't I understand you to say that this--somewhat tanned young lady was your daughter?
> **OPHELIA:** Only by adoption. She's my adopted daughter.

DEACON: O-oh! (*Aside.*) I breathe again.[43]

The relieved suitor and hopeful spinster go off into the house for refreshments; he offers his arm.

> **OPHELIA:** As gallant as ever, Deacon. I declare, you grow younger every day.
> **DEACON:** And you can never grow old, madam.
> **OPHELIA:** Ah, you flatterer! (*Exeunt.*)
> **TOPSY:** Dar dey go, like an old goose and gander.

In the end, Deacon Perry, satisfied that Ophelia had not married a black man down in Louisiana, makes a happy woman of the dour old spinster by asking her to marry him. Knock-down comic business ensues when the reprobate Gumption Cute tries to break up the union between Ophelia and the Deacon, whom he calls, "old half a century." Cute chases Deacon Perry, Ophelia faints in the Deacon's arms, and Topsy beats Cute with a broom.[44]

Throughout the play, Aiken shifts the focus of the story away from the female characters, away from anything that might be viewed as gender-role transgression. Although Aiken may have broken new theatrical and cultural ground by representing a serious black, male figure on the stage, he was retrograde in the area of gender politics, compared to Stowe. At the same time, he also softened the abolition theme by populating the stage with stock characters (the stage Yankee and the old spinster)

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[43] Aiken 116.

[44] Aiken 124.

comically drawn and ridiculed, whose comic antics are reassuringly familiar.

The strong women that populated Stowe's novel represented thousands of women who, like Stowe herself, were actively and publicly engaged in the current drama of American life. Aiken's stage version silenced them. The stock spinster figure served as one of the cultural tools for that silencing. If the apotheosis at the end of the play is not enough to send audiences home feeling untroubled by any serious social critique, the gutting and marrying off of Miss Ophelia should suffice to assure them that this play signified business as usual: a male God is in his heaven, (white) male heroes preside over the earth, men outnumber women 2 to 1, the occasional brutality of slavery is due to *individual* villains (most white masters are good people), and elderly maiden ladies are still good for a laugh.

The Aiken play exemplifies the systemic elimination and reductive treatment of female characters, culturally enacted and institutionally implemented. Aiken's use of the ridiculous, stock spinster type served to 1) eradicate any female power or seriousness in the world of the play; 2) reflect *males* as the central characters in the great American drama of abolition, and, 3) ridicule and trivialize the would-be single woman. Women's literature

of the period may have allowed for models of The Cult of Single Blessedness, but the professional theatre did not.

The persistence of the comic stage spinster was supported by mutually-reinforcing theatre practices and conventions, including *lines of business*, the composition of the acting companies, audience expectation and market-driven imperatives, and playwrights rapidly churning out commercially viable scripts. The popularity of the stereotypical stage spinster also reflected a cultural anxiety over decreasing birth rates (especially among middle-class whites), the influx of immigrant populations, increasing numbers of female wage-earners, and the challenges posed to social relations by women's right's advocates.

CHAPTER THREE

WIDOWS: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE BOLD

> A daughter's a positive plague; a wife's a worse; and a widow's the torment superlative. There's grammar for you. I'll have no more widows.... I hate widows. [1]

The opinion above is offered by the merchant, Mr. Campdon, in James Nelson Barker's Tears and Smiles. The merchant is upset with the Widow Freegrace for interfering with *his* plans for his daughter's marriage and urging the girl to defy her father's choice. Freegrace counsels the girl to marry for love rather than material gain, and she arranges clandestine meetings for the daughter and her true love. To the merchant the widow is a torment, indeed; to another gentleman in the play, however, a gallant embarking on a romantic widow hunt, Freegrace is "an angel." Such contradictory responses are the hallmark of the widow character. Whereas mothers were generally valorized and spinsters ridiculed in nineteenth century American plays, widows evoked highly conflicting attitudes. They were often the focus of *both* praise and condemnation, desire and disgust, fascination and fear.

Real life widows occupied a unique social position in the nineteenth century; they had a potential for legal and

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[1] James Nelson Barker, Tears and Smiles [1807] Reprinted in Paul Musser, James Nelson Barker, 1784-1858 (Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 1929) 160.

economical autonomy unavailable to maid, wife, or spinster. Widows were also in a position to exercise power over others, through the control of business and property. Unlike a maid or wife, who were under the authority of a father or husband, the widow had an unusual degree of autonomy. Unlike the spinster, who almost invariably had limited financial resources, many widows often gained a degree of financial independence. As a wife in mid-nineteenth century America, according to the laws of coverture, any property or income that a wife had was *her husband's* property to use as he wanted. She could not pass on property, sign a contract, or sue in her own name. The widow, by contrast, was free to manage her own resources, to conduct business, and to sue in her own name if necessary. She became a *femme sole* with a legal identity of her own. This uniquely autonomous female, who had the possibility of standing outside direct male supervision and control was a threatening figure, potentially disrupting and challenging the hegemony of male-controlled Victorian power structures.

In this chapter I will trace these contrary qualities in linguistic, Biblical, and literary figurations of the widow, in order to 1) place the nineteenth-century stage widow within an ongoing cultural discourse, and 2) to identify the particular nineteenth-century American characteristics in widow formations. Analysis of

representative nineteenth-century widow figures will demonstrate that the widow was a particularly apt embodiment of the tensions at play in mid-nineteenth-century America: tensions between market values and moral values, tumultuous social and economic flux, and the conflicting articulations of American identity.

I will discuss the following representative widows: Mrs. Wilson in W. H. Smith's The Drunkard; or, The Fallen Saved (1844), Mrs. Codliver in Mrs. Sidney Bateman's Self (1856), Mrs. Phipps in Everyday Life by W.S.C. (1858), Dame Barbara in Charles Barras' The Black Crook (1863), and Widow Joybell in John Brougham's The Game of Life (1856). I will probe the theatrical conventions, questioning the assumptions and unstated power relations imbedded within those conventions in order to foreground the lenses of gender and age[2] that are at work in the articulation of the nineteenth-century widow figure. I will begin with the term widow itself, then discuss the accretion of meanings encoded in the widow figure.

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[2] To review, Bem's lenses of gender are 1) *gender polarization* which ascribes different scripts to male and female, 2) *androcentrism* which posit the male as the standard and the female as a defective variant, and 3) *biological essentialism* which "rationalized and legitimizes both the other lenses by treating them as the natural and inevitable consequences of the intrinsic biological natures of men and women" (Bem, 2).

ON THE ETYMOLOGY OF *WIDOW*

"The word for 'widow,' is one of the first words that was recognized as Indo-European," writes linguist Robert S. P. Beekes. He points out that "widow" is derived from a feminine adjective root which meant "deprived of, bereft of, without."[3] This meaning is significant. From the ancient Indo-European linguistic wellspring, the widow was identified *in relation*, in a deficit position relative to a defining other. The widow was not marked as "alone" or "single" but as *lacking* (the husband). She was defined by *lack;* she was defined by a continuing relation to an absent male.

Beekes points out that the masculine substantive, "widower" appears much later and is clearly a secondary derivation from the primary "widow." By comparison, 'widower' is a pale signifier; it is limited in meaning, an afterthought in the social history of gendered social relations. The dictionary lists but one meaning for widower: "a man whose wife is dead and has not married again."[4] Widow, by contrast, carries alternative multiple meanings; these alternative definitions offer important insights into the cultural signification(s) of widow.

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[3] Robert S. P. Beekes, "Widow," Historische Sprachforsch 105 (1992): 171, 178.

[4] "Widow," Thorndike-Barnhart's The World Dictionary, 1973 ed.

By analyzing the subtleties of meaning in the alternative uses, we can better understand the social meanings embedded in "the *widow.*"

The primary definition of widow as "a woman whose husband is dead and who has not married again" tells us little about what means to be a widow. It says nothing of the social value placed upon the term or the person, nor does it tell us anything about the rights or restrictions associated with a person termed a "widow." The alternative uses of the term, however, reveal more of what it might *mean* to be a widow. A second definition for "widow" is the following: "(in card game) a hand, or group of cards, not dealt to any player but capable of being used by a player who bids for it."[5] In other words, *this* widow is an object without agency or self-possession that is not owned by anyone, but is available for purchase by a player in a game. This widow's only value is in its usefulness to the players in the game; this "widow" is beneficial, has positive value, and is desirable.

A third definition for widow comes from its use in printing where it signifies

> a word or group of words constituting less than a full line at the head of a column or page, *generally considered to be typographically undesirable* and therefore required to either be filled out to the

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[5] Thorndike-Barnhart.

> full width of the column or page or moved back to the bottom of the preceding column or page. [6] [italics mine]

This "widow" is problematic, undesirable, and does not fit a predetermined form: *it disrupts the order of the page.*

These alternative definitions of widow express the conflicting values encoded in the term: qualities of surplus and/or deficiency within a certain order. Widow signifies a valuable resource *and* a problematic breach of form. The widow is an excess to be used and/or a deficiency to be filled out. Within the given social order, the living female widow has special value: childbearing potential, material wealth, labor capital, beauty or other cultural capital; she is "bid for" by social players who can use her resources to their advantage. The widow is also a non-con*form*ing figure who needs to be contained within an appropriate social structure. She is incomplete and in need of "filling-out" through remarriage; or, if "filling-out" is not feasible due to her advanced age, infirmity, or destitution, the widow needs to be absorbed back into another appropriate social framework, a framework that contains potential disruptions, promotes prevailing values, and assures the coherence of the social order. Having teased out the etymologically encoded meanings of surplus and breach of

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[6] Thorndike-Barnhart.

form in the term widow, we can see how various cultural representations of the human widow relate to her social use and containment.

BIBLICAL WIDOWS: POOR, POWERLESS, PIOUS; OR, SEX-MAD

Biblical representations of the widow reiterate the following themes: the widow's helplessness, her submission to male authority, her self-sacrifice, the biologically-determined nature of her sexual identity, and the fact that autonomous, power-wielding widows are under social erasure.

Biblical texts offer two images of the widow: one eminently honorable, the other reprehensible. Images which valorize the widow equate her with poverty and helplessness. In this construction, the widow is purported to be a special recipient of God's love, by virtue of her helplessness and her being all alone in the world, and the community is enjoined to help her. Fulfilling this duty is purported to bring God's blessing, while failing to provide for the widow invokes God's wrath. The widow is worthy of this protection *because* she is in abject poverty and completely alone and helpless. It follows, within this construct, that the widow *needs* to be helpless and poor in order to warrant, and receive, this reverence and material support. Dependence on, and obeisance to God is also a mark of the good widow, as the pastoral epistles make clear:

> Now she that is a widow indeed, and desolate, trusteth in God, and continueth in supplications and prayers night and day. But she that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth. (1 Timothy 5:5-6)

Devotion to God and church serves as an extension of the widow's devotion and faithfulness to her deceased husband. The potential breach of order that the widow signifies is contained in this exemplary Biblical widow:

> And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser: she was of a great age, and had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity. And she was a widow of about four score and four years, which departed not from the temple, served God with fastings and prayers night and day. (Luke 2:36-37)

The good widow is to stand as a model of devotion and piety for the rest of the community. The widow in Mark 12:38-44 also earns praise as she gives *all* that she has, unlike the wealthy who give but a small portion of their wealth. The trope of the widow's mite,[7] inculcates sacrifice as the hallmark of the good widow: her time, her allegiance and her material goods, no matter how paltry, were to be freely given.

In contrast, the reprehensible widow in the Biblical formation is marked by faithlessness and devotion to the pleasures of the flesh. In 1 Timothy, this distinction has a decidedly age-determined aspect: young widows are

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[7] A mite was the least valuable of coins. Harper's Bible Dictionary (New York: Harper & Row, 1985) identifies the mite as the Greek lepton, c. 30 AD.

portrayed as subject to uncontrollable sexuality. This biological determinism is evident in the guidelines for admitting widows into membership in the church's order of widows. For a widow to be admitted into the order she must be at least sixty years old, have raised children, and have lived a pious life filled with charity and good deeds. Young widows, no matter how pious, were to be summarily excluded:

> But the younger widows refuse: for when they have begun to wax wanton against Christ, they will marry; Having damnation, because they have cast off their first faith ... I will therefore that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house, give none occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully. [1 Timothy 5:11-14]

Far from an admonition for women to live chaste lives, this edict actually participates in the *construction* of the very sexuality that it purports to control, as Teresa de Lauretis observes in Technologies of Gender:

> [T]he prohibition and regulations pertaining to sexual behaviors, whether spoken by religious, legal, or scientific authorities, far from constraining or repressing sexuality, have on the contrary produced it, and continue to produce it, in the sense in which industrial machinery produces goods or commodities, and in so doing also produces social relations.[8]

In the regulation of the younger widow's overriding sexual desire, the Biblical doctrine participates in the

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[8] Teresa de Lauretis, Technologies of Gender (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 12.

construction of that available sexuality, as well as the construction of the older widow as naturally devoid of sexuality. It is a Biblical version of the *denial* and *forcing* of sexuality that we observed in the nineteenth-century "Stages of Life" lithographs. Not only do the Biblical regulations *produce* the sexuality they seemingly attempt to regulate, they also contribute to the construction of the aging female body. This polarization of widows into young, fertile, sex-driven females and infertile, old, sexless females reproduces patriarchal social relations, apportioning widows into age-determined resources to be used by players in "the game." Younger (fertile) widows are to be reabsorbed into marriage. Older (non-fertile) widows are to be pitied, yet revered; their potential for disrupting the patriarchal *order* is contained in the form of a saintly, submissive widowhood.

What is omitted, or only obliquely referred to, in the Biblical representations of widows is the independent widow, the leader, the prophet, the administrator. There are only passing mentions of widows like Mary of Jerusalem, the widow whose house was the meeting place of the disciples following the death of Jesus[9]; or Anna, the widow-prophet who daily spoke at the temple and recognized the child from Nazareth as the future redeemer of Jerusalem; or

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[9] Acts 12:11-17.

the many nameless widows who were leaders of house churches[10] or participants in the order of widows. Biblical references give witness to women's active participation in the early church only through its efforts to silence and constrain them.

The enduring influence of Biblical constructs of gender and age on early American culture cannot be underestimated. We will return to this point in discussion of the plays, but first, we turn to some key aspects of widows in literature.

WIDOWS IN LITERATURE: THE ~~GRIEVING~~ LUSTY WIDOW

Two themes stand out in the figuration of the widow in classical, medieval and early modern literature: the ideal of the widow's faithfulness to the deceased husband, and the image, or fantasy, of the widow as prey to uncontrollable sexual desire. Both images are satirically employed in Petronius' tale of the Widow of Ephesus, that paragon of faithful widowhood who is wooed and won by a soldier right in the tomb of her deceased husband. At first she is "the shining example of fidelity and love,"[11] mourning the loss of her husband and starving herself in

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[10] Acts 2:46.

[11] Petronius, The Satyricon, trans. J.P. Sullivan (London: Penguin, 1986) 120.

order to join him in death;[12] but she is ultimately revealed to be a lusty widow who cannot restrain her sexual passion. This widow reiterates the Biblical notion of the *young* widow being inevitably prey to her uncontrollable sexuality. In the literature, however, it is older widows, too, who are subject to passion: Chaucer's Wife of Bath and Shakespeare's Gertrude. The Jacobean period, as Katherine James notes in "Ben Jonson's Way with Widows: Dame Pliant and Dame Purecraft," was remarkable for "the sudden appearance of the widow as a stock character and new heroine." The lusty (and wealthy) older widow had arrived.[13] Matronly passion was deemed unnatural, however, as Hamlet makes clear in the closet scene:

> You cannot call it love; for at your age
> The hey-day in the blood is tame, it's humble,
> And waits upon the judgement ... (3.4.69-71).

Sexual desire in a matron's bones stood witness not only to an excess of passion which led to a dangerous loss of reason, but also to demonic influence.

> Rebellious hell,
> If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,
> To flaming youth let virtue be as wax,

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[12] The association between appetite for food and sexual appetite is a recurrent motif.

[13] Examples of the lusty older widow include: the anonymous play, Lust's Dominion; or, The Lascivious Queen (1600), Lady Plus in The Puritan; or, The Widow of Watling Street (1606), Isabella in Webster's The Devil's Law Case (1617), Fletcher and Massinger's Thierry and Theodoret (1617), Guiomar in Fletcher and Massinger's the Custom of the Country (1620).

