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Theater Matters: Female Theatricality in Hawthorne, Alcott, Brontë, and James

by

Keiko Miyajima

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment

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ABSTRACT

Theater Matters: Female Theatricality in Hawthorne, Alcott, Brontë, and James

By

Keiko Miyajima

Advisor: Professor Richard Kaye

This dissertation examines the ways the novelists on both sides of the Atlantic use the figure of the theatrical woman to advance claims about the nature and role of women. Theater is a deeply paradoxical art form: Seen at once as socially constitutive and promoting mass conformity, it is also criticized as denaturalizing, decentering, etiolating, queering, feminizing. These anxieties coalesce around the image of the actress. In nineteenth century fiction, the image of a woman performing on stage is a powerful one, suggestive of ideal femininity, but also of negative traits including deception, artificiality and an unfeminine appetite for public attention. By examining nineteenth century depictions of the performing woman, I show these depictions as emblematic of society's ambivalent attitudes in a time when women were demanding more of a public role.

Nineteenth century ideology held that the woman's ideal realm was in private, in the domestic sphere, and the ideal woman should be authentically chaste, loving and modest. However, the very existence of an ideal for women to emulate suggested that this set of traits was merely a role—an inauthentic performance that women could adopt and discard at will. The need to perform ideal womanhood placed particularly high demands on women in public life. Women in the arts and professions had to negotiate the demand that they be ladylike, attractive and genteel, performing feminine modesty in order to advance public careers.

A host of novels problematize the public/private, authentic/artificial split by using female characters in public space to embody the powerful cultural shifts that modernity and rapid urbanization were bringing to the society. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*, Louisa May Alcott's sensational works, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, and Henry James's *The Bostonians* and *The Tragic Muse* use the figure of the female performer to address the changing roles of women along with wider issues of social performance, identity, subjectivity and sexuality. These novels feature scenes of female performance in particular because the figure of the performer encapsulates many of the traits of the self-fashioning modern woman, with her ability to manipulate conventions of feminine behavior while being placed between repressive "Victorian-ness" and the coming of the New Woman.

To My Family in Japan and in the U.S.

and

In Memory of Eve

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INTRODUCTION

In Louisa May Alcott's novel *Work*, the main character, Christie, quits a successful acting career after realizing that she is succumbing to the "temptations" of the acting life, "growing selfish, frivolous and vain" with "no care for any one but herself" (41). While she sees the world of theater as morally corrupting, her training will play a key role in her moral development, "giving her [the] self-possession, power of voice, and ease of gesture" to pursue a career as a feminist, pro-labor public speaker (332).

This ambivalence about the actress's power of voice and gesture is at the heart of many nineteenth-century portrayals of theater. In nineteenth-century fiction, the image of a woman performing on stage is a powerful one: suggestive of femininity and self-expression, but also of negative traits including deception, artificiality and an unfeminine appetite for public attention. In the late nineteenth century, a host of novels use the figure of the actress to address the changing roles of women along with wider issues of social performance, identity, subjectivity and sexuality. These novels problematize the public/private split by using female characters in public space to embody the powerful cultural shifts that modernity and rapid urbanization were bringing to society. Theater is a deeply paradoxical art form, seen at once as socially constitutive and promoting conformity, and as denaturalizing, decentering, etiolating, queering, feminizing. Nineteenth-century novels, placed between repressive "Victorian-ness" and the coming of the New Woman, often illustrate social activities in theatrical metaphors, while simultaneously making an effort to maintain those social norms by concealing the anxieties surrounding the stability of these norms, the anxieties which coalesce around scenes of theater and theatricality. In the following chapters, I will examine

the ways in which nineteenth-century novelists on both sides of the Atlantic use the figure of the theatrical woman to advance claims about the role of women.

Theater and theatricality play important roles in the nineteenth-century literature of both England and America.¹ These novels are preoccupied not only with metaphors of society as a “stage,” but also with actual scenes of theater and theatrical performance. Quite often, theater in the nineteenth-century novel exerts a seductive power, engrossing, and at times repulsing, the audience. In Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, a private theatrical performance captivates the performers, but is ultimately portrayed as a temptation to be resisted due to its ability to induce desire and prompt imitation of the characters. These concerns persisted throughout the century. The novels I will discuss—including Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*, Brontë’s *Villette*, Alcott’s *Work*, James’s *The Bostonians* and *The Tragic Muse*—similarly portray theater as fascinating, but at the same time dangerously provocative, in particular when women act on stage.

The disturbing power ascribed to theater calls for critical attention. As I will discuss in Chapter Three, antitheatricalists have historically expressed anxieties about the disturbing relation between acting and gender. According to Jonas Barish, European and American moralists from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century express what he calls “antitheatrical prejudice” against actors and acting; since, for those polemicists, the impersonation of evil or inferior characters was morally harmful to the impersonator, endangering the integrity of the authentic self, or even signifying the absence of such integrity (307-10). The theater was

¹ For example, Nina Auerbach, in her seminal work *Private Theatricals*, examines the impact of theater and theatricality in Victorian imagination and representations. Joseph Litvak’s *Caught in the Act* analyzes the at once subversive and conformist presence of theatricality in Victorian literature. Emily Allen’s *Theater Figures* also extensively analyzes the tense relation between the novel and theater in Victorian literature. In *Portable Theater*, Allan Ackerman investigates the cultural importance of theater and melodrama in nineteenth-century American literature. Randall Knoper, in *Acting Naturally*, argues that Mark Twain’s works, as well as his comic persona, are deeply embedded in the American culture of performance and theatricality. Peter Brooks also examines the influence of French melodramatic theater in the modern, “realist” novels of James and Balzac.

often considered a locus not only for moral corruption but also for gender and sexual disturbance, of the actors as well as of the audience. Renaissance antitheatricalists expressed fear of the theatrical custom of cross-dressing because it would make a boy actor effeminate, hinting at the grotesque possibility that if a male can convincingly portray a female, “there is no masculinity, no masculine self” within (Levin 8). During the Restoration period, during which the custom of cross-dressing was in decline, women began to act on stage. As Barish notes, however, the theater was condemned at once for employing men to impersonate women, and for allowing actresses on stage in order to avoid cross-dressing (91). Jean Marsden further points out that antitheatrical tracts in late seventeenth-century England began to emphasize the danger of the theater’s immoral effect on the audience, particularly on the female audience. Moralists expressed concern that women would identify with what they saw on stage, connecting this fear to women’s “latent unmanageability” (884-86), their tendency to disobey patriarchal codes of conduct.

These antitheatrical prejudices also travelled to America with the English Puritans (Houchin, 6). American moralists expressed persistent antitheatrical sentiments from the colonial period to the nineteenth century, a trend which culminates in Congress’s passing of legislation for “the suppression of ‘shews, plays and other expensive diversions and entertainments’” in 1774 (Davis, 18). According to John Houchin, the stage for colonial Puritans represented a chaotic site, “exempt from the laws of the state and of God[,] where sexual, social, and religious transgressions could be practiced with impunity” (6), and from the Colonial period through the twentieth century, antitheatrical censorship frequently took aim against “immoral, pernicious, or subversive” performances (2). Houchin argues that by 1860s the American theater had gained respectability by excluding prostitutes from the

audience, but attempts to purify theater suffered a serious setback with the appearance of Lydia Thompson's "British Blondes" burlesque troupe in 1868 and the increasing popularity of burlesque, followed by Thompson's phenomenal success. Thompson's female troupe adopted female-to-male cross-dressing, and mimicked masculine liberty of speech and behavior. The critics fiercely attacked Thompson's troupe for its corrupting influence, citing "sensual exhibitions of the feminine form" that pander to "the base and vulgar elements of human nature" (quoted in Houchin, 34).² For both British and American critics of theater, female performers were often considered morally provocative since their acting on stage and showing their bodies were viewed as scandalous and unnatural, analogous to the behavior of prostitutes who offered their bodies for public consumption. Polemicists further saw the danger of mimetic desire that courting scenes might arouse in the audience, fearing that performances of sexuality could turn audiences into performers of parallel acts in a real, offstage setting.

Critics of the theater in both England and America commonly express anxieties about the "vicious" effects caused by performing on and viewing the theatrical stage: the confusion and crisis of one's sexual and social being blur the boundaries between self and other, stage and audience, fiction and reality, even male and female. However, the anxieties caused by the "ontological subversiveness" (Barish 21) of theatricality are not limited to the theater and the debates surrounding the theater. The controversy over theater in fact anticipates the historical

² Houchin reads the history of theater from the Colonial period through twentieth century America as one of "censorship" and the incessant struggle between legal suppressions of theater and the theater's protest against them. Indeed, American opponents of theater primarily stood against "indecent and immoral" elements in theater, just as their British counterparts. However, early American antitheatricalism also incorporated patriotic sentiment against the influence of British theater and its vices. Theresa Saxton argues that the anti-theatrical lobby mainly attacked the "vicious" theatrical shows imported from England; by banning them, the Americans attempted to establish a new, virtuous theater, promoting the performance of plays as "moral lectures" that morally improve the audience. Heather S. Nathans also states that Congress's theatrical ban signifies America's attempt to sever its connections with Britain, the "revolutionary transformation" of antitheatricalism "from a simple matter of religious preference to one of patriotic duty" to establish a new national theater (37).

and social transition that was taking place in both American and British cultures. Accounts of societies undergoing modernization suggest that the Western world experienced a radical shift in its conception of the self as the nineteenth century progressed. The accepted model of the self shifted from an essentialist one, in which identity is a deeply rooted phenomenon, to a more modest view of human identity, psychology and subjectivity as environmentally determined and nonessential. Judith Ryan points out that, with the emergence during the 1880's of the "new psychologists" in Europe and America such as Franz Brentano, Wilhelm Wundt and William James, the Cartesian fundamentalist view of subject was giving way to the "phenomenalist" or empiricist way of understanding human identity and subjectivity. As a prime example, James's empiricist psychology locates the self in a spatial mode, as a bundle of associations and sense impressions, changing from moment to moment, without a substantial core. Thinkers like James saw the self as a fluid, unbounded entity composed of constant interactions, adaptations and feedback between self and others, self and contexts—"a self that was not distinct from its surroundings" (Ryan 12) but reflected them. Within this context, the disturbing vision evoked by the theater evokes a wider shift of view the Victorian world was undergoing.

Ryan's view aptly explains the emergence of "personality" and decline of "character" that theorists such as Warren Susman observe in turn-of-the-century American culture. The increasing interest in personality reflects a larger cultural reorientation toward a new concept of self as a "performer." Early nineteenth-century thought saw "character" as anchored by a fixed, bounded and innate core, a concept best exemplified in Emersonian self-reliance and Jacksonian possessive individualism. This concept of the self was implicitly masculinist, rooted in "masculine" values like independence from others and willingness to take action. In

his 1841 essay on “Self-Reliance,” Emerson writes: “Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members”(261). For Emerson’s self-reliant gendered subject, “imitation is suicide”: “Insist on yourself; never imitate” (259). By contrast, this new, more fluid concept of “personality,” as it loomed large in popular and psychiatric literature toward the beginning of the twentieth century, was perceived as adaptable, as something to be learned, practiced, imitated and performed (Susman 280). The self began to be seen as fundamentally theatrical and mimetic, inevitably responsive to others and environments, and thus changeable and displaceable.

This shift in thinking affected beliefs about social behavior as well as innate selfhood. Karen Halttunen’s study of nineteenth-century American middle-class culture focuses on the significance of “disguise, masking, and theatrical ritual” as an identity-shaping concept and activity: “Proper dress gradually came to be accepted as a legitimate form of disguise; proper etiquette was increasingly viewed as a means of masking and thus controlling unacceptable social impulses; and mourning ritual was coming to be a form of public theater, designed to display the perfect gentility of its participants” (Halttunen [1982],196). Social rituals and codes of conduct and appearance contributed to the formulation of one’s social and self-identity during the “antebellum crisis of social confidence” (193). Middle-class men and women, finding themselves in the new social interstices of ‘middle-ness,’ were desperately and “constantly assuming new identities and struggling to be convincing in new social roles,” following (and imitating) the sentimental models of sincerity suggested by popular advice manuals. In this climate of overall cultural uneasiness, the middle-class ideal of “sincerity,” performed and practiced as such, becomes difficult to distinguish from the very “hypocrisy” against which the middle-class defines itself (195-6). Likewise, Nina Auerbach states that the

Victorian theater's investment in the mores of its time made it more of a threat: Its "menace was not its threat to the integrity of sincerity, but the theatricality of sincerity itself" (114). According to Auerbach, the Victorian "fear" of theatrical performance reflects the fear of the "histrionic artifice of ordinary life" (114). In other words, nineteenth-century Western society increasingly saw itself as a theater of social performers.

Central to these anxieties was the belief that even traditional domestic and private space is not immune to the theatrical, as the performance of expected social and, in particular, gender roles leads to a type of offstage acting that cuts across both spheres. As the safely-defined cognitive barrier between theater and the world was tumbling down, so too was the boundary of the self and subjectivity; as a result the theater became the source of both obsession and anxiety for Victorian antitheatrical polemicists, as well as for novelists. Theater had thus become at once a cultural icon and scapegoat.

The performer is doubly a source of anxiety because he or she is both a perpetrator of deception, and a victim of social forces that shape her identity in a coercive way. The double significance of this modern, performative self is that on one level it cancels out the autonomy and authenticity of the subject, making a self into a "carrier of theatrical disorder" (Auerbach 118); and on another, it can be the receptacle of social control. This phenomenon is well described by sociologist Erving Goffman's theory of "presentation of self," with its Shakespearean view that all the world is a stage and we are all actors. As Auerbach observes, for Goffman, the social performance is not "the release of multiple selves, but a grim capitulation to social control"(10).

With the coming of the twentieth century, theorists began to describe theatricality in positive terms, as a universal feature of social life, or even as a site of potential subversion.

Current use of the word “performativity” includes notions of the speech-act theory of J. L. Austin, as well as post-structuralist critique by theorists such as Derrida, Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Performativity was defined by J. L. Austin in the field of linguistics as the function of speech not only to represent reality, but to carry out some act within the context of social life (such as a request, order, declaration or assertion of fact). He gives the example of a wedding ceremony, in which the statement “I now pronounce you man and wife” itself performs the act of wedding the couple. In the decades that followed the 1962 publication of his groundbreaking *How to Do Things With Words*, work inspired by Austin has grown to consider various social activities as themselves a kind of speech act. Theorists such as Judith Butler address the culturally constructed meaning not only of utterances but also of events, acts, or even bodies. Butler’s argument specifically relates to the performative formation of gender: Men and women are created as gendered beings through the constitutive acts that comprise their gender roles and sexual identities. In line with Austin, Althusser and Foucault, the “performative,” for Butler, is a dominant type of power/discourse that presupposes one’s action and being or even actualizes what it describes, heavily depending on appropriate circumstances—conventions, conditions, and contexts. For example, the phrase “I now pronounce you man and wife” is only effective if the context is a wedding service and the speaker has the proper authority.

Butler’s conception of social performance contrasts with the straightforward notion of an actor playing a role. Butler carefully separates performativity in the social domain from theater: “It is important to distinguish performance from performativity: the former presumes a subject, but the latter contests the very notion of the subject” (“Interview”). That is, “performance” tends to assume “an acting subject” who is pretending to be someone else;

“performativity,” on the other hand, tends to refer to the performance indistinguishable from the acting subject, preceding and hence constructing the subject of performance.

Despite this apparent opposition in Butler’s definition, however, theatrical performance cannot be clearly dissociated from performativity. Especially in the historical context of antitheatrical censorship and Victorian decorum (one in which aesthetics, morality and gender propriety were interwoven), theatricality and performance, both on stage and off, also rely on performativity—on discursive and spectacular legibility and intelligibility. This means that analyses of performance cannot assume either “willful and arbitrary choice” (*Bodies* 187), or necessarily intentional or predictable effects. As Peggy Phelan reminds us, intelligibility of theatrical performance is also a matter of performativity, the “problem of citationality, documentation, and context,” since performers are also bound by cultural conventions and contexts, within “unequal economy of power-knowledge in which performers and writers find themselves”(14, 23).

Butler is not the only thinker who is wary of the performativity of theatrical performance. She is in fact curiously repeating, although in a very different context, Austin’s dismissal of theatricality from his study of performativity. Austin also excludes theatrical performance from his study of “serious” performative language, classifying the former as parasitic, non-normative, unnatural, non-serious and etiolated (20)³. In his view, utterances made in a theatrical performance are not real questions, commands, requests, etc., but representations of such acts. As Parker and Sedgwick point out, Austin’s view of theatricality as “etiolated” derives from its associations with “the perverted, the artificial, the unnatural,

³ According to Austin, “A performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. Language in such circumstances is used not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of the etiolations of language”(22).

the abnormal, the decadent, the effete, the diseased” (5). (Tellingly, the current definition of “theatricality” carries a similar queering connotation of excess, exaggeration and unnaturalness; according to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, one of the definitions of “theatrical” is characterized by “exaggerated self-display and unnatural behavior; affectedly dramatic”). Parker and Sedgwick deconstruct the opposition between performativity and theatrical performance drawn by Austin, pointing out that the most exemplary performative utterance, a marriage ceremony (“I do”), itself assumes the material condition of a theater, depending on the presence of the witness/beholder to ensure its legitimacy (Parker and Sedgwick 11). In other words, social performance is not self-sufficient and self-contained, but requires the presence of the other—an audience or witness to the performance.

Theater, with its reliance on audience, has also been depicted as exerting a debasing influence on the other arts. It is precisely this impurity in performance-audience relations that lies at the base of Michael Fried’s famous diatribe against minimalist art, “Art and Objecthood.” It is “objecthood,” this very dependency on the gaze of the other, the sensibility “corrupted or perverted by theater” (161), that troubles Fried’s ideal of modernist art’s/artists’ autonomy. The imperative for the “survival” of modernist art, he argues, is to “*defeat theater*,” to defeat the “theatricality of objecthood” (163, 160). Amelia Jones argues that the modernist practices seen in Fried are an expression of gender anxiety. She reads Fried’s view of theatricality as a “specifically *feminizing* debasement of the virility of ‘pure’ modernism” (*Body Art* 112), which she finds coextensive with Nietzsche’s homophobic diatribe against Wagner’s “herd, female” theater (quoted in Jones, *Postmodernism* 43). If, as Jones argues, both Fried’s and Nietzsche’s critiques of theatricality imply a masculinist and homophobic anxiety about the denaturalizing aspect of performance, it is because the theatrical subject’s

dependence on spectacle places the subject as the object of gaze, and thus in an inherently feminized position. Both Austin's and Fried's dismissals of theatricality are illustrative of antitheatrical prejudice, a long-standing derision of theatricality as perverted, feminizing and queering—an adulteration of identity and origin.⁴

Performance, performativity and theatricality then encompass otherness—beholders, others, impure referents—in a non-selfsame relationship between signifier and signified, between performance and audience, between performance and performing subject. In other words, like theater, performance is an open space in which the subject of performance is constantly in negotiation with the performance itself, perpetually subject to improvisation and mutation. It is in this very spatial dimension of theatricality that Derrida's idea of citationality is effective, just as Butler sees it as useful to apply to the queer strategy of performativity (*Bodies* 14, 191). Theatricality, implied both in performance and performativity, is fundamentally a mimetic art, making use of citations to make itself intelligible. In the Derridian two-fold function of citationality, a citation retroactively refers to the “original” and thus reconstitutes the latter's authority; but on the other hand, a citation is “always already” a secondhand repetition, open to other interpretations and referents, subject to centrifugal disseminations of meanings.

In a similar vein, performing (or citing) heterosexual norms, on the one hand, results in the formation of a heterosexually coercive society; but, on the other hand, citing them in certain other contexts may destabilize the line between natural and constructed sexual

⁴ Andreas Huyssen also argues that Nietzsche's diatribe against the Wagnerian stage is a modernist's phobic reaction against mass culture's feminizing power (44-62). According to Huyssen, mass culture is often labeled as “woman,” feminizing and feminized in modernist texts, as something engulfing, dangerous, trivial and inauthentic. The identification of woman and mass culture can be seen in Hawthorne's famous criticism against popular writers as “a damned mob of scribbling women,” as well as in several works by Henry James: *The American Scene*, *The Bostonians* and *The Tragic Muse*, for example.

identity. Performance both on stage and off stage is thus a conflicted site in which the normalizing tendency and the denaturalizing one are always in collision and negotiation. Thus, a strategic imitation or performance of or across gender is an act of negotiation between the performative power of gender and the performing power of the subject. This kind of performance may end up enforcing the gender ideal; but may also cause a shift of terms and meanings, expanding the cultural range of gender gestures and vocabularies.

The studies of performance and performativity by Butler, Sedgwick and Derrida help us understand the relationship between antitheatrical discourses and the subversive threats implied in theatricality. If the theater has been historically problematic, it is because theatrical performance attests to the fact that any identity, in particular a gendered or sexual identity, is performative in that it is made viable through acting, miming, gesturing, gazing—whether on stage or off stage; and that, to quote Butler’s often-quoted hypothesis, “*gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*” (“Imitation” 306). Theatrical performance makes the machinery of performativity visible.

In the nineteenth century, novelists used theatrical tropes to reflect on these issues of authenticity, social coercion and women’s complex ontology. In the chapters below, I examine a variety of novels that feature actresses or scenes of performance. In Chapter One, I read Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance* as an exploration of the way performance constitutes identity, especially gender and sexual identity. The novel explores performativity in a context where people are expected to live simple and guilelessly authentic lives: a transcendentalist commune, modeled on the real-life Brook Farm. In so doing, it shows how this tight-knit community is just another social stage. In the novel, women are associated with objecthood and theatricality, objects to be gazed at and speculated upon:

Zenobia as a passionate, proto-feminist orator, and Priscilla as a hypnotized clairvoyant on stage. The most prominent example is the character of Zenobia, whose excessive sexuality and transgressive (both over-feminine and unfeminine) nature are perceived by the narrator as elements of the actress/performer. In particular, she is made into an “other” in relation to Priscilla, whose domestic femininity is defined and constructed exclusively in contrast to Zenobia’s theatrical, spectacular presence. Theatricality here results in punishment for women, with Priscilla swept from the hypnotic stage into domestic invisibility, and Zenobia caught in a melodramatic death scene.

In Chapter Two, I discuss Louisa May Alcott’s *Behind the Mask* and *Work*, two novels that depict women who turn to acting and build successful careers. As Alcott herself was once an actress, her novels express strong interests in theater and performance, experiences which inform her works’ feminist concern with women’s development. Alcott portrays performance as a psychological necessity within the lives of women, imbuing female performance with subversive and empowering potential in the context of sentimental nineteenth-century ideology. In *Behind the Mask*, Alcott directly associates “a woman’s power” (the subtitle of the work) with offstage theatricality, a social performance of feminine perfection, thus critiquing the middle-class ideals of feminine virtue and “true womanhood.” The heroine of *Work*, Christie Devon, on the other hand, dismisses theatrical performance as an improper (or non-feminine) vocational choice after her successful career as an actress. Her antitheatrical rhetoric, however, contradicts the novel’s final endorsement of female performance, with Christie making a successful debut as a public speaker. Like Brontë’s *Villette*, the shadow of which is quite tangible in *Work*, Alcott casts light here on the expressive and informing possibilities of performance for arousing feminist consciousness.

In Chapter Three, I examine Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* from the perspective of feminist models of performance. The novel's main character, Lucy Snowe, rejects the showiness of Catholic Europe and represses any external sign of her emotions, yet is also persuaded to perform as a male wooer in a school play, a part she takes to with enthusiasm. While the novel depicts performance of "femininity" on and off the Victorian social stage, it also displays female performance that symbolizes a woman's potential for class/social/gender mobility. Behind the novel's apparent antitheatrical rhetoric, Brontë celebrates the expressive possibilities of female cross-dressing performance, fusing the "natural" or "real" with the "artificial" and "theatrical" into a hybrid spectacle that destabilizes representations of class, gender and sexuality.

In the final two chapters, Chapters Four and Five, I read Henry James's novels *The Bostonians* and *The Tragic Muse*. In these novels, theatrical metaphors underscore the idea that the characters are all playing social roles, while scenes of theater vibrate with the queer energies of non-heteronormative desires and identities. James not only recognizes the spectacular nature of society as examined in *The American Scene*: he also understands the control that society exerts over its citizens through internalized, coercive performance and surveillance.⁵ This recognition of what J. A. Ward calls "compulsive theatricalism" (131) is exemplified, for example, in the depiction of Isabel Archer toward the second half of *The Portrait of a Lady*, where Isabel "performs" a perfect lady as the wife of Gilbert Osmond. James is typically seen as a realist author who depicts characters' interiority. The theatrical elements in James's novels, however, also serve to unsettle the notion of mimetic representation by introducing a (post)modernist conception of the fluidity of the self. While

⁵ For example. Mark Seltzer's *Henry James and the Art of Power* persuasively argues that James's works of psychological realism incorporate the workings of Foucauldian surveillance and coercion.

the pervasive intrusion of theatricality in the novels seems to work in tandem with the social mill of convention, the actual scenes of performance on stage, together with the occasional eruptions of staginess, seem to question the full deployment of Jamesian realism's "strategy of containment" (to use Frederic Jameson's famous term). Like Basil Ransom in *The Bostonians* and Peter Shirringham in *The Tragic Muse*, James is simultaneously attracted to and repelled by the theatricality that potentially subverts the carefully inscribed boundaries of society. Through the pervasively theatrical elements in his novels, James embraces the contrasting movements of resistance and surrender to society's expectations of the self, in particular in regard to female social/theatrical performers. In these novels, the antitheatrical rhetoric is often entwined with heterosexual discourses (as seen in the characters of Basil Ransom, Peter Sherringham and Julia Dallow), while theatrical elements are imbued with queer desires, as embodied in the figures of Gabriel Nash and Miriam Rooth. James's ambivalence toward theater and theatricality can thus be contextualized in his deep-seated ambivalence toward sexual anomalies. While *The Bostonians* ends in the heterosexual engagement of the feminist performer, Verena Tarrant, *The Tragic Muse*, woven at first with antitheatrical discourse, gradually moves toward the celebration of the actress and the theater. In this sense, Miriam Rooth is not only the embodiment of female self-realization, but also that of queer sexuality and identity. A quintessential representation of the actress and artist, Miriam's identity is presented as always in performance, perpetually shifting from one persona to another, frustrating the viewer's desire to get hold of her. A cosmopolitan who is "more than half a Jewess" (49), her heterogeneous, ever-shifting nomad identity postpones and frustrates the telos of heteronormativity, rejecting the creation of a totalized sexual and cultural identity.

CHAPTER ONE

“A Counterfeit Arcadia”:

Women and Theatricality in *The Blithedale Romance*

In 1852's *The Blithedale Romance*, Nathaniel Hawthorne abandoned the 17th-century historical setting that had served as the backdrop for his critically acclaimed first three novels, writing for the first time about his own time. *The Blithedale Romance* is the only novel among Hawthorne's works that directly depicts nineteenth-century American society. His choice of topic was Brook Farm, a short-lived utopian commune that Hawthorne had lived in for seven months. Based on Transcendental principles, the farm offered members equal payment in exchange for equal work, with a goal of allowing each member ample time to pursue art and learning. Physical labor on the property's farm, along with cultivated leisure, were intended to produce the ideally balanced life. The financially unstable group was forced to close due to bankruptcy after 6 years. This commune's idealistic attempts to transcend nineteenth-century commercialism served as Hawthorne's springboard to explore the artificiality of his rapidly changing social world.

As critics have observed, *The Blithedale Romance* is filled with metaphors of theater.¹ The novel uses the trope of theatricality to reflect the issues, anxieties, and changes that society in the nineteenth century was undergoing, including rapid urbanization and industrialization, differentiation and stratification of life style, the formation of a distinct class system, and the crisis of self-identity these brought about. *The Blithedale Romance* shows that the commune, while ostensibly a retreat from the “theatrical” superficial values of the mainstream, is ultimately a site for an equally pervasive form of theatricality, particularly in regard to female characters.

¹ For example, see Lewis, Pagan and Eisen.

In addition to Hawthorne's shift in place and time, the novel also exhibits a change in style and technique which further reinforces and reflects his modernity. Unlike Hawthorne's other novels, *The Blithedale Romance* is written in the first person. In concert with this narrative shift, the novel performs a psychological analysis of modernity, in which a social actor's need to project correct social and gender identity is revealed as a kind of forced theatricality. The author himself introduces "the creatures of his brain" by making the following list of characters: "The self-concentrated Philanthropist; the high-spirited Woman, bruising herself against the narrow limitations of her sex; the weakly Maiden, whose tremulous nerves endow her with sibylline attributes; the Minor Poet, beginning life with strenuous aspirations, which die out with his youthful fervor" (2). By reducing the characters in the novel to stereotypes and roles, Hawthorne reinforces the idea of the novel as a theatrical exhibition and the characters as a felicitous meeting of signifier and signified. As Jonathan Auerbach points out, this presentation of characters appears as an allegorical and theatrical configuration, and thus "the author's description of his creations reads more like a playbill from a popular nineteenth-century melodrama" (92). By presenting his characters as allegorical figures that loyally play out the author's intentions, Hawthorne, with his figurative vision of theater, establishes his own narrative authority as the director of the stage and the characters he has created. By using metaphors of theatricality, the novel is able to present an incisive view of the ways individual subjectivity is shaped amongst the Victorian middle class.

The novel takes place at a time when middle-class Americans were having their mental life shaped by prescriptive texts on "acting" in public. Karen Halttunen notes that the rise of the middle class and increased affluence in nineteenth-century America coincided with a proliferation of conduct and etiquette books, which attempted to inculcate in the reader highly

coded rules for proper behavior, manners, and dress for both men and women ([1982], 1). These instructions injected the theatrical into everyday life, with each conversation, act, and choice of appearance much more akin to a staged performance than a spontaneous and natural interaction. As Halttunen suggests, performance in nineteenth-century America was at once both self-constitutive—essential to a person’s sense of self—and self-regulatory—a way of disciplining the self’s unruly or undesirable traits. At the same time, however, the notion of identity as a performance of personality must inevitably carry the threat of disruption of the integral self, particularly in the midst of stringent social roles and mores. Social performance is both a way of locating the self in a society or community, and itself an anxiety-provoking threat to the inner self. *The Blithedale Romance* uses the theater as a metaphor for this socially-prescribed theatricality.

Theater pervades the novel, along with a sense of instability and emptiness resulting from the replacement of selfhood with self-theater. The novel’s portrayal of theatrical and social performance is particularly disturbing because it does so through a first-person account, showing the difficulty of establishing real subjectivity even in the site where it should most fully exist. Indeed, as Richard Millington argues, by placing Miles Coverdale, a character obsessed with performance but with very little corresponding self-awareness, at the novel’s focal center, Hawthorne investigates the critical issues surrounding identity in the nineteenth century. Millington observes: “Coverdale’s composition of the novel is in essence his attempt to compose a self, to locate in retrospect the traces of an authenticity that continues to elude him” (560). Forced theatricality gets in the way of this search for authenticity by continually masking these traces.

In the novel, the portrayal of the nineteenth-century cultural entanglement of selfhood with theatricality of manners has a double function. While the prescribed behavior is evoked and encoded in the individual largely as a means of control, it simultaneously creates the possibility for the disruption and slippage of identities. Even as the customs and mores form identities, they also mask or even degrade those identities. This very theatricality invites moments of disruption to the self-identity, causing a loss of narrative control.

If Westervelt is the puppet-master of Priscilla as the Veiled Lady, it could be said that Coverdale, as a narrator, holds the same role for Zenobia and the other characters at Blithedale, or at least attempts to. Indeed, Blithedale, as a constructed utopia, is the ideal blank canvas or stage upon which Coverdale can weave his desired narrative. In the novel, the community is a socialist stage prepared and presented by Hollingsworth, which is recorded, implicitly criticized, and aestheticized by Coverdale, who plays the narrator, stage-manager, and off-stage spectator. He describes himself as a “Chorus,” a person on the threshold between the stage and audience, who narrates the events coherently to the audience/reader. He continues: “Destiny, it may be the most skillful of stage-managers—seldom chooses to arrange its scenes, and carry forward its drama, without securing the presence of at least one calm observer” (97). Coverdale often predicts what is going to happen in the novel.² As a result, Zenobia’s defeat and death seem to be a predestined course of events, causing little surprise to the reader. Narrating the events in retrospect, he also acts indeed as a stage-manager, arranging and connecting events to carry forward the drama of otherwise unrelated scenes of life. At the same time, it is also “a theater” in

² For example, Coverdale dreams of “a dim shadow of [this narrative’s] catastrophe” in his sick-bed early in the novel (38). He also anticipates that “some sufficiently tragic catastrophe” might arise between passionate Zenobia and egoistic Hollingsworth (79). Early in the novel he states figuratively that the exotic Zenobia is “a sister of the Veiled Lady”(45). Later, strolling on the a river bank, he imagines that “the skeleton of the drowned wretch still lay beneath the inscrutable depth, clinging to some sunken log at the bottom with the grip of its old despair,” foreshadowing Zenobia’s death (206).

the author's mind, a little removed from reality but symbolically representing the gist of reality, "where the creatures of his brain may play their phantasmagorical antics"(1). Furthermore, as Ffrangcon Lewis points out, Hollingsworth's desire to form an ideal community resembles the stage-manager's overarching impulse to create a stage that reflects his own ideas (75). The Blithedale participants also seem to be aware of this "staginess" of their experiment. Upon arriving at Blithedale, one of the participants asks: "Have our various parts assigned?" (16). The rhetoric, metaphor, and power dynamics of theater thus permeate, on various levels, the narrative layers surrounding the Blithedale community. Recurrent at each level is the desire to make the narrative and social stages performatively exemplify each stage-manager's beliefs and expectations.

Indeed, the desire to create an exemplary theater, seen on multiple layers in the novel, can be seen as a traditional impulse of nascent America itself. In *Theater Enough*, Jeffrey H. Richards argues that metaphors of stage and theater were often used by English colonists, and later American-born writers. On the world stage, America itself was a theater built by Puritans as a reformed society—an example for the rest of the world (164)—and was considered a model of religious, political, and societal designs that were often referred to in teleological language. As a stage on the hill, the social actors perform their duties under the eyes of God. In a similar fashion, the Blithedale residents act out their ideals under the guidance of Hollingsworth, while the novel's characters also perform their predestined actions and stories under the controlling hands of the author.

But while the metaphor of a society as world-theater was therefore accepted and implicit since the Puritans' landing in America, the nineteenth century was also characterized by an intense anxiety about its own theatricality. As Halttunen observes, the nineteenth-century middle

class was both deeply disturbed by, and deeply immersed in, the increasing theatricality of the self, with its inherent possibility of replacing natural identities and social orders with self-fashioned identities—the possibility eminent in what Jonas Barish calls the “ontological subversiveness” (331) of theater. The self-awareness of its own theatricality and the impulse to establish an exemplary theater seem to strangely coexist in the sentiments of nineteenth-century America. And it is these ambivalent attitudes about theatricality that resonate in the novel.

Indeed, elements of stage and theater, both metaphorical and actual, are evident from the beginning of *The Blithedale Romance*. Coverdale’s narrative opens with a detailed description of “the wonderful exhibition of the Veiled Lady” on stage. Her stage, described as “a phenomenon in the mesmeric line,” exerts “such skillfully contrived circumstances of stage-effect, as those which at once mystified and illuminated the remarkable performances of the lady in question”(5). Although the Veiled Lady is not yet directly present in the novel, the introduction of the Veiled Lady at its outset introduces an important thematic element: the association of theater and theatricality with women. The stage is indeed the novel’s empty center, containing an “enigma of her identity” and the complex ontology of female performance. The “exhibitor” (5) is in control of her body, while the female clairvoyant’s white drapery functions “to insulate her from the material world, from time and space, and to endow her with many of the privileges of a disembodied spirit” (6). In a sense, the stage is an allegorical index of nineteenth-century woman, of her as an icon of a disembodied femininity under male control—and its intricate theatricality, a “stage-effect.”

In striking similarity to Hawthorne’s own placement of self as director of the novel, we find a corresponding authorial vision in Coverdale’s way of seeing, both in the city and after his voyage to Blithedale. Coverdale is a flaneur, a “gentleman stroller of city streets,” to use the

words of Baudelaire, a Hawthorne contemporary. Coverdale describes his frequent trips to theaters, exhibitions, and museums, leading the reader to understand that the narrator's way of seeing has been irrevocably conditioned by his state of perpetual spectatorship. In the chapter titled "A Village-Hall," Coverdale returns to the city, abandoning his stay in Blithedale. Amid the endless spectatorial and intellectual entertainments the city offers, such as lectures, exhibitions, stage plays, dioramas, and panoramas, he again takes up his former pleasures of theater- and museum-going. When he revisits the stage of the Veiled Lady, he describes his impressions to the reader:

The audience was of a generally decent and respectable character; old farmers, in their Sunday black coats, with shrewd, hard, sun-dried faces, and a cynical humor, oftener than any other expression, in their eyes; pretty girls, in many-colored attire; pretty young men—the schoolmaster, the lawyer, or student-at-law, the shopkeeper—all looking rather suburban than rural. In these days, there is absolutely no rusticity, except when the actual labor of the soil leaves its earth-mold on the person. There was likewise a considerable proportion of young and middle-aged women, many of them stern in feature, with marked foreheads, and a very definite line of eyebrow; a type of womanhood in which a bold intellectual development seems to be keeping pace with the progressive delicacy of the physical constitution. Of all these people I took note, at first according to my custom.

(197)

Coverdale's description highlights the way he sees the audience as if they are themselves exhibitions in a museum, actors on stage, or allegorical characters in a novel. For Coverdale, his fellow theater-goers' bodies and attire are transparent signifiers that lay bare their vocations and classes, and their interiority—who they really are. Interestingly, his way of seeing here is

comparable to the way he saw wax figures in a museum shortly before: “Here is displayed the museum of wax figures, illustrating the wide Catholicism of earthy renown by mixing up heroes and statesmen, the Pope and Mormon Prophet, kings, queens, murderers, and beautiful ladies” (196). Coverdale easily reduces both waxen figures and living human beings to understandable and theatrical tropes.

This way of seeing objects and living beings as transparent signifiers of identity is not only conditioned by his habit of theater-going, but also deeply rooted in modern consumer culture. As Dana Brand argues, the novel is presenting, through the eyes of Coverdale, an emerging culture of modernity, and it also presents the narrator as a representative figure of the nineteenth-century literary flaneur. According to Brand, Coverdale is an “idle bachelor of independent means” (127), a newly arising figure of middle-class male. As a flaneur, he views the urban stage of real human dramas as if the people are actors in a realist theater. In much the same way that he enjoys a life of leisure and of the middle-class intellectualism of reading, writing, going to museums, concerts, and theaters, he sees those around him as mere extensions of theater. In his view, as evidenced by the narration, the boundaries between stage and audience, the theater and the city, the wax figures and the humans around him, seem to be collapsing. Because of his spectatorial subjectivity, observing the reality of human lives becomes virtually interchangeable with seeing museum objects and on-stage actors, and everything he sees unavoidably takes on an aspect of theatricality. Likewise, the characters rooted in Blithedale appear to Coverdale to be acting out their identities in front of his inquisitive and consuming eye. For him, the exterior of personhood is transparent, and merely an allegorical signifier of the person’s interior.

Richard Brodhead argues that in *The Blithedale Romance*, “publicly presented self and its language of public abstraction are...an index to the psychological and emotional state of the buried self” (102). Indeed, in Coverdale’s narrative, others are presented as if characters on stage or in a drama, with the publicly presented selves as an interpretive map for the inner, buried self. As Coverdale observes people, he transforms them into “characters of [his] private theater” (70), echoing the author’s own theatrical transmutation of characters in his own life to characters in the novel. By framing each person he encounters in his own mental and interpretive theater, Coverdale attempts to reveal the mysteries those characters carry as he watches them, as if they were acting out scenes for his own benefit. Like a private eye, he constantly attempts to decipher the hidden self in every personal encounter between characters, precisely as “the indices of a problem which it was my business to solve” (70).

Coverdale’s gaze is reifying and detached, as if he were enjoying the scene from the safeguarded viewpoint of an observatory: In Blithedale, he habitually enjoys viewing the scenes from a “rare seclusion” in a “leafy cave” hidden in the high branches of a pine tree (98). Coverdale himself understands his own detached view this way, noting that, “this hermitage symbolized my individuality, and aided me in keeping it inviolate” (99). Yet again, this mode of seeing likens itself to that of a theatrical audience, which, despite being occasionally sympathetic, is fundamentally detached and critical of the performance before it.³ Coverdale, behaving as if he is merely watching a private performance for an audience of one, sees his role as that of an interpreter and isolated observer. He assigns himself the role of “the Chorus in a classic play, which seems to be set aloof from the possibility of the personal concernment, and bestows the whole measure of its hope or fear, its exultation or sorrow, on the fortunes of others, between

³ Coverdale’s private observatory resembles a theatrical box seat created in early nineteenth century. The box seats, in contrast to the pit and the gallery in theater, were made to protect the more “respectable” audience’s “privacy, prestige, and a kind of social decorum” (Grimstead, 55) among the mixed mass of theatergoers.

whom and itself this sympathy is the only bond” (97). Although Coverdale is deeply sympathetic towards others, this sympathy is couched in disengagement. As critics have argued, Coverdale cannot see Blithedale as an actual place inhabited by actual people, each with their own motivations and agency, but rather can only view it from the vantage point of cognitive mastery. For him, Blithedale and its denizens are not an open, vital community, but a closed, character-filled space, on the dramatic, or even melodramatic, stage of his own consciousness.

While each character holds a hidden self that Coverdale wishes to uncover, the main focus of his spectatorship is the beautiful Zenobia. Immediately after their first meeting, Coverdale begins his attempt to interpret her and detect the “mystery” of Zenobia’s life, a pursuit that ultimately leaves him frustrated. Zenobia, being the focal point of Coverdale’s private theater, is inevitably portrayed in the novel as the figure most associated with theatricality, because of both her own theatrical inclinations and Coverdale’s objectifying and reductive view of her. This connection between her person and theater occurs even before her first appearance in the novel. Her character is introduced in Chapter One, in a conversation between Coverdale and Old Moodie immediately after the narrator leaves the theater that is featuring the Veiled Lady. According to Coverdale, Zenobia and the Veiled Lady are merely representations of the same character archetype, as he describes Zenobia as only a pseudonym, a “public name... a sort of mask in which she comes before the world, retaining all the privileges of privacy—a contrivance, in short, like the white drapery of the Veiled Lady, only a little more transparent” (8). By directly associating Zenobia with both the Veiled Lady and theatrical masks, Hawthorne presents her as an oxymoronic figure of a publicly presented private self, and as such she becomes representative of overt theatricality throughout the rest of the narrative.

The complex machinery of social theatricality is used as a means of controlling objects by the narrator. It is also centered specifically on the bodies of women in the novel. Coverdale, as the constant observer of the theatrical, even in everyday life, responds strongly to Zenobia's association with theater. Seeing her performance in a *tableau vivant*, Coverdale observes, "Zenobia, besides, was fond of giving us readings from Shakespeare, and often with a depth of tragic power, or breadth of comic effect, that made one feel it an intolerable wrong to the world, that she did not at once go upon the stage" (106). Though Coverdale tends to see Zenobia less as a flesh-and-blood woman and more as the quintessential actress, her skills are not merely limited to stage performance. With her "quick fancy and magical skill" (107), Zenobia is also a talented stage-manager, writer, and storyteller, reflecting the role assigned to her in the preface as "the high-spirited Woman." But rather than "bruising herself against the narrow limitations of her sex," she expresses her will to go beyond these "limitations" (2). Her self-conscious theatricality, which encompasses her entire person, including her art of dressing, becomes for Zenobia a mode of conscious self-expression. Indeed, though Zenobia herself is not a professional actress, she has a penchant for the private theatricals that were popular in the nineteenth century. At Blithedale, she organizes seasonal revelries, literary readings, and a masquerade carnival, in which she indulges her love of ornate costumes and dresses for both herself and the mysterious Priscilla, for whom she expresses sisterly affection. Zenobia seems to find the most joy in staging stunning *tableaux vivants*, which aptly demonstrate her own dramatic tendencies and her constant desire to perform in front of an audience. As Lewis notes, "in her costumes, her gestures of physicality, and her literary readings and *tableaux vivants*, [Zenobia] attempts to remake the world as a stage upon which to play out her self-dramatizations" (75).⁴ Her art of self-expression and

⁴ Similarly, Jooma and Miles argue that Zenobia's art of dressing is an expression of her creativity and artistry.

representation conveys the power of creating one's own reality, much like a novelist or director creates the reality of their characters.

However, as Coverdale observes Zenobia, he interprets her attire, attitude, and gestures in a way that relies on his own views of gender and sexuality, rather than objectively viewing her personality traits as an index of her own selfhood. Moreover, as a character mediated by the narrator's subjective voice and curiosity towards her, she becomes an object of art, as if she were a text to be read and a palimpsest to be inscribed upon. As a result, Zenobia's artistic talent for representation becomes, in Coverdale's interpretation, merely representative of the constraining gender conventions of the age.

In Coverdale's conception of her, her theatrical artistry is interpreted as an inferior, gendered form of art that is primarily based on appearance, the artificiality of self-presentation, and the discrepancy between appearance and reality. Rather than understanding that Zenobia controls the aesthetics of everything around her in order to create her own self-image, he reduces this creative, expressive theatricality into an attempt at (hetero)sexual allure that serves only to attract the male gaze. In their very first meeting, Coverdale observes: "We seldom meet with women, now-a-days, and in this country, who impress us as being women at all; their sex fades away and goes for nothing, in ordinary intercourse. Not so with Zenobia. One felt an influence breathing out of her, such as we might suppose to come from Eve, when she was just made, and her Creator brought her to Adam, saying—'Behold, here is a woman!'" (17). By casting Zenobia in the role of the sexually-charged prototypical Woman, the narrator essentially remolds Zenobia into a controllable signifier, representative of something that the "Creator brought...to Adam." By analogizing her with the temptress Eve, Coverdale equates Zenobia with an object created

exclusively for men, somebody who is doomed to be punished for her sin. These comparisons are clearly rooted in Coverdale's own conceptions of the nature of gender.

A closer reading of Zenobia, however, reveals much more complexity of character than the narrator is aware of. Coverdale is largely preoccupied with her body, not her personality, and her physical materiality—that is, her body, clothes, gestures, and mannerisms—are emphasized constantly throughout the novel. While this tendency reveals Coverdale's superficial way of viewing the world, it also provides Zenobia with a strong physical presence that is, as Brodhead points out, clearly tangible to the reader (94). Hawthorne creates a character that is fully embodied, both physically and in personality, and so stands out as the most substantial and complex female character in the novel.

One aspect of her personality that is largely ignored by Coverdale, but fully transparent to the reader, is her staunch feminist beliefs and advocacy for gender equality. On Coverdale's first evening at Blithedale, she expounds the feminist view that, though domestic routines might be "feminine occupations, for the present," these assigned gender roles could and should be revised according to individual skills rather than one's gender. Zenobia argues: "By and by, perhaps when our individual adaptations begin to develop themselves, it may be that some of us who wear the petticoat will go a-field, and leave the weaker brethren to take our place in the kitchen" (38). This belief system stands in sharp contrast to that of Coverdale, who "frequently articulates throughout his stay at Blithedale...the differences between the sexes" and "rummages through his ragbag of prejudices about woman to find just the right a priori notion to understand his experience of individual women" (Schriber 64). Coverdale rejects the notion that people's occupations should be determined by their innate qualities, rather than their superficial/predetermined social role. While Coverdale's adherence to gender stereotypes reflects

the attitudes of society in Hawthorne's time, it nonetheless further reinforces how progressive Zenobia is in regards to her feminism, and how ill-suited Coverdale and Zenobia are for each other.

Zenobia's specific utopian vision includes the dissolution of public and private spheres, while her social identity blurs these boundaries, and by her excessive and attention-getting femininity transgresses the boundaries of what is ladylike and becomes too public/male. Her penchant for power and desire for independence goes against the cultural expectations of femininity, and with her overt sexuality and physicality, she violates the domestic ideal. As Benjamin Scott Grossberg points out, Zenobia is at once "an ideal woman and too masculine" (9). Paradoxically, her "masculinity" comes from an overabundance of femininity—Zenobia has too much body, too many ideas, and too much sexuality, to the point that her character invites gender ambiguity. According to the narrator, Zenobia is "too powerful for all my opposing struggles" (165) and has "too much sense, and too much means, and enjoy[s] life a great deal too much" (231). Indeed, her larger-than-life physicality—the "largeness of her physical nature" (164)—is continuously brought up by the narrator, with her "bloom, health, and vigor...possessed in such overflow" (16), her hands being "larger than most women would like to have—or than they could afford to have" (15), and her peculiar habit of indulging in "a large amount of physical exercise," which "distinguish[es] Zenobia from most of her sex" (156). Although Coverdale sees Zenobia as the prototype of woman, her physicality and beliefs about gender roles are strikingly at odds with Victorian ideas of womanhood.

Another aspect of Zenobia's personality that sets her apart from Victorian standards is her sexuality, which Coverdale perceives to be at once both hidden and overt. Sustaining the novel's theme of illusion and masks, he sees Zenobia's sexuality as both a transparent sign and

an obscure mystery. Zenobia is sexualized by Coverdale precisely because of her mysterious, masked identity, which serves to make her an enigma; this aspect of her character further attracts Coverdale's interpretive speculation. He frequently speculates on Zenobia's sexual history, wondering if she is "a woman to whom wedlock had thrown wide the gates of mystery" (36). Indeed, he becomes nearly obsessed with her state of virginity, finally concluding: "Zenobia is a wife! Zenobia has lived, and loved! There is no folded petal, no latent dew-drop, in this perfectly developed rose!" (47). Rather than being a symbol of her confidence and adventurous spirit, Zenobia's free and unconstrained gestures and mannerisms are interpreted as a sign of her having known sexual intimacy. Instead of interpreting signs and deciphering the mystery, he is creating signs and meanings upon her enigmatic identity. He does not merely observe others: his conjecture over the mystery actively produces a fact about a woman's (hetero)sexual identity ("Zenobia is a wife!"). As a result, Coverdale, presupposing that Zenobia knows the mysteries of sex, sees Zenobia as a pure index of sexuality. This, combined with his voyeuristic tendencies, leads him to fixate on her as a purely sexual object. Her lack of sexual purity also gives Coverdale a sense of entitlement towards Zenobia. Because Coverdale sees the entire world as a performance, Zenobia becomes another actor for him to spectate and fixate upon.

Coverdale's objectification of Zenobia is an indication of the ambivalent results of this attitude toward society: While a woman can craft her social identity perfectly, her dimensionality is still at the mercy of flattening male misinterpretations. Zenobia is also viewed as an object to be seen, appreciated, and speculated upon, rather than someone that exists by herself. When Coverdale meets Zenobia for the first time, he conjures in his mind "a picture of that fine, perfectly developed figure, in Eve's earliest garment," and continues: "I almost fancied myself actually beholding it" (17). From the outset, Zenobia is, in Coverdale's mind, a static object of

the male gaze. Zenobia herself comments on Coverdale's persistent gaze, saying: "I have been exposed to a great deal of eye-shot in the few years of my mixing in the world, but never, I think, to precisely such glances as you are in the habit of favoring me with" (47). Zenobia's slightly accusatory tone underscores the gender and power disequilibrium that occurs between the observer and the object of the gaze.⁵

Coverdale's trope of the actress renders Zenobia not as a self-expressing artist but as a commodified image. Appraising Zenobia's excessive physicality that "the homely simplicity of her dress could not conceal," the narrator comments: "The image of her form and face should have been multiplied all over the earth. It was wronging for the rest of mankind, to retain her as the spectacle of only a few" (44). By imagining Zenobia as a stable image that circulates among male viewers, the narrator emphasizes the objectification and commodification of Zenobia's body as an object of exchange between men. The narrator concludes: "The stage would have been her proper sphere" (44). Zenobia's attributes of theatricality, sexuality, and mystery combine to make her an object of spectatorship, rather than a subject of self-expression and agency. Placing Zenobia on the stage would reinforce her role as a spectacle to be looked upon and appraised, while enabling the largest possible audience—mostly male—to gaze upon her.

Not surprisingly, the excessive, overly visible nature of Zenobia's body and theatricality contradicts the prevailing gendered, public/private spatiality. Coverdale's narrative centers on Zenobia throughout the novel precisely because of this excessive, almost uncontrollable physicality. In fact, the entire novel is characterized by the narrator's irresistible enthrallment by Zenobia and his constant, reactionary attempts to encage and cognitively control her into narrative and gender conventions. As discussed earlier, Coverdale's often quoted words—

⁵ See Laura Mulvey's analysis of the cinematic male gaze (6-18), as well as Jooma and Greven's detailed analyses of the hierarchical construction of gender and gaze in *The Blithedale Romance*.

“Behold, here is a woman!”—suggest his attempt to confine her disruptive, excessive body into a more acceptable prototypical “Woman.” They also suggest that the spectatorial gaze can be a means of attempted control, defining and generating meanings for the seen subject, even without the subject’s participation.

The very theatricality and materiality of Zenobia’s persona, as well as the dark lady role ascribed to her, inevitably precludes her desirability for a more private role, namely, as a domestic housewife. Zenobia’s unfitness for that role, as a figure of the Other Woman in Victorian America, is further highlighted by the entrance of Priscilla, another focus of Coverdale’s attraction and narrative interest. Juxtaposed with Zenobia’s explicit sexuality, theatricality, and tangible materiality, Priscilla’s selfhood is held up as ideal Victorian femininity. The dichotomy of public and private is reinforced in the typecasting of Zenobia as a contrast to Priscilla, whose presence after being introduced in the novel perpetually evokes comparison with Zenobia. When Priscilla is first introduced into Blithedale, Coverdale is attracted by her “pleasant weakness...not quite able to look after her own interests or fight her battle with the world” (74). Like her mother, a seamstress and “poor phantom” (185), Priscilla is a pale shadow, a “ghost-child” (187) who seems to be always about to vanish, to the extent that “there was a lack of human substance” (185) in her. With her delicate, fragile, almost non-existent body and her “perfectly modest, delicate, and virgin-like” (77) persona, Priscilla is portrayed as a self-less, private presence, and one that embodies the Victorian ideal of angelic girlhood—fragile, spiritual, and skilled in feminine, domestic labor, which stands in striking contrast to the voluptuous, strident, political Zenobia.

Russ Castronovo argues that Priscilla’s mesmerized body as the Veiled Lady “suggests that the most desirable way to appear in public is as a private body” (238). Enshrouded in her

impenetrable veil, Priscilla's public appearance and performance paradoxically emphasize the carefully-guarded private self; surrounded by an excited and overzealous audience, the Veiled Lady "remained seated and motionless, with a composure that was hardly less than awful, because implying so immeasurable a distance betwixt her and these rude persecutors" (202). Even as Priscilla is fetishized and commodified as a target for visual consumption, the public performance of her mesmerized body and consciousness as the Veiled Lady becomes an icon for feminine privacy and passivity.