> And melt in her own fire: proclaim no shame
> When the compulsive ardor gives the charge,
> Since frost itself as actively doth burn,
> And reason panders will. (Hamlet 3.4.69-89)

Even where the older widow was not depicted as overtly sexual, she often serves as a model of inconstancy, inevitably subject to passions that impair reason, and easy prey to devilish forces. As Marilyn Maxwell explains in "Menopausal Women in Literature": "... middle age seems to represent a stage of life during which passion and excess usurp reason and moderation."[14]

This can be seen in the widow Graziana in Tourneur's The Revenger's Tragedy, where a previously virtuous widow is talked into pandering her virgin daughter to the Duke's son. Interestingly it is the widow's own son, Vindice, in disguise, who tests the virtue of both sister and mother. The sister proves true, but the mother succumbs to temptation. The lure of money, comforts and jewels, and her weak resistance to the crafty arguments put forth by the emissary-tempter combine to ignite this widow's passion for the pleasures of the flesh. "Oh, if I were young, I should be ravisht!" she exclaims (2.1.190).

Repulsed and horrified, the son, in an aside, prays for his sister's virtue: "Troupes of celestiall soldiers gard her heart. Yon dame has devills ynough to take her

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[14] Marilyn Maxwell, "Menopausal Woman in Literature" The Meanings of Menopause: Historical, Medical and Clinical Perspectives (Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic press, 1990) 255-279.

part" (2.1.135-6). But the widow is in a frenzy and she instructs her daughter, Castiza, to yield to the Duke's son. Incredulous, the daughter replies, "Pray, did you see my mother? ... Pray God, I have not lost her." Flaring up at this sassy remark, this previously loving and virtuous widow strikes her daughter, a sure sign that passion has overcome her reason.

> **GRATZIANA:** Doe you not know me now?"
> **CASTIZA:** Why, are you she?
> The world's so changed, one shape into another,
> It is a wise child now that knowes her mother.[15]

This widow is shown to exhibit a dangerous inconstancy. Later in the play, the son confronts his mother with her wicked deed in yielding to the foul request, but she denies having done so: "Who--I? That had been monstrous! ... Good son, believe it not." Like his sister, the son is struck with disorientation:

> **VINDICE:** Oh, I'me in doubt,
> Whether I'me my self or no!
> Stay, let me looke agen upon this face.
> Who shall be sav'd when mothers have no grace?
> (4.4.25-28.)

Mother is supposed to be the ground of constancy, but the mid-life female is portrayed as prey to a dangerous inconstancy.

This widow is caught when her son reveals that it was he himself who was the emissary, *and* that he had a witness

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[15] Tourneur, The Revenger's Tragedy (1608) in Jacobean Drama, vol. 2, ed. Richard C. Harrier (New York: Anchor, 1963) 118. (2.1)

to the transaction: his brother and her other son, Hippolito. Ultimately, this widow-mother is redeemed, however. Where passions of appetite and self-interest ushered in her devilish wickedness, submissive and tearful passion redeem her:

> **GRATIANA:** Oh sonnes, forgive me! To myself Ile prove more true. You that should honor me, I kneele to you. [*She kneels and weeps.*]

Seeing her weeping, her son-judge forgives her.

> **VINDICE:** Yfaith, tis a sweet shower, it dos much good;
> The fruitful grounds and meadows of her soule
> Has been long dry: powre downe, thou blessed dew!
> (4.4.48-50)

As if suddenly recovering from a fog, she marvels, "I wonder now what fury did transport me….I am recovered of that foule disease [t]hat haunts too many mothers" (4.4.122-3). It is the middle-aged woman that is most susceptible to such disease, or, rather, most susceptible to being *portrayed* as victim to the disease of excess passion and deficient restraint.

The older widow, if she is not depicted as a model of piety and faithfulness, is a figure whose unnatural lust or unruly, irrational passions bring tragic (or comic) disaster. She may also serve as the embodiment of old age itself, and provide a foil to young female characters, as

Gratiana does for Castiza, or Lady Wishfort does for Millamont, and Lady Sneerwell for Maria.[16]

In "Heiress, Beggar, Saint, or Strumpet: The Widow in the Society and on the Stage in Early Modern England," Elizabeth Oakes suggests that these dichotomous images of chastity and cupidity "enabled the society to harness the widow's financial resources."[17]

> [T]he rich, but perpetual widow was a veritable Fortuna for the society, and in return for her contribution, the culture elevated her to a kind of secular sainthood.... [on the other hand, the lusty widow] appears to have been mainly a fantasy arising from the vision of the widow as a potential bride, one whose wealth could save a man from economic marginality or outright bankruptcy. Here, too, the widow was Fortuna, with her projected lust the need a destitute male hoped to satisfy.[18]

Older widows in early modern plays reflect conflicting images: the widow as an impoverished and helpless victim, the widow as a model of piety and faithfulness, the widow whose unnatural passion brings tragic (or comic) disaster, and the widow as the epitome of old age itself, thus serving as a foil to young female characters.

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[16] Tourneur's The Revenger's Tragedy, Congreve's Way of the World, Sheridan's School for Scandal.

[17] Elizabeth Thompson Oakes, "Heiress, Beggar, Saint, or Strumpet: The Widow in the Society and on the Stage in Early Modern England," diss., Vanderbuilt U, 1990, 4.

[18] Oakes 49.

Elizabeth Oakes notes that there is one kind of widow missing from dramatic representation on the early modern English stage: the "fortunate widow living an independent life." Oakes observes that although models for such widows were plentiful, male playwrights did not represent them.

> As a character in Renaissance drama, the widow is most often defined *in relation to* the men in the play as victim, icon, bride, and sexual monster. More object than subject, she exists chiefly as male characters perceive her.[19]

Playwrights capitalized on the stereotypes of older widows as highly sexed and *prey* to younger men in search of material advancement or as *pursuers* of younger men. These stereotypes enjoyed wide circulation, despite evidence that the majority of widows lived respectable lives, did *not* remarry, and that they served vital economic functions in the society as benefactors and money lenders.[20]

Before moving on to the widows in the nineteenth-century American plays, I will review the traces of widow signification identified thus far. Etymologically encoded is the fundamental notion of the widow as a person defined by *lack* and in continued *relation to* an absent male. Her

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[19] Oakes 134.

[20] Holderness notes that one of the most prominent enterprises for the widow, right up to 1900, was money lending. This was especially valuable in rural areas where official financial services were not available. B. A. Holderness, "Widows in pre-industrial society: an essay upon their economic functions." Land, Kinship and Life-Cycle, ed. Richard M. Smith (London: Cambridge UP, 1984) 435.

major properties are that of a *surplus* to be used by players in a game, as well as a *problematic* breach of order which needs to be *contained*. This signification has particular resonance with the depictions of widows in both early modern plays and in the nineteenth-century plays.

Biblical figuration offers a saint or sinner dichotomy that is largely age-determined, with helplessness, poverty, and exemplary piety ascribed to postmenopausal widows, and an uncontrollable sensuality ascribed to all other widows. This age-determined dichotomy is reflected in the plays of the nineteenth century, bolstered by similar constructions in nineteenth-century medical discourse. The Biblical figure of the poor, pious older widow continues to serve as the foundation of the good older widow throughout the nineteenth century. Likewise, the Biblical assumptions regarding the young widow's inevitable sexuality lends support to the endless procession of marriage plots.

Literary themes emphasized fidelity to the deceased husband-lord; the importance of fidelity can be seen to reflect feudal social relations, as well as patriarchal gender relations. In literature, the dichotomous figures were the faithful, grieving widow contrasted to the lusty widow. The lusty postmenopausal widow is a popular figure in early modern plays, where she is emblematic of a monstrous, unnatural sexuality and an excess of passion which destroys reason. She supposedly harbors an

insatiable appetite and a fondness for young men. The older widow is also emblematic of both age and deception. The ravaging effects of age are often figured in the person of the postmenopausal widow, and "to paint" referred to her age-denying, cosmetic lies.

Nineteenth-century plays draw on these emblematic functions, and the aged, deceptive widow often serves as a foil to the heroine's youthfulness and honesty. Finally, the older widow as a signifier of a state of excess passions which lead to loss of reason is consonant with the depictions of older widows in nineteenth-century plays, where the reigning-in of the out-of-control older widow is a recurrent dramatic action. In the social comedies, she is the emblem of uncontrolled appetite, lust for power, and moral chaos--the headless woman who is restored to order by a rational male figure.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN STAGE WIDOWS

Older widows in nineteenth-century American plays tend to fall into one of three categories: good widows, bad widows, and free-spirited rebels. "Good" widows are pious, chaste, and usually poor. "Bad" widows are usually foolish rather than evil, although self-interest and the exercise of power can mark a widow as dangerous and somewhat villainous. The overtly lusty widow was largely avoided

in American plays; where she does appear, the setting of the play, or the character, is usually European. As playwrights delineated American characters in distinction from European characters, sexual licentiousness was deemed an aristocratic and European trait. The combination of a strong Puritan ethic and the drive to articulate national identity are at work here as are the dominant middle-class values which promoted self-control and respectability as guarantors of economic and social well-being. The negative traits that *were* used to delineate unsympathetic American widows, were foolishness, pretentiousness, self-interest, extravagance, and the physical signs of aging.

There is a third type of older American widow character that seems to occupy an ambiguous position, neither wholly good, nor wholly bad; this widow is a free-spirited rebel. She is an unusually energetic, plain-speaking older woman who defies social conventions and male authority. Nonetheless, these widows are clearly sympathetic characters despite the challenges they present to male authority; she may draw criticism within the play, but the criticism flows from morally weak characters who are blind to her virtues. Although this feisty widow is unconventional and somewhat revolutionary, her actions within the play ultimately preserve the very authority she seems to be defying.

THE GOOD OLDER WIDOW

The good older widow draws heavily on the Biblical model as well as the literary figure of the perpetually grieving widow. Examples of this good widow can be found in Mrs. Otis, the widow who pawns her furniture to hire a lawyer to defend her son wrongly accused of theft, in J. S. Jones' The People's Lawyer (1839); Mrs. Wilson, the impoverished and helpless mother of the drunkard's wife in W. H. Smith's The Drunkard; or, The Fallen Saved (1844); and Mrs. Fairweather, the distraught widow whose family nearly starves to death after their inheritance has been stolen by the villainous Bloodgood in Dion Boucicault's The Poor of New York (1857).

These good widows are all devoted mothers. They are virtuous and chaste; in fact, their virtue goes *beyond* chastity for they embody an immaculate sexlessness. They faithfully maintain their relationship to the deceased husband, keeping his memory alive, as in this passage from The Drunkard; or, The Fallen Saved: "It was in that corner, Mary, where your poor father breathed his last--this chair is indeed dear to me for it was in this he sat the very day before he died."[21] Mrs. Wilson exemplifies the idealized, continually mourning widow who longs to join her husband in death. The pathos in this scene comes from her fear that

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[21] W. H. Smith, The Drunkard; or, The Fallen Saved (New York: Samuel French, n.d.) 1.

she is about to lose her home, including the ground that holds her husband's grave, so that she will not "be laid in yon little nook beside him."[22]

Mrs. Wilson is the epitome of the poor "widows indeed" in the Bible: she is helpless, wholly dependent on *male* power and protection. Her difficulties are increased since she is the mother of a girl; a widow with a daughter is especially at risk. Mrs. Wilson refers to her daughter, Mary, as an "orphan," reflecting the view that only a father provided parentage and safety. The rescuing male will often have connections to the deceased father, thus extending, by proxy, the father's rightful influence and control.

As a good widow, Mrs. Wilson is idealized but greatly marginalized in the potting of The Drunkard which focuses on the treacherous villain, the suffering young daughter, and the men who come to save her. In the play, Mrs. Wilson suffers passively as she and her daughter sink into the abject poverty that results from her son-in-law's increasing drunkenness until, at last, she dies.

There are two male protectors in The Drunkard: the first is the drunkard's foster-brother, William, who saves the daughter from the villain's sexual attack, provides food for her when she and her child are near starvation,

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[22] Smith 1.

and he saves her from the rat-infested New York lodging in which she struggles to survive by doing out-work.[23]

Events which represent the male-as-protector are repeated throughout The Drunkard and culminate in the redemptive intervention of the second and more powerful rescuer, the elderly philanthropist, Mr. Rencelaw. Rencelaw reclaims the fallen Edward, returning him to sobriety and his family to domestic peace and happiness. Unfortunately, the widow, Mrs. Wilson, has died from poverty and lack of medical treatment before Rencelaw's intervention occurs. Her death serves as a sacrifice, for pathos' sake, and it spurs the drunken son-in-law to deeper remorse.

The good widow occupies a marginal position in the plays. She may be a sacrificial victim, as in The Drunkard, or a sufferer restored to good fortune, as in The People's Lawyer and The Poor of New York, but, whatever her fate, she is background: her powerlessness constitutes male power within the world of the play and in the world beyond the footlights. The gender constructs in The Drunkard are

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[23] Out-work was piece work done by laborers outside the factories, usually done in the worker's own home. Boydston estimates that 50% of the craft-workers in New York in 1850 were working as out-workers. Out-work was one of the few occupations open to women in mid-nineteenth-century New York. See Christine Stansell, City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860 (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1987) and Jeanne Boydston, Home & Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic (New York: Oxford UP, 1990).

clear: women are helpless and at risk and men are powerful and duty-bound to protect them.

On the one hand this male chivalry *is* laudable, and many women alone in the world have, indeed, been saved by generous men with the power to act as benefactors. On the other hand, one must ask *why* the woman alone, whether widow or fatherless daughter, must automatically fall into great risk. What social institutions and proscriptions were in place that prevented women from self-support? What work was closed to them? Why were the streets, or the forests, unquestionably dangerous for females without male protectors? Or, *were* they? Are these tales of seduction and violence out of proportion to such actual events in real life? And if so, why? Images of violence against women serve to control women, inculcating fear, submissiveness, and dependency on male protection.

Images of helpless widows had multivalent cultural significance: the images valorized and promoted these very qualities in women, serving as one of the innumerable ways in which the culture taught females to think of themselves as needing help.[24] These images of helplessness reflected the masculine subject as *the* site of power; they promoted and supported a unified picture of a paternal and benevolent American masculinity. At a time when a

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[24] Sandra Bem articulates this acculturation process in Lenses of Gender.

noticeable number of women were opting not to marry, these images served as a warning of what could happen to women without reliable male protection.

To a certain extent, the images of helpless and destitute widows *did* reflect real-life widows who faced devastating hardships with the death of a husband.[25] However, Lisa Wilson suggests that the reflection greatly exaggerates the problem, particularly regarding older widows. In her study, Life After Death: Widows in Pennsylvania 1750-1850, Wilson observes that the widows who suffered the worst destitution were widows with young children, not older widows, as older widows tended to have more resources, both material resources and social support networks upon which to draw. Further, Wilson reminds us that the widows who faced the most devastating hardship with the death of a husband were poor women who lived in poverty even when their husband was living, so that widowhood in itself was not the deciding factor. Wilson's point is that the stereotype of the destitute and helpless widow overshadowed and erased representations of autonomous and successful widows.

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[25] There are several studies that support the association of widowhood and poverty: Scadron 1988, Stansell 1986, Haber 1983, and Fischer 1977. However, Wilson's study (1992) suggests that the representation of widows as *invariably* poor does not reflect the actuality of most widows' lives.

The autonomous widows who do appear in nineteenth-century American plays are largely young widows: high-spirited targets of a sentimentalized widow hunt. By play's end, they are reabsorbed into marriage, as with the Widow Freegrace in James Nelson Barker's Tears and Smiles and Mrs. Lovebird in Dion Boucicault and Charles Seymour's Wanted a Widow With Immediate Possession. Older, autonomous widows, like their counterparts in early modern plays, are problematic.

BAD WIDOWS: THE FOOL REFORMED, THE HYPOCRITE REVEALED, AND THE SPECTER OF AGED FEMALE BODY

The three widows that follow exemplify a particular construction or type of unsympathetic widow. The first, Mrs. Codliver, is drawn as the typical "headless woman": she is a foolish, comic figure driven by an insatiable appetite for food and fashionable cures. She is a matron out of control, in need of male guidance. The second widow, Mrs. Phipps, is a wealthy and powerful charity administrator who serves her own self-interest while appearing to help others. Her charity work occurs in the public arena, where she exercises power over men as well as women. The third widow, Dame Barbara, is a vain, pretentious, and gullible matron whose physical appearance and age-inappropriate romantic notions are the subject of

endless mockery. She serves as the ugly, aged foil to youthful feminine beauty.

MRS. CODLIVER; OR, THE GLUTTONOUS FOOL REFORMED

Mrs. Codliver is the "good natured parvenue" who hovers around the Apex family, in Self (discussed in chapter one). She is a menopausal widow whose profuse speech is marked with linguistic errors à la Malaprop. She makes her befuddled entry into the dry goods store in the midst of a hot flash.

> **CODLIVER:** Good Morning. I was under the compression that it was very cold, but the heat, on the contrary, is most concessive. This is the dreadfullest climacteric!" [26]

Displaying the symptoms of the change touted in the medical treatises of the day, Codliver is in a mental fog, plagued by hot flashes, hypochondria, and an insatiable appetite.