This comparative feature is an artistic device that Hawthorne frequently uses—the juxtaposition of two heroines, one dark, passionate, and mysterious, the other fair, virginal, and passive. However, a close reading of the text suggests that this dichotomy does not hold up well. For one thing, Priscilla, every man's favorite pet and dominated object, begins to slip out from under the control and misinterpretations others impose upon her. Not surprisingly, it is the perceptive Zenobia who points out the disjunction between Priscilla's image and reality. Zenobia tells Coverdale: "What I find most singular in Priscilla, as her health improves... is her wildness. Such a quiet little body as she seemed, one would not have expected that! Why, as we strolled the woods together, I could hardly keep her from scrambling up the trees like a squirrel!" (59). At one point, even Coverdale himself observes this, stating: "While she seemed as impressible as wax, the girl often showed a persistence in her own ideas as stubborn as it was gentle" (78).

Although Priscilla appears to be the opposite image of Zenobia, their lives and characters are strangely analogous: soon after the first encounter with Priscilla in Blithedale, Coverdale observes her and remarks that she resembles Margaret Fuller—a strange association given that, as critics have pointed out, it is Zenobia who more closely represents Fuller's proto-feminist

ideologies.⁶ Zenobia and Priscilla are not only half-siblings, they are also doubles in that, though they are typecast as dichotomous, many of their defining characteristics overlap—both have past entanglements with Westervelt and both fall in love with Hollingsworth, for example. The most striking similarity between the two contrasting heroines, however, is the fact that they are both quintessential theatrical performers. Although Zenobia is far more overt in her theatricality, it is Priscilla who is the central gravitational figure of theater in the novel through her role as the Veiled Lady. Despite her stage persona being characterized by feminine passivity and disembodiment, she is a far more public and symbolically theatrical figure than Zenobia.

Further, Priscilla and Zenobia both attract Coverdale's interest due to their mystery, which Coverdale ostensibly wishes to maintain and protect, while also desperately wanting to reveal. Using similar language as he did when describing Zenobia's sexual past, Coverdale attempts to "come within [Priscilla's] maidenly mystery...to take just one peep beneath her folded petals" (125). This desire causes Coverdale to see symbols of Priscilla's mystery everywhere, such as in the silk purses that she makes, themselves a symbol of domesticity and socially acceptable femininity. However, Coverdale finds further meaning, saying: "Their peculiar excellence...lay in the almost impossibility that any uninitiated person should discover the aperture; although, to a practiced touch, they would open as wide as charity or prodigality might wish. I wondered if it were not a symbol of Priscilla's own mystery" (35). This spoken desire is not necessarily indicative of Coverdale wanting to reveal the hidden Priscilla, but, as in his relationship with Zenobia, is contingent on his viewing her as a *tabula rasa*, on which he can input his own impressions and interpretations. Zenobia herself recognizes this, sarcastically commenting on Coverdale's assessment of Priscilla: "As she has hardly any physique, a poet, like Mr. Miles Coverdale, may be allowed to think her spiritual!" (34). It is not Priscilla that

⁶ See, for example, Cary and Van Cromphout.

Coverdale wishes to uncover, but rather the fictitious woman he has created in his mind, who may bear little resemblance to the actual woman.

As critics such as Nina Baym note, Priscilla's mystery, like Zenobia's, has a clear sexual connotation—as something ready to snap open with a male touch. Unlike Zenobia, who is portrayed as a sexually experienced and active woman, with the gates of knowledge widely open, Priscilla's mystery contains passivity and sexual innocence, still waiting to be opened by experienced hands. Of course, Priscilla harbors an actual mystery, not just one imagined by Coverdale—namely, that she is the Veiled Lady, a clairvoyant under the control of the mesmerizing Westervelt. Discussing the emergence of mesmerists and mediums in nineteenth-century show business, Samuel Chase Coale observes that although mediums were almost equally divided between men and women at the time, female mediums fit very easily into the emerging Victorian stereotype of gender roles, as women were supposed to be “passive, easily controlled by outside forces, and are more sympathetic, religious, and sensitive than men” (13).

Indeed, Priscilla's antiquated femininity allows her to fit perfectly within that role, and as the Veiled Lady she becomes a symbolic and reflective vessel, not only for the mesmerist's power, but also for the viewers, who fill the empty vessel with their desires for knowledge and meaning, and with their speculations. The spectacle of a hypnotized, feminine, submissive, totally passive body additionally conveys an eroticized image of woman as a recipient of invasive male power—a “spiritual strip tease” according to Baym (565). As a result, Priscilla attracts a large, predominantly male audience, including Coverdale. Indeed, the Veiled Lady, as “a figure for the disembodiment of women in nineteenth-century domesticity” (Brodhead 274), paradoxically symbolizes a public icon of private femininity. Although Priscilla is placed in this ideally hyper-feminine pose—at once exposed in order to titillate, and covered in order to

preserve feminine ideals of modesty—there are small hints in her role as the Veiled Lady that she possesses greater power.

In fact, Priscilla is more than an empty receptacle for the mesmerist's power and the narrator's speculations. The reader is informed that, before she fell into the hands of Westervelt, Priscilla was already known as having the gift of second sight and prophecy: "Hidden things were visible to her...and silence was audible. And, in the entire world, there was nothing so difficult to be endured, by those who had any dark secret to conceal, as the glance of Priscilla's timid and melancholy eyes" (187). Ironically, when Priscilla, the object of invasive gazes and unmerited speculations, turns her eyes toward the beholder, she causes fear of unexpected and unwanted exposure, and the beholder learns how it feels to be detected and invaded. Though Priscilla's power of second-sight is exploited and co-opted by Westervelt's mesmerism, the description of her second-sight is suggestive of her ability to return the gaze and thus reverse the gender disequilibrium.

Not surprisingly, it is Zenobia who again reminds Coverdale, and by extension the reader, of the reversibility of the gendered gaze. When Zenobia improvises "The Silvery Veil," the legend of the Veiled Lady, she points to the precariousness of power relations in the interaction of gaze. In the story, a young man of fashion becomes determined to discover the true identity of a mysterious medium who gives public exhibitions. When he hides in her dressing room, she senses his presence and offers him a choice: Either kiss her through the veil and claim her as his bride—a choice she says will bring happiness—or remove her veil and see her once, but become grief-stricken by losing her forever. The cynical young man doubts that she is beautiful, and tears off her veil at once. He sees her for an instant: "His retribution was, to pine, forever and ever, for another sight of that dim, mournful face" (114).

While constructing this cautionary tale for Coverdale's benefit, Zenobia dramatizes the fear and anxiety of unmasking, and the Medusa-like power of a returned gaze. Zenobia catalogues speculations regarding the Veiled Lady's identity, suggesting fearsome images: "It was the face of a corpse; it was the head of a skeleton; it was a monstrous visage, with snaky locks, like Medusa's, and one great red eye in the center of the forehead. Again, it was affirmed, that there was no single and unchangeable set of features, beneath the veil, but that whosoever should be bold enough to lift it, would behold the features of that person, in all the world, who was destined to be his fate" (110).

As Millington observes, Zenobia's description of the veil strongly expresses the anxieties and fantasies about the hidden nature of others (573). The deadly images associated with the veil and implied in the notion of the unveiled self are further suggestive of the anxieties associated with feminine identity. The Veiled Lady's secrets are associated with other women's perhaps more mundane concealments: As the men sit talking over champagne, "among other ladies less mysterious—the subject of the Veiled Lady, as was very natural, happened to come up before them for discussion" (108). And the skeptical Theodore rejects her offer out of an implicit distrust of women's wiles: He "felt himself almost injured and insulted by the Veiled Lady's proposal that he should pledge himself, for life and eternity, to so questionable a creature as herself...taking into view the probability that her face was none of the most bewitching. ...Even should she prove a comely maiden enough, in other respects, the odds were ten to one that her teeth were defective; a terrible drawback on the delectableness of a kiss!" (113). While an object of desire and speculation, the figure of a veiled, anonymous woman also evokes anxiety that the veil may conceal something abject or unnamable, or, like Medusa, a returned gaze. It further

expresses the anxiety over female theatricality pervasive in nineteenth-century America, the possibility of slippage between one's appearance and reality.

Zenobia's story indicates to the reader her profound authorial talent, in spite of Coverdale's criticisms that, despite her ability as a theatricalized performer, she is a mediocre, talentless writer—a criticism that echoes Hawthorne's own dismissal of female writers as a “damned mob of scribbling women.”⁷ Despite Coverdale's belief that Zenobia is better left to the stage, her improvisation of “The Silvery Veil” is notable in that it literally displaces and eclipses the voice and presence of the narrator. Indeed, it is not only Coverdale's narration that is missing throughout the duration of “The Silvery Veil,” but his viewpoint and presence abruptly depart as well. The tale, itself concerned with subverting the gendered hierarchy of the male subject and female object, not only interrupts the voice of the male, first-person narrative, it also disrupts the coherence of the genre by abruptly transforming into a fantastic fairy-tale, strongly implying its narrative power. Additionally, Zenobia's story aptly satirizes Coverdale's male-oriented ideas about nineteenth-century femininity. While the viewer projects his desires and fantasies onto the veil, what lies beneath is only a fleeting image that will haunt the viewer ever after: as Gillian Brown notes, “a sight that never solidifies into certainty” (122).

While Priscilla, in her persona as the Veiled Lady, is used as an explicit stand-in for Medusa, it is actually Zenobia who embodies more effectively the role of Medusa and the power of the returned gaze throughout the novel. Even as Coverdale observes others as if they were characters in a play, Zenobia is observing his observations, and noting their departure from reality and truth. When Coverdale discloses his romantic notions about Priscilla, Zenobia scornfully responds, “you see the young woman in so poetical a light” (58). Under Zenobia's

⁷ See Tanner and Joona, who respectively argue that Coverdale constantly attempts to suppress Zenobia's voice and artistic talent.

scrutiny, Priscilla's status as a romantic, fairy-tale heroine is revealed as the unimaginative creation of typical male fantasies. Zenobia further continues: "We women judge one another by tokens that escape the obtuseness of masculine perceptions" (34), suggesting that Zenobia, as representative of womanhood, can see through the male tendency to portray the object of desire as an extension of their own desires and interpretations. Zenobia, as a skilled performer and artist herself, is well aware that identity is an artifice constructed by oneself as well as by others, but unlike Coverdale, is able to see through the illusion.

Zenobia's view thus tends to denounce gender conventions that inform the narrator's view of women. At the same time, Zenobia, as the quintessential actress, uncannily undermines the apparent authenticity of identity. By using a theatrical metaphor to view the world, Coverdale is able to objectify others from a safe distance and at the same time to entitle himself alone as a privileged narrator and observer whom "God assigned" (160). However, Zenobia's theatricality destabilizes this distance, making everything appear artificial, even including the narrator's privileged position. Early in the novel, Coverdale observes that "it was a singular, but irresistible effect—the presence of Zenobia caused our heroic enterprise to show like an illusion, a masquerade, a pastoral, a counterfeit Arcadia, in which we grown-up men and women were making a play-day of the years that were given us to live in" (21). This contagious effect is similar to the Brechtian concept of *Verfremdungseffekt*, an effect of alienation and estrangement, that makes the observer suddenly aware that what they previously considered reality is only a constructed, theatrical artifact—or even further, that the observers themselves are merely artifacts on the stage of society. Zenobia creates her own reality through authorial story-telling and theatricality, and as a result, has the power of making everything surrounding her appear artificial as well.

This alienating effect of female theatricality evinced at Zenobia's entrance into the novel goes on to overshadow and engulf the narrator's epistemological and narrative field, which gradually begins to lose ground. As he spends more time in Blithedale, Coverdale's belief in the cause—that is, of creating and participating in a utopian community—gradually becomes unmoored by his increasing skepticism. As a result, his narrative point of view similarly loses its stability and hierarchical focus, betraying the disintegration of his epistemological, recognizable universe:

I was beginning to lose the sense of what kind of a world it was, among innumerable schemes of what it might or ought to be. It was impossible situated as we were, not to imbibe the idea that everything in nature and human existence was fluid, or fast becoming so: the crust of the Earth, in many places, was broken, and its whole surface portentously upheaving.... Our great globe floated in the atmosphere in infinite space like an unsubstantial bubble. (140)

His words show that he is losing control over the narrative and point of view: alienated from his own narrative, and losing his foothold. Clearly, the safe distance he has maintained as a detached observer breaks down, and he feels as if he is being washed away with others in the fluidity of human identities. As Laura Tanner points out, this disruption is also caused by the “collision with Zenobia's universe” (6)—the collision of his own viewpoint with the returning gaze of Zenobia.

A similar moment can also be observed in Coverdale's encounter with Westervelt, another theatricality-embodiment figure, in the woods earlier in the novel. As master of mesmeric performance, his on-stage display implies masculine control over the female body. However, Westervelt himself looks rather like a staged automaton to Coverdale, with “his wonderful

beauty of face” appearing to be “removeable like a mask” (95). His affected manner, gold-bordered “sham” teeth and “well-ordered foppishness” (92)—all make him a symbol of debasing theatricality and, as David Greven points out, of “effeminate artificiality”(139). Like Zenobia’s, his theatricality, with its contagious effect, destabilizes the narrator’s privileged position as a spectator of the world-stage. After encountering Westervelt on the wood-path, he experiences a slippage of viewpoints and self-identities, sensing that “it was through his eyes, more than my own, that I was looking” (101). He experiences an uncanny moment in which the boundaries between self and other, the observer and observed, become entangled with each other. Coverdale’s sense of rootlessness, combined with his sense of self-disintegration, becomes more and more tangible as he becomes increasingly absorbed in the act of observation and subsequent eruption of self-alienating theatricality. As a result of this epistemological crisis, Coverdale decides to leave Blithedale and go back to the city in order to reestablish a safe distance between observer and observed. In the city his privileged status as a middle-class flaneur can be easily maintained.

After his break with Blithedale, Coverdale feels the need to “remove [him]self to a little distance, and take an exterior view of what we had all been about” (140), and retreats to the city of Boston. At this moment his vantage point, as it existed in Blithedale, is lost, and he is afflicted by a feeling of exclusion, both relational and epistemological: “Blithedale looked vague, as if it were at a distance both in time and space, and so shadowy, that a question might be raised whether the whole affair had been anything more than the thoughts of a speculative man” (146). However, his detached, objectifying, dehumanizing gaze soon returns when he finds a privileged vantage point from a rear window of his hotel, from which he can once again voyeuristically observe the typical urban life that is spread out before him:

After the distinctness of separate characters, to which I had recently been accustomed, it perplexed and annoyed me not to be able to resolve this combination of human interests into well-defined elements. It seemed hardly worthwhile for more than one of those families to be in existence, since they all had the same glimpse of the sky, all looked into the same area, all received just their equal share of sunshine through the front windows, and all listened to precisely the same noises of the street on which they boarded. Men are so much alike in their nature, that they grow intolerable unless varied by their circumstances. (150)

From Coverdale's new perspective, the spectacle of urban life takes on an even, flattened surface, in which human beings display the same texture, making them almost indistinguishable from the environment. As Dana Brand points out, under Coverdale's observance human beings assume a uniform, identical, predictable, and therefore metonymic visual pattern, which makes them "suitable inhabitants of the mechanical diorama to which [Coverdale] has reduced the city" (134).

Coverdale's experience of himself as the only unique viewpoint in the repetitive urban landscape seems to "cure" the epistemological confusion brought on by his time in Blithedale. When Coverdale re-encounters Zenobia in this urban setting, he describes Zenobia's figure and attire with decorative, artificial imagery. Even more than in Blithedale, Zenobia in Boston is cohesively rendered into an object of Coverdale's spectatorial gaze, as if the brief respite from Blithedale had recharged his objectifying abilities. When Coverdale sees Zenobia through the window of her hotel room, he describes the experience in theatrical terms: "It felt like the drop curtain of a theatre, in the interval between the acts" (159). Even more pointedly than he did in Blithedale, Coverdale here seeks to control the threatening force Zenobia exerts on his life by attempting to turn her from an artist on even footing with himself, into a mere object of art,

whose primary function is not to act or create, but to be seen. The narrator's efforts to make Zenobia into something "to be fully seen" (163) reach their apotheosis in the urban environment, where everything has the flattened surface of figures in a diorama. The window of his hotel room epitomizes his renewed viewpoint, offering him an obvious and stable voyeuristic perspective that is marked by a safe distance from the observed, akin to his own private box seat at a theater.

From the temporal and spatial distance provided by the hotel window, the drama played out among Zenobia, Priscilla, and Hollingsworth begins to resemble a pantomime or charade—a private show performed deliberately for an audience. Such a viewpoint causes Coverdale to further adorn Zenobia with an urban theatricality. Upon her unexpected visit to his hotel on the following day, Coverdale describes Zenobia: "Those costly robes which she had on, those flaming jewels on her neck, served as lamps to display the personal advantages which required nothing less than such an illumination, to be fully seen. Even her characteristic flower, though it seemed to be still there, had undergone a cold and bright transfiguration; it was a flower exquisitely imitated in jeweler's work, and imparting the last touch that transformed Zenobia into a work of art" (163-64). By juxtaposing Zenobia with an imitation flower, the narrator is not only comparing her to a work of art, but also associating her with inauthenticity. Zenobia, who in Blithedale appeared to him as prototypical womanhood, is reinterpreted in Boston as an embodiment of theatrical fabrication. Zenobia is literally transformed in his eyes into a figure of debased artificiality. The mystery is gone, and now her exuberant physicality and image belie the "true character of the woman, passionate, luxurious, lacking simplicity, not deeply refined, incapable of pure and perfect taste" (165). Coverdale's detailed description bespeaks his strong rhetorical condemnation of Zenobia by identifying her "true character" as inauthentic and fake, his aesthetic judgment reverberating with Puritanical language against the theater in general.

In this urban, diorama-like setting, Coverdale's attempts to distance himself from the scene, regain his epistemological mastery, and again read the female form as a staged object, seem almost to be successful. However, as with Theodore catching a glimpse of the Veiled Lady, his glimpse of Zenobia's "true nature" is fleeting and quickly escapes his grasp. Coverdale realizes this, commenting: "But, the next instant, [Zenobia] was too powerful for all my opposing struggles... To this day, however, I hardly know whether I then beheld Zenobia in her truest attitude, or whether that were the truer one in which she had presented herself at Blithedale. In both, there was something like the illusion which a great actress flings around her" (165). Whether Zenobia is true or false, real or illusory, authentic or artificial, Coverdale is never able to tell. The narrator's words—"to this day, however, I hardly know"—suggest that the safe distance between the narrated past and narrating present, like that between the object and the subject, dissolves before Zenobia's theatricality, disrupting the narrative temporality. Perplexed by Zenobia's transfiguration, Coverdale "determine[s] to make proof if there were any spells that would exorcise her out of the part which she seemed to be acting" (165), as if his inability to project his own stable interpretations onto Zenobia has revealed that Zenobia's "true nature" is, in fact, performative.

Discovering Coverdale spying through the window, Zenobia pulls down the curtains, completing the theatrical figuration of the scene. Coverdale, caught in the act of spying, reflects with a dawning sense of guilt: "was mine a mere vulgar curiosity?" However, he immediately attempts to justify his act, continuing:

Zenobia should have known me better than to suppose it. She should have been able to appreciate that quality of the intellect and the heart which impelled me... to live in other lives, and to endeavor—by generous sympathies, by delicate intuitions, by taking note of

things too slight for record, and by bringing my human spirit into manifold accordance with the companions whom God assigned me—to learn the secret which was hidden even from themselves. Of all possible observers, methought a woman like Zenobia and a man like Hollingsworth should have selected me. And now when the event has long been past, I retain the same opinion of my fitness for the office. (160)

As exemplified in this scene, at every moment in which Coverdale's narrative mastery undergoes a crisis, his narrative is patterned by a counter-movement that strives to regain control. Gordon Hunter notes that in his attempt to preserve the sense of self, Coverdale tries to "dehumanize others by forcing them into roles and projecting the voyeur's private psychodrama on them" (109). The rest of the narrative is marked by Coverdale's constant attempts to make the Blithedale residents characters in his own consciousness, acting out a compulsive psychodrama in much the same way that Hawthorne has imprisoned his own characters in their rigid roles that conform to the master-slave, masculine-feminine dynamics of his time.

After Coverdale's regaining of privileged status as an urban flaneur, the novel returns to Blithedale. The theatrical climax occurs at Eliot's Pulpit, itself a symbolic stage of the Puritan drama of moral and physical punishment, fulfilling the same role as the scaffold in *The Scarlet Letter*. Here, the theatrical metaphor culminates in a performance that plays out all the psychodramatic undercurrents glimpsed throughout the novel. The narrator describes the scene, resonating with the author's allegorical introduction of the novel's characters in the preface: "Among them was an Indian chief...the goddess Diana...a Bavarian broom-girl, a negro of the Jim Crow order, one or two foresters of the Middle Ages, a Kentucky woodsman in his trimmed hunting-shirt and deerskin leggings, and a Shaker elder...Shepherds of Arcadia, and allegoric figures from the 'Faerie Queen,' were oddly mixed up with these"(209). This carnivalesque stage

becomes the setting for an allegorical, revelatory morality play—“a special stage in the theater of the world” in Jeffrey Richards’ words (xvi)—on which Zenobia and the other characters of the novel act out “truth,” or more accurately, the teleologies of the novel’s plot, in a performance “viewed by people and God” (Richards, xvi). The scene of Zenobia’s trial and defeat is presented in the framework of Puritan moral theater, resembling a witch trial. On this world stage, the “whole character and history” and the “true nature” of “Queen Zenobia” is exposed, as she is accused and condemned in front of the others (211): “Her attitude was free and noble; yet, if a queen’s it was not that of a queen triumphant, but dethroned, on trial for her life, or perchance, condemned, already” (213). In the impassioned gestures of suppressed anger and jealousy, Zenobia collapses into an outburst of emotions in front of her love-object, Hollingsworth. Interestingly, her suppressed emotions surface in a melodramatic and clichéd performance that undercuts both her natural theatrical ability and earlier feminist statements: “Lips of man will never touch my hand again, I intend to become a Catholic, for the sake of going into a nunnery.... Once more, farewell!” (227).

Coverdale further reinforces the melodramatic interpretive framework in which Zenobia’s feminism is merely an expression of repressed female sexuality:

What amused and puzzled me was the fact that women, however intellectually superior, so seldom disquiet themselves about the rights or wrongs of their sex, unless their own individual affections chance to lie in idleness, or to be ill at ease. They are not natural reformers, but become such by the pressure of exceptional misfortune. I could measure Zenobia’s inward trouble by the animosity with which she now took up the general quarrel of woman against man. (138)

By denying Zenobia's feminism any political significance and refashioning it into a performative mask that redirects her sexual and romantic frustration, Coverdale is, by extension, transforming all other women who fight against gender inequality into melodramatic characters who are merely suffering from romantic and sexual frustration. Zenobia, hailed in the novel as the greatest "actress" in Blithedale, is thus captured in a punitive moral melodrama, and eventually purged from the world stage by the novel's repudiation of female theatricality.

Ironically, however, the way in which the novel renounces Zenobia is itself marked by conspicuous theatricality. In the final chapters of the novel, Zenobia seems to have lost her individual, highly developed character that was manifested earlier in the novel. In its place, Zenobia has become nothing more than a "role," acting out the novel's predetermined plot as a Shakespearean "tragic queen" (124) on Coverdale's—and by extension, Hawthorne's—"mental stage" (156). Just like another famous theatrical figure, *Hamlet's* Ophelia, Zenobia is found drowned, submerged in water. Even in her death, however, Coverdale does not forget to flood the reader's consciousness with antitheatrical prejudice:

Being the woman that she was, could Zenobia have foreseen all these ugly circumstances of death, how ill it would become her, the altogether unseemly aspect which she must put on...she would no more have committed the dreadful act, than have exhibited herself to a public assembly in a badly-fitting garment! ...In Zenobia's case, there was some tint of the Arcadian affectation that had been visible in all our lives, for a few months past. (236-37)

Being the "woman that she was," that is, an actress who should care for her appearance above all, this self-exhibition in bad taste constitutes an exceedingly undesirable ending for her. Clearly, death is not enough to punish Zenobia for her excessive physical visibility and lack of

conformity to social standards, and so her theatricality is made into a mockery in her final performance. Zenobia's corpse, via Coverdale's punitive inscription, becomes an "ugly...unseemly" (236) public image, marked by the disfiguration of her dead body, a body thus reclaimed as a grotesque, sensationalized, abject crystallization of the Arcadian theatricality persistent in Blithedale. By turning Zenobia's body and death into an expression of bad theatrics that resembles a Gothic death-scene, the novel's plot punishes the very theatricality that constitutes her identity.

Moreover, when Coverdale sees Zenobia's drowned body, her image is immediately reinterpreted into a tragic figure submitting to the ultimate patriarchal power—a familiar denouement that reestablishes the social order and expectations: "Her arms had grown rigid in the act of struggling, and were bent before her, with clenched hands; her knees, too, were bent, and--thank God for it!--in the attitude of prayer.... She knelt, as if in prayer. With the last, choking consciousness, her soul, bubbling out through her lips, it may be, had given itself up to the Father, reconciled and penitent" (235). In this manner, Zenobia's image becomes safely stabilized outside the actual narrative space. Ultimately, her imagined act of religious repentance is figured as more important than anything she actually said or did during her life. She is transformed into a symbolic, interpretive field woven between the narrator and the reader as the tragic and defeated woman who is finally, in death, "redeemed."

The novel ambivalently critiques theatrical social identities, while using theatrical tropes to do so. Just before her death, Zenobia intuitively mocks Coverdale's behavior as "turning this whole affair into a ballad" (229). No doubt, he also turns the life and person of Zenobia into a melodramatic ballad in order to give it a meaning that fits into his narrative world. By reducing Zenobia to the grotesque, sensational rubric of Gothic melodrama, the novel also acts out its

desire to produce an exemplary stage of moral theater, in which a woman's theatrical agency gives way to her natural, God-given identity. Her dead, silenced body-text ultimately is objectified into a target of speculation and interpretation, eloquently communicating the moral message. As Elisabeth Bronfen aptly summarizes, Zenobia, upon her death, has become a myth, an allegory for the "truth" (247)—the high-spirited Woman's Destiny of sin, punishment and redemption. Projecting interpretations onto her lifeless body, Coverdale at last successfully turns the female performer/artist into a static, stabilized text that is forever open to symbolic and allegorical interpretations.

In preparation for the retreat of the melodramatized queen, another theatrical figure retakes center stage, and the novel comes to embrace Priscilla as a heroine. Priscilla replaces Zenobia as the central desirable object, not only for Hollingsworth but for Coverdale as well. Their desire for her culminates in her performance as the Veiled Lady towards the end of the novel. Here, Priscilla enacts her melodrama of enslavement and submission at the hands of Westervelt. In the Village Hall where Coverdale returns to view the Veiled Lady, she appears on stage like "a blindfold prisoner," who is, in stark contrast to Zenobia's self-awareness, "wholly unconscious of being the central object to all those straining eyes" (201). While Coverdale stays rooted in his usual role as a spectator, it is Hollingsworth who darts onto the stage to rescue Priscilla from the mesmeric performance. Having maintained under her veil "her virgin reserve and sanctity of soul throughout it all," Priscilla finally escapes from the hands of Westervelt and is immediately transferred into the hands of another master, Hollingsworth, who will keep her "safe forever" (203). At the moment Priscilla is saved from the mesmeric theater of exhibition, the text validates her as a heroine of domestic melodrama, shedding her association with theater and her theatrical double.

In Boston, Coverdale was determined to “exorcise [Zenobia] out of the part which she seemed to be acting” (165). However, Zenobia’s theatricality is a fundamental part of her and cannot be exorcised; instead, Zenobia herself must be exorcised in order to eradicate feminine theatricality and save another heroine, Zenobia’s own kin, from the same fate. In contrast to her half-sister, Priscilla’s performance on stage is contradictorily marked by non-theatricality. Instead, Priscilla appears as a symbolic and static figure of self-effacement and self-sacrifice—the ideal of femininity in nineteenth-century society. Passive, silent, submissive, and unconscious of any eyes upon her, Priscilla is unaffected by the audience and thus maintains the symbolic virginity of her body and soul. Indeed, she is a performative medium fulfilling male control of and desire for the female form, and is untainted by the theatricality and agency that punctuated Zenobia’s performances, for which Zenobia was severely punished by the narrative. Instead, Priscilla’s unconscious performance is sanctioned by the novel’s melodramatic, almost artificial denouement with its chivalric rescue narrative. In stark contrast to the theatrical figure of Zenobia, whose physicality is always already tainted by publicity, Priscilla, both on stage and off, symbolizes a totally new kind of performance, that of a private, and privatized, domestic woman.

The theatrical has ambivalent connotations, in part, because of the ambivalent qualities of theater during this time period. David Grimstead argues that the early nineteenth-century American theater underwent a gradual shift from sensational, Gothic melodramas to the more “respectable” domestic plays that presented the private, middle-class woman as the heroine and the private space of home as the setting, and were thus more suitable and acceptable for the tastes and morals of the emerging middle-class theater-goers (10-12). The early fascination with Gothic melodramas was thus replaced by a desire for more domestic, sentimental stories.

This historical shift is represented in the novel by the displacement of Zenobia by Priscilla as heroine, and when the Veiled Lady is unveiled and rescued by Hollingsworth, the locus for performativity leaves the actual stage and shifts into the off-stage domestic setting. If the Veiled Lady evokes woman as a receptacle for desire, control, and possession, the novel extends this performativity off-stage. At the end of the novel, Coverdale describes his final encounter with Hollingsworth and Priscilla several years later, once again set in the private observatory space of a secluded lane near their cottage, and with Priscilla seemingly unaware of her role in the domestic drama unraveling before Coverdale's eyes. Coverdale observes that the powerful, confident, and egotistical Hollingsworth has been reduced to a "self-distrustful weakness, and a childlike or childish tendency to press close" (242) to Priscilla, and he further perceives in Priscilla "a protective and watchful quality, as if she felt herself the guardian of her companion" and "a deep, submissive, unquestioning reverence, and also a veiled happiness in her fair and quiet countenance" (242). Simultaneously strong and submissive, simultaneously a mother, daughter and wife to Hollingsworth—a sublimation of identities only identifiable in relation to men—she is now an ideal, exemplary figure of womanhood in Victorian middle-class society. If the novel sets up the familiar dichotomy of public and private in the contrasting bodies of double heroines, it appears to successfully convey a conventional denouement that accentuates the middle-class reproduction of female subjectivity confined in its proper private space. However, as we have seen, this overtly sentimental scene of domestic bliss is painstakingly won after the construction and repudiation of its antithesis (constitutive other), female theatricality. In this sense, private femininity and female theatricality are mutually constitutive and thus inseparable.

By finally exorcising the unnerving elements associated with Zenobia from Priscilla, as well as from the novel, and safely transplanting Priscilla into domestic space, the novel allows itself to perform its own denouement which was obviously designed a priori: Coverdale's abrupt confession of his secret love for Priscilla. The confession is defined, according to the narrator, as "essential to the full understanding of my story.... As I write it, [the reader] will charitably suppose me to blush and turn away my face: I—myself—was in love—with—PRISCILLA!" (247). As many critics have sensed, however, this gesture of love is fraught with undeniable artificiality.⁸ In an elaborately staged performance prepared for the novel's last word, he turns his secret and his private feelings into a public spectacle, in a hyperbolically dramatic punctuation. As both the novel and the narrator are absorbed in their own stage-management, the theatricality once rejected is thus restored again, which only accentuates the narrator's unreliability and inauthenticity. We might say that even in her death, Zenobia's uncanny power of theatrical *Verfremdungseffekt*, the contagious force to make everything appear as "an illusion, a masquerade, a pastoral, a counterfeit" (21), still persists.

The Blithedale Romance expresses historical anxieties surrounding female theatricality, defined as middle-class society's constitutive Other, and thus participates in the historical and literary convention associating the theatrical character with moral degradation and inauthenticity. As we have seen, however, the novel is at the same time infected with the resilient, uncontrollable force of theatricality, which returns to its center repeatedly until it takes over the narrative voice at the end. Theatricality in the novel is like the uncanny ghost, repeatedly repressed and repudiated but still returning. The novel's attempt to renounce Zenobia's overt theatricality and sanction the desirable, domestic heroine Priscilla thus betrays its own theatrical

⁸ For example, Millington argues that Coverdale's final confession contradicts all the preceding events, revealing its inauthenticity and his own emptiness (580).

performativity that is implicit in romantic and gender ideology. If, as critics have noted, Coverdale's precarious narrative attempts to construct the self are marked by repeated failure, it is precisely because the novel dramatizes the difficulty in constituting the narrator's self without the intervention of theatrical role-playing. In portraying the human dramas in Blithedale, the novel condemns the social histrionics embodied in Zenobia, while at the same time betraying the inherent and inevitable theatricality of nineteenth-century life and selfhood—a theatricality at once disciplinary and disruptive.

CHAPTER TWO

“If Actresses Ever Are Themselves”:

Female Performers in Louisa May Alcott’s Works

One of the most frequently recurring motifs in Louisa May Alcott’s works is that of theater and performance. Though theater is defined against domesticity throughout the nineteenth century, her sentimental and domestic novels are replete with familial and private theatricals.¹ These theatricals in Alcott’s major novels are mostly part of the moral education and social discipline that her juvenile characters undergo throughout these stories. Famously, *Little Women* begins with the March daughters discussing Jo’s Christmas play entitled *The Witch’s Curse, an Operatic Tragedy*, a melodramatic, murderous, sensational thriller filled with scenes of female fainting and male violence. The chapter ends with Marmee bringing up another, allegorical kind of play, a “play we are playing all the time in one way or another” (*Little Women* 18)—the Pilgrim’s Progress that traces the March girls’ journey toward the Celestial City, a happy home where they are reunited with their Father.

The abundance of literal and metaphorical “plays” and theaters in her work is not surprising, when we consider that Alcott herself was something of a theater addict. At the age of eight she created her own Louy Alcott Troupe and played the parts of play-writer, director and lead actress, performing for family and neighbors (Stern [1998], 42). While writing stories for magazines, she continued to pursue her “dramatic passions”(Stern [1998], 76) and joined the Walpole Amateur Dramatic Company with her sister Anna at the age of 23. After moving to

¹ Halttunen highlights Alcott’s fascination with and literary uses of theater, arguing that Alcott’s works embrace two competing views of theater: one as that of a rebellious antithesis to the cult of domesticity, and the other as that of the moral and educational stage. Halttunen aptly summarizes: “While ‘Witch’s Curse’ permits the [March] girls to engage in passionate self-expression, the Pilgrim’s Progress guides their conscientious efforts to develop their emotional self-control”(Halttunen [1984], 233).

Boston, the two sisters joined the Dramatic Union in Concord and became popular amateur actresses (Reisen, 160). According to Harriet Reisen, Anna was thought the better actress of the two sisters, and Louisa the superior comedienne by their theatrical comrades. One of the actors in the Dramatic Union recalls that the sisters were “always in demand when private theatricals were on foot and yet—[Louisa’s] acting had this peculiarity, that she seemed always to be herself and the character she was representing at the same time” (Reisen, 160). (This quality of duality was later to inform the theatrical performance of Christie Devon in *Work*.) Alcott clearly enjoyed both acting on, and writing for, the stage. According to Stern, she “carried the theater with her wherever she went” as a director, author and actress (1975, xii).

However, despite her lifelong penchant for theater, Alcott depicts this art form ambivalently in her work. Like other writers in the same period, she wrote from within a set of cultural constraints that depicted theater as a decadent and dishonest art unfit for proper ladies. Theater’s subversive elements, such as its focus on the public display of female bodies or the malleability of identity, made it anathema to the mid-nineteenth-century cult of domesticity. Alcott was well aware of the theater’s subversive elements, and rather than ignoring contemporary critiques, she presents a nuanced view of theater in her major novels like *Little Women*.

Indeed, *Little Women* is the story of how Jo, a resistant tomboy aspiring to become a writer of sensational stories, eventually finds the “right way” under the guidance of another Father figure, Professor Bhaer. The antitheatrical sentiments still pervasive in Victorian America seem to have curbed Jo’s theatrical passion. But the dramatic passions of Alcott are nonetheless evident: Alcott loads the “blood-and-thunder” energies inherent in theater mostly into her sensational thrillers, written anonymously or pseudonymously. Like her famous character Jo

March, Alcott had embedded her passion for melodrama in these sensational stories, a product of her “natural ambition” for “the lurid style” (Alcott, quoted in Stern [1998], 192). But unlike Jo, Alcott did not burn her sensational writings to ashes. They survive as an indication of a nineteenth-century actress’s and author’s complex attitude toward the stage. Among the recent discoveries of Alcott’s sensational novels, the most eminent and recurrent character type is that of the theatrical woman, appearing as an evil or tragic heroine. Through this figure, Alcott reflects ambivalent feelings about her career as a sentimental *and* sensational author, and the ways in which this role contrasts with the prevailing image of ideal womanhood.

Through the theatrical elements recurrent in her sensational novels, Alcott represents characters who subvert the social and familial order. Specifically, the figure of the *femme fatale* actress is a powerful woman who threatens, rather than nurtures, the men around her. The female performers in Alcott’s novels are usually outsiders to the familial and domestic space. They act as a destabilizing force, challenging the secured boundary of that space by, for instance, infiltrating the home under false pretenses. The American home is typically seen as a microcosm of the nation, a place where proper values are taught and proper gender roles are performed. Significantly, Alcott’s actress heroines in sensational fiction are invariably associated with foreignness; they are mostly French (Virginie Varens in “VV.; or, Plots and Counterplots,” Natalie in “La Jeune; or, Actress and Woman,” Mrs. Vane in “Mrs. Vane’s Charade,” Melanie in “The Romance of a Bouquet”), sometimes Spanish (Clotilde in “A Double Tragedy: An Actor’s Story”) or Indian (Almée in “La Belle Bayadere”). In other words, Alcott’s sensational actresses are the ultimate outsiders: they are foreign to home as well as to the nation and the American readership. As symbolic figures of foreignness, most of the actress-heroines in these thrillers (such as “V.V.,” “A Double Tragedy,” “La Jeune,” and “Mrs. Vane’s Charade”) are evil,

scheming, vengeful, and ultimately tragic, contrary to the sentimental feminine model of an angel in the house. They desperately seek domestic security but end up being punished by narrative conventions such as ostracism, betrayal, death, or suicide, as is Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance*.² But this isn't always the case, and Alcott does not simply adhere to this antitheatrical literary formula. There are some standout examples of female performers using their *femme fatale* power for productive, self-constructive change. They use their outsider status to create the lives they desire and craft a new status for themselves as insiders. It is on these complex texts, in which the performativity of theater ultimately promotes authenticity, that this chapter will focus. Below, I discuss the ways Alcott uses theater, theatricality, and performance, via the female (or feminized) performer, to explore alternative possibilities for women's (and also for men's) behaviors. Through theatricality, she challenges the cult of domesticity, the family, gender and class roles, and the expectation that women should not wield power and agency in their lives. Ultimately, the characters of Jean Muir from *Behind the Mask* and Christie Devon from *Work* use theatricality as an active medium of change, an art form through which women can embrace a constructive version of selfhood beyond the confines of the domestic cult of womanhood.

Work and *Behind a Mask* play on theatrical tropes through heroines who occupy domestic space in unconventional ways. Although there is a stark contrast in genre between the two novels in which Jean and Christie appear—one is Alcott's "adult" sentimental novel, and the other is a sensational thriller written under a pseudonym—the heroines of *Behind a Mask* and

² "The Romance of a Bouquet," in contrast, foregrounds Mademoiselle Melanie, a "talented and *virtuous*" actress (649), falling for a kind stranger who tries to help her out of her trouble. As Alcott's original emphasis suggests, she is an exceptional character in Alcott's thrillers in that she is at once an actress *and* a virtuous woman. However, this novella ends abruptly and awkwardly before the story unfolds. This unfinished ending is also suggestive of the difficulty for a successful actress of attaining a domestic happy ending within cultural and literary constraints.

Work have some key qualities in common, at times almost doubling each other.³ Both are ambitious women who leave home to embark on their own careers. Just as Jean is the step-daughter of a gentlewoman, Christie is also a gentleman's daughter. Both novels follow the heroines' lives and struggles for social survival in their thirties, an age at which a single woman was considered to be past her prime. Both embrace the world of work. Jean is a Scottish orphan with a mysterious background who goes to work as a governess for the wealthy Coventry family. Her role in the Coventry household is multifaceted: She is a governess, servant, companion, nurse, and actress. Likewise, Christie is an orphan who leaves her uncle's home to find jobs and make her own living, taking up different professions in succession as a servant, an actress, a governess, a companion, a seamstress, a gardener, and a war nurse. Jean and Christie in their varied ways are able to change their lives and realize forms of selfhood beyond the cultural expectations of their time. Their theatrical skill and ability to present themselves allow them to define new gender roles for both themselves and the men and women around them, whom they inspire to form new identities as men and women.

Alcott's own struggle with the pressure to conform to ideals of domesticity and antitheatricalism is evident in many of her characters and works of that time. A key example is the protagonist in "La Jeune; or, Actress and Woman" (1868), a depiction of an actress that is more stereotypical than those in *Behind a Mask* and *Work*, though still relatively progressive for its time. The protagonist, La Jeune, attempts to challenge prejudice in her role as a performer, but ultimately is unable to survive the story due to the cultural constraints of her authoring: like most

³ In *Work*, Christie as an actress examines herself in the mirror behind the stage: "she turned up the gas, wiped the rouge from her cheeks, pushed back her hair, and studied her own face intently for several moments. It was pale and jaded now, and all its freshness seemed gone; hard lines had come about the mouth, a feverish disquiet filled the eyes, and on the forehead seemed to lie the shadow of discontent that saddened the whole face"(43). The description clearly recalls a scene in *Mask*, where Jean takes off her disguise in the mirror: "she unbound and removed the long abundant braids from her head, wiped the pink from her face, took out several pearly teeth, and slipping off her dress appeared herself indeed, a haggard, worn, and moody woman of thirty at least"(367).

female characters who challenge the taboos of the time, she meets a grim fate of death. La Jeune's inability to reconcile her role as both woman and actress will serve as a counterpoint to Jean and Christie's extraordinary ability to survive and thrive as unconventional working women.

The actress-heroine in "La Jeune; or, Actress and Woman" (1868) is an ambiguous character who both exemplifies and defies the stereotype of the dishonest, *louche* actress. The narrator of this novella at first tries to dispel his young friend's infatuation with La Jeune, and to play a detective in order to find the clues that reveal the actress's true motives. The narrator regards La Jeune with typical Victorian skepticism and distrust of actresses, dismissing her thus: "I know her class; they are all alike, mercenary, treacherous and shallow"(626). However, the narrator himself becomes gradually infatuated with the actress and finally confesses his love. La Jeune, in rejection, confesses her secrets, that she became an actress only to sustain herself and her penniless, ailing husband, and that she herself is suffering from an incurable disease. The narrator, being humbled, relates: "never in her most brilliant hour, on stage or in *salon*, had she shone so fair or impressed me with her power as she did now. That was art, this nature. I admired the actress. I adored the woman"(636).

As Klaiber points out, this novella consciously plays on the traditional views of the actress as an embodiment of all the feminine evils, only to reveal that these representations are merely conventions which do not necessarily match reality. La Jeune deliberately allows the narrator to believe that she is just as she appears in public: a dissolute young woman. She uses his prejudice against her to punish his arrogance. La Jeune accomplishes this power play by giving him what he wants on the one hand: by taking on the role of a beautiful French actress who lives the off-stage, hidden life of a frivolous, treacherous, gambling, opium-addicted gold digger, only to later reveal her true identity as a sincere, virtuous, sacrificial wife loyally

supporting her invalid husband. Not only does she perform her social identity, but she also disguises her national identity: the foreign, French actress turns out to be English and thus “domestic” in both senses.

In creating La Jeune, a virtuous, domestic Englishwoman beneath the mask of a treacherous *femme fatale* actress, Alcott undoes the more common stereotype of a wicked actress impersonating a good woman. The novella thus disrupts the traditional dichotomy between “actress and woman,” as its subtitle suggests. Still, the ending that reveals La Jeune’s impending death suggests that performance and female virtue, actress and woman, cannot coexist in the same body, except a doomed one.⁴ This ending of “La Jeune,” along with the plots of other sensational stories of the actress-heroine, shows that Alcott, while portraying actresses and their theatrical performance as a means of expressing passion and desire, is still often trapped in the Victorian punitive narrative framework dictated by the culture within which she is writing. The plots of “La Jeune” and Alcott’s other thrillers demonstrate how, despite Alcott’s passion for and familiarity with the theater, her sensational novels are persistently circumscribed by narrative conventions in which a woman with theatrical traits must be punished.⁵ In these novels, woman and actress, home and theater, domesticity and foreignness are categorically in opposition, and therefore the actress-heroines cannot find any socially-approved habitable space outside the stage.

The two characters who undermine this convention are Jean Muir in *Behind a Mask: A Woman’s Power* and Christie Devon in *Work: A Story of Experience*. Surprisingly, these heroines have many elements in common, though they are in stark contrast both in character and

⁴ “Marion Earle, or, Only an Actress!” is another example of an actress who is a saintly good and domestic woman but doomed to death. For a detailed discussion of the novella’s failed attempt to break down the dichotomy of good woman vs. actress, see Ackerman, 171-74.

⁵ For example, Virginie Varens in “VV.; or, Plots and Counterplots,” Mrs. Vane in “Mrs. Vane’s Charade,” and Clotilde in “A Double Tragedy: An Actor’s Story” are equally duplicitous, scheming theatrical performers who are eventually punished by either suicide (Virginie and Clotilde) or by public humiliation (Mrs. Vane). Beatrice, an opera diva who murders her love rival Teresa in “Rival Prima Donnas” ends up being shut in an asylum for life as a madwoman.

literary genre; they are both extraordinary because they are able to reconcile the roles of actress and woman. In these works, acting enables new possibilities for women rather than dooming them to exclusion or death. These two ex-actress heroines transcend the dichotomy of domesticity and foreignness and other binary oppositions reliant on the cult of womanhood.

I. *Behind the Mask*

One of the standard critical takes on *Behind a Mask* (1866) is that the novel questions the conventions of Victorian womanhood, in particular by setting an actress-heroine, Jean Muir, at center stage in domestic family life.⁶ On the other hand, *Work* has been read as an adult version of the female sentimental *Bildungsroman* comparable to *Little Women*, in which female ambitions are eventually curbed within the ideology of separate spheres.⁷ Despite the difference in genres, however, close reading of the novels shows how the heroines share similarities, in particular in terms of female theatricality. Protagonist Jean Muir is a Scottish orphan who takes a job as a governess for the wealthy Coventry household. Her reasons for leaving her last job are hazy, and while she appears to be a virtuous young woman, the reader receives many hints that she has an ulterior motive for being in the house. As the reader ultimately learns, her true goal is revenge against the rigidly classist society which keeps pushing her aside: She will make the two younger Coventry men fall in love with her, only to reject them in favor of their wealthy uncle and patriarch, Sir John Coventry. At the end, the ex-actress triumphantly takes up her new role as Lady Coventry. Her true background remains mysterious until the end of the novel, when she turns out to be an actress who established herself in the French theater. As a governess, Jean is an outsider who has intruded on the sanctity of home and successfully taken over the domestic

⁶ See Fetterly, M. Dawson, Elliot, Klaiber, Hackenberg, Butterworth-McDermott and Ackerman Jr.

⁷ For example, see Yellin, J. Dawson and Fitzpatrick.

space. While seemingly upholding domestic values, she represents uncontained and uncontrollable feminine theatricality, and thus a pure threat to those values. In what follows I will focus on the power Jean creates for herself by performing an identity that is sentimental, powerless, and middle-class. I will then explore in greater detail how she uses these roles in order to gain power over others, to romance a powerful man, and to ultimately write her own fate.

The threat of Jean's deceptive foreignness is suggested by the theatrical metaphors circulating around her from the beginning of the text. The first appearance of the young governess in the British aristocratic Coventry family is described in curiously dramatic and theatrical language. Observing the new governess playing the piano in a melancholic mood, Gerald Coventry comments, "Scene first, very well done," to which Jean replies: "Thanks. The last scene shall be still better" (Mask, 364). After retiring to her room, Jean tells herself: "Come, the curtain is down, so I may be myself for a few hours, if actresses ever are themselves" (367). At the very end of the first day and the first chapter, the narrator exposes the dramatic "metamorphosis" of Jean Muir behind the curtain, in which her aged self—"haggard, worn, and moody" and "weary, hard, bitter"—is revealed behind the mask of the wig, false teeth and makeup (367). By uncovering Jean's mask from the outset, the novel encourages the reader to see her in theatrical terms, to read behind the scenes of Jean's performance throughout the rest of the story.

The novel's subtitle, "A Woman's Power," exemplifies this ambivalence. Read in the context of nineteenth-century middle-class culture and sentiments, it seems to refer to women's sentimental power in the cult of womanhood, and their ethical and emotional influence over men⁸. However, as Karen Halttunen argues, Jean "commands total sway over the lives of others

⁸ In "Sentimental Power," Tompkins argues that nineteenth-century sentimental novels were a political attempt to criticize and change the temperament of American culture and society.

by means of a monstrous perversion of the sentimental concept of woman's influence" (Halttunen [1984], 241). The reader soon becomes aware that the subtitle instead refers to a woman's power of performance. The feminine influence itself can be exercised, not only by sincere love and femininity, but by deliberate acting. Readers are given a privileged perspective from which to read behind the lines and to see every act of Jean as strategic. Read with the consciousness that the governess's "domestic graces" and innocent appearance may be fictitious, her every act appears as "performance" in the reader's eye. Meanwhile, the Coventry residents remain completely blind to her performance. Her true power thus springs from the gap between her apparent and real selves.

Such feminine performance by Jean is impressively exemplified on her second day at the Coventrys, when she tries to tame a wild horse she encounters in the garden: "Seating herself in the grass, she began to pull daisies, singing idly the while, as if unconscious of the spirited prancings of the horse. She took no notice, but plaited the daisies and sang on as if he was not there" (369). "With much coquetting," Jean tames the "wild, wayward beast" not by physical power but by acts of sentimental femininity: picking flowers, singing, plaiting the flowers. The conquering power is effective in particular because she does it by feigning unconsciousness not only of her spectator, but also of her own performance. Edward, who is the first to fall under the spell of the governess, witnesses the scene of feminine taming. Jean's performance draws Edward in, making him feel that it is "impossible to restrain himself any longer" from joining the scene (369). The narrator thus emphasizes Jean's magnetism in pulling the beholders into her own performance against themselves, manipulating the way the Coventry men see her and interpret her. The actress, who is usually the object of the male gaze, here not only controls the

gaze and the way men see her, but also draws the audience onstage to become performers themselves.

Jean is adept at reading and interpreting every subtle sign in others' behavior, and also at controlling others' readings of her. She plays on the sympathy of the onlookers by fainting at the piano, crying for her mother as a lonely orphaned girl, trembling in tears in secret, elements with which the reader of sentimental fiction is quite familiar. She pretends that she is trying to hide her sufferings, while actually weeping in places she knows she will be observed. As Elizabeth Schewe observes, she plays on the conventions that uphold the cult of Victorian womanhood (582). As we shall see, by performing powerlessness, she enhances her own power.

Jean's status as a governess reflects the problematic nature of social acting. A Victorian governess has much in common with an actress, as a class and gender performer. The profession and social status of a governess is historically highly ambiguous in Victorian culture.⁹ As the narrator aptly comments, a governess is usually "a forlorn creature hovering between superiors and inferiors" (376). A governess is at once the obedient employee of the upper-class family and the skilled teacher who educates upper-class daughters by modeling the behaviors of a lady. Governesses thus perform ladyhood, while being seen as inherently lesser due to their status as servants. Jean is a model teacher, showing Bella and the family the repertoire of manners and codes for perfect womanhood, including playing the piano, singing songs, speaking French, drawing, fluent reading and reciting and fine speech, and other signs of upper class status. Jean, like other governesses in Victorian literature, excels in class performance, implicitly suggesting that class behavior is something to be taught, rather than innately inherited, and thus can be easily assumed by the lower class. In other words, the Victorian governess is an exemplary figure that testifies to the overall theatrical tendency of mid-nineteenth-century society.

⁹ For the socially ambiguous status of the Victorian governesses, see Chapman, 40-41 and Schewe, 579-81.

Just as the governess's status complicates the intrinsic existence of class, Jean's performance also disturbs and de-naturalizes the construct of Victorian femininity. She captivates and bewitches the Coventry men by acting out versatile modes of womanhood designed to make her seem hard-working, modest and self-effacing. These include fainting, "secret" tears that are designed to be seen, and a plain, modest appearance that is actually the result of cosmetic enhancements like a wig. As a result, the Coventry men, including the skeptical Gerald, are gradually drawn into her sentimental performance not only as sympathetic audience but also as melodramatic heroes. These behaviors are especially effective because they contrast with the expected hyperbolic theatricality of sentiments and flirtations intended to attract men—for example, the ostentatious theatricality associated with aristocratic femininity as displayed by Lucia.

The femininity Jean assumes is deliberately set against the overt *display* of femininity that Gerald and Edward are familiar with. Jean offers a kind of femininity that is new to the Coventry men: that of the middle-class woman. To this end, Jean is described by the narrator and the Coventrys in terms such as "unassuming," "unconscious," "innocent," "quiet," and "submissive." The governess, under the observation of the Coventrys, appears "Meek, modest, faithful, and invariably sweet-tempered" (376). However, under her mask of subservience, her "indomitable will" (397) and "quiet dignity" (377) are repeatedly glimpsed. By acting the part of a woman too modest to seek attention, Jean paradoxically attracts the men more than a flirtatious woman could. She is apparently powerless but covertly strong: what Jean is and performs is precisely this contradictory, masked ontology of a sentimental middle-class woman, at once powerless and powerful, in order to exert a transformative, sentimental influence over

others. Her manipulation of the sentimental heroine role implicitly calls it into question: the only difference from the conventional heroine is that Jean is conscious of her own will and power.

There is no doubt that Jean is a powerful figure in *Behind a Mask*. She is able to control not only her own life, but also the lives of others. Despite the fact that Gerald finds Jean's entrance highly theatrical at their first encounter, he is soon engulfed in the sentimental narrative space that Jean creates around herself. Jean's performance throughout the rest of the narrative is successful precisely because it seems natural. She thus maneuvers through her complex and contradictory performance, seeming to embody the self-effacing, non-theatrical identity characteristic of middle-class womanhood. Gerald, despite his initial distrust of the governess, soon begins to fall for her, precisely because she tries to avoid his gaze. As much as Gerald wants to see Jean, he feels frustrated because all he can get are traces of her presence—such as a book left open in the library or her voice heard from afar. Jean deliberately keeps herself out of his sight in order to attract him more.