> **CODLIVER:** I'm so weak--I never teched a bit of breakfast this morning, but a young chicken, seven eggs, and a few cups of chocolate, so I feel quite exasperated with the exertions I have made.[27]

In an obvious breach of prevailing norms for mourning, Mrs. Codliver has too soon returned to the social round of parties. "I want to buy something really stylish," she announces, "Mr. Codliver has been dead eighteen months, and

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[26] Bateman 713.

[27] Bateman 714.

I'm sure it's high time I laid aside my sombrero accoutrements."[28]

Prevailing social conventions in nineteenth-century America required that widows wear special clothing, that they severely restrict their activities. During the two-year mourning period the widow was to wear black widow's weeds. She was to stay in her house for the first month, leaving it only to go to church. She was not to attend any social events until the second year, and then she should still appear in her widow's weeds.[29] But Codliver is a fashion consumer as well as a consumer of food and medical treatments. Codliver is, in fact, an emblem of consumption uncontrolled. Her insatiable appetite is one manifestation of the climacteric female as prey to uncontrollable passions and lack of restraint.

The foolish older woman is subject to verbal ridicule, as this merchant's remarks about her demonstrate:

> **MR. PROMTCASH:** [There goes] more gluttony and ignorance, in the form of a grumbling old woman, than all New York contains besides ... A man, to succeed in our business, must be forgetful of everything but the main chance, and never fail to be smooth and polite to the ugliest old frumps in the city![30]

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[28] Bateman 714.

[29] The black dress could gradually be replaced after the first year with increasingly lighter shades of dress, moving from the initial black to violet. See Lisa Wilson, Life After Death (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992) 12.

[30] Bateman 714-715.

Mrs. Codliver cannot control her appetite or her tongue: she is figured as a loquacious gossip. In each of her four scenes, her lengthy, befuddled speeches draw laughter from the other characters, and, one presumes, from the audience, as well.

> *Enter Mrs. CODLIVER; she has a large bottle, labelled and wrapped in paper, and large pill box, also labelled.*
> **CODLIVER:** Good mornin' all! Have you got here a' ready? Mrs. Radius, I wish Dr. Lever was here! How very handy! if I should by any contrary temps be taken poorly, he could be at hand to proscribe, you know ... for I have eaten nothin' but three plates of oysters and some blue monge since ten o'clock, and it's now nearly twelve, and I do feel more exasperated than I have been for a long time."[31]

Mrs. Codliver goes on at length about doctors--"them people with medical faculties and diplomacy"--never saying anything favorable about the popular remedies that she so believes in. Pointing to the label of her newest elixer as proof its curative powers, she marvels,

> What a great cure it perfected on Mrs. R. who had childbains, serfula, nervous headache, and rhumatiz in her elbow, and got cured of every one of those melodys after she had taken a bottle and three-quarters,--and here's a picture of her, in a balloon, bearing the glad tidings to the world! [*All laugh.*] You may laugh, but if you suffered as I do--
> *[Enter SERVANT, with tray.--MRS. CODLIVER commences eating greedily.]*
> Ah, it looks very nice![32]

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[31] Bateman 735-736.

[32] Bateman 736.

The voice of reason that reigns in this runaway consumption is the frugal old businessman, Mr. Unit, who restores this widow to order and appropriate behavior.

> **UNIT:** Take my advice, old lady, eat three times a day, instead of twenty--throw your physic bottles out the window--cut all your fashionable friends, and call into your big house all your poor, hard-working relations, and you'll be a healthy and happy woman--two things that always pay.[33]

Not only does Mr. Unit's advice reflect the middle-class obsession with self-control, it reflects the culture's gender polarizing lens which defines mutually exclusive scripts for men and women. Whereas the errant son, in Self was redeemed by being sent out to work, Mrs. Codliver is directed to stay at home and care for her relatives. The female script requires containment within the domestic space, self-abnegation, and service to others.

Playwright Bateman pairs Codliver with a matron of a different type: Mrs. Radius, a woman of fewer words, more cunning, and more sinister, gossip-mongering power. Next to Radius, Codliver appears innocuously foolish. Whereas Codliver typifies the figure of the matron as a silly fool, Mrs. Radius typifies the figure of the matron as a power-hungry viper. They represent the division into two distinct types that we saw with the mother figures in chapter one: the mindless or the strong-minded. Or, to

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[33] Bateman 763.

use terms of the day, they represent the notions of woman as head*less* or head*strong*. The widow in the next section is of the latter type.

MRS. PHIPPS; OR THE POWER-HUNGRY WIDOW REVEALED

Everyday Life is the story of Mr. Wise, an honorable and wealthy old merchant, and his daughter, Lizzie, who is in love with Carroll, an honest but temporarily poor young artist-turned-clerk. There are nine principal male characters and four females in the play. The widow Phipps is the only older woman, the other female parts are that of the merchant's daughter, an Irish chambermaid (both in their mid-twenties), and a young Italian girl. All the young females are virtuous and sympathetic characters; the older widow is highly unsympathetic.

The widow Phipps is a wealthy, self-serving social dynamo who manages several charities. In addition to her charity work, she has two pet projects: building a chapel which will be named after *herself* and grooming a young would-be parson to become Lizzie Wise's suitor. Mrs. Phipps calls at the Wise home, protégé in tow, collecting for one of her many charities. Mr. Wise (who is Wise, indeed) sees behind her charitable façade. Phipps complains about his dreadful neighborhood, "where you must see a crowd of disgusting wretches every time you look out of your parlor windows, and when you step out of your hall

door, are likely to stumble over some ragged woman with a nursing baby in her arms." "I thought you were the devoted friend of those poor creatures," Wise challenges, to which Phipps responds with a lesson in charity management:

> **MRS. PHIPPS:** What a woman can do for those poor and degraded creatures, I humbly try to do. But charity should be systematic; and, in all the various benevolent societies of which I am a directress, our rule is: never give any thing for the comfort of the body to those who show no concern for the good of their souls.

"That is," retorts Wise, "you force them to swallow a pinch of brimstone with every bowl of soup."[34] This critique would have been timely and appropriate for audiences in 1858. With the Panic of 1857, benevolent societies were inundated with appeals for help. A morality-screening process to verify the worthiness of applicants was used by charity organizations like the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows, the Female Benevolent Society, and the Association for the Relief of Respectable, Aged and Indigent Females. Character references were required as well as marriage certificates in order for women to secure assistance. Pregnant women were turned away if they could not produce a marriage certificate. Christine Stansell notes, in City of Women, that even "the manner in which [women] raised their children" or kept house could be

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[34] C.W.S. Every-Day Life (New York: Samuel French, 1858) 4.

grounds for denial of aid, as charity workers instituted home visits.[35] "To distinguish between real and pretended misfortune is a difficult task," Mrs. Phipps confides to Lizzie, and she offers to take the young woman with her on her rounds. "I will take you to see wretchedness such as you have no conception of."[36]

Many parts of the city which housed the largest concentration of the urban poor would ordinarily have been considered off-limits to a propertied woman like Mrs. Phipps. Her forays into the sordid and dangerous areas of the city, "on [her] rounds through the haunts of vice and poverty,"[37] are emblematic of the evangelical philanthropist tradition and reflect real-life women who challenged the urban sexual-geographical demarcations of antebellum New York. The "wretchedness" over which Mrs. Phipps wielded her power was located in the notorious Five Points area of the city. Just as dramatic characters on the stage were constituted on the basis of *difference*--the contrasting of sympathetic characters and unsympathetic characters, rural and urban, foreign and native, business class and working class--so, too did groups and individuals in real life carve out identities by way of contrast, one against

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[35] Christine Stansell, City of Women: Sex and Class in New York 1789-1860 (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1987) 70,73.

[36] C.W.S. 5.

[37] C.W.S. 6.

another. For middle-class New Yorkers, the notorious area of Five Points[38] served as the epitome of poverty, sin, and vice against which middle-class gentility, self-control, and respectability were set off in relief. Its infamy was as much a cultural construction as are the saintly, disorderly, and fearsome female figures in this study.

In the play, Everyday Life, it is clear Mrs. Phipps is after power, not aid for the needy; the playwright demonstrates this when the merchant, Mr. Wise, refuses to donate to her new charity.

> **MRS. PHIPPS:** There're not many men in New York who dare to refuse to subscribe when I ask them. The world has just found out how rich he is, or I could make him feel that it would be better for his *credit* to put down his name for something, when I call.[39]

A woman who could exert power over the credit upon which male merchant's relied would be an aberrant and fearsome figure indeed; yet, Mrs. Phipps is not figured as the overt villain of the play. The villain in Everyday Life is Henry Fox, a former schoolmate of the hero, Carroll. Fox

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[38] The United States General Services Administration has funded an excavation of the Foley Square Courthouse block, which yielded 850,000 artifacts in 1991. Reporting on the ongoing study of those artifacts by a team of seventeen archeologists and historians, Dr. Rebecca Yamin observes: "To outsiders, Five Points was a frightening slum; from the inside it was a thriving working-class neighborhood ... The archaeological remains of hard work and industry stand in stark contrast to contemporary descriptions of Five Points, which were blatantly biased." General Services Administration. "Who Lived at Five Points?" online, Internet, May 9, 1999.

[39] C.W.S. 5.

proves to be an idler, a liar, and a crook; he is also a leader in a "Club" of other rich, young, "frenchified" idlers. That Mrs. Phipps becomes involved with Fox reiterates the motif that Elizabeth Oakes identified in early modern English plays wherein the lusty widow is associated with vice-like male characters. This association positions the widow as secondary in power to the male villain. It diminishes female power by placing the ultimate power in an outside male figure; the widow, through her unchecked passion and lack of judgement, is seduced into a position of drudge.[40] Mrs. Phipps, however, is no man's drudge. She is clearly in charge of their relationship, and she uses Fox more craftily than he uses her. Fox qualifies as the typical villain in that he commits obvious crimes--theft and forgery--which are later revealed and punished, but Mrs. Phipps is unaware of these crimes for most of the play. She behaves as reprehensibly in her attempts to ruin the hero as Fox does, but her actions are all within the bounds of the law: spying, slander, seduction. We can see her manipulations in this scene where she entices Fox to help her gather damaging evidence on Carroll.[41]

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[40] Another nineteenth-century example of figuration can be found in the character of Old Judas in Augustin Daly's Under Gaslight.

[41] Of course, she pretends that she is gathering this information for young Lizzie's sake, to protect her from a dangerous fortune-hunter. Phipps is a calculating and resourceful woman who does not tip her hand.

> **MRS. PHIPPS:** Since my poor husband died, I have never, till now, enjoyed such a feeling of security ... There is a sweet society to be enjoyed only by those who assume the sacred responsibilities of wedlock.
> **FOX:** (*Aside.*) The widow is mine!.... and I'll ride to church in that carriage before next Lent comes.

Here is also a reiteration of the theme of the young suitor who woos the older woman only for her property.

> **MRS. PHIPPS:** Sir, I need some one to confide in; some friend to whom I can speak about my private affairs… You never knew my poor dear deceased husband. He was a plain man, but very exemplary; busy from morning till night. (*Sobbing.*) But he left me well off. (*Sobs.*) Though he was a plain man, to be sure, he left me well off, (*Sobs,*) very well off. (*Sobs.*)
> **FOX:** (*Repeating to himself, with an ironical grimace-mocking her.*) He left her well off, very well off.
> **MRS. PHIPPS:** But then I feel that I am but the stewardess of heavens bounty.[42]

While his intention is to "marry that block of houses," Mrs. Phipps has her own agenda, which is to get Fox to help her discredit Carroll in order to clear the way for her parson-in-training to marry Lizzie. Even Mrs. Phipps' matchmaking has selfish motives: Lizzie's money would support the parson and the Clarissa Phipps Chapel. It is a dangerous woman who can turn the tables on the villain. She leads him on:

> **MRS. PHIPPS:** Come, Henry, we have talked long enough in this place. Let us go where we cannot be intruded upon. Let us go home ...
> **FOX:** Home! yes, home, home! I now begin to feel the beauty, the poetry of that familiar monosyllable. How much it suggests!

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[42] C.W.S. 18.

(*Exeunt* MRS. PHIPPS *and* FOX.)[43]

This widow's lusty nature is cloaked in the mantle of charity. Interestingly, this play in unusual in that there is no criticism from other characters regarding her relationship with the younger man, nor is the humor based on her physical appear and age. Mr. Wise makes some deprecatory remarks about the widow, but they are aimed at her hypocrisy, not her appearance, nor her age.

The widow's actions in the scene quoted above are not portrayed as the comically feigned prudery meant to entice the young man's affections. Mrs. Phipps has an agenda of her own in this scene. The proposal occurs *within* her pursuit of *her* goal: enlisting Fox's help in gathering information on Carroll. The audience must have felt a certain satisfaction in seeing the villain so roundly manipulated, yet there is still an edge of treachery implied in the figure of Mrs. Phipps. This widow is not trivialized, nor is she fully demonized, although the suggestion is that a middle-aged woman of means and ambition can be dangerous to the social order.

At a dinner party at Mr. Wise's house, Mrs. Phipps spreads some damaging gossip about young Carroll. As a lead-in to her revelation, she critiques contemporary gender roles, then turns them to her advantage.[44]

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[43] C.W.S. 21.

> **MRS. PHIPPS:** I was just saying that we, simple women, have now-a-days to mind our household affairs just the same as they did in old King Solomon's time. But you men have grown very wise and learned, to make steamships, rail-cars and telegraphs, and send them all over the world; yet, you men don't see what is sometimes going on in your own houses ...[45]

We do not immediately hear what follows, but the ostracism that Carroll visibly receives from the other guests, makes it clear that the allegations are reprehensible. Fragments of conversation soon reveal that the widow has reported that Carroll has an immoral relationship with a very young Italian girl who has been seen going in and out of his lodgings! Lizzie steps forward to silence the widow.

> **LIZZIE:** No, madam, no. I am the hostess here, and I must not listen to the slanderous whisperings about the humblest of my guests... [*Notices the manner in which* CARROLL *is being treated.*] If woman is weak she sometimes can protect, when man's strength is powerless. [*Pauses a moment, then goes up and offers herself to* CARROLL *as a partner, and they waltz.*][46]

Mrs. Phipps continues to wield her power; she calls in a bank note that she holds against Carroll's deceased father; she has a policeman search Carroll's room, has him followed, and arranges for Lizzie to see him in his true haunts of vice. The "haunt of vice" that the widow's

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[44] Phipps is expressing what was a prevalent attitude of the time, especially among reformers. Bourgeois female reformers turned the disadvantage of separate spheres (male/public and business and female/domestic and moral) to advantage by emphasizing women's moral superiority and obligations to apply moral influence in the areas of public reform (charity, education, public health, etc.).

[45] C.W.S. 30.

[46] C.W.S. 32.

detective identified is a grog shop where a poor Italian sculptor and his two children live.

Unknown to the widow Phipps, Fox has planted fake evidence of a forgery in Carroll's room, a forgery that Fox, himself committed. Ultimately, it is Kitty Broom, the Irish maid at Carroll's rooming house, who saves him. Carefully watching the "the widow and her folks pull the wires," Kitty saw through the "old woman." Kitty testifies about the spying, the attempts to slander Carroll, and Fox's planting the fake evidence.

> **MRS. PHIPPS:** Why girl, are you crazy? Do you know you may be punished for such falsehoods about respectable people.
> **KITTY:** But I did see him though.... I just ran into the next room and peeped in the bed-room window, where your young man used to watch Mr. Carroll for you, and there I see everything you did there that day.

With this, Mrs. Phipps makes a speedy exit, leaving Fox in her wake.

> **MRS. PHIPPS:** I'll not stay another moment in this house, where a servant is allowed to insult me before her master's face. (*Going FOX offers to attend her ... To Fox.*) No sir, I shall go home in my carriage alone tonight.[47]

Unlike Mrs. Codliver, Mrs. Phipps is not trivialized or relegated to comic relief. Mrs. Phipps is a relatively complex character. She follows her own plan throughout the play; she is an active agent. She is as cunning and

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[47] C.W.S. 37-38.

dissembling as Fox is, only *her* character does not reveal itself in conventional asides, as Fox does. As mentioned earlier, there are no age-based jokes aimed at the widow Phipps, nor does her liaison with the younger Mr. Fox draw ridicule. The target of satire with this widow is the disparity between what she purports to be--a paragon of charity and selfless service to others, and what she *is*--an ambitious, self-serving, and manipulative woman. The fact that she has a chapel built and names it after herself, rather than her deceased husband, is telling. The biggest violation of widow norms, and female norms in general, is the self-serving nature of her endeavors. Clarissa Phipps wants to govern, to control things, and to have her power recognized. She wants to succeed, to bring in the largest donations, to administer organizations "systematically". Were she a man, would she be criticized for this ambition? No. She says as much herself at the dinner party when she articulates a feminist critique of the inequality of contemporary gender-roles--that she offers this critique with an artful and detached Knickerbocker tone should not surprise us, for that is the world in which she lives. Mrs. Phipps could be read as a capable and powerful woman of her time doing the best she could, given the rules of the game. The playwright even lets her off with little punishment at the end of the play, and one gets the feeling that, given a week or two, Mrs. Phipps would be

right back soliciting Mr. Wise as well as Carroll and Lizzie for donations. She is too adept at social masking to allow this *faux pas* to slow her down.

However, if we look at the constellation of characters in the play, and if we consider the prevailing social norms for widows, then there is a sharp critique of the widow Phipps and women like her who attempt to govern. The young lovers top the moral scale in the play: they are innocent, earnest, and in love. The resolution of the play upholds patriarchal values with the daughter given by the elder male to the younger male (the son of the merchant's best friend); the exchange secures a son-in-law and future partner and heir for the merchant's business.

The widow Phipps stands on the other end of the moral spectrum, not quite as reprehensible as the thieving Fox, but in close association. I have already pointed out the reiteration of the widow-associated-with-vice-characters on which this play draws. Her characterization also draws on the image of lusty widow through her enticement of a young man; but these are merely traces of conventional widow lore. The widow's dangerous sexuality is not the target of censure and containment in this play. The transgressions for which Mrs. Phipps becomes a target of satire are her self-interest, hypocrisy, and attempts to exercise power over others in both the private and public spheres. In the private arena, she tries to manage marriage contracts,

usurping the rightful power of the *pater familias*, and blatantly asserting her own self-interest. Phipps exercises power in the public arena through fundraising and the administration of charities. Mrs. Phipps, as a representative of the head-strong widow reflects the cultural anxiety over women wielding power in a public arena: working in social reform movements, controlling large sums of money, or exerting her influence on available credit. With the unpredictable and capricious credit situation, the notion of a *woman* having influence and control over a man's financial dealings would signify chaos, indeed.

Mrs. Phipps also figures a cultural concern over women's exercise of power in the church, where wealthy widows might extend what normatively should be *service to* the church into *control of* the church through puppet pastors and priests. A similar figuration appears in George Henry Boker's The World a Mask (1851), where the widow, Lady Willburg, calls in a priest that is economically beholding to her to perform a marriage ceremony against the protestations of the bride-to-be. The fact that widows could be in a position to control their own resources and to operate independent of male control made the widow figure a potent signifier of disorder and unruly, transgressive female power. Women as well as men feared the specter of the head-strong women,

and the disruption of social order that she embodied. As Catherine Beecher warned:

> [T]he moment woman begins to feel the promptings of ambition, or the thirst for power, her aegis of defense is gone. All the sacred protection of religion, all the generous promptings of chivalry, all the poetry of romantic gallantry, depend upon woman's retaining her place as dependent and defenseless, and making no claims...[48]

MISSING: INDEPENDENT, SUCCESSFUL WIDOWS

Although nineteenth-century cultural norms promoted the ideology of separate spheres, with business and finance an exclusively masculine domain, there were many widows who *did* support themselves and their families in supposedly *male-only* activities: managing property, investments, and running businesses.

The widow's primary responsibility was to care for her family; she was to manage whatever resources the family had and to provide support for herself and her dependents as best she could. This could be difficult given the cultural prescriptions regarding separate spheres that relegated women to private domestic spaces and activities, and men to the public life of business, government, and professional careers. Understandably, there would be few

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[48] From Catherine Beecher, "Essay on Slavery and Abolition" (1837), quoted in Jeanne Boydston, Home & Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic (New York: Oxford U P, 1990) 162.

business opportunities for women in such a system, yet, as Lisa Wilson discovered in her study of widows in Pennsylvania, a widow's relationship to the cultural ideals of proper feminine behavior and the restraints of separate spheres could be complex and malleable. Wilson reports that when the cultural demands for "proper femininity stood in the way of providing for herself and her family, cultural prescription was quietly put aside,"[49] and widows did engage in business on their own.

So firm was the association of public life with male identity, however, that when a widow *did* venture into domains that were determined to be male, like business and finance, she took on an aspect of masculine identity. A woman who astutely managed a business or handled leases and investments and the sale of property was termed a "man of business" since "*woman* of business" was deemed to be an oxymoron. One widow referred to herself in these terms in a letter to a tenant who was late in paying his rent. She wrote, "Every Man of business must be sensible,--that if I wish to preserve integrity in my own engagements I take care that others are punctual in their payments to me."[50] Another example is the widow Anna Stockton who managed her property along with her daughter Emma. In a letter to

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[49] Wilson 5.

[50] Elizabeth Powell to Thomas Pichands, 23 May 1811, Powell Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Quoted in Wilson 117.

their attorney regarding the sale of property and future investments, the twenty-five year old Emma writes, "Perhaps you may be surprised at my confidence in writing you, but having been my mother's 'Man of business' for sometime past I have become quite courageous."[51] And we saw in chapter one that John Brown could only use masculine pronouns in reference to Harriet Tubman: "Hariet Tubman [sic] hooked on *his* whole team at once. *He Hariet* is thee [sic] most of a *man* naturally; that I *ever* met with."[52]

Despite the pervasive biological essentialism in nineteenth-century gender ideology, the inability to separate action from identity reveals a sense of the performative nature of gender; such an awareness opens a space for uncertainty and potential disruption. Given the degree of social flux, the shifting nature work, and changes which could be seen to threaten beliefs regarding masculine (read American) identity, this equation of activity with gender identity could be especially disorienting. It might be suggested that the growing emphasis on medical authority from mid-century on--particularly in the ascension of gynecology--might be seen as an attempt to more securely *anchor* belief in biology as *the* indisputable foundation of gender identity.

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[51] Emma Stockton to William Meredith, September, 1836, Meredith Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Quoted in Wilson 127.

[52] Quoted in Stephen Oates 242.

Meanwhile, stage figures reiterated polarized gender and age roles that reinforced male power and privilege. Independent older widows of means and principle were notably missing. Representations of autonomous widows are rendered as young and marriage-bound, or, if older, then they are monstrous and immoral like Phipps, foolish like Codliver, or repulsively old and ugly like Dame Barbara.

DAME BARBARA; OR, THE SPECTER OF THE AGED FEMALE BODY

Dame Barbara is a major character in The Black Crook and the only older female in the play. She is also the only unsympathetic female character in the play. Dame Barbara is a vain and pretentious matron who tries to force her foster daughter into a loveless marriage with the evil, but wealthy Count Wolfenstein, in The Black Crook, by Charles Barras. She is a totally self-serving "material crone" with no interest in service to others or in waiting prayerfully for death; rather, she preens and flirts and even marries! Dame Barbara is depicted as a foolish and gullible older woman who values money and social status over love and filial duty. She sacrifices the well-being of the younger generation in order to gain material comfort and influence for *herself.* Only through the brave actions of the young hero (and the magical interventions of the radiant young Queen Stalacta, played by the fifteen-year-

old Mlle. Marie Bonfant) is the innocent heroine happily wed to the man that she loves.

But most importantly in this landmark American musical spectacle, Dame Barbara functions as the icon of the aged and repulsive female body which is held up in contrast to the youthful splendor of the nymphs in the grotto of the Golden Realm. Dame Barbara's primary function in the play is to stand as a foil to the young female bodies on display in this "leg show," visual extravaganza. Their "beauty" is affirmed (constructed) in juxtaposition to her "ugliness," their youth to her old age. It should be noted that this is a European storytelling tradition--evident in Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and other tales of the Brothers Grimm.

Significantly, the agent for the older woman's ridicule is a younger female character, Carline, the leader of the young maidens of the village. The divisiveness of this model of female-female otherization is glaring. As the stage directions indicate, Dame Barbara makes her first appearance "extravagantly dressed, wearing a monstrous cap ridiculously trimmed" and, "Displays herself." In an aside to one of the maidens, Carline identifies the evening's sport, "Observe me tickle the old buzzard ..."

> **CARLINE:** Why you've almost taken my breath. I declare, Dame, you're looking gorgeous. So young

> and girlish, too. Indeed, if I were 'Mina ... I wouldn't care to have you in the way when his Lordship, the Count, arrives.
> **BARBARA:** And why not, pray?
> **CARLINE:** Because I should consider you a dangerous rival.

As Carline and the maidens laugh among themselves, Dame Barbara reflects, "It is strange, I never noticed it before. But that girl Carline is a very sensible person."[53] The gullible Dame remains an easy mark for Carline, and Carline continues to tickle "the old buzzard" at every opportunity. In their first encounter it is the other maidens who are in on the jokes; in subsequent scenes, it is the audience that becomes Carline's confidant in the mocking game. The items of ridicule are the Dame's appearance and her age; physical signs of aging are disparaged (full waist, wrinkles, shortness of breath, and hot flashes), as are her age-inappropriate coquetry and preening.

The comic sub-plot, a romance between Dame Barbara and the Count's corpulent and rubicund chamberlain, Von Puffengruntz, also draws barbs from Carline. The "waddling old buzzard" and the "silly old porpoise" do wed; but the marriage turns sour and Von Puffengruntz demands separate apartments. He has become a lush--the implication being

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[53] Charles M. Barras, The Black Crook (c1863), ed. Myron Matlaw, The Black Crook and Other Nineteenth-Century American Plays (New York: Dutton, 1967) 329.

that he has been driven to drink by the "cackling" of Dame Barbara.

> **PUFF:** (Hic.) Cackle, my dear. You know I never have a moment's peace, you're not even quiet when you sleep. ... I took you for a gentle spice--a sort of seasoning to the dull life I lead here in the castle, but, damn it, Madame, you have turned out to be all the condiments in one. A bottom layer of mustard, a top dressing of cayenne pepper, and a subterranean lake of vinegar.[54]

Compare this fluid imagery to the image of the silver, shimmering lake of the young Queen Stalacta, which is filled with magic and life, and it is clear that Dame Barbara stands for all that is repulsive, stagnant, and lifeless--in direct opposition to, and comparison with the young females in the play.

The supreme power that saves the young hero in The Black Crook is a magical young female power in the form of Queen Stalacta and her fairy legions. Because the young hero helped the fairy queen, she is always there to help him when he needs it. He has only to kiss the magic ring that she has given him, and she appears.

> *(Lights flash.* STALACTA *springs up in glittering mail, with helmet, sword and shield, followed by* DRAGONFIN, *armed with a trident. Fairies and nymphs as amazons, with breastplates, helmets, shields and javelins. Gnomes and amphibea with knobbed clubs and tridents.) (Exciting action.)* [55]

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[54] Barras 369.

[55] Barras 367.

The depiction of the young fairy queen as an Amazon warrior both recognizes an aggressive female power *and* tames it. In Stalacta, this female power is tamed by loyalty and service to the male hero; it is also tamed by putting the female body on display in a commodified spectacle and placing it alongside (in competition and comparison with) the repellent, rejected female form of Dame Barbara. Her fate is their future--for female beauty and sexual allure, under the prevailing age/gender ideology, has a short shelf life. This female-female competition/obliteration (articulated by Carline on the body of the older female) secures a short-term generational triumph for Carline and the other young females; they win the crown for the moment, yet they doom themselves at the same time--for none of the females on display can avoid aging! It is a value system like that in the "Stage of Life" lithographs which relegates females past forty to a marginal and meaningless existence. What is *not* acknowledged in this value system is the author(ity) and the androcentric positioning of the male subject--the male *as subject* and female *as object.* The generationally antagonistic female-female relationships represented in The Black Crook obfuscate and perpetuate the underlying gender politics.

The magical power which sustains the brave young hero is a shimmering, young, female power--ever ready to serve--

her beautiful subterranean grotto, a bejeweled haven for the young hero. "Am I dreaming," he asks. The nubile Queen Stalacta reassures him, "The glittering wonders that assail [his] eyes are not creations of phantastic dreams but nature's handiwork, wrought with the cunning fingers of a bounteous mood."[56] It is the *natural* order.

The Black Crook was a box office bonanza. Its power, in performance, was the "power" of female bodies *on display*. On the most obvious level, it appealed to male spectators--introducing American audiences to a new level of spectral commodification the female body at precisely the time when women's demands for legal, economic, educational rights had been gaining ground. I would suggest that part of this fantasy was also an appeal to female spectators to play along--to identify with the powerful, young Queen Stalacta and rescue the noble masculine hero from forces that would destroy him.

The Black Crook marks a decisive move in the commodification of female flesh that was part of the backlash or retrenchment of masculinist forces in post-civil war American culture. I suggest that the figure of the *older woman* is strategically employed to enhance that commodification and to disrupt female alliances across generations. As Foucault argues, power fields also create

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[56] Barras 354.

pleasure. The Black Crook offers three positions of seeming power and pleasure for female spectators--the passive, romantic daughter who is rescued by her hero-lover, the out-spoken Carline who triumphs by ridiculing older female, and the nymph-Queen of the magic realm who exerts power over male viewers in the spectral economy. The function of the older female as a foil plays an important part in this economy. In a similar way that the specter of the spinster served to propel young women into marriage, so, too, the specter of the repugnant, old female body, served mark young female bodies as valuable and attractive, enticing young women into the pleasure-power field of *being looked at*. In other words, the ridiculed older female body is a fundamental lynchpin for the operation of the "beauty myth"[57] and the enculturation of young women into an orientation of display for male viewing subjects.

> Like the commodity, the female body serves in capitalist culture as a lure, simultaneously fetishized as the locus of pleasure and voyeuristically investigated for its secrets. Appearing to be naturally invested with power, both embody the power of social structures that give their material substance meaning and value. ... Both women and commodities are represented as the seductive objects that hide other, more important sites for social explanation.[58]

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[57] See Naomi Wolf, The Beauty Myth, (London : Chatto & Windus, 1990).

The last widow that I will discuss is Widow Joybell, John Brougham's Game of Life. Joybell is a feisty older widow whose energy and unconventional ways confound or delight those around her.

WIDOW JOYBELL: REBEL CRONE OR TRADITIONAL (M)OTHER NATURE?

John Brougham's Game of Life[59] was discussed in chapter one: the Smiler family is on the brink of ruin due to extravagance, their survival rests on securing a wealthy bridegroom for daughter, Tilly, and protecting an expected inheritance by breaking-up the recent marriage of old Uncle Greenleaf and his young bride, Rose. The world of the Smilers is a conflicted and mendacious world, publicly gracious and artful, privately anxiety-ridden and scheming. Into this world of masking and posing bursts the unpretentious and out-spoken widow Joybell, an older widow who flaunts social convention. Joybell unashamedly admits that she dances "for fun not for fashion." Her entry is heralded by the rich, young would-be bridegroom, Little Wyndham:

> **WYNDHAM:** Good gracious! look at that extraordinary creature, Widow Joybell! I declare she hasn't done dancing that polka yet! She has tired out two or three partners!

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[58] Ann Cvetkovich, Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1992) 200-201.

[59] Game of Life was produced at Wallack's Theatre in 1856, with Mrs. Brougham as Widow Joybell. The audience at Wallack's was predominantly middle class.

Joybell is as lively as her name implies; there are no jokes about her appearance, no allusions to physical decay. This widow demonstrates a postmenopausal zest and literally dances rings around all others on the stage; only the young daughter Tilly is able to match her energy: "Come along, my love, let us show those lazy superfluities, the men, that we can do without them."[60]

The widow has a special relationship with Tilly; where Mrs. Smiler is ruthlessly intent on keeping up appearances and *controlling* sentiment, Joybell aligns herself on the side of feeling. Breaking into the scene where Mrs. Smiler informs Tilly that the match has been made with Wyndham, the widow recognizes the affect that Mrs. Smiler would deny:

> **JOYBELL:** [Y]ou have a volume of grief within your little heart, your face is the index. Let me lend you a tongue. You're in love!
> **MATILDA:** Ma says there's no such thing.
> **JOYBELL:** Does she? Then she's an infidel.[61]

Joybell speaks her mind. She chastises Mrs. Smiler for forcing her too-young daughter to marry for money; she encourages the girl to speak up and resist her mother's mercenary schemes; Joybell silences the male gossip-mongers who slander Rose and make jokes about old Greenleaf and his baby wife; but when Joybell takes on Mr. Smiler directly

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[60] Brougham 10.

[61] Brougham 13.

and tries to stop his scheme, she fails. "That there's a devilish plot, I know, but unfortunately have no power to penetrate it."[62] The only real influence that the widow has is domestic, as she counsels both Tilly and Rose how to be good wives. And, although Joybell is portrayed as an unconventional free spirit, this feisty widow's actions within the play ultimately serve to preserve the very authority they *seem* to be flaunting. Her character is drawn from the plain-speaking Yankee tradition and her gender politics are, on the surface, decidedly conservative, as she makes clear in the following exchange.