Gerald begins to fall for Jean because she is able to perform non-theatrical, self-effacing womanhood—an ideal embodiment of Victorian sentimental values. According to the cult of true womanhood, a woman's modest body and gesture, without explicit speech or behavior, convey transparent signs of interiority by means of bodily language such as tears, blushes, paleness and trembling. However discreet, the theatrical nature of this model of sentimental womanhood is undeniable because it necessitates a visible display or exteriorization of private interiority. Only the presence of a beholder can validate and sanction the sentimental woman by means of her inconspicuous but eloquent body. Because of the other-oriented nature of her sentimentality, with its visibility of non-visibility, the sentimental woman is always already inherently theatrical. A sentimental woman's silent feelings are visibly and performatively conveyed through

transparent, almost spectacular bodily signs, as she must refrain from directly expressing her romantic interests in the name of modesty. As Jean asks herself: “How can I make [Sir John] understand, yet not overstep the bounds of maiden modesty?”(413). Thus, Jean’s kiss secretly placed on Sir John’s photo must be caught by the “covert glances” of Sir John himself (413), just as her tears secretly shed must be detected by him. In this sense, Jean is an exaggerated parody of a set of cultural clichés about ideal middle-class womanhood and a sentimental woman’s simultaneous will to powerlessness and empowerment, visibility and invisibility, implicit in Victorian fiction.¹⁰

However theatrical, the power Jean exerts over the Coventry family is authentic, as is the sentimental power a true woman exerts over men. As Sara Hackenberg and Elizabeth Schewe point out, Jean’s theatricality entails a positive influence on the family, in contrast to the corruptive influence a theatrical figure typically brings into the domestic sphere (such as Yates in *Mansfield Park*). Jean’s display of middle-class values, e.g. her work ethic, encourages this aristocratic family to overcome their inertia, despite the moral ambiguity of her actual intentions (Hackenberg, 443-445; Schewe, 216). Indeed, as we shall see, Jean’s role-playing, as well as her role-casting for others, actually transforms the Coventry men, enabling each of them to “become a man.”

The first example of Jean’s positive influence over the Coventrys is displayed through romantic love. As Jean reads a novel to the family, Gerald notices that Edward “makes himself a hero, and Jean Muir the heroine, and lives the love scene” in his imagination (377). After “the romantic boy” actually confesses his love for her, Jean is able to use her privileged position of love object to impact the others. For example, she advises Gerald to send Edward to the army,

¹⁰ Halttunen’s study of nineteenth-century conduct manuals reveals how thoroughly this encoding had become by mid-century. The manuals urge the “true woman” to be “constitutionally transparent... With her heart on her lips and her soul in her eyes”(Halttunen [1982], 57).

instead of letting him idle his days away at home, in order to “help to make a man” of him (380). Jean is successful in this endeavor, as Edward himself claims to Gerald: “She would make a man of me. She puts strength and courage into me as no one else can” (384). What’s more, Gerald also begins to see himself as a “chivalrous man” motivated to protect Jean, a “poor, homeless soul” (380). Her effect on Gerald, characterized by the narrator as listless, bored, prone to ennui, lazy and idle, is equally noteworthy. Her presence turns Gerald from a typically languid and indolent aristocrat into a newly energetic and passionate man. Gerald is motivated to perform duties that he, as the Coventry heir, has neglected so far. He decides to look for “some work that shall make a man of me” (397) and to follow his dead father by “attend[ing] the things as a master should” (406). Gerald confesses to Jean: “I am beginning to wake from my disgraceful idleness, and long for some work that shall make a man of me” (397).

As with middle-class sentimental heroines, “woman’s power” is a moral force, transforming the idle aristocrat into a newly hard-working man. Jean not only reforms the Coventry brothers into more productive, energetic and responsible men, she also causes Sir John to regain youth and masculinity, first by behaving “like a dutiful daughter” (391), then as the lonely orphaned girl with noble blood. Sir John acts out his part, taking action from the romantic, chivalrous urge to protect a helpless woman, only to fall in love with her like the brothers. Each of these men responds almost automatically to Jean’s feminine performances, specifically tailored to each individual. Jean skillfully performs one role after another for the men, who without knowing act out their assigned roles. The ease with which Jean takes them in suggests that romantic love is *a priori* culturally-conditioned gender performance.

The most outstanding episode associating romantic love with the role-playing performative is the scene involving *tableaux vivants*. In the chapter aptly titled “How the Girl

Did It,” the narrator delineates Jean’s strategic performance on and off stage in successfully fascinating the Coventry heir. Throughout the novel, Gerald recurrently describes Jean as a “Scottish witch” (378), at once exotic and erotic. Her being Scottish, an outsider within the nation, overlaps with her ambiguous standing as a governess, an outsider within the household. Gerald tells Jean, “I think you are a witch. Scotland is the home of weird, uncanny creatures, who take lovely shapes for the bedevilment of poor weak souls” (417). The *tableaux* scene encapsulates this idea; Jean acts out a series of vignettes, including one featuring the Biblical Judith, to entertain the household. In the first *tableau*, Jean impersonates an “oriental” woman with darkened skin and black hair, robed with “barbaric splendor” (393). Her foreignness as an orphaned Scottish woman brought up in France is transplanted onto this exotic, theatrical representation of a dark female body, implicitly associated with sexuality. Jean’s oriental, exotic self-representation exactly matches Gerald’s fantasy of her. By exoticizing the woman as a cultural other, the *tableau* also eroticizes her, positioning the male subject as a spectator superior to the passive spectacle. Foreignness, theatricality and sexuality thus converge on the body of Jean. But here, Jean rewrites the conventional image of the orient or cultural other—the passive, servile receptacle of Western desire—into the stronger image of Judith.

The highly exotic image of Judith is a screen for Jean’s real-life resentments. Gerald is immediately captivated by Jean’s impersonation of Judith, who is about to murder Holofernes in revenge:

It was not all art: the intense detestation mingled with a savage joy that the object of her hatred was in her power was too perfect to be feigned and having the key to a part of her story, Coventry felt as if he caught a glimpse of the truth. (393)

Jean's versatile off-stage masquerade casts her as a perfect woman. In contrast, her posing as Judith conveys disturbing images of a murderous, passionate and resentful woman, doubling the "real" Jean in the reader's eye. In this sense, the *tableau* indeed gives the audience, including the reader, "the glimpse of truth" about Jean Muir's self.

The truth and authenticity of Jean's interiority are most transparently conveyed in her sheer theatricality. This paradoxical relation between the truth and theatricality highlights the interchangeability of stage and offstage. The secured boundaries between truth and art, authenticity and theatricality, reality and fiction, become blurry at the moment when the power relation between man and woman, victimizer (Holofernes) and victim (Judith), reverses on stage.¹¹

In the second *tableau*, Gerald is asked to play the role of a fugitive lover with Jean on stage, and "a new sensation" (394) begins to take over his subjectivity. As he feels her body, "for the first time in his life he felt the indescribable spell of womanhood, and looked the ardent lover to perfection" (395). In the following *tableau*, in which Jean plays a role of a dying woman, she feels Gerald's body becoming aroused: She sees "his hands tremble, saw the color flash into his cheek," realizing with "a sense of triumph" that "she had touched him at last" (395). Gerald's true feelings burst out for the first time in his life when he plays these roles with Jean. The actor's emotions are driven, or even conditioned, by the role he plays: in other words, the role precedes reality.¹² The stage takes over not only the behavioral realm but also the emotional one.

¹¹ For a more detailed account of this *tableau vivant* foregrounding Judith's revenge on Holofernes, which is juxtaposed with Jean's revenge on the Coventrys, see Chapman, 41-44. Dawson analyses Jean's *tableaux vivants* in their historical context, arguing that her dramatic performance is the act of negotiation between woman's subversive desire and traditional motivations.

¹² See Schewe, 584; and Ackerman Jr, 163-64.

In this private theatrical, the dichotomies between performance and reality, public and private, stage and home blur, and the boundary circumscribing the stage is no longer effective.¹³

After the *tableau vivant* scenes awaken Gerald from his usual indifference and emotional apathy, he tells Jean while both are still in costume: “I am not what I seem, and my indolent indifference is but the mask under which I conceal my real self” (397). The theatrical rhetoric of masking and unmasking now infects Gerald. He defines himself as an actor in everyday life, whose real face is hidden. His unmasking and the awakening of his real self are the result of Jean’s stage management, her casting him as a romantic lover. His unmasked “real” self is in fact a typecast character that Jean has powerfully brought to the fore. The stage effect continues to hold Gerald spellbound even after the private theatricals are over. Afterward, Gerald finds Jean alone in a deserted room. Conversing with her as a friend rather than as her employer, Gerald feels as if he is still playing the romantic role he was assigned in the *tableau*. Although he knows “not how to play his part,” he identifies strongly with it: “Still feeling as if he had suddenly stepped into a romance, yet finding a keen pleasure in the part assigned him, Coventry threw himself into it with spirit” (399). Being half-conscious of the performative nature of Jean’s act and his own role, Gerald cannot help but willingly take up the assigned role of a friend and a knight protecting Jean from the supposedly vengeful lover, Sydney. “We are acting our parts in reality now,” Gerald aptly comments (400).

The Coventry men thus act in accordance with their assigned roles, unconsciously or subconsciously participating in Jean’s stage production. By doing so, however, they turn themselves into what they covertly desire to be: Edward into a romantic, grown-up hero, Gerald into a hard-working, responsible heir, and Sir John into at once a father and a husband to the

¹³ Halttunen attributes the rise of private theatricals in the 1850s and ‘60s, including *tableaux vivants* and charades, to the fact that “stylized and controlled emotional self-expression demanded of parlor players strongly resembled the demonstration of right feeling demanded by sentimentalism”(Halttunen [1982], 184).

orphaned girl. Jean thus plays on, while the Coventry men act out, male fantasies of protecting a helpless, wronged woman. Jean's performance not only reveals the performative nature of femininity; it also reveals the manner in which masculinity is a typecast construct, unconsciously performed as such in given situations and roles, and reliant on the performance of femininity for its validation. This novella thus reveals the degree to which the identities of not only women, but also men, are the product of gender conventions.

Acting is contagious, inevitably drawing even the most detached, skeptical beholder into responding and playing along. Jean's self-production as simultaneously a conspicuous and inconspicuous spectacle makes her a paradoxically active object of male desires. Furthermore, she creates complex triangulations of male desire, making the Coventry men—first Edward, then Gerald, and lastly Sir John—turn against one another. By seducing beholders into actors, she makes her own identity a stage on which men act out an overdetermined fight for control. The novel delineates how males are made into men by the virtue of a sentimental woman's performance. As a result, it betrays the performative nature of the male *Bildungsroman* as a byproduct of the Cult of True Womanhood: the construction of the normative male subject via fictions of gender.

Jean thus excels not only as an actress, but also as a stage writer and director.¹⁴ Her writerly skill allows her to tell her own version of her story, rewriting reality for herself and others, and encouraging them to participate in her story. Eventually, her scheme is exposed in the eyes of the Coventrys, but only after she has already rewritten reality, sealing it permanently with her marriage vow to Sir John.

Interestingly, even the unmasking and unmaking of Jean's posing is only possible through her own writing—the letters written to her “accomplice” in Paris, a friend named

¹⁴ For more extensive analysis of Jean Muir's creative and (sensational) novelistic skills, see Hackenberg 439-450.

Hortense. Edward, who received the letters from Sydney (who bribed the letters from Hortense) reads them to the Coventrys as a proof of Jean's reprobate motives. Ventriloquized through Edward, however, Jean's letters horrify and shame them instead of her, as they present her schemes through a resentful retelling of the story from her point of view. Her writing is full of anger and resentment against her employers' haughty and "patronizing" attitudes toward her, in particular against Gerald's unconcealed "hatred of governesses": "They are an intensely proud family, but I can humble them all, I think, by captivating the sons, and when they have committed themselves, cast them off, and marry the old uncle, whose title takes my fancy"(415). The letters not only unmask Jean, but even more powerfully unmask the Coventrys, revealing their arrogance, snobbish superiority, and blind sense of entitlement. If, as Jean states in her letters, her purpose in seducing Gerald is to humble him and his haughty cousin, Lucia, these letters do the job. However, even after the exposure of Jean's secret, her reality-making, performative power is still intact. When Jean burns the letters to ashes, she also burns the exposed truth. Without Jean's written confession of the truth as a solid proof, nothing can now menace the new reality she has created, as she now stands legally as Lady Coventry.

Immediately after Jean's hidden motives are finally revealed, Jean takes up her new role with good-wifely enthusiasm, and invites other members of the Coventrys to play along. Bella, the youngest Coventry and yet the keenest and most sensitive observer in the family, extends her hands to Jean in response, in spite of herself. Just like Bella, the reader—the most detached and critical observer of Jean's conduct—is also lured into applauding Jean's performance, sympathetically identifying with her even with ambiguously mixed feelings. Even after the truth is revealed and the real face of Jean is exposed, Jean's feminine and moral performance is so compelling that she even wins the sympathy of the reader, who has been aware of the heroine's

scheme from the beginning of the novel. Just as Gerald, who detects Jean's theatricality from the outset, still keeps "forget[ting] [him]self" (409), so too does the reader.

The people who have come under Jean's influence are naturally shocked when the truth comes out. "She never wrote that! It is impossible. A woman could not do it," Lucia responds to Jean's letters (425). By doing something impossible for a woman—defying mid-Victorian sensational narrative conventions of crime and punishment—Jean, as well as Alcott herself, has rewritten the conventions of both sensational and sentimental narratives of the nineteenth century. Indeed, *Behind a Mask* is the story that delineates "how the girl did" that which a woman can rarely do within the existing cultural discourse. Jean Muir's story expands the readability and writeability of women's acts and behavior in Victorian culture. Furthermore, it is the story of how the author did it, as a woman writing from within the narrative and moral conventions of mid-Victorian culture, so as to enable a *femme fatale* to survive the novel and fulfill her ambition.

Because roles are preexisting within society, they are not determined by any one performer, no matter how skilled. Jean does not stand autonomously behind the mask as a self-realizing subject of power. As a carrier for gender and narrative clichés, the woman must incessantly put on one mask after another in the manner of a Chinese box. At the novel's ending, thus, she willingly puts on the mask of modesty yet again, determined to keep it on for the rest of her life as Lady Coventry and a perfect wife to Sir John. By doing so, she engages herself within the theatrical space of aristocratic domesticity. Indeed, as a working-class woman without a family connection, she has nowhere else to live, outside the domestic space. The novel suggests that there is no autonomous, free-standing subject behind the mask—only yet another mask and another performance. Jean's "real" self is partially glimpsed but not fully exposed, always out of

cognitive reach. As the novel's title implies, Jean embodies the complicated ontology of the actress/woman, questioning what lies behind her mask.

In the final scene, Jean Muir exits the novel triumphantly, only to enter a lifelong role in which the Coventry family name and reputation are solely upheld and maintained by Jean's wifely performance. Sir John declares to the members of Coventry household who try to inform him of Jean's true history and motives: "I will look at nothing, hear nothing, believe nothing...know nothing" (428). This patriarchal family's good name and future are perpetuated not only by a woman's performance, but also the patriarch's determined ignorance of her performativity. Only Sir John's deliberate ignorance—his decision to accept Jean's story and his own role as they are, to remain blind to her face under the mask—enables him to attain domestic bliss.

At the end, the Coventry household becomes a pure theater of everyday domestic life, wherein women are explicitly performing their given roles, and men are also "feminized" into domestic performativity, in a play directed by the Lady of the house. This simultaneously cohesive and voluntary domestic performativity is an apt metaphor for the nineteenth-century middle-class family, kept running by a supreme actress called an angel in the house, in which men and women equally are performing their roles. The novel, written from behind the mask by a sentimental novelist, thus lays bare an uneasy awareness of the culture's own theatricality—of the sentimental private woman's affinity to the sensational, theatrical woman.

Jean Muir is undeniably an extraordinary character. She is aware of her own power and uses it to create the life she desires. In many ways her cunning is a direct outgrowth of the pressures under which Victorian women existed. At one point in *Mask*, Jean tells Gerald that "a look, a word can tarnish [a woman's good name]; a scornful smile, a significant shrug can do me

more harm than any blow; for I am a woman—friendless, poor, and at the mercy of his tongue” (399). As Klaiber points out, though these words are spoken for the role she fabricates as a wronged woman, it conveys a truth about the Victorian woman: the virtue of a woman is not an inherent quality, but a performative, linguistic artifact, and hence a highly precarious construct, in that a word, gesture or rumor can ruin her life. On the other hand, the very constructed nature of selfhood allows Jean to performatively fabricate and refashion her self, in order to successfully maneuver through the mesh of gender conventions and social roles.

II. *Work*

Behind a Mask expresses ambivalence toward the black-and-white dichotomy of good and evil, sincerity and performance, while the heroine at once affirms and problematizes the intrinsic values of domesticity. Jean’s power of compelling performance to create her own reality is exactly what Christie Devon, another ex-actress who survives her novel’s ending, will attain at the end of her story. Alcott’s *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873) further emphasizes the parallels between theatricality and social practices, while suggesting their political implications. As a sentimental female *Bildungsroman*, *Work* celebrates women for their interior qualities and private and domestic nature, while it promotes the values and rights of working women. And yet, while the sentimental novel presents femininity as a matter of nature, theatrical performance can denaturalize femininity as role-playing. *Work*, like *Behind a Mask*, also gives the reader glimpses of what lies under the mask of sentimental femininity.

Work is the story of Christie Devon, who leaves her uncle’s home to become independent through work. The novel is autobiographical to some extent, reflecting Alcott’s experience as a servant, war nurse and, in particular, an actress. Saxton notes that the name “Christie” appears in

a stock troupe called the Boston Theater Company during the 1855-1856 season, “and may have been Louisa’s stage name when [Alcott] tried briefly to be an actress” (320). It is not surprising then that Christie, while portrayed in a way that gestures toward a somewhat perfunctory antitheatrical prejudice, still willingly takes up the vocation of actress for three years, the longest employment in her resume, before she finally enters into the gardening business. Indeed, while she takes on a series of roles in her life, Christie is first and foremost an actress. Her story is primarily a story of experience and intellect, not only of sentiments. Alcott’s father, Bronson Alcott, writes “I conceive the ideal woman to be a person in whom the sentiments predominate over the intellect...the type, eternally, will be feminine” (quoted in Saxton, 303). From the point of view of Bronson’s gender definition, Christie appears to be strikingly unfeminine.¹⁵ While never stepping out of the bounds of female modesty and virtue, Christie attains something a heroine of a sentimental novel rarely can—an independent life and career. Hereafter, I will trace Christie’s journey, exploring how much of Christie’s “Success” (the novel’s original title) is owed to her talent as an actress and her propensity to act in social life.

Christie Devon enacts a feminine version of Pilgrim’s Progress, tracing a path through a series of professions. To begin, she makes a famous “Declaration of Independence” –“I’m going to take care of myself, and not be a burden any longer”—and leaves her uncle’s home, to “travel away into the world and seek my fortune”(*Work* 5). The story takes a typical *Bildungsroman* trajectory featuring upward mobility, from an orphan’s declaration of independence, through nursing Civil War soldiers, toward the establishment of home and business. At the end, she also attains self-realization as a public speaker and a central figure of the democratic “league of sisters.” While we can find endless common threads between Jean and Christie, Christie’s

¹⁵ Nineteenth-century readers of *Work* seems to have noted Christie’s “unfeminine” qualities. According to Hendler, an anonymous reviewer characterizes Christie as “a female who was not a woman...[who] never so much as dreamed of womanly selflessness” (cited in Hendler, 685).

journey curiously reflects and coincides with the history of American democracy, and as an American character, she is a fully domesticated version of Jean. Christie's journey into self-production is also a journey into the establishment of a national identity for American womanhood, and an alternative to the typical male-centered history of America. In what follows, I trace the various roles played and worked by Christie as she appears as a critical observer, an All-American natural performer, a modest woman, an authentic actress, a figure of sympathy and empathy, and finally a transformative force. Throughout her varied roles and life experiences, it is her ability to perform with ease that enables her to do great things.

After leaving her uncle's house, Christie, like Jean, tries to find work as a governess, but she soon finds "her want of accomplishments a barrier to success in that line, for the mammas thought less of the solid than of the ornamental branches, and wished their little darlings to learn French before English, music before grammar, and drawing before writing" (16-17). Therefore, she decides to "work [her] way up" (17). The first job Christie takes on is that of a servant in the middle-class household of Mr. and Mrs. Stuart. She soon finds that they act as a "superior race of being," and regard the servants as interchangeable robots, treating them as if "they were clocks, to be wound up once a day, and sent away the moment they got out of repair," and that they look at her as if she is "no more than a new bonnet, a necessary article to be ordered home for examination" (18). Upon entering the house, Christie is immediately renamed as "Jane," after their previous servant. This suggests that her employers assume that the servant is just a puppet acting at the will of the puppeteer, within which there is no personal identity or individual autonomy.

However, this lack of interiority extends to her employers. Mrs. Stuart regards herself as "a queen of society"; she assumes "majestic manners in public and could not entirely divest

herself of them in private” (18). But it soon becomes obvious to the reader, via Christie’s keen observation, that her employers themselves are the puppets, who perform the daily routine of receiving guests every day and week with “elegant sameness,” just like “trained canaries” in the “gilded cage” called society (25). Christie delivers the observation to her ex-slave co-worker, Hepsy, that her master is “a fat dandy, with nothing to be vain of but his clothes” (24). In this sense, Christie’s critical analysis of the Stuart household strongly calls to mind the mid-nineteenth-century middle-class society that Halttunen describes, with its emphasis on fashion as part of social and public performance that invaded domesticity: The “hypocrisy of fashion” was a necessary evil for social climbers maneuvering toward social success (Halttunen [1982], 61). Upper class homes were no sanctuary from the conspicuous class performance that governed the whole of society.

Work, from the outset, studies and critiques the theatricality of the Stuarts through the eyes of a servant. Just like Jean Muir, Christie is an acute observer and emulator of her employers’ behavior. This “too intelligent table-girl” examines her employers with a detached and critical eye. She “studies,” “hears,” “sees,” “listens” “looks,” “stares” and “laughs” at the Stuarts from behind the curtain of this puppet stage. Christie also shares with Jean her ambition for greater things. Christie says to herself: “I’ve got no rich friends to help me up, but sooner or later, I mean to find a place among cultivated people; and while I’m working and waiting, I can be fitting myself to fill that place like a gentlewoman, as I am” (24). The imitation of class performance is, indeed, the best education she receives from the work experience, by which she aims to attain her goal of becoming a self-made gentlewoman. The narrator notes that,

If masters and mistresses knew how skillfully they are studied, criticized, and imitated by their servants, they would take more heed to their ways, and set better examples,

perhaps. Mrs. Stuart never dreamed that her quiet, respectful Jane kept a sharp eye on all her movements, smiled covertly at her affectations, envied her accomplishments, and practiced certain little elegancies that struck her fancy (24).

Christie imitates, practices and absorbs the manners and speech of the upper middle class with the ambition of emulating them. While critiquing the theatrical pretensions of the Stuarts, Christie educates herself by secretly mimicking them and incorporating elements of their class performance into her own. Gaining this new repertoire means she will eventually be qualified enough for a position as a governess in an upper-class household, teaching wealthy daughters appropriate manners and behaviors.

By describing the Stuart household from the servant's point of view as a downright performance, the novel de-familiarizes the everyday life of the upper-class family, rendering it comical and even grotesque to the observer's eyes. Christie is well aware of the theatricality of this upper-class household and finds it "dull," but she plays along with it anyway: "As each had his part to play he managed to do it with spirit" (25). This chapter suggests that the servant, who is usually an obscure and unthreatening figure in a household as part of the master's property, is actually a critical observer and emulator of her employer, a servant whose subjectivity calls attention to the intrinsic theatricality of upper-class domesticity.

Not surprisingly, Christie reveals her talent as a professional actress soon after she leaves the Stuarts. She befriends a co-boarder and an actress at "a respectable theater" (31) who introduces her to the world of the stage. When the stage manager gives her the opportunity to try out for the role of a martial, androgynous figure, "the Queen of the Amazons," Christie takes it up with "a delicious sense of freedom" (32), well aware that "Uncle Enos considered 'play-

acting' as the sum of all iniquity" (32). Christie's rebellious spirit thus finds its vent in the play-acting she employs against the conventions of patriarchal antitheatrical prejudice.

Once on stage, after the first "most uncomfortable sense of the absurdity of her position" has passed, Christie is filled with "the desire to please," and "natural grace made it easy for her to catch and copy the steps and poses given her to imitate. Soon she forgot herself, entered into the spirit of the thing, and exerted every sense to please" (35). After the extraordinary success of her first performance, the narrator comments: "Christie was no dramatic genius born to shine before the world and leave a name behind her. She had no talent except that which may be developed in any girl possessing the lively fancy, sympathetic nature, and ambitious spirit which make such girls naturally dramatic" (37). In Christie's performances, naturalness and acting seamlessly merge. The acting talent dwells not in genius but in any All-American girl with a sympathetic, imaginative, and ambitious spirit without any previous training. The novel suggests that lack of theatrical training makes a better actress out of an American girl, as her active mind gives life to any role she plays. Even in playing the Dickensian grotesque and comical parts, Christie "dressed such parts to the life, and played them with a spirit and ease that surprised those who had considered her a dignified and rather dull young person" (39). Despite the narrator's lukewarm appraisal of her talent as "a clever actress, never a great one" (39), the theater's main comedian attests to the stage manager Mr. Sharp that "that girl is going to make a capital character actress. When her parts suit, she forgets herself entirely and does admirably well" (40).

Rather than repudiating stage acting, Christie embraces it as something inherent in any woman, and uses it for self-improvement. This is in stark contrast to La Jeune, who was unable to reconcile her role as both actress and woman. As Christie continues to perfect her performing

skills, she gradually becomes a popular actress, mainly because “behind the actress the public saw a woman who never ‘[forgot] the modesty of nature’” (40). The self-effacing nature of feminine modesty is publicly staged, and thus visibly displayed by a woman’s performance without any apparent contradiction. In Christie’s body, publicity and the privacy of a woman’s interiority are seamlessly combined, refuting the sentimental culture’s insistence on the public/private dichotomy.

But the text’s attitude to theater is ambivalent. Gradually, the narrator notes, Christie starts to succumb to the “temptations” of self, “growing selfish, frivolous and vain” with “no care for any one but herself” (41). These words clearly bespeak the widespread antitheatrical views deeply rooted in nineteenth-century sentimental culture: that having too much self is the major vice of an actress, one that theatricality and publicity inevitably invite. Theatricality must be thus denied and rejected for the heroine to survive the narrative successfully. In this novel, as in most sentimental fiction and culture, women’s authentic selfhood (paradoxically associated with selflessness) is defined against its Other, the inauthentic, excessive selfhood of an actress.