> **MATILDA** [to Wyndham]: I'll have you know, sir, that women are no longer to be considered as nothing in the social scale ... Our rights must be respected, and our oppression cease!
> **WIDOW:** Dear me! What strong minded oration has the child been reading? My poor dear girl, those rhapsodies only proceed from a few mannish individuals, sprinkled here and there amongst our sex! And with great justice let me tell you, for a few such masculine women are needed, to counterbalance the gossiping, tale bearing mischievous male things, one occasionally meets in the other.[63]

Now that Tilly and Wyndham are husband and wife, he demands obedience, but she refuses and wants to go home "to mama." Joybell's advice to the young bride is to "go to your husband's room--tell him you repent the childishness of your conduct.... "

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[62] Brougham 39.

[63] Ibid.

> **MATILDA:** [But] he'll think he has conquered.
> **JOYBELLL:** Let him think so,--you will have achieved a greater conquest than he: you will have triumphed over the stubbornness of your own character, and in the end, that must conquer him.[64]

This advice is shown to work in the play: once Matilda gives up her "opposition," young Wyndham gives up his bothersome ways. At the end, Wyndham finally acknowledges the widow's wisdom, "I find, widow, you women have a stronger weapon than opposition; and that mildness, gentleness, and persuasion, can make us men do just as you please."[65] Again, we need to remember this is spoken by a female actor which invites multiple readings, and plays on an excess that cannot be contained within traditional gender representations.[66]

Widow Joybell's function in the play is to serve as the wise older woman, whose traditional role is to usher the next generation into their proper social relationships. Her vivacity serves as a code that signifies the healthy *natural*ness of the social relationships she advocates--marriage in which the female is submissive to male authority. Joybell's independence is unproblematic because

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[64] Brougham 40.

[65] Brougham 44.

[66] "Excess," as described by de Lauretis in Technologies of Gender, is that which "remains outside discourse as a potential trauma which can rupture or destabilize, if not contained, any representation." de Lauretis 3.

she does not seriously challenge prevailing gender/power relations, and the focus of her own copious energy is on service to others.

Once the lovers are re-united, Joybell recedes from the action of the play. The important resolution in the play occurs between Greenleaf and Rose's young ex-suitor. The curtain falls with the requisite peacemaking scene, a scene that reiterates the exchange that Levi-Straus identifies as the fundamental exchange undergirding the patriarchal social order: the exchange of a female between two males which establishes a relationship between *the men* (the woman is merely a token). Interestingly, in this play, the exchange runs generationally *upstream*, as it were, with the younger Rupert Wolfe clearing Rose of any impropriety, and the elder Greenleaf accepting the gift: "You have restored to me my wife--her purity and truth established beyond a doubt ... and to my dying hour, I'll bless you from my heart, from my heart!"[67]

Game of Life is a valorization of old time ethics and values embodied in the elder characters of Joybell and Greenleaf. They are not heralds of a new freedom, but romanticized emblems of the glorious past. They represent a nostalgia for an imagined pre-industrial *authenticity.* This imagined authenticity reveals the lenses of gender and

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[67] Brougham 41.

age at work: *gender* and *age polarization*, which defines mutually exclusive scripts for being male and female, young and old; *androcentrism* and *youthcentrism*, through which female value is recognized only in terms of functional significance (domestic and sexual) to the male, and youthfulness (signified by energy, vitality, sexuality, and power) is the standard to which "old" is the decaying variant; and, the anchoring of all of these lenses in the body, "treating them as the natural and inevitable consequences of the intrinsic biological natures of men, and women," the young and the old.[68] It is noteworthy that in this play the older *man's* vitality is demonstrated through his sexuality, through his marriage to much younger woman. Even the names, Adam Greenleaf and Rose (his "rosebud") invoke associations with spring, enduring youth, an idyllic Eden, and an innocent unspoiled, un*knowing* Eve. The older *woman's* vitality, on the other hand, is demonstrated by a complete erasure of sexuality and an emphasis on her cheerful attitude, her wise counsel to young females to be gracious and submissive wives, her generous defense of Greenleaf's marriage against derisive critiques from other males.

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[68] Bem 2,81.

WIDOW AS A SIGNIFIER OF ANXIETY OVER CHANGE

The widow figure is uniquely suited as a signifier of the tensions and uncertainties evoked through social flux. For patriarchal societies, the widow is not only emblematic of a rupture in the male-controlled social order, but also of uncontrollable change itself: a sudden male death inaugurates her changed social position and identity. The older widow also embodies the physical *change* from fertile to non-fertile so meaningful to patriarchal social relations.

The pervasive and exclusive reiteration of theatrical stereotypes could lend an insidious power to the images of poor, helpless older widows on the one hand, and foolish, treacherous, or repulsive older widows on the other. It must be remembered, however, that theatre is a living art form, and there is the potential for disrupting even the most conservative ideological formations in performance, for the living bodies of middle-aged actresses can disrupt the fixedness of character that often appears on the page. While widow stereotypes reflected dominant gender-roles and gender relations, the presence and performance by living actors could challenge hegemonic certainty and offer the possibilities of diverse readings in performance.

CHAPTER FOUR

HAGS: TAMING THE ~~DIVINE~~ FEARSOME CRONE

> [T]he goddess appears to the future king, and as a rule, to his two brothers, in the form of a hideous old woman; the brothers reject her sexual advances with horror. The one who is to be king, however, accepts them, and thereupon the hag turns into the most lovely girl imaginable ... She mates with the king-elect, thus bestowing his majesty upon him and blessing him and his reign.[1]

In this passage from "The Divine Hag of the Pagan Celts," Anne Ross describes but one of the many dual-form goddesses in Celtic mythology: the divine hag who appears as both a repulsive old woman who tests the future king, and as a beautiful young maiden who bestows sovereignty upon him. The hero's encounter with the hag signals a rite of passage, the crucial phase in a heroic journey. In her study of female figures in Germanic religions and myth, entitled The Beauty and the Hag, Lotte Motz describes four episodes in the hero's journey: the period of danger, the test, the gift received, and the return to "the World of Men." The hero encounters a superhuman hag "far from the settlement of men ... in the wilderness of stone and rock," and there she tests the hero and bestows a gift upon him.[2]

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[1] Anne Ross, "The Divine Hag of the Pagan Celts," The Witch Figure: Folklore essays by a group of scholars in England honoring the birthday of Katherine M. Briggs, ed. Venetia Newall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973) 146.

[2] Lotte Motz, The Beauty and the Hag: Female Figures of Germanic Faith and Myth (Wein: Fassbaender, 1993) 62. Skellenefja and Geirrior are

The hags in nineteenth-century melodramas are likewise encountered in the woods or at the margins of *civilized* space. The hero is tested in some way and the gift that the hag imparts is *knowledge*--knowledge of the hero's origins. The hag of the nineteenth-century melodrama does not turn into a beautiful woman, but rather a beautiful woman *is* won by the hero in his "return to the world of men."

The nineteenth-century stage hag is an amalgam of multiple traditions: ancient goddess lore, Celtic mythology, classical and Biblical texts, village wise women traditions, gypsy traditions, medieval folklore, sixteenth and seventeenth-century discourse on witchcraft, fairy tales, and literary and dramatic works. The hag is a figure of profound female power and knowledge. The nineteenth-century stage provided yet another venue for the patriarchal refiguration of the divine and powerful hag of mythology and folklore, resulting in a demystification and disempowerment of this archetypal crone.

Barbara Walker notes that *hag* in its original form meant *holy woman*. "Hag was a cognate of Egyptian *heq*, a predynastic matriarch ruler who knew the words of power ... In Greek she became Hecate ... the queen of the dead. In

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cited as "hideous hags" who test the hero by demanding sexual relations only to turn into beautiful women after the hero complies.

northern Europe, the Hag was the Death Goddess."[3] In The Crone: Emerging Voice in a Feminine Symbolic Discourse, Lynne Masland defines the hag within the typology of the crone as *witch, crazed,* and *ugly.* She is a shape-shifter with magical powers and she can communicate with demons and spirits. Masland notes that the hag is both a healer and poisoner through her knowledge of herbs and potions, and she has a magical connection to nature and the supernatural, including animal *familiars.*[4] Her curses are powerful and fearsome.

The hag is derived from the Old European goddess traditions, where her wizened, postmenopausal body is but one manifestation of the triple goddess. Refigured in the Indo-European dualities of good versus bad, man versus woman, fertile/life versus infertile/death, the duality of hag versus beauty is enduring and strong. This duality is evidenced in the hag melodramas, as well, where the "hideous old woman" is replaced by "the most lovely girl imaginable" at play's end, very like the mythic rite of passage of the Celtic king-elect; however, in the melodramas, the hag and the beauty are not different and

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[3] Barbara G. Walker, The Women's Encylclopedia of Myths and Secrets (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 1983) 366-67.

[4] Lynne S. Masland, "The Crone: Emerging Voice in a Feminine Symbolic Discourse," diss., University of British Columbia, 1994.

separate forms of the same goddess, but one goddess split in two. The splitting sets up the condition for *abjection.*[5] Recognizing this abjection is one of the aims of the present study.

The hag of the nineteenth-century stage exhibits many of the features identified by Masland. The stage hag is certainly witch-like, crazed, and ugly; her appearance is wildly disheveled. She often wears some clothing of red, the symbol of death. She is associated with the night and inhabits the woods and the margins of civilized space. The hag is almost always shown in an outdoor location; she is not an interior, domesticated female. Her entrances are often highlighted by musical effects, such as *chords,* to convey the mysterious aura of power that surrounds her.

The hag has, or appears to have, supernatural powers: she can read palms and the stars; she can *see* the future; she can find lost objects; she knows how to prepare both curative and lethal herbs; and her curse has *death-dealing*

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[5] In Powers of Horror, Julia Kristeva writes, "What is *abject* ... the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses .... Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-object relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be--maintaining that night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable effect is carried out"(2,10). In order to establish the separateness of the subject, the maternal body which threatens to engulf the ego and blur the distinct boundaries of the self, is abjected. The maternal is split into the *abject* and the *sublime*. In as much as women are equated with the maternal, women as a (w)hole are culturally abject and split. See Julia Kristeva, The Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, (New York: Columbia UP, 1982).

power. The hag transgresses gender norms and inverts gender hierarchy, for she can be physically as well as verbally aggressive. She commands obedience, threatens those who cross her, and instills fear in everyone--everyone, that is, except the hero. Most importantly, the hag has special knowledge: the knowledge that controls the fate of hero and villain, alike. She unravels the mysteries of the past and restores displaced heroes to status and fortune. The hag also has special knowledge about the villain and his crimes and she often stands against him as his nemesis.

She is called "hag" or "witch" by the villain and his minions, particularly when she counters the villain's demands. The virtuous characters in the melodrama do not use the terms "hag" or "witch": virtuous men are respectful though cautious in her presence and virtuous women are usually terrified. The hag is regarded as mad, although her "madness" always turns out to be a wretchedness and despair that springs from a terrible wrong done to her, or a crime in which she had been a forced participant. Unlike the hags of folklore and mythology whose powers are beyond human control or explanation, the hag of the melodrama lives in a moral universe where even the aberrant behavior of outcast hags must ultimately be explained. The nature of this *explaining*, and the constitutive male identity that emerges as a result, are the subject of this chapter.

I will begin with Daniel Terry's Guy Mannering; or, The Gipsey's Prophecy (1816), to demonstrate both the characteristics of the hag figure and the demystification of the hag within the course of the play, as she first appears to be a fearsome and powerful figure and then gradually is revealed to be less fearsome, less powerful. I will also examine the shifts in the figuration of the hag over time and will suggest that, as the hag is demystified and tamed within the course of a single play, so, too, is she demystified and tamed over the decades of the mid-nineteenth century.

There seems to be a decided shift in the delineation of the hag figure by the 1860s. The hag, who in the first half of the century uses her powers to confront the villain and to restore the hero to his rightful place, later appears as a marginal presence with no powers and no active role in the play. A comparison of Meg Merriles in Daniel Terry's Guy Mannering (1817) and Mother Mix in Lester Wallack's Rosedale (1863) illustrates the difference: Meg plays a crucial, active role in the defeat of the villain and the restoration of the hero; the hag in Wallack's play is reduced to a very brief appearance in which she is patronized by two younger males and then by the villain's henchman ordered to disappear. Wallack's hag complies without a single curse or grumble.

I will discuss the hags in the following plays in order to demonstrate some key variations in the delineation of the hag figure: J. S. Jones' Moll Pitcher; or, The Fortune-Teller of Lynn (1839), Lee Herbert's The Avenger; or, The Moor of Sicily (1847), John Burdett Howe's The Golden Eagle; or, The Privateer of '76 (1857). Finally, I will offer a reading of the somewhat anomolous hag figure, the Saga of Vesuvius, in Louisa Medina's The Last Days of Pompeii (1835), in order to foreground the threat of uncontrollable female power that is a basic component of the hag figure, be she *tamed or untamed.*

I attempt to read the shifts in the hag figure in light of several contemporary factors: the increasing devaluation of the aged over the course of the century,[6] the ongoing gender discourse and the articulation of American masculine identity within the fluid social environment of mid-century America, and the professional battle against midwives and subsequent rise of the male-dominated field of gynecology. Theatre is a site of contestation over identity, social roles, and power. One might claim a tenuous connection, not *causative* but *relational*, between the figurative control of the female body in the plays and

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[6] See Ackenbaum (1995) and Stears (1982).

the surgical control of the female body in the medical operating theatres of the 1870s and 80s.[7]

THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY STAGE HAG

In the hag melodramas, the quintessential female specter is presented and then *tamed.* The hag, historically the most dangerous of female figures, is evoked only to demonstrate that there is nothing to fear from her supposed power. Her gender-role transgression is displayed but then reversed, and the inversion of gender hierarchy which she represents is righted by play's end. Likewise, her initial infantilization of the hero is later reframed and erased from memory as the hero assumes his place of authority. Thus the hag who has been instrumental in restoring the hero to his rightful place is finally silenced.

The hag is further tamed by the way in which her circumstances and motives are delineated within the world of the play. As her past is revealed, she is shown to conform to a much more traditional gender ideology than her initial behavior had indicated. She is shown to be the victim of a male villain and the trauma that she endured is offered as an explanation for her aberrant behavior and wretched state.

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[7] See G. J. Barker-Benfield, The Horrors of the Half-Known Life (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

MEG MERRILIES; OR, THE HAG WITH A HEART OF GOLD

The most famous hag character of the nineteenth-century American theatre was Meg Merrilies in Daniel Terry's Guy Mannering; or, the Gipsey's Prophecy.[8] Meg is the leader of the "gipsey band," and is known as "the ruler and terror of them all."[9] She inverts traditional gender hierarchy as she orders adult men around, threatening, scolding, and commanding all to do her bidding. She can tell the future and invokes "words of power."[10] Her behavior is weird and frightening; the heroine concludes that the hag is "mad," but meg retorts, "No, I am not mad. I've been imprisoned for mad, --scourged for mad, -- banished for mad; but mad I am not."[11]

The story of Guy Mannering concerns the fate of the hero, Henry Bertram, heir of Ellangowan, who was stolen as a young child and is now prevented from marrying his beloved due to his unknown parentage and meager financial

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[8] Although written by the English actor-playwright from Sir Walter Scott's novel, Meg was a staple in the American repertoire. The frequency of performance might be credited, in some measure, to the great American actor, Charlotte Cushman, for whom Meg had became a signature role. Cushman played Meg from the late 30s, throughout the 40s and 50s.

[9] Daniel Terry, Guy Mannering; or, the Gipsey Prophecy [1816] in The Modern Standard Drama, vol. 10, F. C. Wemyss, editor (New York: William Taylor, 1846) 41.

[10] Terry 42.

[11] Terry 51

prospects. Henry has unknowingly returned to the land of his birth and is about to find himself under attack by the villainous lawyer who had him kidnapped sixteen years before. Meg had prophesied that the lad would return, for like Hecate at the intersection where three roads meet, Meg can see past, present, and future. Fate is working to restore the Lord of Ellangowan, she warns the villain, and Meg uses her considerable powers to make sure that Fate has her way.

Meg's most profound power is her *knowledge* of the hero's past. When the hero, lost in the woods, stumbles into her gypsy camp, Meg has only to hear his voice in order to recognize him as the stolen child and heir. She leaps from behind her tent and, planting herself next to Bertram, stares at him intently.[12]

> **BERTRAM:** My good woman, do you know me, that you look at me so hard?
> **MEG:** Better than you know yourself.
> **BERTRAM:** Aye, aye; that is, you'll tell my future fortune.
> **MEG:** Yes, because I know your past.[13]

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[12] When Charlotte Cushman made this entrance for the first time, the leading actor was so astonished that he sought out Cushman in her dressing room after the show and confessed, "when I turned and saw you in that first scene I felt a cold chill run all over me." Quoted in Emma Stebbins, ed., Charlotte Cushman: Her Letters and Memories of Her Life. (Boston: Osgood and Company, 1879) 149.

[13] Terry 41.

Meg's knowledge of Henry Bertram's past is both enticing and terrifying to him. It is not simply that she has objective knowledge about his true identity, for there are others in the play who possess that knowledge. What makes this hag compelling and meaningful, is that she has a body knowledge of him. It is a physical knowledge that they share, although Bertram does not quite remember. "Hark, listen to the sound of other days!" she commands, and she sings the song that she sang to him as a baby, when he was a nursling in her care.

> **MEG:** Oh! Hark, thee, young Henry,
> Thy sire is a knight,
> Thy mother's a lady,
> So lovely and bright;
> The hills and the dales,
> From the towers which we see,
> They all shall belong,
> My dear Henry, to thee.
> Oh! rest thee, babe; rest thee, babe;
> Sleep on till day
> Oh! rest thee babe; rest thee, babe;
> Sleep while you may.[14]

On hearing her song Bertram is agitated, overwhelmed with strange feelings:

> **BERTRAM:** Woman, speak more plainly, and tell me why those sounds thus agitate my inmost soul: and what ideas they are, that thus darkly throng upon my mind at hearing them.[15]

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[14] Terry 42.

[15] Ibid.

The sound of the semiotic is not *plain;* it is disorienting and agitating, stirring up images that elude articulation.[16] This disheveled, repugnant and unruly hag is disorder personified. By play's end, her power, in all its supernatural and maternal aspects will be silenced, appropriated, and reframed within the dominant gender ideology, and she will prove to be a creation friendly to the patriarchy. This is borne out by her function within the narrative, her characterization as a victim, and the sentimental, sacrificial, maternal gloss that ultimately marks her death.

However, I contend that there are meanings that are not *contained* in this "patriarchy-friendly" creation, indications that Meg can be read as a sign for the abject maternal body within this male-rite-of-passage melodrama. But first, I will discuss the ways in which the transgressive hag is *tamed.*

The hag's primary function in the play is to restore the dispossessed young hero to his rightful place and to restore the social (read patriarchal) order. Having

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[16] The *semiotic* is the pre-linguistic, pre-Oedipal maternal ground from which a subject emerges into the *symbolic* order--into language and the Law of the Father. It should be noted that the *semiotic* and *symbolic* are not exclusive and separate; Kristeva locates the foundations of the symbolic *within* the rhythms of the semiotic, the maternal body; and See Kristeva, Powers; "Revolution in Poetic Language," The Kristeva Reader ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 90-136; and Kelly Oliver, Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993).

accomplished that, her fate is death: she is shot by the villain in the final confrontation scene. Meg is as magnanimous in death as John Brown's wife in Ossawattomie Brown, discussed in chapter one. Through her death, Meg becomes the ideal self-sacrificing and self-effacing mother.

> **MEG:** I knew it would end this way--bear me up--let me but see my master's son; let me but behold Henry Bertram, and bear witness to him, and the gipsey vagrant has nothing more to do with life.[17]

In this acknowledgement the hag supports the existing class and gender hierarchies, and she assumes proper female submission and allegiance to her former *master*. She also confirms *paternal* primacy through the erasure of the *maternal*: Bertram is identified as his *father's* son. Bertram's biological mother is blatantly absent from the play; and although Meg has behaved toward Bertram in a fiercely maternal fashion--doting, affectionate, and protective--she still does not claim any emotional relationship with him, and he offers her none.[18] It is time for the hag to be gone and the "beautiful young goddess" to appear for the hero/"king." This motif is realized when

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[17] Terry 57.

[18] This also supports Nancy Chodorow's point that sons must reject their mothers so they can develop relations with a woman who will bear them children *and* care for both the children and the children's father. Nancy J. Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender (Berkeley: U of California P, 1978).

Bertram's sister embraces her long-lost brother: "Welcome to a sister's love." Hearing this reunion, the dying Meg, exclaims,

> **MEG:** Hear ye that? he's owned--there's a living witness, and here, here is one, who will soon speak no more. Hear her last words! There stands Harry Bertram: shout, shout, and acknowledge him Lord of Ellangowan! [*the people shout.*] My ears grow dull--stand from the light, and let me gaze on him;--no, the darkness is in my own eyes.
> [*Sinks into the arms of Bertram and Col. Mannering.*][19]

Meg gives her testimony, the hero is restored to the world of men, the hag can be replaced by beauty, and the hag dies. Meg is carried off to clear the stage for the celebration that follows.

Col. Mannering, a close friend of Henry Bertram's deceased father, officially acknowledges Bertram's "restoration to birth and fortune," and, as the eldest and most prominent male, he enacts the ritual exchange of a woman between two men: Mannering agrees to his younger sister's marriage to Bertram. Thus order is restored.

The transgressive hag is rendered tame not only through her narrative function in service to the rule of primogeniture; she is also tamed by means of a character history which subjugatges her power to a stronger male force. In the final confrontation scene between the

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[19] Terry 58.

villainous lawyer and Meg, he orders her not to interfere with his plans, warning, "You were as deep as we in the whole business." He is referring to the murder of the servant who was escorting young Bertram from her cottage back to the castle sixteen years earlier when the boy was kidnapped. To this charge, Meg responds,

> **MEG:** You forced me to consent that you should hurry him away, kidnapp him, plunder him; but to murder him was your own device! Yours![20]

Forced? Suddenly Meg, "the ruler and terror of them all," is depicted as having been *forced*! This rendition of the hag being made to commit a crime by the superior powers of a *male* agent echoes the Calvinist conception of woman. In Daemonology, King James' treatise on witchcraft, he explains that women are more likely to be witches:

> ... for as that sex is frailer than man, so it is easier to be intrapped in these gross snares of the Devil, as was well proved by the Serpent's deceiving Eve.[21]

Meg is revealed to be a less autonomous, less powerful, less transgressive hag, and more of a frail woman.

This hag is also tamed by means of sentiment. Here Meg speaks of the place where she lived when she cared for the infant Bertram.

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[20] Terry 56.

[21] James VI, Daemonology, 1597. Quoted in Hilary Bourdillon, Women as Healers: A History of Women and Medicine (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988) 19.

> **MEG:** ... there blazed my hearth for many a day! and there, beneath the willow that hung its garlands over the brook, I've sat and sung to Harry Bertram songs of the old time ... That tree is wither'd now, never to be green again--and old Meg Merrilies will never sing blythe songs more.[22]

The revelation of her feelings of remorse and the pathos of her thwarted maternal love serve to reassure nineteenth-century audiences that this hag is more *woman* than *hag*.

The character of Meg Merilles actually carries many figurative meanings within the play: hag, caretaker, soothsayer, sorceress, guide, matriarch, outcast, victim, senile old woman, and avenger. She can also be read as the *abject* maternal ground. The spatial signs within the play and the child-stealing metaphor reveal a semiotic excess that cannot be contained by the traditional hero-restored-to-fortune narrative. It is the excess of the maternal body in its knowledge of origin, sexuality, and maternal power, an excess which presses threateningly at the edges of nineteenth-century paternal order.

It is significant that the climax of the play takes place at the mouth of a cave near the spot where Meg once lived and where she cared for the infant hero. It is the site of caretaker-infant symbiosis and of bodily pleasure. It is also the site of the kidnapping and murder that took place sixteen years earlier. In short, it is *her* space,

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[22] Terry 52.

the child-stealing place, the murder place, and the place where the heir must be confirmed. The action that transpires at this significant site is the re-enactment of birth, of individuation and the violent passage from what Kristeva calls "the semiotic" to the symbolic order.

If we read the story of Henry Bertram through Irigaray's "*Plato's Hystera*," this melodrama can be seen as archetypal drama of the son's passage from (erasure of) the semiotic maternal ground and being turned to the symbolic order,

> The eternity of the Father's Good ... All this, of course, requires that he turn his back on any beginning that is still empirical, still too material and matrical, and that he receive being only from the one who wills himself as origin without beginning.[23]

Henry Bertram is a lost son in search of his origin, a *paternal* reference point, he believes. He must find the father, so that he can assume his rightful promised place. It is not the semiotic pre-birth Real that he consciously seeks, but he cannot locate the paternal Truth without recourse to that ground. He is disoriented. The maternal ground is overwhelming with its strange feelings and ideas. And there is a crime, some memory of a crime--a child stolen.

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[23] Luce Irigaray, "Plato's Hystera," Speculum of the Other Woman, Gillian C. Gill, trans. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974) 295.

> So some accomplice, some acolyte-obstetrician, some faceless, nameless hack, of whom we know only that he is male, will with a firm hand forcibly extract the prisoner-child, against his will, from his previous home.[24]

If the hag figures the maternal split, the father figure is split, too, and figured in the villain: the male, responsible for tearing the child away from his maternal ground. Both the villain and the hag are split figures; those aspects of *bad father* and *bad mother* are split off from the child's concept of the good mother and good father and assigned to a specter figure. This is a glaringly asymmetrical splitting, however. While the villain is the specter figure that carries the weight of the bad father who ripped the child from his maternal ground, there is also a *good father* figure in the play. This good father figure is present at play's end to preside over the hero's assumption of his rightful place with status, fortune, and bride. On the other hand, there is no other mother figure in the play except the hag. There is only the abject mother. The erasure of the semiotic is complete. The symbolic order prevails, secure and unchallenged.

In folklore, the Triple Goddess figures of the maid, mother, and crone form a coven that offers defense against oppressive masculine forces. There is no mother in the hag

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[24] Irigaray 278.

melodramas, only the hag-crone and the young beauty--the mother triumvirate is missing. In this play, the maternal aspects are projected onto the clearly repugnant hag figure, who, as outsider, disenfranchised and visually repellent, is like the goat set off into the wilderness, the scapegoat. As such, she serves as the proxy abject. In this rite of passage, the hero need not truly encounter his place of origin, the maternal body, nor the individual subjecthood of the mother. That is the connection which cannot be endured without unmanning him, so he goes through a proxy encounter with the hag as proxy maternal-ground.

> Alone, then, in the closed circle of "his soul," that theater for the re-presentation of likeness, that vertigo of a god that recognizes nothing but himself now. And who, *if it were suggested he identify a (female) other*, would no doubt come up with the confession that he can't see very well--anymore? That he needs time to evaluate, to take the measure of, what and whom he's dealing with. Time to accustom his eyes to what in front of him? Or to bring this "object" into his own perspective?[25]

The hag/maternal figure has verified the hero's paternity and exacted revenge on the split-off bad father figure, whereupon she dies. The hero-son is free from any maternal connection. This freedom is reflected in the absence of the biological mother and her replacement by the expendable maternal-hag figure. She is a figure that carries all the negative maternal attributes: the knowledge

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[25] Irigaray 362.

of his origin, the threatening, disorienting, engulfing, maternal power and death.[26] The hag is a perfect embodiment of the abject maternal. Meg Merrilies nursed young Bertram, sang to him, loved and loves him, and knows his lineage; she bears witness to his birthright, then disappears, an easily abjected figure. She emerges from the play with no remaining identity of her own but becomes the submerged jetsam from which he emerges as a subject.

APOCALYPSE, THY NAME IS WOMAN: SAGA of VESUVIUS

In Louisa Medina's Last Days of Pompeii, the hag, Saga of Vesuvius, possesses substantial supernatural powers. She is also figured as a victim who lives for revenge. The Saga is not a central character, however, and there is no dispossessed male hero who is restored to his rightful position. Still, this hag's impact on the world of the play is unpredictably dangerous and devastating, even though she occupies only a marginal position and appears but once at the end of Act One. Her curses are fulfilled in the course of the plot, and although she is a marginal character in the play, her power is central: her vengeance destroys everything with a terrifying violence.

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[26] See Kristeva Powers of Horror; Klaus Theweleit, Male Fantasies: Women, Floods, Bodies, History (U of Minnesota P, 1987); and Jessica Benjamin, Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination (New York: Pantheon,1988).

The source of the Saga's drive to vengeance is revealed when the play's villain, Arbaces, an Egyptian Priest and master of dark arts, seeks her help. Arbaces goes to the Saga's mountain cave to get a potion of "deadly herbs" in order to kill the young hero, Glaucus.

> *Gong--Thunder and lightning--Red fire--The cave opens and discovers the witch in the midst of flames.*[27]

Arbaces commands her to make a deadly poison, but the Saga declines, explaining:

> **WITCH:** Look at these ghastly and corse-like [corpse-like] features; these are the effects of that fatal knowledge ... I cannot do it. Years ago, I was not the loathsome thing you now behold me! I loved, and was beloved; another allured me from my chosen. I mixed for her a deadly potion, which she by a fatal chance--hear it, ye dread walls, and crush me--administered to him. I saw the writhing of his form--his dying agonies--the death-foam upon his lips! I fled forever from the world, living *only* in the hope of wreaking vengeance on my hated rival, or those she loves.[28]

When the Saga learns that the proposed recipient of the poison is Glaucus, the son of her hated rival, she gladly agrees to make the poison; the poison is never made, however. Young Glaucus and his lady suddenly arrive, seeking shelter from the storm, and the Saga exacts revenge by means of a hag's most fearsome power: her curse.

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[27] Louisa Medina, The Last Days of Pompeii [1835](New York: Samuel French, 1857) 15.

[28] Medina 16.

> **WITCH:** Glaucus, seest thou these withered limbs, these corse-like features? once they were fair; who was it changed them? thy hated mother. I curse thee, and thou art cursed ... May thy love be blasted--may thy name be blackened--may the infernals mark thee--may thy heart wither and scorch--and, in thy last hour, mayst thou think upon the Saga of Vesuvius.[29]

Unlike the melodramas discussed earlier, Medina chose to make the hag's enemy a *woman*, rather than a man. This is but one of the ways that Medina disrupts an exclusively male-dominated power field within her play.

The play's ending also disrupts a traditionally gendered narrative; this ending is prophesied in the curse above. Five curses are embedded in her harangue: Glaucus will have a blasted love, a blackened name, damned to feel the fires of hell, have his heart withered and scorched, and, at the hour of his death, his thoughts will be of the Saga. The first curse is realized almost immediately: Arbaces is about to stab Glaucus with his sword and Ione, in order to save his life, is forced to swear never to see Glaucus again. With this, the Saga laughs her witch's laugh. The second curse is realized when his name is blackened as he is falsely charged with murder he did not commit. The last curses are fulfilled in the eruption of Vesuvius at the end of the play where his heart is literally withered and scorched, and his thoughts, no doubt, turn to the fearful Saga of Vesuvius. This

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[29] Medina 17.

catastrophic event that claims both guilty and innocent alike.

The effect of the play's ending is remarkably modern in that it disrupts usual expectations for closure. There is no tableau with the paternal figure, the young hero, and his bride-to-be. A momentary triumph at play's end belongs to the blind flower-girl, Nydia, as she clears the innocent Glaucus of the murder charge, and names the villain Arbaces the real murderer. Although the Saga of Vesuvius did not set herself up directly against the villain Arbaces, he is the first to die in the eruption of Vesuvius when a stone falls and strikes him dead. There is no marriage, no happy ending in Medina's play. The ultimate triumph belongs to the Saga of Vesuvius; she triumphs as an outcast and vengeful female power, apparently obliterating villain and hero alike. As the curtain descends on Medina's play, the audience is left only with the image of the imminent destruction of Pompeii. The hag's curse is about to graphically come to pass: "may thy heart wither and scorch--and, in thy last hour, mayst thou--think upon the Saga of Vesuvius."[30]

Louisa Medina's ending differs greatly from the Edward Bulwer-Lytton novel that served as her source. Bulwer-Lytton has Nydia, the blind slave-girl, lead Glaucus and

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[30] Medina 17.

his beloved Ione out of the smoke-darkened city to a boat at the seashore. The trio sails safely away, and the blind slave-girl commits suicide while Glaucus and Ione are asleep. Unable to live with the unrequited love she feels for Glaucus, Nydia slips silently into the sea at night. An epistolary epilogue reveals that Glaucus and Ione settled happily in Athens and that they eventually became Christians. Medina's play disrupts the male-triumphant, happy-ending formula; she differs from Bulwer-Lytton and from George Henry Boker, who wrote two dramatic versions of the Bulwer-Lytton novel, one in 1885 and another in 1886. Boker's first version, called Nydia, uses Bulwer-Lytton's ending, although it omits Nydia's suicide and has her die on the beach. Stage directions in the playscript indicate that Ione moves away so that Nydia may speak freely to Glaucus. Just before Nydia dies, she confesses her love to Glaucus, and then she swoons. Ione returns and Nydia thinks it is her mother standing over her:

> **NYDIA:** Glaucus, I see! The touch of death has cleared
> My stony vision. Look, my mother comes! Lift me, to
> catch her falling kiss!
> (*Ione kisses her, weeping.*)
> So, so!
> (*Glaucus kisses her*)
> All blessings fall together! Glaucus--ah! (*Dies.*)[31]

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[31] George Henry Boker, Nydia, ed. Edward Sulley Bradley (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1929).