The novel tries to solve this contradiction between woman and actress by choosing the theater as an important stepping-stone in Christie’s career. As Glenn Hendler points out, Christie’s best stage performance, approved by the novel and applauded by the audience, is that in which authenticity and performance, reality and act converge (696); where her performing body becomes a transparent sign of her interiority. In her final public performance as an actress, Christie throws “her whole heart in the work,” and as a result, she “had never played better before” (44). The scene is “full of those touches of nature that need very little art to make them effective” (44). Christie’s authentic, sincere, “genuine” (45) performance immediately achieves a similarly powerful effect on the viewer and on her co-star Lucy, who has been estranged from

Christie because of her growing jealousy of Christie's success as an actress, and of Christie's closeness to St. George, Lucy's secret love. In response, Lucy becomes "suddenly gifted with unsuspected skill" (44), acting with "real" tears, love and longing. Ultimately, it is Christie's non-theatrical, "unpremeditated action" in saving Lucy from the accidental fall off the stage mechanics, that wins from the audience "heartier applause than Christie ever had received for her best rendering of more heroic deeds" (46). The scene is at once real and realistic. The actress attains the ultimate success when she plays the role with a spirit, plays it sincerely, to the extent that it induces real emotions from the co-players as well as the audience. At the moment that the performing self and performed role merge into one, the actress receives the most exultant applause for her performance.

On Christie's last stage, the theatrical performance coexists with a non-theatrical act of sincerity. Where private and public, sensational and realistic, art and life, get mixed up, they evoke the audience's sincere "sympathy." Alcott waves off the traditional rendition of the actress as an embodiment of inauthenticity, and instead offers an alternative type of actress who is capable of expressing "authentic" feelings—a more respectable, middle-class, "realist" actress, the figure that becomes dominant in theater toward the end of the century.¹⁶ The actress gives her best performance when she is most herself, when she does not appear to be acting—when reality takes over the stage. By rendering the scene as the height of Christie's career, the novel attempts to establish the connection between the power of theatrical performance and the feminine, sentimental power of influence over the beholder.

¹⁶ For the rise of the respectability of the actress and the theater toward the end of nineteenth century in England, see Allen, 19-21. According to Allen, the actress became "fully respectable and fully middle class, that is, by appearing not to act" (21). Ackerman Jr. also discusses the development of the nineteenth-century American theater from melodrama to realism, with the theater's increasing focus on "domestic" and "private" actions (Ackerman Jr. xiii).

After being injured in the accident, Christie says to herself, “The stage is not the place for me,” and decides to go back to her “dull but safe” old life, leaving the stage without any hesitation. Christie finds the actress’s “mimic life” unsatisfactory, and seemingly forsakes her successful stage career as “a mistake” (47), in favor of a job with moral integrity. However, her decision notwithstanding, the rest of the narrative elaborates how integral theatricality is to Christie’s subjectivity, life, and success.

Christie says she has chosen to leave the stage because “Other women can lead this life safely and happily: I cannot” (48); she can easily succumb to the “temptations” of theater, of at once losing herself by developing “too much” self. Suggestive of the malleability of self, the danger of theater and acting that Christie speaks of here is that theatricality has the power to over-influence and de-essentialize the selfhood of the performer: There is no stable subjectivity under the mask, but rather, the mask makes the person. This is not surprising, because Alcott, in writing *Work*, highlights the experiential view of self, in which the experience of work makes a person. In spite of the fact that that Christie leaves the stage in favor of less conspicuous, more domestic jobs such as that of governess, companion and seamstress, the rest of the novel demonstrates how theatricality is integral to the sympathetic nature of sentimentalism, highlighting its power to transform or reform the other, as well as the self. According to Emily Allen, the “sympathetic identification itself [is] a form of role playing, and hence already theatrically contaminated” (51). As an actress, Christie’s success mainly comes from her ability to elicit sympathy and empathic identification from the audience. Likewise, her success in life also comes from the sympathetic responses that her character invites from the beholder, as well as from the reader. Thus, *Work* not only accentuates the heroine’s theatrical nature but it also stresses the mimetic, self-transforming responses Christie draws forth from others.

The following chapter, entitled “Governess”, exemplifies Christie’s theatrical nature even in an offstage setting. Despite her strong disavowal of the theater world, Christie clearly incorporates the skills she has learned from her acting career into her self-presentation. Thanks to her acting career, she now has acquired the perfect qualifications for her next job as a governess: aside from the manners and speech she picks up from mimicking the Stuarts, she adopts her knowledge of French and music from the theater. Just like Jean Muir, the ex-actress fits perfectly in the role of teacher and model performer of class behaviors and manners. Although she moves from theater to home, the two are not very different. The theater permeates the everyday, middle-class domestic life of Mrs. Saltonstall, who appears to Christie just like “a fashion plate” (51) with her ostentatious costumes. Following the example of Mr. and Mrs. Stuart, Mrs. Saltonstall is a figure that represents the rising middle class, in that upper-middle-class women are social climbers and skilled performers.

If Mrs. Saltonstall is one of the painted women of the leisure class, her brother, Philip Fletcher, is almost a double of Gerald Coventry with his chronic disease of ennui, boredom and lethargy. After having pursued all kinds of pleasures in his youth, this typical dandy figure is now described as an “invalid,” spending days doing nothing but perusing the newspaper (53). Rather than a physical illness, his is a mental one, characterized as an incapacity to feel. His illness is thus a metaphor for the boredom and lack of motivation typical in the leisure class that Alcott describes. Just as Jean Muir exercises her “feminine,” reformatory power over the Coventry men, Christie’s “unconscious gift” (59) immediately starts to affect Philip Fletcher. His dormant emotions start to awaken in response to the sentimental spectacle he encounters, as Christie secretly sheds tears over the letter informing her of her aunt’s death. Hereafter, he finds Christie’s “womanly sincerity and strength” so compelling and appealing that he begins to feel

the desire “to prove himself a man under all the elegance and polish of the gentleman” (59). Her influence, as the narrator says, works “as a touchstone for the genuineness of others” (59), and this transformative power makes Fletcher desire to “live his life over again and do it better” (59). Her sentimental sincerity invokes sympathetic, mimetic responses from the beholder. As a result, Christie invigorates Fletcher, and makes a “man” out of the inert, lethargic dandy.

Though the narrator says that Christie is “no actress off the stage” (69), the narrative soon proves otherwise, in particular when she is involved in a romantic relationship. Christie and Fletcher begin to exchange “those small signs and symbols which lovers’ eyes are so quick to see and understand”(60)—coded, recognizable gestures woven in the body language of the performers. In spite of herself, she is almost swayed by her own romantic performance, and gestures toward accepting Fletcher’s love and marriage proposal. However, Fletcher, upon finding out that Christie was once a stage actress, tells her that he will “forgive and forget that [his] wife had ever been an actress” (68)—a sentence which seals his fate. Feeling insulted by Fletcher’s condescending language, Christie declines his proposal, but in doing so, she “unconsciously spoke with something of her old dramatic fervor in voice and gesture” (70). Fletcher detects it immediately, and complements the theatricality of the scene by clapping his hands: “Very well done! ...I am disappointed in the woman, but I make my compliments to the actress, and leave the stage free for another and a more successful Romeo” (70).

The presence of the beholder, along with the actor’s consciousness of it, completes the scene’s theatricality.¹⁷ Christie herself at once notices the conversation’s staginess, seeing the whole scene “from a ludicrous point of view” (70) and feeling embarrassed “at the part she had played in this affair.” This de-familiarizing effect continues to haunt the scene till the end of the

¹⁷ Michael Fried defines theatricality in art as its self-consciousness of the beholder and the viewer’s reception. See Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (148-172).

chapter, when Christie, “being a woman,” wrings her heart with tears “as if she loved him” (73). Tears, the sign of genuine feelings, are shed “as if” she loves Fletcher. Both the narrator and Christie are thus conscious of the language and gestures of romantic love. This kind of uneasy entanglement of love and performativity, actress and woman, stage and offstage, consistently resurfaces despite the narrator’s repeated repudiation of theatricality.

Work further elaborates performativity in domestic space through another important female performer, Helen Carrol. Soon after Christie takes leave of the Saltonstall household, she embarks on the next stage of her career with yet another leisure-class family, serving as a companion to an “invalid” girl named Helen Carrol. She soon finds out, however, that the illness from which Helen suffers is a mental one, as the “curse of insanity” runs through the blood of the Carrol offspring. This madness, however, is not something visible or tangible, as none of the family members actually act particularly insane, and socially, the family passes as respectable, keeping their history secret. Helen is in bed on a rest cure, struck with despair and melancholy, and heartbroken from the loss of her past lover. Likewise, her elder brother Augustine is a melancholic priest, with the “absent air of one who leads an inward life” (81), trying to “[hide] his calamity and expiate his father’s sin by endless penances and prayers” (89). Meanwhile, the younger Harry lives a frivolous and dissipated life, trying to waste away and shorten it. They all live in anticipation of the impending “curse of insanity” (86), the fear of which binds them tightly together. They deplore the fact that they were ever born to their family and blame their mother for her “sins” of having married into the Carrols and given birth to cursed children. They are all sane enough to dreadfully fear losing their minds: Rather than the insanity itself, it is the knowledge of insanity that afflicts them. But the Carrol children’s preemptive attempts to postpone their fall into insanity, “to avoid the fate [they] all dread” (91),

as a result, mimic conventional symptoms of mental disturbance such as melancholy, ennui, and dissipation. They thus paradoxically act out their fate while trying to forestall it.

The family curse most conspicuously manifests itself in Helen. Christie first learns of the family secret when Helen reveals it to her. She voices her constant fear of insanity, the despair at her cursed life as an invalid, and her lost love due to the family history, as well as her blame for her mother for prolonging this heritage. However, the reader identifies Helen as mentally disturbed only because she tells us so. Just as with her brothers, her melancholic mental state derives from her fear of insanity. Rather than acting out an inherent mental condition, therefore, Helen is acting *on* the insanity she believes she inherited from her father. The chapter thus presents a closed circuit, a metaphor without a vehicle, a signifier without a signified, a citation without its origin. Madness described here is thus distinctively performative, rather than clinical or actual. It is Helen's self-referential discourse and testimony that performatively constitute the insanity.

At once metaphoric and performative, Helen's (fear of) insanity inevitably makes its bearer melodramatic and theatrical. This staginess infects every aspect of the narrative. Even the narrative voice is not immune to the authorial theatricality, as the family history of the Carrols unfolds: Just before Helen's long confession of the family curse begins, the chapter abruptly shifts to a melodramatic tone of voice in describing the Gothic turn of events, with the narrator's sudden dramatic intervention:

Alas, for Christie's pride, for Harry's hope, and for poor Helen's bitter fate! When all was brightest, the black shadow came; when all looked safest, danger was at hand; and when the past seemed buried, the ghost which haunted it returned, for the punishment of a broken law is as inevitable as death. (84)

The Gothic story of the “curse of insanity,” of sin and punishment, of the return of the repressed past, is now revealed to Christie by Helen’s confession. However, the story of insanity told by Helen, who is described as a tell-tale embodiment of the family curse, is surprisingly coherent and sensible, not erratic enough to convince either Christie or the reader that she is insane. The storyteller’s body and gestures, not the story itself, prove the story’s authenticity. The truth of her soliloquized narrative is demonstrated by the spectacularity of her body in a striking display of disturbed interiority. She is described as crying “passionately,” “with “a shrill laugh” (85), talking with “vehemence”, marching “restless[ly]” (90), and her narrative bursts out of her body “violently” (90). While speaking, she walks to and fro “with hurried steps and excited face as if driven by some power beyond her control” (85). Finally, her whole body becomes a frozen image, when, “[c]lasp[ing] her hands above her head, she stood like a beautiful pale image of despair” (88)—invoking the photographic iconography of Charcot’s hysteria.¹⁸ Helen’s madness is only apparent when an observer is there to see her troubled actions. Her body and gesture perform the content of her narrative of insanity more eloquently than her words. She continues to tell her story “with an expression in her face that bereft the listener the power to move or speak” (85). If, as Michael Fried suggests, theatricality necessitates the presence of the beholder, her madness also necessitates the presence of the beholder.

The Carrols’ hereditary madness is thus eloquently made visible on Helen’s hysterical body. Not surprisingly, the chapter concludes with the ultimate form of spectacular madness—namely, Helen’s suicide by stabbing. Paradoxically, as she lies dying, Helen is described as “sane and safe at last” (97). While suicide is an act of madness, it also

¹⁸ Didi-Huberman details the importance of theatricality in the clinical studies of hysteria by Charcot: Hysteria was performatively “invented” on women’s bodies, which performed coded symptoms toward an audience in the theatricalized amphitheater and photography studio in Charcot’s clinic. For the discussion of theatricality in the constitution of hysteria as a “female malady,” see also Showalter (150-55).

brings the actor back to sanity. Safely made sane, Helen's dying body becomes a sentimental stage upon which mother and daughter reconcile at last, with "the voiceless prayers for pardon which passed between those reunited hearts" (97). Helen's death also consolidates the family bonding, as Bella, following Christie's advice, decides to give up her mercenary fiancé in order to support her mother and her brothers, playing the role Helen wanted to play. The Carrols' stage of madness is thus successfully transformed into a sentimentalized stage, wherein the family members forgive each other and reunite through empathic bonding.

Curiously, the self-theatricalizing tendency of the Carrols' insanity is closely tied to the theatricality of class. Like the curse of insanity, the curse of class is a hereditary malady. Augustine's melancholy and Harry's dissipation are, as discussed earlier, the symptoms of mental disturbance; but at the same time, they are surprisingly similar to the symptoms (ennui, indolence, inertia, boredom, melancholy) that Alcott often envisions in the aristocratic leisure class, as seen in the examples of Gerald Coventry and Philip Fletcher. Their aristocratic theatricality is thus rendered as, borrowing Parker and Sedgwick's words, "the perverted, the artificial, the unnatural, the abnormal, the decadent, the effete, the diseased" (Parker and Sedgwick, 5), which, at the end of the chapter, has been transformed into, and hence valorized as, sentimental theatricality, over the body of Helen Carrol. This sentimentality is associated with middle-class values. It is not surprising, then, that the novel further promotes the middle-class work ethic as the best medicine to ameliorate and postpone (if not cure) this class/mental disease for the rest of the Carrols.

After the tragic death of Helen, Bella pleads with Christie, who decides to leave the Carrols for her next job, to: "Lead me, teach me; I will follow and obey you" (100). The leisure class has to be taught middle-class productivity in order to save themselves from their inherited

malady. Much later, in the final chapter of the novel, Bella returns after twenty years. She tells Christie that her words of encouragement and hope had changed Harry from “a wild boy” to “a man” (335), from a dissipated youth to a hard-working medical doctor. Bella and Harry together make a happy home driven by the middle-class ethic of labor and productivity, making themselves always “cheerful and busy” (335). In other words, the Carrol household has gone through the sentimentalizing process via their encounter with Christie, having been successfully transformed from a theatrical Gothic family to a sentimental, professional, middle-class family.¹⁹

Though Christie’s story is a female sentimental *Bildungsroman*, it is also the story of how youths grow into manhood through their encounter with Christie, as briefly seen in the example of Harry Carrol. Philip Fletcher, first appearing in the novel as an “invalid,” another embodiment of the leisure-class malady, later returns transformed to Christie’s life, his health and manhood much improved after exposure to Christie’s sentimental influence. The only man approved by the novel as he is, is David Sterling, though even he is not an exception to the list of men who are improved by their encounter with Christie. While he is not a member of the leisure class, David appears in the novel as another melancholy figure. Being “melancholy, learned, and sentimental” (174), he appears to Christie as a martyr, marked by “self-sacrifice and self-control,” in a state of content resignation (221), and without ambition (194). As a gardener and florist, who not only grows but also arranges flowers, he works from home, “tend[ing] his flowers like a woman” (299). He lives with his mother whom he adores, while offering jobs and help for women, including Christie, as charity. He even wears a pinafore, growing flowers and marketing them, and sending them for weddings, funerals and other ceremonial occasions. Thus the

¹⁹ In the final chapter of *Work*, Christie further encourages Bella to set a “new fashion” in upper-class society by creating a *salon* to lead those who are “dying of frivolity or *ennui*,” providing them with “employment and pleasure for others”(338). The *salon* envisioned here can thus be redefined as a stage on which Bella performs as a role model to educate leisure-class women toward middle-class productivity.

traditional oppositions of work and domestic labor, business and charity, public and private, men's sphere and women's, are rendered ambiguous in the Sterling household. David singularly embodies gender ambiguity and sentimentality. Christie herself is not oblivious to this, for at first she regards him as lacking in traditional masculinity. But soon, she comes to regard him with admiration: rather than as a romantic hero, Christie learns to worship him as a domestic, sentimental hero. In the garden where work and home coexist, her "restless spirit" (193) finally begins to learn contentment in domesticity. Following the example of David, she learns to respect this new type of manhood and, by association, her place as a woman.

At first, Christie regards her relationship with David as that of de-sexualized siblings. At one point Christie asks David: "forget that I am a woman and tell me as freely as if I was a younger brother," adding, "you'd make a splendid elder brother" (208). Theatricality plays an important role in the development of their romantic relationship. In the chapter titled "Christie's Gala," Christie, prompted by Mrs. Wilkins and her children, plays several Shakespearean roles, such as Juliet, Lady Macbeth and Portia, with "all the power and passion she possessed" (210). This "play-actin'" is performed with various domestic items, such as a tablecloth instead of a stage costume, a corn cob instead of a dagger, a leafy chaplet instead of a crown. Clearly, Christie's stage is a domesticated version of her public and professional play-acting. But these theatricals illuminate the actress's unique, individuated power of performance, a power which articulates the "dramatic ability which Christie's usual quietude had most effectually hidden" and the "passion and imagination" that "few of us have" (211).

After Christie's performance, Mr. Power asks David: "how do you like [Christie] as an actress?" to which David answers: "Very much; but better as a woman. I'd no idea she had it in her" (211). Doubling David's answer here, Christie herself tells David, a few pages earlier: "I'd

rather *be* a woman than *act* a queen” (206), after he expresses his “worldly and dreadful wish” (as Christie ironically comments) to see her acting. Echoing the antitheatrical prejudice embedded in the sentimental culture, both Christie and David voice the irreconcilability of being and acting, woman and actress. The actress/woman opposition is thus repeatedly emphasized, seemingly in favor of the latter. However, the novel also repeatedly reminds the reader of the fact that Christie is an ex-actress who, as a woman, continues to perform various roles offstage, disabling the very dichotomy on which the novel insists. Contrary to its own antitheatrical indictment, *Work* embraces the view that acting a woman is inseparable from being a woman.

In particular, Christie’s last performance as Portia from *The Merchant of Venice* eloquently conveys the idea of a woman as an actress. In the famous monologue from Act 3, scene 2, Portia accepts Lord Bassanio’s marriage proposal, while pledging to be a good and loyal wife. While the speech conveys her modesty, the audience is well aware that Portia is performing femininity, and that her feminine modesty is a mask that covers her outstanding intelligence and courage. Likewise, Christie’s performance reveals her passion and imagination hidden behind the appearance of a “peaceful, pious nun” (213). Awed by her performance, David cannot do anything but stare at her “as if [he] never had” seen Christie, and “as if she had been a picture” (213). After Christie’s performance of Lady Macbeth, David also stands silent, looking at her “as if he still saw and heard the haunted lady” (211).

Recurrent “as if” responses to Christie’s “as if” acting implicate the viewer in the shared experiential space of theatricality: Reality and fiction, stage and offstage, actor and audience, the self and the other are all mixed up in this “as if” spatiality. Far from the gendered spectacle-spectator, object-subject relationship, the ex-actress’s power, like the woman’s power Jean Muir exercises over men, is shown here as something that disturbs the hierarchical relation inherent in

spectatorship. It is the spectator who is caught and swallowed by the empathetic space that the actress creates around herself, on- or offstage. Petrified by the spectacle, David, who has never been to the theater, is moved by the new experience. Additionally, one cannot ignore the erotic undercurrents that the acting brings out in the audience, as the stage ignites the romance between the two. While this makeshift kitchen-turned-stage in which Christie performs her repertoire is an apparently domestic and domesticated space, the novel suggests that her play-acting, as well as her “dramatic ability” is something that cannot easily be domesticated.

If Christie’s theatricality is a site for passion and sincerity, as opposed to the indolence and showiness of the leisure-class household, what distinguishes the two? The novel suggests that it is the power of passion and imagination, or the “gift of sympathy” (239) with which Christie performs. Christie’s performance is striking not only because she imbues Lady Macbeth with life and reality, but also because she demonstrates her own everyday self as a consummate actress, who, like Jean Muir, hides her extraordinary dramatic ability beneath meek, sentimental womanhood. A living theater of sympathy and hidden passion, Christie creates and inhabits a shared field of sympathetic identification between actor and audience; a truly powerful position.

The mirroring effect of theater invites the viewer to mimic and self-reflect. After seeing Christie acting, struck with her talent, David confesses to her that he too wears a mask, that under the mask of domestic, “modest” self-contentment hides a dissatisfied, restless self:

Outwardly I seem to you ‘cheerful, contented, generous, and good.’ In reality I am sad, dissatisfied, bad, and selfish: see if I’m not. I often tire of this quiet life, hate my work, and long to break away, and follow my own wild and willful impulses, no matter where they lead. Nothing keeps me at such times but my mother and God’s patience. (214)

In this respect, David's presentation of his own self curiously overlaps with the feminine subjectivities of Christie, Jo March, or any of the other heroines of sentimental novels, in which impulsive girls eventually grow into self-controlled womanhood under maternal and divine guidance. Both Christie's and David's selfhoods are thus defined by their constant self-control, beneath which restless, resilient spirits lie. David's domestic and gentle masculinity has thus much in common with Christie's subjectivity, each doubling the other in spite of gender difference. Not surprisingly, Christie finds David's peculiar type of masculinity more English than American. "You are very like an Englishman," she says when she observes him, father-like—or mother-like—taking care of Mrs. Wilkins' baby with ease (207). Christie describes David's singular masculinity thus: "Blunt and honest, domestic and kind, hard to get at, but true as steel when once won; not so brilliant and original as Americans, perhaps, but more solid and steadfast. On the whole, I think them the manliest men in the world" (207). Christie finds David's gentle, domestic and restrained personality a better masculine model than the typical American man exemplified by either the Emersonian transcendental self or the Jacksonian competitive capitalist.²⁰

Through her marriage to David, Christie attains domestic bliss, finding her ideal vocation in wifely domestic labor, with her "restless ambitions" (223) and "restless longing" (241) satiated at last. She finally finds her personal goal in the creation of a household where man's sphere and woman's sphere are comfortably merged. However, Alcott refuses to end Christie's story of experience with marriage. Instead, the author writes beyond the conventional ending in order to explore alternative models of self for women, as well as for men. Christie's

²⁰ Critics such as Rigsby and Fitzpatrick argue that *Work* presents an alternative ethos (in the form of domestic/sentimental/feminine/interdependent economy) to critique the contemporary American model of individualism.

domestic bliss is cut short by the advent of the Civil War, which becomes an important stage for the construction of new models for American identities.

War, as an identity-making stage for men, is not thematically new in nineteenth-century fiction. Scenes abound of men's battles to protect home, women and nation. The Civil War is first and foremost men's territory, and naturally functions as a national stage whereon masculinity is tested and proven. For example, Mrs. Wilkins sends her husband off to the war against his will, for "it will make a man of Lisha" (289). Philip Fletcher also returns to the novel, this time as an injured colonel who has lost one of his arms and is carried to the hospital where Christie serves as a nurse. This "piece of elegance" (270, 301) reappears on the man-making battleground, wounded and dismembered, and is thus finally approved as a brave man by the novel and by Christie, as a man who "f[ought] like a tiger" (302-303) even without his right arm. War is thus clearly a metaphoric, as well as performative, battleground for men, who gain the opportunity to act out their cause and duty as citizens. David is not an exception, and when he volunteers to enlist in the army, Christie also decides to join him as a nurse.

The narrator proudly reports that he is "doing his part manfully" (299) on the battleground: David, who tended flowers "like a woman," now joins the scene to "prove[]" that he can also "do his duty and keep his honor stainless as a soldier and a gentleman" (299). Masculinity is redefined here as something to be performatively proven, rather than an innate trait. The Civil War is a perfect stage for a man to prove his masculinity in the eyes of his beloved, and of the nation. However, Alcott does not represent the Civil War as merely a man-making battlefield. The chapter on the war begins strikingly with the consistent metaphor of theater, not for male soldiers but for women:

Ten years earlier Christie made her *debut* as an Amazon, now she had a braver part to play on a larger stage, with a nation for audience, martial music and the boom of cannon for orchestra; the glare of battle-fields was the “red light”; danger, disease, and death, the foes she was to contend against; and the *troupe* she joined, not timid girls, but high-hearted women, who fought gallantly till the “demon” lay dead, and sang their song of exultation with bleeding hearts, for this great spectacle was a dire tragedy to them. (297)

The narrator configures the Civil War as a grand “spectacle,” a public performance in which the Republicans fight for a cause, played out for the audience called nation. However, what is striking here is that the novel clearly translates the battleground into a military stage for women as war nurses. The war, traditionally conceived as men’s battleground, is now reconceived as women’s grand stage “with a nation for audience.” The metaphor refers the reader back to Christie’s first experience on stage in a theater, in which she fought as an androgynous military queen. Like Amazon soldiers, the Civil War nurse-warriors bravely fight against death at the battlefield. The text thus elevates nurses from a subordinate to a central role. As the novel attempts to dismantle the contradictions between worker/woman and actress/woman, it further tries to disrupt the soldier/woman dichotomy. The metaphor of both male soldiers and female nurses as performers here is dissociated from any implication of antitheatricality, and instead proudly propagates patriotic femininity through sincere theatricality.

This metaphor of military women conveys a realistic impression of nurses’ wartime experience, something usually overshadowed by men’s history. Furthermore, once she reconceives the Civil War as women’s military stage, Alcott uses her authorial power to feminize and even maternalize the battleground. The women’s battlefield, the war hospital, is

reconfigured almost as a second Plumfield, the boys' school over which the matriarch Jo Bhaer reigns in *Little Men*. Like teachers or mothers, war nurses call the injured soldiers "the boys" (297). The nurse Christie literally nurses the injured Fletcher while he "obey[s] like a child," though sometimes shows irritation "like a teething baby" (305) or "a sick child" (306). Even the bravest men turn into babies under the care of nurses.

Just as in her first stage performance, Christie confronts the enemy, trying to rescue wounded soldiers from death and defeat. Not surprisingly, she immediately proves to be exceptionally capable as a nurse and is promoted to an important post: "Mrs. Sterling, Jr., certainly did look like an efficient nurse, who thought more of 'the boys' than herself" (298). Her fellow nurse praises Christie for her "gift" as a nurse, quoting a soldier's comment that "Mis Sterlin' takes care of me as ef she was my own mother" (298). Attending to her patient "as if" she were his mother, indeed, Christie conceives of nursing as a maternal role to be performed realistically and authentically. In reply to the praise, she answers, "I only treat the poor fellows as I would have other women treat my David if he should be in their care" (298). Her "gift" as a nurse is precisely that for sympathetic theatricality, for acting and role-playing "as if." The healing, sympathetic hands of the nurse render the patient-nurse relationship more filial and domestic, a transformation which itself contains therapeutic power. Nursing, mothering, acting—all share the characteristics of "forgetting one's self" to please others, the same characteristic the novel attributes to Christie as a major cause of her success as an actress.

By rendering the hospital as a military battlefield, Alcott metaphorically empowers women, enables them to participate, to enlist in the army as soldiers, in an equally important role in the national spectacle. The final chapters of *Work* thus proclaim that, if the War is a performative battleground for national masculinity, it is also one for national femininity. Under

the maternal logic of war, wounded soldiers in need of nurses' hands are even more brave, heroic and manly than healthy soldiers (as in the example of Mr. Wilkins). And yet these most heroic men, once carried to the hospital, become boys or even babies in the hands of war nurses. Alcott thus overturns the traditionally assigned opposition between public and private, battlefield and home, the protector and the protected.

But Alcott's version of the Civil War as a stage for female national identities doesn't stop here. By rendering injured men—or nurse-mothers' "boys"—as more manly than others, Alcott gives a twist to the traditional military masculinity, based on successful acts of violence, and instead offers an alternative model of manhood for postbellum America. The novel entrusts the future of national manhood to David, the socially marginal, un-American character the novel portrays as a perfect match for Christie. Once he enters on to the military stage, he is validated as an authentic American by acting "like a man" (279) and doing "[his] part" (280) on the battleground. Shortly, however, David returns to Christie as a dying soldier, critically wounded by gunshot while trying to save a slave mother who had lost her baby. David sacrifices himself for her, he explains to Christie, "because I owed it;—she suffered more than this seeing her baby die;—I thought of you in her place, and I could not help doing it" (315). David felt and acted "as if" the fugitive mother was Christie, and sacrificed himself to save her. At the same time, he acted "as if" he himself was the mother trying to save the dying baby ("she suffered more than this seeing her baby die"). He also acted "just as" Christie would have acted. Suggestive here is the cross-gender, cross-racial sympathetic identification. David dies heroically in a mimetic act of sympathetic performance, which glorifies Christie as a nurse and woman. Heroic masculinity and sentimental theatricality thus seamlessly combine in the description of David's act.

Furthermore, David's honored death eloquently symbolizes the sentimental, self-sacrificial ethic Alcott and other sentimental writers extol, which is usually exemplified by women and girls (or by Uncle Tom, a "feminized" African American man).²¹ David's domestic, gentle, restrained self, which had appeared semi-foreign to Christie, is now publicly applauded as representing American sentimental heroism. Self-sacrificial death—the ultimate form of feminine self-effacement and self-assertion—is performed by a man, and translated into the manliest act. The novel thus extends the feminine logic of self-sacrifice to men's virtue as well, while transforming male-centered military territory into women's battlefield. By doing so, Alcott promotes new models of manhood and womanhood, as conduits for energies for reconstructing the nation's moral ground.

David's death not only valorizes the sentimental, sacrificial man as a symbolic figure of the new nation, but also offers a ground upon which Christie can build a women's community. Recovering from David's death, Christie creates an ideal workplace for women that combines home and work, family and business, and thus dissolves the contradictions between these concepts. The novel concludes Christie's pilgrimage with the chapter "At Forty," in which she establishes herself as an owner of a home-based business as a gardener and florist. Mrs. Sterling, Letty/Rachel and Christie make a "feminine household" (321) where, as Christie describes, they "won't make bargains...[they] work for one another and share everything together" (325). As Uncle Enos's comment—"So like women!" (325)—suggests, this household is consciously formed as one maintained by a feminine ethos and economy, in contrast to the capitalist ethos of self-interest. If, as Eve Sedgwick argues, patriarchal society has built itself upon the exchange of

²¹ Fitzpatrick points out that *Work* seeks to extend feminine self-sacrifice and self-denial as an ideal ethos for men as well to counter postbellum competitive capitalist market forces: "Alcott creates a *male* character as selflessly virtuous—and as alienated from the competitive marketplace of nineteenth-century capitalism—as any 'true woman' could ever be" (32).

a woman between men, this feminine, non-capitalistic household initially establishes itself around the sharing of a man among his mother (Mrs. Sterling), his sister (Letty), his wife (Christie), and finally, his daughter (Ruth).²² However, this feminine household doesn't limit itself only to kin. At the very end of the novel, Christie takes one further step toward the creation of a larger feminine and even feminist community, starting with the "loving league of sisters, old and young, black and white, rich and poor, each ready to do her part to hasten the coming of the happy end" (343). Finally, the novel concludes Christie's pilgrimage with a gesture toward the possible formation of a larger community of women, trying to extend her "feminine household" to society itself, as the author prepares a "new field of labor" (329) for Christie.

As Fitzpatrick suggests, *Work's* promotion of a sentimental, feminine economy might be a nostalgic, ineffectual gesture in the face of the rapidly rising capitalism of the late nineteenth century (38-39). However, the speech Christie delivers in public in the final chapter envisions the emerging power of performance, the power that resides in theater, for political activism. At a meeting for working women she happens to attend, Christie witnesses a clear disjunction between the stage and the audience, upper-class and lower-class women, public deeds and private needs. Seeing the vast chasm between them, she feels "a strong desire to bring the helpers and the helped into truer relations with each other" (331). Then, "a sudden and uncontrollable impulse" (332) takes over Christie, and, before she knows it, she stands up among the audience and delivers a monumental speech. The novel clearly reminds us, in presenting Christie as a future public speaker for women's rights and democracy, that her self-presenting ability owes much to her past experience as an actress. The narrator comments: "That early training stood her in good stead now, giving her self-possession, power of voice, and ease of gesture" (332). Seeing her speak up, the audience immediately senses that the speaker is "one of them," in particular

²² Sedgwick, 26.

because her body is clearly marked with “the same lines...on her face that they saw on their own, her hands were no fine lady’s hands” (333). It is her physical body and character, rather than her spoken words, which appeal to the working-class women: “more impressive than anything she said was the subtle magnetism of character” (333).

Christie’s speech, her “universal language which all can understand” (333), is not directly presented in the novel. Instead, the scene captures in detail how the eloquence of her speaking, or more precisely of her performing body and her magnetic character, leaves an indelible impression on the minds of the listeners. In doing so, the narrator describes how her body, her own self, even more than the content of her speech, wins the sympathy of the audience. Rather than that of a public speaker, then, her final vocation, presented here by the narrator as a consummation of all her past experience and work, is precisely that of a public *performer*. Standing among the audience instead of onstage, she makes a spectacle out of her own body and character as “one of us.” Calling upon her forty years of experience, she presents her body as a living theater that creates an empathetic space in and around herself. Her presence is both performative and authentic, since her body shows marks of suffering and hard work that cannot be faked. By presenting her own body as at once a public and a private stage, she creates a theatrical space in which the divisions between stage and audience, the helper and the helped, subject and object, self and other, are dismantled, merging through sympathetic identification. Out of this empathetic relation between performance and audience emerges a political space that actively invites the audience to imitate the performer. It is precisely the spatiality inherent in the experience of the theater that allows for the transformation of the self, and by extension, of society.

Christie describes her speech in retrospect: “I don’t deserve any credit for the speech, because it spoke itself, and I couldn’t help it. I had no thought of such a thing till it came over me all at once, and I was up before I knew it” (342). She defines her speech as an involuntary act, seemingly disavowing any intentionality—and hence, theatricality—in her own action. Hendler notes, regarding the textual omission of Christie’s speech, along with the lack of agency in Christie’s delivering of the speech, that antitheatrical sentiments and the feminine modesty of self-effacement govern the scene (700). However, while not stepping out of the bounds of Victorian femininity, the scene suggests a performative eruption of theatricality. Theatricality is redefined precisely through its unconsciousness: it is neither controllable nor something outside the self, but something hidden inside, always about to burst out from within the bounds of the self. “It spoke itself” as a theatrical concept suggests that her performance is a spontaneous act, wherein the performance, while inseparable from the performer, drives the scene. Christie’s act is a reactive response to the site-specific spatiality constituted by stage and audience dynamics. By disavowing any control or intentionality in her acting, in other words, Christie presents the performance of her own self as *happening*, a burst of dialectical dynamics between the performance and the performer, the actor and the audience, the woman and the actress. Rather than a self-effacing act, her performance constitutes and empowers the performer, and this in turn enables her to strengthen the bond between speaker and listener. Alcott thus presents theatricality as an active medium of change, embracing a constructive version of selfhood.

In this respect, *Work* embraces the “theme of female self-production through stage spectacle” that Susan A. Glenn discusses regarding female performers in modern-day America (7). The novel details the moment of birth of a female performer/reformer, the moment that exemplifies “the theatrical roots of modern feminism,” to borrow the subtitle of Glenn’s study.

Christie's performance makes the space around her a theater of sympathy, wherein the self reflects the other, and invites a mimetic act from the other. Sympathetic identification, inseparable from the political power of sentimental fiction, is thus a mimetic theater wherein the self actively contains the other—precisely the quality for which antitheatrical polemicists have traditionally criticized the theater and its performers (especially actresses). This interpersonal theater of sympathy allows the participants to dialectically act out a political cause. What Christie attains in her journey is a theatricality of this kind. Theatricality here is not merely the relation between the spectacle and the beholder, the object and the subject of gaze. In her public and private performance, she creates a sympathetic space that involves both the actor (helper) and the acted for (helped), and that empowers both as actors for a cause. Theatricality (public visibility) and sincerity (feminine interiority) are no longer mutually exclusive. While Jean Muir in *Mask* demonstrates the power of sincere theatricality to attain a personal goal, *Work* traces Christie's growth from the domestic to the political, the personal to the collective experience, through female theatricality, toward the empowerment of working women.

At one point in Alcott's unfinished novella, "The Romance of a Bouquet," the actress-heroine, Melanie, declares, "hitherto the world has seen me in the role of an actress. Now I am about to attempt that of a woman, and whether in comedy or tragedy, I assure you, I shall play my part with *my whole heart!*" (653-54). These words aptly summarize the ontological complexity of woman, repeatedly delineated in Alcott's works. A woman, as well as an actress, is a role women play: as an actress is a woman, a woman is an actress. From this perspective, the actress-woman dichotomy is rendered nonsensical. Indeed, both *Behind the Mask* and *Work* articulate the view that a woman's life is one of role-playing, and that theatricality permeates

society, including domestic and subjective space. Jean Muir, an ex-actress and a “Scottish witch,” domineers the domestic space while wielding a woman’s power. Alcott transplants the actress-heroine and her power of performance onto American soil, and into the sentimental literary genre. In doing so, however, the author does not repudiate the theatricality associated with Jean Muir outright. Instead, Alcott incorporates this inclusive, transforming theatrical power for a political cause in *Work*. In the performance of both Jean and Christie, sincerity and theatricality, which Victorian America was so desperately trying to distinguish in a rigid dichotomy, are extensions of each other. The fluidity of their various roles and experiences composes the heroines’ selfhood. However, they not only accept these roles but also reinvigorate them, which in turn invigorates others’ roles. While seemingly contrasting both in character and in literary genre, their lives and identities are equally anchored by unconventional female theatricality.

If *Behind a Mask* theatricalizes domesticity, *Work* domesticates theatricality without taming theatricality’s power as “a woman’s power.” Contrary to *The Blithedale Romance*, the domestication of theatricality in *Work* is achieved not by repudiating but by embracing it, in order to create a kind of theatricality characterized by its spatial, sympathetic inclusion of others. Ultimately, both Jean and Christie use their positions as performing women to create the lives they desire, beyond the stage and the roles into which they were born. Encouraging others to join in their performances, Jean and Christie empower themselves to expand beyond the simplistic roles of the domestic woman and the dangerous actress.

CHAPTER THREE

Acting Across Genders:

Performance and Gender Subversion in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

The literary linkage between Louisa May Alcott and Charlotte Brontë has been increasingly recognized in the past decade, and critics have found abundant examples of Brontë's transatlantic literary influence in the works of Alcott. For example, Christine Doyle has demonstrated, in a book-length discussion, "affinities" between Brontë and Alcott, both in their works and in their lives. Doyle, Elizabeth Lennox Keyser and Isabell Klaiber have respectively pointed out that Alcott's *Behind the Mask* evokes *Jane Eyre*, not only in the heroine's name, but also in the setting and characters, despite the obvious differences in plot and literary genre.¹ Most notably, *Work* evinces myriad traces of Brontë's literary influence, in particular in its repeated allusions to both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*.² Indeed, the name of the protagonist, Kate Snow, in Alcott's "A Nurse's Story," who will later be recast as Christie Devon in *Work*, apparently reflects the name of Lucy Snowe, the heroine of *Villette*.

Work and *Villette* share a thematic interest in "work" as a part of women's search for selfhood. They also share a simultaneous preoccupation with, and reluctance toward, acting, a profession that, like work itself, raises urgent questions concerning women's power to define themselves. These authors' interest in acting is based on experience. In early childhood, both Brontë and Alcott acted in family theatricals, a pastime which repeatedly appears in their writings, in particular in *Villette* and *Work*. Despite the evident enjoyment each took in acting, their work offers different conclusions on its value. Both Brontë and Alcott internalized the antitheatrical tradition still prevalent in nineteenth-century America and England, and as a result,

¹ See Doyle, 53-57 and Klaiber, 217. Keyser 47-48.

² For detailed comparison between *Work* and *Villette*, see Doyle.

the heroines of both *Villette* and *Work* display resistance toward acting, at least initially. However, despite the heroines' reluctance, both novels explicitly thematize acting, to the extent that it seems each heroine's *Bildung* centers around scenes of performance. Brontë in particular agrees with the antitheatrical sentiment. Doyle discusses the parallel between Lucy Snowe's acting in *Villette* and the "Actress" chapter of *Work*, concluding that whereas Alcott portrayed theatricality as something powerful and positive in *Work*, Brontë, in her writing, considers it morally questionable. The act of performing is a locus of falseness in her work. It also entails a loss of control, in particular in *Villette* (Doyle 41, 157). However, this message is contradicted by other aspects of the text. If Brontë simply employs theatricality to disdain and dismiss it, as Doyle suggests, why then does *Villette* so persistently depict its power?

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Alcott, under the pretense of an apparent antitheatrical attitude, successfully turns its "power," as exemplified in *Behind the Mask*, into a progressive, reforming force that helps create a new form of community in *Work*. In consciously modeling *Work* on *Villette*, then, Alcott must have sensed the undeniably positive energy pulsating in the scenes of acting in *Villette*. While an undercurrent of feminist pro-theatricality is present in Brontë's novel, Alcott's American version of Lucy Snowe is deemed more "unconventional" by Keyser and Doyle. But Lucy Snowe is not merely a more conventional version of her literary descendant. Brontë, in *Villette*, seeks to lay bare "convention" itself. Not only does the novel explore the social norms, expectations, and prejudices that define gender roles for both men and women, it gestures toward the more radical idea that gender itself may be no more than a role, a performance by an inevitably protean self that merely adopts historical, artificial, and therefore changeable gender "conventions" or "effects." Ultimately, the text does not subscribe to a Judith Butler-like model of the self in which all identities are fluid; rather, it

suggests that there is an authentic self to which one should remain true, and that Lucy successfully does so. (For instance, Lucy's internal rebellion against the intrusive regime of the *pensionnat* is real, even though she outwardly performs the role of a perfect employee.) And the novel subscribes to Victorian convention in numerous ways, portraying Lucy as a virtuous woman who deserves to be rewarded with a happy marriage. But the text suggests that no social role will ever adequately express the real self. Lucy's identity is revealed to the reader through her intimate narration, not through the outward actions that the rest of the characters see. Despite its deep engagement with Victorian narrative conventions, *Villette* uses the trope of theatricality to question them, suggesting that all social action has elements of the theatrical.

The antitheatrical tradition that looms over Brontë's works is responsible both for her heroines' resistance to theatrical performance and the power of their attraction to it. That tradition, as we will see below, reserved most of its ire for the moral peril in which it placed gender norms in general and women in particular. In drawing on antitheatrical prejudices and arguments, Brontë, first in *Jane Eyre* and then, more powerfully, in *Villette*, questions gender as a performance (performative), one that constructs *and* threatens the boundaries between men and women, self and other, and reality and appearance, thereby opening a space for alternative female identities. And because the actress is a powerful figure of female artistry, the text creates parallels between actress and woman writer. Performance is not only a political but an *aesthetic* act which entails the power to become other than one is, which for Brontë suggests the female artist's power to shape and control her own world.

As we have seen in previous chapters, the mid-nineteenth century literature is full of scenes of performance and theatricality, and such scenes often focus in particular on women's relation to acting. Female characters' attraction or resistance to acting seems to indicate their position on some moral scale. In *Jane Eyre*, the aristocratic party attendees at Thornfield invite Jane to participate in the game of "charade," in which Rochester, Blanche Ingram, and others perform several scenes as *tableaux vivants*. Jane declines this invitation and keeps her usual seat at the corner of the room. This episode expresses well her position in the novel—her marginality in social scenes, her role as a critical observer of aristocratic society, and above all her moral superiority in separating herself from the artificial and frivolous intercourse symbolized in the *tableaux*. In *Villette*, likewise, Lucy Snowe shows her reluctance to play a role on stage at the school festival, which indicates her propriety as an English Protestant woman in a French Catholic country. Whereas Fanny Price's obstinate refusal to join the rehearsal of a family play attests to her superior moral position in *Mansfield Park*, Mary Crawford's desire to act a heroine's role in the courtship play betrays her frivolity. Similarly, Gwendolen Harleth's avowal of her desire to be a stage singer in *Daniel Deronda* immediately maps her on to the tradition of the "erroneous heroine." In *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart's breathtaking appearance on stage in the sensuous *tableau vivant* of "Mrs. Lloyd" leads her to the fatal scandal and social ostracism, and ultimately to a tragic death. Likewise, Dreiser's narrator in *Sister Carrie* frequently interrupts the narrative flow with moralizing, didactic comments on the actress-heroine's desire for success and material comforts. Each of these scenes functions as a crucial turn of the plot and a basis of moral judgment in the novel: Female theatricality is equated with transgression. But why and how could a woman's relation to acting signify her morality? What kind of machinery and context are working behind these scenes?

Nineteenth-century literature's preoccupation with the relationship among gender, performance, and reality was the culmination of a long history of anti-theatrical discourses. From the Renaissance through the Victorian age, the theater was often considered a locus of moral corruption for actors as well as audiences. During the Renaissance, the English theater was a contested site associated at once with the human power of imaginative creation and with "the hypocrisy involved in acting" (Marsden 878). Acting, as the supreme art of deception, nonetheless made visible the disturbing truth that appearance does not coincide with reality, that one can act as another, that the self can become another. *Hamlet* asked how one could be "true" to one's "own self," when that self could not be known, either through action or in words that are always merely "painted" (Act 1, scene 3, 78–82). Such questions would become profoundly perturbing for later believers in the Enlightenment religion of "Self." Thus, according to Jonas Barish, European and American moralists from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries express what he calls the "antitheatrical prejudice" against actors and acting. For those polemicists, the impersonation of evil or inferior characters was morally harmful to the impersonator, endangering the integrity of the authentic self, or even signifying the absence of such integrity (307-10).

The "authentic self" threatened by impersonation was, for many, first and foremost a *gendered* self. Moralists in Renaissance England attacked the stage mainly for its custom of cross-dressing, which travestied what ought to be the most essential attribute of one's identity. According to Laura Levin, "the male actor, dressed in women's clothing, seemed to lack an inherent gender, and this seemed to make him monstrous" (12). In the period from the Renaissance to the seventeenth century, it was customary for male actors to play female roles. Levine observes that this custom disturbed those upholders of traditional social roles and duties

who firmly believed in the given identity and boundary of the sexed body. They felt dressing in female clothes would actually make a boy actor effeminate, and even the most masculine man could become effeminized through the imitative identification with a woman (44-45). Dreadful to them was the grotesque glimpse a cross-dressing stage brings out—that “there is no masculinity, no masculine self” (8) behind the imitation of femininity.

But why, then, had Renaissance theaters maintained the custom of cross-dressing for so long, if men in female clothing were so threatening? According to Barish, allowing women to act on stage was more problematic than allowing men to act as women. To avoid this scandal—the female body as a public spectacle—the theater perpetrated another scandal: the male body impersonating a female. During the decline of the custom of cross-dressing, anti-theatrical debates betray this contradiction more apparently. According to Barish’s analysis of nineteenth-century antitheatrical discourses, the theater was condemned both for employing men to impersonate females, and then, to avoid this evil custom of transvestism, for employing women to act—or flirt—with male actors on stage. The concept of women on stage was scandalous, since such actions were redolent of the behavior of prostitutes, who sell and exhibit their bodies in public (Barish 464-69). It was believed that women should be modest and invisible, and maintain propriety—that is, they should be what they “naturally” are. Such prerequisites of femininity applied offstage, as well. According to Jean I. Marsden, antitheatrical tracts in late seventeenth-century England began to emphasize the danger of the theater’s immoral effect on the audience, particularly on the female audience and their “natural modesty.” They expressed fear of female spectatorship, which they linked to sexuality and its unnatural, “latent unmanageability,” worrying that a woman would respond to or identify herself with what she saw in the spectacle onstage (884-86). Polemicists saw the danger of mimetic desire and

sexuality that courting scenes, for instance, might arouse in female spectators, and insisted that performances of passion could turn spectators into performers of parallel acts in real, offstage settings.

The anxiety of mimetic desire suggested here is a complex one. Performance itself is mimetic, freely crossing over the boundaries between self and other, between onstage fabrication and offstage reality. If female spectators saw a courtship performance acted on stage, they, too, might cross over the divisions, identifying themselves with the sexual transgressions demonstrated there. At the same time, if they saw a male transvestite acting out female sexuality, they might identify with the gender confusion implied in the actor/actress. Indeed, the mimetic is profoundly disturbing because it necessarily entails the desire for the other, the desire to *do* or to *be* the other, and the desire for what the other desires; any and all boundaries may be transgressed.

In short, critics of the theater commonly expressed anxieties about the confusion and crisis of one's being, denouncing dramatic performance for its menacing power to dissolve the boundaries between self and other, stage and audience, fiction and reality—and between men and women. Such confusion would be very scandalous to the moralists and rationalists whose cognitive worlds were based on those consistent binary oppositions. But performance also caused such deep anxiety in the minds of spectators, especially regarding gender confusion and impropriety, although it was only acting or cross-dressing. Is there any natural agreement between one's sex and gender, as they believed, that would keep one's identity ever intact and self-evident, when it could be so profoundly disturbed merely by performance and dress? If not, then, what was it to be a man or a woman?

Women writers were themselves beginning to seek answers to these questions in the eighteenth century. One of Mary Wollstonecraft's insights in her proto-feminist vindication of women is that, although the female physical condition is an inevitable fact, what is called femininity or "women's weakness" is largely the product of bourgeois culture and the education deemed sufficient for girls and women. In her view, women are indeed born weaker; but it is their superficial education that has reproduced and exaggerated their physical condition into general, even mental, weakness: the "delicate vessel" is an exaggerated imitation or even distorted parody of that natural condition (52-77). Speaking from the perspective of a rationalist tradition that contests its own reliance on essentialism, she contends that women's femininity is reinforced by external and secondary factors. She argues that although there may be natal faults in women, "the sexual distinction which men have so warmly insisted upon" is "arbitrary" (193); to eradicate the vast gap and inequality between the sexes, women "should be dressed alike, and all obliged to submit to the same discipline [as men]" in order to attain equal mental and physical strength (168). At one point she points out an interesting example: "Soldiers, as well as women, practice the minor virtues with punctilious politeness. Where is then the sexual difference, when the education has been the same?"(23). These military men, usually considered the most virile, behave no differently from the opposite sex in their gestural gallantry and frivolous education. Although her discursive goal is women's equality based on obviously "masculine" virtue and rationality, Wollstonecraft's observation thus suggests the key idea that sexual difference depends more on how one is educated than on how one is born.

The idea that cultural norms help define our notions of gender was, by the twentieth century, taken considerably further. "One is not born a woman, but becomes a woman," Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*. "Woman" is not an innate identity originally given but

rather a secondary identity. Woman is the “second sex,” a negative reflection in the mirror of sexual difference, defined not by what she is but by how she is not like a man: “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other” (13). This suggests that a woman’s identity lies not in herself but in her role as an antecedent image in the male gaze, in her defining role as *difference*. Virginia Woolf, on the other hand, finds men’s identity also a kind of reflection, a magnified self-image built on the Other-image, when she ruminates: “Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (37). The very otherness of the reflected images in these looking-glasses—their inferiority, powerlessness, and anonymity—pours into him “vitality” and the “illusion” of a subject-identity, without which “man may die” (38). Thus, taking both views into sight, both man and woman are reflexive and referential: each is an effect of the other, endlessly and interdependently reproducing themselves, like the repeated images in two mirrors held against each other. Jane Flax argues further that gender—man/woman—is “relation,” defined in relative and mutually exclusive terms, and gender relations are “relations of domination,” in which one signifies, and hence controls, the other as difference (628-29). But if the One is also defined by the very difference of the Other, and if both are thus each other’s mirrors, which precedes which, and where is the original of each image?

This reflexive formation of gender identity is, for Judith Butler, essentially performative. The “performative,” as J. L. Austin describes it, is a common type of language that does not describe some pre-existing reality, but brings a state of affairs into being, as when a minister states “I now pronounce you man and wife.” Successful (or “felicitous”) performance of speech is heavily dependent on appropriate circumstances—conventions, conditions, and contexts. Using Austin’s definition, Butler argues that both gender and [hetero]sexuality are not innate nor

inherent, but imitated and performed through clearly coded, “stylized repetition[s] of act[s]” that rely for their effect on the body, language and clothes (1989, 519). Neither gender nor sexuality is the cause of identity, but are rather mere effects accumulated by repetition, representation, and reflection. Butler’s understanding of performativity thus suggests a theatrical connotation: the defining factor of human beings lies in their *acting* within the social scenario. Identity is made viable only in the double process of an external imposition of codes and one’s performance of them.

If the theater has been historically problematic, it is because theatrical performance inevitably implies that any identity, even that of gender and sexuality, is performative, in that it is brought into being through acting, miming, dressing and gesturing—whether on stage or off. A certain sign or gesture onstage can be immediately and tacitly understood as referring to a certain original identity—either lady, dandy, queen or king—even if it is irrelevant to the performer’s sex. This suggests, by extension, that the “original” identity is already a set of references, and even its gender is a gesture, sign, or reference encoded in a common register of a symbolic system. As Butler describes it, “*gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*” (1997, 306). Indeed, no one can stand outside the regime of coercive repetition or the imposition of gender; nonetheless, admitting that there might be no original of gender, one may consciously wear it, cross-dress it, or redress it as a gesture of self-expression—expression of the very alterable, non-original self—in what Butler calls “subversive repetition,” or imitation with a difference (1997, 311). In other words, strategic imitation or performance of and across gender is the act of negotiation between the performative power of gender and the performing power of the subject, from which the possibility for a change emerges. A performance that is androgynous or that does not “match” the performer’s body may cause a shift of terms and meanings—a slippage

of gender coherence into contingency, a gradual transformation of gender into hybridity, if not a total displacement. We may conclude that it is this potentiality in performance in general, and cross-dressing in particular, that has so profoundly alarmed antitheatrical polemicists. More importantly, a woman's acting is even more disturbing for being "unnatural" and contagious, potentially inspiring other women to imitate it. Female gender is at once more prescribed and more precarious, for it is more performatively coded and visually built up in order to signify sexual difference from the male. If gender is a power-performative relation in which men's power and "natural" identity depend on women's "natural" difference, then women's "acting" can endanger the whole power-relation itself, betraying its artificiality. Therefore, to keep the difference intact, women should not act, but remain "as they are"—even if this is already a kind of acting. Thus female performance by itself invites scandal, and female performance across genders is even more subversive.

In depicting women as either morally sound or suspect depending on their relationship to theatrical performance, nineteenth-century novels were prey to fears raised by centuries of antitheatrical discourse. But changes in social structures and social roles that emerged during that era necessarily informed—and often compromised—attitudes toward acting. In Brontë's novels, and in particular in her portrayal of Lucy Snowe, one can see a profound ambivalence at work in regard to performance—and to the performativity of gender. The very dangers of acting, which arise from "subversive repetition," are enlisted to question not only gender norms and roles, but the very nature or essence of gender itself. In *Villette*, Lucy Snowe's performance of different, possible selves destabilizes traditional notions of the gendered self, and poses new ways of narrating—and affirming—women's roles.