Glaucus and Ione take Nydia's body into the boat so that they can bury her ashes in Greece.

Boker's second version was rewritten to play down Nydia's role and play up the role of Glaucus (appropriately retitled Glaucus). At the end of this version, Boker has Glaucus invoke his ancestors, the Olympian gods, to bring justice down on his enemies, and then the eruption begins. In other words, the eruption is an answer to *his* prayer. This version ends with a tableau of Glaucus sailing away on a ship; Nydia is in the bow, "a harp in her hands, singing" as they sail to Greece and freedom.[32] *Neither* of Boker's versions includes the Witch of Vesuvius.

In Medina's Last Days of Pompeii, the resolution is less definitive: the threat of female power lingers at play's end. Bruce McConachie identifies Pompeii in the genre of catastrophe plays so popular with working-class audiences in the forties. McConachie summarizes the underlying message of these plays as a warning to the upper classes not to tread too heavily on the lower classes, or the latter might rise in violent and uncontrollable revolution.[33] If we look at the source of the *catastrophe*

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[32] Boker 226.

[33] Bruce A. McConachie, Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre & Society, 1820-1870 (Iowa City: U of Iowa P,1992) 143.

in Medina's Last Days of Pompeii, the revolutionary force is decidedly female.

As Barker-Benfield suggests,

> [W]hite American men's experience of the increasingly democratic society was one of unrelenting pressure, and that their sexual beliefs and their treatment of women were shaped very largely by that pressure.... [and] in a context of real and impending change in sex roles men interpreted any deviation in women's behavior as tantamount to social anarchy.[34]

NO HAGS TO UNMAN HIM: THE POWERLESS, PERIPHERAL VICTIM

There is nothing supernatural about the powerless, peripheral hag figures that will be discussed next: they are rendered as devastated and deranged old women. They show the pitiful effects of villainy, but they themselves take no action to combat the villain. These hags are passive victims, aged damsels in distress who wait on male heroes to defeat the evil villains.

Stella in Herbert Lee's The Avenger; or, The Moor of Sicily and Cecil in Maturin Murray Ballou's Miralda; or, The Justice of Tacon are representative of the hags who are deranged victims waiting for deliverance and justice, but take no action on their own. They are peripheral characters in two senses: first, they have little or no direct involvement in the actions of the play, and second, they physically occupy the margins of the playing space.

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[34] Barker-Benfield xii-xiii.

They hover at the edges of a scene, just beyond a fence, at the edge of town, or on the outside of a dwelling.

Cecil, the hag in Miralda, is a distraught, aged mother whose daughter was despoiled and murdered by the villain many years ago. Cecil hovers around the edges of town waiting for justice to befall the villain, but she takes no part in the exacting of that justice. She is a peripheral victim with no demonstrable power. She displays the pitiful effects of the villain's misdeeds and is present to laugh her crazed hag-laugh, when retribution finally strikes the villain down, but she takes no action herself. In this melodrama, action belongs exclusively to *male* characters.

The Avenger; or, The Moor of Sicily is set in Sicily under tyrannical French occupation. The hero of the play is the hag's son, John Di Procida, who disguises himself as a Moor, and leads a revolt against the French. The hag, Stella di Procida, is another passive victim. We first see her as she emerges from the burning, disfigured ruins of the Di Procida castle: her hair is "disheveled, her garments torn and scorched, a deep scar on her forehead; her whole appearance denoting the greatest wildness."[35]

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[35] Herbert Lee, The Avenger; or, The Moor of Sicily. (New York: Samuel French, 1847) 14. First performed at the National Theatre in Boston, 1847.

A recurrent theme in this play is self-control: control of emotions and of speech. Unguarded speech, by men or women, is dangerous, particularly in a time of war. Stella figures the danger of uncontrolled emotions and a loose tongue: her mad ramblings put her hero-son and the other rebels in danger when overheard by the enemy. This "mad beldame" is a valuable asset to the villains: "Her tongue is worth a city's ransom.... The babbling dame shall expose the traitors bare."[36]

Other characters in the play who are specifically marked by loose tongues are the hero's young friend Alessandro and latter's sentimental old father. In other words, the powerless--old men, young men, and females--are marked by lack of control and excess of passion, while the hallmark of a powerful man is his ability to restrain his emotions and his tongue. This is the lesson that the hero, John di Procida, repeatedly tries to teach the young Allesandro: "Unhappy youth! ... Twice hast thou brought thy country's cause on the very verge of ruin." The country depends upon this restraint.

> **DI PROCIDA:** Let no personal hate ... no galling insults, bid thee risk a life devoted to thy country; lest in the very gasp of death thy bosom secrets should rouse thy slumbering enemy. [37]

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[36] Lee 16, 23.

[37] Lee 19.

A man must hold in his passions, his secrets. The "*nation's destiny* ... [and] the fate of millions" hangs in the balance, Di Procida insists. What endangers this control? The next scene in the play demonstrates the force that threatens to undermine even the most heroic restraint: the maternal.

Di Procida and Alessandro (now exhibiting more control) are guests of the traitorous Count when, unexpectedly, the count has Stella brought in chained. As soon as Di Procida hears her voice, he is paralyzed.

> **STELLA:** (*without, L.H.*) Away you slaves! -- Unloose your hold!
> (*The Moor seems struck motionless.*)
> **COUNT B:** What ails thee moor?[38]

Di Procida remains immobile as Stella continues to berate the French count--"Thy time is near! My son, the great avenger, comes! ... His bosom friend, too"--whereupon she sees Alessandro and blurts out, "Ah, here behold the noble youth." This revelation forces Allessandro to run for his life, while the Moor, unrecognized by his mother, slowly revives, but still cannot fully look at her:

> **MOOR:** (*gradually raising himself*) This horrid dream! Alive! Beyond my hopes; yes, beyond my wish! Her piteous form, her lacerated brow!
> **COUNT B:** Moor! --traitor!
> **MOOR:** (*perceives Stella*) Ha! that dress again! Alas! no dream![39]

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[38] Lee 23.

When the Count's henchman Malcour moves to strike the still chastizing hag, the Moor grabs a dagger and stabs Malcour in the heart and then craftily escapes.

Stella is eventually rescued by a band of rebels; her next encounter with her son is at the rebel hideout in a cave. We notice how quickly this mother's presence threatens to *unman* her heroic son.

> *Enter STELLA, 2 E. R. H., rushing into the arms of Di Procida.*
> **STELLA:** Thy mother's joy at clasping thee within her arms is as full as when first she cradled thee to the fount of life.
> **DI PROCIDA:** I dare not now look o'er the page stained with our miseries --No, I dare not! --The ghastly sight would *unbrace my mind, unnerve my arm, and leave me helpless to avenge a nation's wrongs.* O then, my dearest mother, hush that piteous sigh! *If those eyes, now dropping their liquid chrystals on my heaving bosom, do not cease, I am lost; and the glorious duties of the man will be buried in the feelings of the son.*[40] [italics mine]

Note the gender and age constructs in this scene: men have glorious duties, whereas mothers and sons have feelings. As a woman, Stella carries the *effects* of war; as a man, Di Procida is duty-bound to wage it. She carries the undeniable signs of the material effects of historically specific events; he is all action and transcendent will. She embodies the past, while his

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[39] Lee 23.

[40] Lee 28.

identity is firmly fixed in the present and the future. We note her invocation of the hero's origin--an infant who sprang from *her*--as well as the effect she has on him in the play. His manhood and resolve are threatened by the feelings that she stirs up in him. Stella literally has *to leave* the space in order to allow her son to be a man:

> **STELLA:** O forgive me, warrior! No, never shall it be said thy mother's foolish tears could damp the daring spirit of her patriot son.
> (*They embrace. - STELLA goes off, R.H. 2 E.*)[41]

Ultimately, the hero defeats the lecherous French General, saves his beloved, and sets Sicily free. In the triumphant scene at the end, the manly, heroic John di Procida is still separated from the disturbing proximity of the maternal:

		STELLA		
Sicilians.		*on ramparts, with banner.*		*Sicilians.*
	French Soldiers.		*French Soldiers.*	
				Sicilians.
2nd French Soldier and Sicilians.		BERNARD, *dead.*	VALDI.	*1st French Soldier.*
	ALLESANDRO		DI PROCIDA	
Soldiers.	VALENTINA			
			COUNT.	
	UBALDO.			
				Officers.
R.H.		*Grand Tableau.—Quick Curtain*		L. H.

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[41] Lee 28.

In this stage picture, Stella is visually conflated with country and liberty as she stands atop the ramparts with a banner in her hand. She is an idea to fight for, a rhetorical figure to rally around, yet the hero-son still keeps his distance from the maternal body.[42]

MABEL: HAG POWERS EXPLAINED

One of the most physically aggressive hags is Mabel, the virago in J. Burdette Howe's The Golden Eagle; or the Privateer of '76 (1857).[43] Mabel engages in hand-to-hand combat, blinds a British soldier in a fight, fends off a whole company of enemy soldiers, and saves the hero by interposing her bullet-proof body as a shield against his attackers.

Imagine this aged hag with her "[g]ray petticoat, patched ragged drapery; bare feet; [and] long gray hair" holding back the villain and the oncoming British army as the young hero and his band of rebel fighters flee to the harbor:

> **MABEL:** Escape! escape! all of you! I will keep these at bay.
> [*They all exit, as EVANS exclaims:*]
> **EVANS:** Let not this hag's ravings prevent you thus.

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[42] The final Grand Tableau of The Avenger is indicated in the playscript. Lee 82.

[43] Howe played the hero, Benoni Clift in a production at John Brougham's Bowery Theatre. The text also notes that Howe was the manager of the Bowery.

> Fire, comrades!
> [*They fire upon them, as MABEL shields them--MABEL throws down bullets.*][44]
> **MABEL:** Ha! ha! ha! Try your arms in the field, or on the seas--the bullets are not yet moulded, that can pierce the form of Mabel.
> [*Picture and curtain.* END OF FIRST ACT.][45]

But the villain cannot pierce this hag; she is impenetrable and fiercely determined to avenge his villainy: attempted fratricide, seduction, child theft, murder, and collaborating with General Howe and the British troops. Mabel blocks the aristocratic villain at every turn, she confounds his plans, and reveals the knowledge that condemns him and restores the hero to status and fortune.

Mabel not only protects the young hero, but also the old rebel gunsmith and his daughter, and all the patriot fighters of Boston. In a riotous clash between the American citizens and the British soldiers who are searching for rebel ammunition, Mabel steps in to dispel the Red Coats and Tories. It is the Tories who receive the sharpest scolding:

> **MABEL:** Shame on you all, but double shame on thee, villain, for thou art a son of this fair land, and yet you turn your back upon your mother to assist the hellish designs of your country's foes; whip him, all you powers of justice--whip him from these shores that gave him being ...

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[44] Mabel is like the Amazons who, in a trance, repelled spears.

[45] Howe 21.

One of the Torie's calls out, "Down with the old hag; don't mind her crazy pratings," but Mabel boldly stands her ground and taunts her taunters:

> [*They hesitate.*]
> **MABEL:** Come! come on! advance--why stand you? Will none of you aid the craven to put old Mabel down?
> **STEPHEN:** (*a soldier*) I don't want any help, old Beelzebub--I'll do it myself ...
> [*He rushes up to her with drawn bayonet--She seizes him with right hand by the throat; he utters a piercing shriek, and falls apparently dead at her feet.*] [46]

This hag has deadly power. "She is a sorceress--her spell is death!" one cries as they retreat in terror.

When the American rebels finally succeed in routing the British from Boston, it is Mabel who leads the celebration, symbolically delivering the new country's children to their father.

> **MABEL:** Welcome, thrice welcome, brave deliverers of your beloved country! ... your immortal Father, Washington, has entered before ye this famous city, and freedom shall no longer be disturbed by the foul invaders of your country's peace.[47]

Note the association of country, city, and the land itself with the maternal. Sons have delivered the land (mother), Washington (father) has taken possession of it/her, and thus guaranteed their own freedom, freedom assured by the pact between brothers, freedom protected by assuring the

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[46] Howe 16.

[47] Howe 32.

father's right to govern. Sons deliver the land from the villain, the *bad* father who would keep it for himself, so that she can acknowledge the *good* father's rule--that paternal power which assures the sons of their birthright and succession.

The hag in this "national drama" is clearly associated with the maternal. Mabel reflects the mother-of-the-nation archetype. The hag-mother is the expendable--the phallic mother transformed--who leaves father and sons supremely in charge and unchallenged. Within the constellation of the melodrama, the hag-mother plays a vital role in this mythic national birth: villains threaten the birth of the new country; they threaten the mother of the new country, but she is a strong, impenetrable mother, this hag-mother. She is the kind of mother who is needed to withstand the evil forces. She is the phallic mother who can battle the evil that threatens survival. Once survival is secured, however, this phallic mother must set aside her powers and assume a more feminine and submissive form, so that her son, or rather, her *sons of liberty* can rule the republic of free *men*.

This is the same taming of female power that we find in Aeschylus' Oresteia, where the Furies become the Eumenides. Mabel must make this transformation, or die. Unlike earlier aggressive and powerful hags like Meg Merrilies, Mabel lives; she does so by debunking her

supernatural powers and gender-transgressive behavior. Mabel reveals herself to be the righteous avenger of ruined virtue. "I am she, whom you, villain [*to EVANS*] sought to ruin," she explains:

> **MABEL:** Oh! how I have longed, sighed, prayed for this moment. People call me cold and heartless; but I tell you I feel a joy --ay, a joy --in being able to restore those you have wronged to their rights.... I lived for revenge that alone sustained me.[48]

Within a gender ideology that esteems purity as the woman's most valuable asset, Mabel's unnatural behavior is wholly justified. She explains her seemingly mysterious powers:

> **MABEL:** For years I have been mistaken for one who was, by unnatural causes, empowered with the means of dealing death and desolation on all who sought to injure me. That mask contains a valve whose springs sends forth, when set in motion by the breath of the mouth, a sure and deadly poison. My body, for the sake of resisting the many shots aimed at me from my foes, is enwrapped is steel, whose thickness the hardest bullet will repel. Thus have I preserved a life, which else would long since have been forfeited to my wronger's vengeance.[49]

Thus, Mabel's "magic" is rationally explained. Her powers and her gender transgressions are both revealed to be only tricks: a mechanical device that mimics the witch's evil eye, and steel armor that lent her a manly hardness. Her unfeminine actions in taking up arms and armor are

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[48] Howe 36.

[49] Howe 36-37.

justified: they were necessitated by the male villain's action. The extreme, unwomanly measures were necessitated by her victimization as a helpless, wronged female. Positioned as a poor female victim on one hand and a patriotic mother-of-the-country on the other, Mabel is able to be reclaimed into the social order. The hero welcomes her to his household and his protection.

> **BENONI:** Henceforth, with us your home shall be, and the combined efforts of Benoni and his friends shall obliterate all memory of the past, and future paint, with never-ending radiance ...[50]

This reads as an ironic turnabout, *protection* offered by the man who was repeatedly protected by the aged and capable Mabel throughout the rest of the play! But, having, defeated the villain, revealed the hero's true identity and removed obstacles to the hero's marriage, the hag must relinquish her power. She becomes an Athena, having also submerged her *Amazonian* powers within herself as a symbol of patriarchal Law.

There must have been something satisfying in this melodrama for the Bowery audience: a strong and aggressive colonial mother figure who transgresses mid-nineteenth-century norms of respectability to battle an exploitive, thieving, aristocratic villain, on behalf of the displaced young hero, only to transform herself back into a gender-

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[50] Howe 37.

role-conforming, submissive, and silent maternal figure once the villain was defeated. Her powers are dissolved, disowned, and she is ultimately a silenced, domesticated, maternal figure at play's end.

The tensions between the colonial dream of America and the economic reality of the industrial revolution, its effect of social upheaval, and the capricious nature of financial institutions and practices must have made it seem that here was indeed a demonic force at work which could suddenly destroy a man without warning. Both working-class and business-class spectators at Brougham's Bowery Theatre could identify with the struggles of the hero: the desire for some connection to the foundation of the country, at a time when the country was being strained by rapid social change, burgeoning immigration, demands for women's suffrage--all of which amounted to a national identity crisis, much like the hero's crisis of identity. This national drama invited spectators to revisit the birth-place of the nation, to return to the mother's labor and the father's triumph, to that powerful and mysterious maternal figure who can attest to our origin, and to refashion that supposed "origin" to reflect contemporary values. The privateer-hero turns out to be the son of the Irish Earl of Moffat, stolen as a child and raised in America. Yet, this hero is thoroughly American and anti-aristocratic, as a friend to the hero's father attests:

"Your hand, young man! By Heaven! 'tis a rough one, and I warrant is akin to a manly heart!"[51]

THE CIPHER-HAG: OR, A VESTIGE OF HER FORMER SELF

With later plays of the period, such as Dion Boucicault's Grimaldi; or, The Life of an Actress(1856), Dr. J. H. Robinson's Nick Whiffles(1858), Lester Wallack's Rosedale; or, The Rifle Ball (1863), the hag figure is a minimal presence, briefly shown for atmosphere only. For example, in Rosedale, the hag, Mother Mix, appears in only one scene, and then very briefly. She is part of the "picturesque group" gathered around the fire in the gypsy dell in Act IV, scene 2.

> **DOCK:** Hey! Mother Mix, you know the stars. When's "big pal" to come back?
> **MOTHER MIX:** When he comes, he comes. Let that content you. D'ye think his coming and goings are to be talked on by such as you? ... You're one of the small curs. You let the big hands find the prey and you pick the bones.
> **DOCK:** Ecod, mother, I wouldn't pick yours. There ain't nothing on 'em.
> **ROMANY:** If you insult the mother, I'll crack your topknot.
> **DOCK:** Well, what's she always backing up everything the "big pal" does, for? He ain't no conjurer to be never wrong ...[52]

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[51] Howe 12.

[52] Lester Wallack, Rosedale: or, The Rifle Ball (1863) published in Americas Lost Plays, v. 4 (New York: Goldberg & Hefner,1940)45-46.

"Big pal," Miles McKenna arrives and asks "how goes it in the burrow?" Romany responds, "All right here. Watches, awake, women and kinchen asleep."

> **MOTHER MIX:** Who's with you?" asks Mother Mix.
> **MILES:** Well done, old mother, you can tell firm footsteps on the green turf while the rest of the rabbits have their ears on their backs. Hist! Pals vanish![53]

Obediently, she retires. That is all we see of Mother Mix in this play. She provides a momentary "picturesque" presence; there are allusions to her ability to read the stars, and she demonstrates her keen hearing, but her essential function in the scene is to pay homage to "Big Pal." This hag is thoroughly tamed, a pale vestige of the mythic hag figure, now used only for atmosphere and obeisance to a thoroughly male-dominated fictional world.

HAGS OVER TIME

There seems to be a noticeable shift away from hags having actual supernatural powers toward hags with faked or no demonstrable powers at all. By mid-century the hag appears more as a passive victim: stories stress her violated innocence or the destruction of her chances of love and marriage by an evil villain. In other words, there is an emphasis making the hag appear more of a

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[53] Wallack 46.

"normal" woman, one who is merely a victim--another female as victim figuration. This victim-hag then "lives for revenge," but she does not take action herself to exact revenge; rather, she waits for a man to do so. When justice is enacted at the hands of a male hero, the hag is present to witness the villain's demise, and she laughs the hag's eerie laugh; but she has not taken action either through natural or supernatural means to help bring about the villain's downfall. This hag is a testimony to female powerlessness, and to a repulsive and powerless old age. The later hag is more to be pitied than feared. She occupies a peripheral position in the story, and is without agency. Her effect on the audience appears to be one of reassurance, reassuring the audience of male control: men save females because females cannot save themselves. Finally, there is an attempt to render the hag a harmless figure of ridicule. Buried within her figuration, however, are the traces of divinity, wisdom, and female power.

There are multiple factors which contribute to the disappearance of the fearsome hag in the latter part of the century, not the least of which is the increasing emphasis on a scientific outlook that demanded rational explanations and valued mastery over mystery. The ascendancy of scientific authority[54] cannot be separated from the

retrenchment and reassertion of male hegemony throughout the culture in the face of female demands for education, a public voice, and access to the professions. In addition, knowledge of the past loses value in a culture that increasingly glorifies progress, change and youth. As attitudes regarding old age become increasingly negative, old age itself will become a target of ridicule, and as suggested earlier, woman carried a disproportionate share of the onus of aging.

Nineteenth-century stage hags served as one cite of contestation over female knowledge and power. As Rosemarie Bank suggests in Theatre Culture in America, "the peoples in a culture stage themselves and perform multiple roles ... outside of playhouses as well as within them." This cultural staging is:

> ... not only or even exclusively metaphoric, a figure standing for something else, but is itself taken as constitutive of the relationships we find circulating in and among the many universes of antebellum America.[55]

The real-life stagings of power and authority over the female body occurred in the ascendancy of nineteenth-century medicine. Battles occurred on many fronts: the

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[54] Gynecology, sociology, anthropology all emerged and contributed scientific weight to the biological essentialism that attempted to justify women's roles and subordination.

[55] Rosemarie Bank, Theatre Culture in America, 1825-1860 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 2.

battle over midwifery as male doctors attempted to discredit and even outlaw female midwives and healers; the emergence of male-controlled gynecology as the locus of *knowledge* and power over women's reproductive organs, the physical taming of female behavior in the surgical operating theatres of the latter half of the nineteenth-century, and the resistance to women entering the medical profession.

TRADITIONS: THE WISE-WOMAN AS HEALER

There has been a long tradition of female healers in ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, and throughout Europe in the Middle Ages.[56] Communities relied on elder *wise-women* who knew how to use herbs and plasters and to care for the sick and serve as midwives.[57] Barbara Ehrenreich and Dierdre English note that "the tradition of female lay healing flourished in colonial America," where the "mixing of

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[56] The Egyptian goddess, Isis, is associated with healing; the Greek Asclepius' daughters, Hygeia and Panacea were healers. Homer speaks of the female healer, Agamede, in the Iliad; and Pliny the Elder praises female healers in Rome. See Hilary Bourdillon, Women as Healers: A History of Women and Medicine (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988)

[57] The extent of wise-women's healing was not chronicled by male historians in the past; yet evidence of their work can be found in written accounts, tombstones, letters, journals, illustrations, artifacts, monastery chronicles, town records, court records, advice books, and household ledgers. Bourdillon notes the following early printed works by women: A Medieval Woman's Guide to Health, early 15th c., MS Sloane 2463; Trotula of Solerno's Diseases of Women, 11th century (plasters, herbal baths, advice on delivery); and Hannah Wolley's Pharmacopolium Muliebris Sexus.

Indian, African and European lore produced a new rich tradition of female healing--complex in its knowledge of the plants and seasons."[58] In a battle that Ehrenreich identifies as "at bottom, economic," female healers and midwives were challenged, suppressed, excluded, and slandered by the male medical authorities. The most aggressive onslaught was over the control of the female body, brutally reflecting not only patriarchal power but the social hierarchy among women, with black slaves and indigent Irish at the bottom.

"HEROIC" MEDICINE

Believing that a woman's reproductive organs ruled her personality, gynecologists increasingly treated behavioral problems surgically: clitoridectome was widely practiced as was ovariotome.

Physicians competed for money and fame by devising new surgical instruments and procedures. Dr. Marion Sims bought black slave women in Montgomery, Alabama in order to do experimental surgeries. Sims taught himself surgery in this trial-and-error way, eventually perfecting operations that he would use on well-paying middle-class women. Later, at New York Women's Hospital, Sims had access to

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[58] Barbara Ehrenereich, and Diedre English, For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women (New York: Anchor Books, 1978) 35.

poor Irish women as test subjects. One woman, Mary Smith, was operated on 30 times in 4 years.[59] (Sims early experiments were without benefit of anesthesia.)

Less physically invasive, but equally invasive psychically was Weir Mitchell's rest cure which demanded complete isolation and sensory deprivation. The epitome of Mitchell's cure for the female patient was in her *submission* to his authority and will. In other words, restoring a woman to proper mental health demanded her restoration to proper gender relations: submission.

Barker-Benfield offers the following view of the surgical frenzy that occurred in the latter decades of nineteenth-century America:

> Men's growing sense of vulnerability after the Civil War--their notion of social crisis and the concomitant gynecological crescendo--cannot be dissociated from the increasing vociferousness of women at the same time, most noticeably on the suffrage front.[60]

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[59] Barker-Benfield 100.

[60] Barker-Benfield 123. Women began to slowly gain access to professional medical training in 1850, following the graduation of Elizabeth Blackwell from Geneva Medical College and midwife Marion Moore's applications to Harvard Medical School. As a mature woman of forty-five, Moore expected less resistance than if she were younger, but her application was twice rejected. The rejection simply served to strengthen her resolve and activism with other women. See Mary Roth Walsh, "Doctors Wanted: No Women Need Apply": Sexual Barriers in the Medical Profession, 1835-1975 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977) and "Send Us A Lady Physician" Women Doctors in America, 1835-1920, ed., Ruth J. Abram, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985).

If women were thought to be controlled by their ovaries and uterus during their childbearing years, one might expect that the postmenopausal woman would be free of the requirements to protect her uterine function by *not taxing her brain,* and free from the uncontrollable emotional effects of menstruation, so that pursuits unsanctioned before would now be open to her, but such was not the case. As we have seen in the medical discourse and in the depictions of older women on the stage: the older woman was purported to be subject to a whole new set of ills--physical and mental--due now to the cessation of menses!

What would happen if *the change* ushered in a real change in her outlook and behavior? What if she failed to do her duty and usher younger women into submissive matrimony and worked, instead with those young women to lobby for legal, educational, and career opportunities? Were she to apply her time, her experience, and her postmenopausal zest to social and political activism, she might be a formidable force. In matter of fact, she was.

EPILOGUE

With female suffrage won over seventy years ago, with limitless educational opportunities available to women of all ages and with increasing numbers of women in professional and leadership positions, how do representations of women in popular culture today differ from those over a century ago? Unfortunately, we must admit that there are as many disparities and limitations in the cultural representations of older women in current popular culture as there were in the nineteenth-century. Evidence for this disparity can be found in the employment figures for the Screen Actors Guild, the union covering employment contracts in films, commercials, and made-for-TV movies. For example, of the 56,308 SAG jobs in 1996, 65% went to men and 35% went to women.[1] The disparity is obvious when we compare these numbers to the 1996 figures from the U. S. Census Bureau which shows a population that is 49% male and 51% female. The disparity grows larger when we add age factors. Out of a total of 56,308 SAG jobs in 1996, one in three went to performers over 40. Of those 18,479 jobs to actors over 40, 73% went to men and 27% went to women,[2] despite the actual demographics that show the population in

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[1] Male-to-female employment ratios for preceding years: 68% to 32% in 1985; 67% to 33% in 1986; 66% to 34% in 1987; 64% to 36% in 1988; 66% to 34% in 1989-91; 65% to 35% in 1992-93; and 64% to 36% in 1994. Screen Actors Guild Affirmative Action Department fax to author, 6 June 1997.

[2] Simi Horwitz, "SAG Aids Minorities via Studies, Pacts," Backstage, (10 October 1997): 1. Online. Lexis. 15 May 1999.

the over 40 age range as 46% male and 54% female. These numbers demonstrate a remarkable erasure of middle-aged and older women from cultural representation. In 1996, males over 40 comprised 19% of the total population, yet they received 24% of the SAG contracts--that is, 24% of the characters represented were for male actors over 40. On the other hand, women over 40 comprised 22% of the total population, yet only 9% of the SAG roles were for women over 40.

The numbers are significant because they reveal a systemic erasure of middle-aged and older women in cultural discourse. There is an unstated assumption that there is little dramatic potential in older female characters, that they have no objectives to pursue, no opportunities for quest and development, no personhood outside service (or dis-service) to male hero plots and young female romance plots. Another assumption is that there are no audiences interested in seeing them; this assumption on the part of studio executives and ad agencies seems particularly insupportable given the current and projected demographics! The disparities in gender and age representation in popular culture are also important because of the weight that scarcity gives to the images that *do* appear. Invisibility, itself, expresses cultural ideology and provides a ground for the reiteration of stereotypes and narrow, constricting social roles. "Women are still fighting stereotypes," says

Ray Forchion, the National Chairman of the Ethnic Employment Opportunities Committee at the Screen Actors Guild.

> It's a constant battle. They continue to be used as props, the leading man's wife as opposed to a strong leading character. And if, she's over 40, she almost ceases to exist altogether![3]

Amy Aquino, vice-president of the Screen Actors Guild, agrees, "Women I've worked with who have won Academy Awards are looking for alternative careers because there's nothing out there for women in midlife."[4]

As mentioned the figures above only identify the *number* of jobs; they do not indicate the size of the roles, the position of the character within the story, or the ways in which characters are delineated. A ten-year study by the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania addresses some of these questions.[5] Between 1982 and 1992, researchers monitored programs on the major television networks, Fox network, and cable (prime-time and daytime drama, Saturday morning children's programs, game shows, and news programs). George Gerbner, director of the research team, observes that the study focused on "the basic building-blocks of story-telling: casting and fate… [the] calculus of visibility, power, and risk."

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[3] Ibid.

[4] "Hollywood Is Cruel When You Get Old," Vancouver Sun, 23 April 1999, Final: D1, Online. Lexis. 15 May 1999.

[5] The study was commissioned by the Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists.

> Who are the characters that populate the world of television? How are women and minorities (seniors, racial and ethnic groups, poor and disabled persons, etc.) represented? And finally, how do they fare in the world?[6]

Space does not permit a detailed discussion of this extensive study, but the results echo the representational distortions indicated in the 1990s SAG reports--the same distortions as those I found in the nineteenth-century American plays: the overall ratio of male-to-female roles in the symbolic environment is maintained at 2:1, older female characters occupy marginal positions in the story, and they are disempowered and ill-fated.

Gerbner summarizes the contemporary representations of gender and age on television in the following:

> Women play one out of three roles in prime time television, one out of four in children's programs, and one out of five of those who make news. They fall short of majority even in daytime serials. They age faster than men, and as they age they are more likely to be portrayed as evil and unsuccessful. Seniors of both genders are greatly underrepresented and seem to be vanishing instead of increasing as in real life ... Mature women seem especially hard to cast--and hard to take. They are disproportionately underrepresented, undervalued, and undersexed.[7]

Old age itself is under symbolic erasure; on the major networks, elderly characters comprised 2.5 percent of those represented, while their real-life proportion is over 12

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[6] George Gerbner, "Women and Minorities on Television: A Study in Casting and Fate." A Report to the Screen Actors Guild and The American Federation of Television Artists. Annenberg School of Communications. University of Pennsylvania. June, 1993, 2.

[7] Gerbner 12.

percent. As in nineteenth-century cultural discourse (including plays, medical treatises, stage of life lithographs) women are culturally aged much more rapidly than men. "Women tend to be concentrated in the younger age groups," Gerner reports, "Their proportion of 'settled adults' declines significantly more than men's."[8]

Interestingly, the one category where females were in the majority was in game shows (58%), although Gerbner notes that "the ringmasters were all men." Further, the host's assistants were *young* women, 3 out of 4 of whom were seen but not heard. The predominance of females as game show contestants signals an enduring cultural association with women and the consumption of goods, not unlike the society women in nineteenth-century social comedies.

In a section entitled "Heroes and Villains" Gerbner notes that female characters are most often depicted as "good," however, "the evaluations are reversed for 'elderly' women." Here we find the same lack of diversity, the same either-or stereotypes of older women that were evident in the plays of the last century. Gerbner explains,

> For every elderly male villain there are 13 male heroes of the same age. But for every such heroine there is one elderly female villain. The proportion of 'bad' old females is more than 8 times that of 'bad' old males. [9]

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[8] Gerbner 5.

[9] Gerbner 9.

Cultural erasure of older women, limited character types, and an angel-or-villain attitude about older female characters have continued to hobble our own depictions of older woman.

Considering these discouraging figures, it is noteworthy that in the last two years there have been several popular American films and plays in which middle-aged and older female characters play central roles: Stepmom (Columbia Pictures), One True Thing (Universal Pictures), Donald Margulies' Collected Stories; Lisette Lecat Ross' Scent of the Roses; Tom Ziegler's Grace and Glorie; the recent Pulitzer Prize winning play by Margaret Edson, W;t; and the Academy Award Winner for Best Picture of the year (1998), Titanic (Paramount Pictures). Interestingly, all of these female characters share the same fate: to borrow a phrase from W;t's opening monologue: "It is not my intention to give away the plot; but ..." they all die.[10] One expires in her sleep at the age of 100, but six of the seven die of cancer.

Like the mother in Mrs. Swzyze's Ossawattomie Brown, the most profound action of these women is *to die*. In Writing Beyond the Ending, Rachel DuPlessis reminds us that the "place where ideology is coiled" is in the narrative structure, and that the *outcome* of a story is particularly meaningful for it is "one place where transindividual

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[10] Margaret Edson, W;t, (New York: Faber and Faber, 1999) 6.

assumptions and values are most clearly visible."[11] What ideology is coiled in the reiteration of the older-woman-dies-of-cancer plot?

As the American demographics change over the next decades what will be the *casting* and *fate* of "older" women in the public imagination? What stories will we tell ourselves? What parts might we play? What is *difficult* to imagine? Perhaps that is where we might start to change the moulds, to create new story-lines, new possibilities.

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[11] Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985) 5,3.

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