II.

Feminist readings of *Villette* tend to vacillate between narratological analysis, on one hand, and thematic analysis of gender and sexuality, on the other. In particular, critics focusing on gender and sexuality have drawn attention to the theatrical performance of Lucy Snowe and of the actress performing Vashti onstage (Gilbert and Gubar, Voskuil, Levy, Surridge). Alternately, critics with a narratological approach have discussed Lucy's baffling tendency to withhold significant information from the reader (ranging from her reticence regarding her familial background to the concealment of the identities of Dr. John and Polly) as indicative of a narrative of sexual strategy (Jackson, Warhol, Preston, Ciolkowski), a traumatic loss (Braun), and so forth. However, they tend to ignore the interrelationship between the gender performance and the problematic narrative technique in *Villette*. In what follows, I will discuss Brontë's representations of women in art and theater, and argue that Brontë employs gender performance as a narrative strategy to question traditional ideas of gender and identity, and to explore what may lie beyond them, particularly for the woman artist. Writing from within the Victorian discourse of antitheatricalism, Brontë often depicts gender performance in her novels in order to implicitly question Victorian cultural inscriptions of gender. In the charade in *Jane Eyre*, Rochester impersonates "the very model of an Eastern emir"—a model patriarch—and Blanche "some Israelitish princess of the patriarchal days," as they act out a courtship scene. Jane views their performance from "her usual seat" in the nook, the place from where she also silently observes their habitual social flirtation. Through her stable point of view as a seated viewer of the aristocratic party, we can easily recognize the fact that the offstage intercourse between Rochester and Blanche is also a part of a performance, an extension of the charade, in which coded gestures and signs—like playing the piano, singing in duet, dancing to a waltz—represent

“courtship.” Even more, Jane’s way of seeing suggests that aristocratic society itself is a theatrical stage, in which ladies and gentlemen should have recognizably stylized “accomplishments,” names and titles according to each gender.

In contrast, the relationship between Jane and Rochester unfolds on a completely different plane, which is well symbolized in another scene of performance. Soon after the scene of the charades, an old gypsy woman visits Thornfield to tell the fortune of all women in the house, including Jane. As the woman begins to read Jane’s mind, in first-person narration, giving voice to suppressed thoughts—loneliness, anger and jealousy—that have remained silent in Jane’s own narrative, the space between the self and the other vertiginously vanishes, and the two consciousnesses merge in the old woman’s voice, in her pronoun “I,” to the extent that Jane finally comments: “Where was I? Did I wake or sleep? Had I been dreaming? Did I dream still? The old woman’s voice had changed: her accent, her gesture, and all were familiar to me as my own face in a glass” (*Jane Eyre* 161, 177). At the moment the dream and reality merge together, and the two women double each other, the old woman turns out to be Rochester in disguise. Jane herself, later labeled as “unfeminine” by St. John, is here facing not only Rochester’s performing ability to *do*, to *be* a woman, but also his permeability, his ability to *be Jane*, completely displacing his identity and gender. Certainly, this dazzlingly erotic episode contributes to rendering their marriage not simply that of a man and a woman, or of the self and the other, but rather that of two equal souls—which once even commune telepathically, traversing in an instant the vast geographical space between them. This scene of Rochester’s cross-dressing, together with the fact that the novel further requires his symbolic castration to sanction his final reunion with Jane, eloquently articulates Brontë’s feminist concern with sexual equality. Within the constraints of Victorian social and narrative conventions which require the heroine to get married,

Brontë shows how the self and its desires can challenge, or even break out of, the bounds of gender and its restrictions.

In *Villette*, Brontë creates another “autobiographical” novel, whose narrator, Lucy Snowe, has also lived under oppressive conditions. Like Jane, she must travel away from her beginnings, and crosses the sea alone to Villette, a land of surveillance that is totally alien to her. But unlike Jane, Lucy does not appear to actively and spiritedly resist the powerful forces that seek to define and limit her. Setting her quiet heroine in an imaginary “land of convents and confessionals” (*Villette* 138), Brontë here fashions the epitome, as several critics have noted, of Victorian society as Foucault defines it: an allegorical microcosm of disciplinary society for women, in which Lucy is constantly under inspection by her superiors, including Madame Beck, M. Paul, and Father Silas.³ Indeed, compared with *Jane Eyre*, *Villette* appears intensely “Victorian,” marked by the heroine’s reticence and self-effacement under the constant surveillance of others. Whereas Jane powerfully enunciates her romantic desires and resistance to traditional gender norms with “unfeminine” revolutionary impulses, Lucy seems to suppress her voice and self even in her own autobiography, to the extent that her narration is often labeled as “unreliable.” However, while Lucy never questions her position as a modest, silent and invisible Protestant woman, her narrative frequently calls the ideas of femininity into question. Lucy modifies her identity through her conscious departure from “coquetry” or “prudery” (526), that is, femininity in relation to men and bourgeois culture. She stubbornly resists wearing feminine finery such as brightly colored dresses or accessories and instead persists with her simple, gray gown. Rising from the station of an obscure nursery governess, now having travelled to a strange city to become a teacher at an all-girls boarding school, Lucy recognizes

³ See Litvak, Boone and Shaw, for detailed discussion of social control and surveillance eminent in the French Catholic community described in *Villette*.

vast class and intra-gender differences from other *jeunes filles*. In this respect, in her quest for vocation, Lucy obviously reflects the life of the author, who, as a stranger in early Victorian society and the literary tradition, made her living by writing novels filled with passion and a desire for independence. In this female autobiographical *Bildungsroman*, which is also a *Künstlerroman* characterized by the reflexive devices of art and artist, Lucy registers a strong fascination with performance, both her own and that of an actress who plays the Biblical figure Vashti. In each case, performance opens new spaces from which to counter traditional and oppressive gender roles within the conventions of Victorian gender and narrative.

Such traditional roles are frequently depicted in the novel, in which Lucy's critical eye calls our attention to various modes and conventions of representing women. For example, as she walks through the paintings at a gallery, she describes an inner struggle that always occurs whenever she sees art works representing—and thus defining—women. Part of herself commands her to appreciate what are ostensibly praiseworthy works of art, but another part refutes the traditional canon of art depicting women. When Lucy comes across a painting titled “The Cleopatra,” which literally “queen[s]” the gallery, she describes and examines the female figure thus:

It represented a woman, considerably larger, I thought, than the life. I calculated that this lady, put into a scale of magnitude suitable for the reception of a commodity of bulk, would infallibly turn from fourteen to sixteen stone. She was, indeed, extremely well fed: very much butcher's meat—to say nothing of bread, vegetables, and liquids—must she have consumed to attain that breadth and height, that wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh.... She ought likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly, which was not the case. (284-85)

Thus for Lucy, this Cleopatra is an exotic and exaggerated image of a prostitute's body, indeed like a "commodity" for sale to men; she concludes it is "on the whole an enormous piece of claptrap" (285). Meanwhile, she notices that a group of male spectators crowding in front of the picture who are fascinated with the image, admiring it unanimously as "le type du voluptueux" (293). While Lucy reads this "gipsy-giantess" only as a lump of flesh, the male audience sees in it a "Venus of the Nile" (292) invested with Oriental sensuality. Then, her future fiancé, M. Paul, astonished to find Lucy gazing at the immoral Cleopatra, forcibly takes her to the other corner of the room, where she sees a set of four paintings which represent other, contrasting images of women. These paintings comprise a series entitled "La vie d'une femme," and Lucy describes them in turn:

They were painted in a rather remarkable style—flat, dead, pale and formal. The first represented a "Jeune Fille," coming out of a church-door, a missal in her hand, her dress very prim, her eyes cast down, her mouth pursed up—the image of a most villainous little precocious she-hypocrite. The second, a "Mariée" with a long white veil, kneeling at a prie-dieu in her chamber, holding her hands plastered together, finger to finger, and showing the whites of her eyes in a most exasperating manner. The third, a "Jeune Mère," hanging disconsolate over a clayey and puffy baby with a face like an unwholesome full moon. The fourth, a "Veuve," being a black woman, holding by the hand a black little girl, and the twain studiously surveying an elegant French monument, set up in a corner of some Père la Chaise. All these four "Ange's" were grim and gray as burglars, and cold and vapid as ghosts. What women to live with! Insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless nonentities! As bad in their way as the indolent gipsy-giantess, the Cleopatra, in hers. (287-9)

This set of pictures, as a flat and formal synopsis of a woman's life, represents an ideal and asexual "pale" bourgeois angel, in contrast to another ideal, the exotic sexuality of Cleopatra. As Paul's recommendation suggests, this set implicitly addresses the female audience, functioning as a didactic and educational means to inculcate in women the desirable image of "Anges" in the house. On the other hand, the Cleopatra addresses the male, arousing and satisfying his implicit desire for women outside his house. These paintings conceptualize the traditional type and antitype of women, that is, either a domestic angel or an exotic prostitute. In other words, though these paintings employ techniques of verisimilitude, which aim to portray what women *are*, they equally rehearse a set of self-fulfilling, self-repetitive, or self-performative conventions related to gender, which aim at portraying what women *should be*. Lucy harshly criticizes both kinds of representation of women, which exaggerate and perpetuate cultural assumptions. In Lucy's eyes, both are larger-than-life images reflected through men's eyes, representing beauty and desirability according to men's evaluation of women: one portrays woman as a sexual object, and the other portrays woman's life only in terms of her roles as daughter, wife, young mother, and widow. Those titles and identities can only be enacted in relation to men. Rather than depict a woman's individual identity, the paintings all show what a woman and her life should be or what the audience wants to see. Taking a woman's point of view, in contrast to the male point of view implied in the paintings, Lucy thus locates their relational machinery of gender norms, rejecting them and sarcastically criticizing both types of women as implausible. This episode suggests that both beauty and value in art are the products of ideology, contingent on the audience's consensus and their performative way of seeing. The novel opens our eyes to this fact by contrasting the female response with that of the male, as well as a male representation of female-as-object with the female subject as audience. This implicit defense of realism critiques

existing conventions for women's identity as false and performative, while holding out the possibility for accurate representations of women's true inner selves.

In contrast, Lucy's detailed portrait of a famous actress, Vashti, speaks for the affirmation of a woman as artist/performer and subject of representation. As critics have noted, the representation of Vashti, as well as Lucy's response to her performance, eloquently communicates the potential power and threat of female performance.⁴ A performing artist who represents her body and soul powerfully and who fills the gap between emotion and expression, this Vashti is for Lucy a person not identified by gender, and therefore totally alien to the codes of representation. At first she appears to Lucy as "only a woman, though a unique woman, who moved in might and grace before this multitude." But as soon as the performance begins, Lucy recognizes her "mistake":

Behold! I found upon her something neither of woman nor of man: in each of her eyes sat a devil. These evil forces bore her through the tragedy, kept up her feeble strength—for she was but a frail creature; and as the action rose and the stir deepened, how wildly they shook her with the passions of the pit! They wrote HELL on her straight, haughty brow...
It was a marvelous sight: a mighty revelation.

It was a spectacle low, horrible, immoral. (369)

Far from the higher culture, this Vashti is a fallen angel and a literal embodiment of inner passion, almost beyond cultural and linguistic representability, at once "marvelous" and "immoral." Under the overwhelming effect of the performance, Lucy's narrative voice reveals her ambivalent fascination with the actress, in which adoration is mixed with moral repulsion.⁵

⁴ See, for example, Gilbert and Guber (421-425), Voskuil (436-438), Stokes (779-783), SurrIDGE (4-5).

⁵ As often noted, Lucy's ambivalent responses to Vashti mirror Brontë's own mixed reaction to the performance by Rachel, vividly inscribed in her letters written after she saw the actress on stage in London in 1851: "She is not a woman—she is a snake she is the—" ; "I shall never forget her—she will come to me in sleepless nights again and

Lucy's moral judgment against the actress, however, almost immediately gives way to aesthetic admiration. Vashti is "something neither woman nor man," but an artist, an acting subject. Lucy is deeply fascinated by the tremendous force of the actress's performance, which subverts the ordinary register of gender, as well as by the artist's strength that places her far beyond an ordinary code of aesthetics:

Where was the artist of the Cleopatra? Let him come and sit down and study this different vision... Wicked, perhaps, [Vashti] is, but also she is strong; and her strength has conquered Beauty, has overcome Grace, and bound both at her side, captives peerlessly fair, and docile as fair. (370)

Instead of "Beauty" and "Grace," with which the conventional and bourgeois bless the "feminine," and instead of the sexual aesthetics which they praise the "exotic" and "Oriental," Lucy appreciates Vashti's sublime strength and her almost violent energy of expression as another index of aesthetic value. What most differentiates Vashti's representation from that of another exotic queen, Cleopatra, is that the former is performed against the expectations of the audience. Gilbert and Gubar argue that "Brontë's actress, like the Biblical queen, refuses to be treated as an object, and consciously rejects art that dehumanizes its subject or its audience" (424). Indeed, far from being a passive object, this Vashti, herself a biblical figure who refused her husband-king's order to attend the banquet as the object of the male gaze, stands before the audience, "neither yielding to, nor enduring, nor in finite measure, resenting it: she stood locked in struggle, rigid in resistance" (369). The actress's immoral performance thus doubly challenges the ideology of gender. She is not only acting the defiant queen, but also *acting against* the audience's expectations by *overacting* that biblical role and *acting out* her own inner tempest, to

yet again. Fiends can hate, scorn, rave, wreathe and agonise as she does, not mere men and women. I neither love, esteem, nor admire this strange being; (if I could bear the high mental stimulus so long), I would go every night for three months to watch and study its manifestations" (*Letters* 658, 652).

the extent that she improvises another grammar for aesthetics. She thus forcibly arrests her audience's attention by her very opposition to them. This departure from the conventional mode of representation is emphasized again by the contrasting response of the male audience. Rather than seeing Vashti as a professional artist, Dr. John coldly "judge[s] her as a woman, not an artist: it was a branding judgment" (373). Dr. John is citing here the familiar dichotomy between woman and actress. By seeing Vashti simply in terms of gender and ignoring her existence as an artist, he tries to domesticate her subversive force, which goes beyond the very definition of gender. Lucy refuses to take his view when she comments thus: "Dr. John could think and think well," but "his heart had no chord for enthusiasms" (372). What he lacks is this enthusiasm, the ability to spontaneously respond to and interact with what is there; instead, he exhibits a prescribed reaction encoded by the ideology of art or by the gender of an artist.

Vashti's stage thus undercuts the valuational and power-performative structures at work in the relation between aesthetic standards and art, the seer and the seen, masculine and feminine, implicit in visual art. This "dangerous, sudden, and flaming" (372) performance even burns out the spatial boundary between interior and exterior, stage and seating, metaphor and reality, when the night ends with the actual smoke and flame that suddenly upsets the whole theater. Lucy says this night of performance "was already marked in my book of life, not with white, but with a deep-red cross" (373). As the writer of her own life, we may say, Lucy here endorses the self-designated paradigm of art and life that contests dominant literary and cultural norms of representation.

Another challenge to such norms seems to be made by the author herself, in relation to her readership. Brontë had been criticized by some reviewers as being transgressive in her depiction of Jane Eyre, and this episode may very well stand for the author's own self-assertion

as an artist and defense of her notion of aesthetics. By setting Vashti at its center, the novel enunciates the power of performing art that circumvents cultural codes, by gesturing toward somewhere between genders, or perhaps beyond gender altogether, as the author's androgynous pseudonym, Currer Bell, suggests. Indeed, it is this forceful capacity to disrupt the power-performative relations between man and woman, the seer and the seen, and sex and gender, which Lucy's life and narrative performance as a proper lady implicitly communicates to a responsive audience.

Significantly, the Vashti episode reminds us of another moment earlier in the narrative that inaugurates Lucy's life in Villette and her vocation as a teacher: Lucy's performance across gender in *vaudeville* at the school festival. Entreated to fill a male role in a comedy, she is half-forcibly dragged onto the stage. Although reluctant, she nonetheless agrees to play the role on one condition: "It must be arranged in my own way; nobody must meddle; the things must not be forced upon me. Just let me dress myself" (194). At a glance, Lucy's response here may be read as an agreement with antitheatrical moralists, foregrounding her unwillingness to act on stage. However, as critics point out, Lucy's insistent negotiation of how to dress herself on stage makes her all the more conspicuously an icon of gender hybridity, which invites even more confusion.⁶ Instead of exchanging her clothes for a man's, she puts on male clothing "in addition," only partially, retaining her "woman's garb without the slightest retrenchment." Shocked by her appearance, Paul warns Lucy: "How must it be, then? How, accept a man's part, and go on the stage dressed as a woman? ...[C]ertain modifications I might sanction, yet something must have to announce you as of the nobler sex" (194). But she stubbornly insists on dressing herself and modifying signs of gender "in her own way," which eventually leads her to a discovery of a "new-found faculty" in herself—a "keen relish for dramatic expression" (197).

⁶ See Gilbert and Gubar 413, Litvak 479, and Voskuil 428-429, Surridge 6.

As her dressing of herself well corroborates, throughout the novel she refashions identity for herself by distancing herself from gender binarism, from both other women and from men. She determinedly differentiates herself from a bourgeois coquette like Ginevra, and also from an aristocratic innocent angel like Polly, and even from Madame Beck, who is figuratively referred to as a cross-dressed man, a figure of gender-reversal described as “the right sort of Minos in petticoats” (98). Forced by Madame Beck to teach English at school, Lucy observes: “At that instant she did not wear a woman’s aspect, but rather a man’s. Power of a particular kind strongly limned itself in all her traits, and that power was not my kind of power” (107). Lucy thus denies other “feminine” gender models and even rejects identifying with a woman who is identified with male power. What kind of power, then, does Lucy have? Given Litvak’s analysis of theatricality in nineteenth-century novels, Lucy’s initial reluctance to act and to wear a male costume in fact accentuates the very disruptive power of stage performance that may blur the dividing lines between reality and disguise, between stage and offstage, the confusions of which are negatively highlighted in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (Litvak 75-107). However, Brontë lets Lucy finally stand on stage, and as a result allows her heroine and herself to take a step beyond moral/gender conventions. Indeed, Lucy’s performance becomes a vivid example of a complex but powerful self-expression that dismantles these boundaries.

In the play, Lucy performs one of the rivals (the fop) in contest for the love of a coquette, played by Ginevra. This stage casting functions in the novel as a parody of the offstage one, in which Dr. John—Lucy’s secret love—and Alfred (the fop) are rivals for Ginevra. To begin her performance, as Litvak points out, Lucy reverses the usual power and spatial structure between spectatorship and spectacle, in which “those who see exercise epistemological and political mastery over those who are seen” (Litvak 93). Instead, Lucy on stage makes the audience a

“spectacle,” decodes its hidden meaning, detects who is Ginevra’s second lover, and then adapts her discovery into her performance and plays it for herself:

The spectacle seemed somehow suggestive. There was language in Dr. John’s look, though I cannot tell what he said; it animated me; I drew out of it a history; I put my idea into the part I performed; I threw it into my wooing for Ginevra. In the “Ours,” or sincere lover, I saw Dr. John. Did I pity him, as erst? No, I hardened my heart, rivalled and out-rivalled him. I knew myself but a fop, but where he was outcast I could please. Now I know I acted as if wishful and resolute to win and conquer. Ginevra seconded me; between us we half-changed the nature of the *rôle*, gilding it from top to toe... Ginevra was tender; how could I be otherwise than chivalric? Retaining the letter, I recklessly altered the spirit of the *rôle*. Without heart, without interest, I could not play it at all. It must be played—in went the yearned-for seasoning—thus flavoured, I played it with relish. (196)

What is notable here is that she perceives Dr. John’s secret attachment to Ginevra on stage as visible “language,” that is, as something embedded in, expressed from, and hence interpreted through a “history”—the established grammatical context or cultural codes. Finding John in the offstage role of the “sincere lover,” Lucy deliberately and recklessly adapts the performative power of that “language,” like a line from a scenario, in her “wooing” of the coquette (her offstage rival). Through her more “chivalric” performance, she out-rivals Dr. John. The onstage plot, cast, and scenario coincide with, or even precede, the offstage ones: this suggests that the offstage heterosexual romance is already a performance coded to be played as such. If there is little difference between the onstage courtship and offstage one, which imitates which? Ginevra, also “second[ing]” Lucy’s overacting of the role, “was tender; how could I be otherwise than

chivalric?” If acting “chivalric” is the conditioned response to feminine “tenderness” and vice versa, and if the “chivalric” can be effectively acted by a woman to “win and conquer” another woman, courtship in itself and its concomitant power-gender relation is nothing more than a stylized gesture or role-play—something not inherent in the acting subject. “I acted to please myself” (197), Lucy says. While Lucy acts according to her own beliefs about the behavior proper for a woman, the performance in which she takes part implicitly undermines binary notions of gender.

Overcoming her initial stage fright, Lucy thus fully embodies the role, becomes the other—“I thought of nothing but the personage I represented” (210)—recalling Christie Devon’s self-forgetting tendency in performance (“When her parts suit, she forgets herself entirely and does admirably well” [*Work* 40]). What is remarkable in her acting is that, as Litvak and Voskuil suggest, Lucy radically interrupts, multiplies and mobilizes the forms of love and sexuality.⁷ According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, romantic love, especially the love triangle in which two men are rivals for a woman, is where sexuality, gender and power are inextricably interwoven to sustain a homosocial/patriarchal society that is based on the exchange of a woman between men (21-27). As the fourth agent who parodically mimics and intervenes in the love triangle, Lucy not only exposes the performative machinery of the power-gender-sexuality triangle in romantic love, but also radically reappropriates it. By being visibly a woman and “doing” a man more manly than the scenario requires, making love to her woman rival in order to figuratively perform her own secret love to the rival man, Lucy encodes her sexuality in her own way—through inversion and substitution, she simultaneously distances and accesses her emotion. In addition, given the offstage signs of covert lesbian sexuality between the two women, this scene appears even more complicated. Though Lucy severely criticizes Ginevra’s flirtation with John,

⁷ See Litvak 480, Voskuil 429.

their bodily contacts—Ginevra’s frequent touches to Lucy’s body and Lucy’s love of sharing foods from the same dish exclusively with Ginevra—are highly conspicuous throughout the novel. Even Ginevra’s heterosexual romance takes on the connotation of lesbianism. She falls in love with Alfred all the more for his eminently feminine fineness—he even makes a transvestite rendezvous in nun’s clothes—and rejects John’s manly whiskers as “disgusting” (205).

Considering these offstage dynamics, then, Lucy on stage is simultaneously a heterosexual female, a homosocial male and a lesbian butch. Dressed as both genders, and performed more chivalrously than anyone else, “his” gender becomes an index of “her” interiority. The more manly she performs him, the more dazzlingly and unexpectedly she communicates herself to the reader. In her adaptation of the letter and alteration of the spirit, Lucy re-fashions her love and self in just such a surprisingly intricate knot of representations, crossing, doubling, and re-crossing among identities and genders.

What has been elaborated in the scene is this multifaceted expression of love, or a desiring subject, which whirls so dizzily that it breaks down normative representational codes of romantic love. In this complex representation, Lucy separates and unsettles the causal chain between sex, gender and sexuality. In these self-reflexive uses of various modes of art, the novel illuminates how deeply traditional aesthetics and codes of appreciation center around patriarchal attitudes, desires, and beliefs regarding gender and sexuality, and how differently things can appear from alternative ways of seeing. The novel suggests that in the dynamics among performer, representation, and receiver, there exist the value and the possibility of mimetic art, with its ability to excite and expand the ready-made register of the performative. They may not reach an indifferent or resistant audience, but an invitation to audience response is nonetheless offered.

Another episode shows once more the strong correlation among theatricality, representation, and revelation. This time, however, the stage is not in a theater; rather, the world itself has become a stage. On the climactic night of Carnival, Lucy manages to escape from the “prison” of the pensionnat to find in the central park a panoramic microcosm of the magnificent world of empire itself, with the “strangest architectural wealth—of altar and of temple, of pyramid, obelisk, and sphinx...the wonders and the symbols of Egypt teemed throughout” (655). She also finds all the citizens gathering there to see the carnival concert. Soon, this “strange vision of Villette at midnight” (651) begins to become a spectacle in Lucy’s eyes. Here she finds the whole park taking on the atmosphere of a vast amphitheatre crowded with actors and “many masks” (672). She feels these dreamlike scenes in the park as if they were part of a long nocturnal drama of masquerade:

Somehow I felt, too, that the night’s drama was but begun, that the prologue was scarce spoken: throughout this woody and turfy theatre reigned a shadow of mystery; actors and incidents unlooked for, waited behind the scenes: I thought so. (662-3)

Then, “safe as if masked” (656) under a shawl and in the “safe seat” (667) among the trees, she witnesses the “secret junta” (666) acted by persons in authority, including Mme. Beck and Father Silas. But now Lucy knows their behind-the-scenes motives. It is their pecuniary self-interests that lie behind their prohibition against the “apostasy” of Paul’s marriage to Lucy, and their reason for sending him to the West Indies. The clerical robe wrapped around authority is a sham mask to cover philistine concerns, just as the splendid imperialist pavilions soon become to Lucy an “illusion unveiled,” made in fact of “timber, the paint, the pasteboard” (655)—just like a stage setting. More importantly, even while those powers think they are behind the curtain, they are already “actors behind the scenes,” performing the scene of revelation for Lucy as well as for the

reader. Theatricality and masquerade thus permeate every corner of the park, and very likely of Villette itself, in which one is somehow made to act a role or wear a mask; even those who have power cannot do without the constant demonstration of this very power, thus betraying its own artificiality.

Indeed, such theatrical preoccupation with appearance is seen everywhere in *Villette*, where every social encounter becomes a spectacle. Paul's primary concern in delivering an academic lecture is "how he looks" and "how his audience thinks," questions he anxiously asks Lucy. Ginevra's elopement with Alfred is obviously a self-dramatized mimicry of romantic customs performed for the audience of the pensionnat. Also, John's marriage to Polly assumes an aspect of spectacle in his view, as Lucy divines: "society must approve—the world must admire what he did, or he counted his measures false and futile. In his victrix [Polly] he required all that was here visible—the imprint of high cultivation, the consecration of a careful and authoritative protection, the adjuncts that Fashion decrees, Wealth purchases, and Taste adjusts" (536). Lucy's insight here exactly anticipates Thorstein Veblen's theory of capitalist society, in which the leisure class is modified through theatrical self-fashioning, through the conspicuous consumption and display of their property, which is symbolically projected on their wives' appearance, dress and belongings (Veblen, especially 68-101, 167-87).

That night Lucy retraces her way to the dormitory while feeling that "[t]he play was not yet indeed quite played out" (677). Indeed, the play is not the kind to be played out because there is no end to it, nor to the theater of Villette. In other words, Lucy's climactic revelation is the mystery of the world itself, the Shakespearean recognition that the world is a stage, that we are all actors who play each role toward one another within a certain scenario that has already been written. If the world is a stage on which everyone—even those in power to direct others—must

perform themselves, then appearance and substance may not coincide. More likely, they never perfectly coincide—every person’s outward presentation and behavior contain elements of performance (as Lucy performs the role of chaste woman, loyal Protestant and obedient worker). The world is therefore not a space where a name is naturally given to the acting subject. Rather, it is the place where both identity and identification are a question of roles to be acted under certain rules—costumes, customs, clichés. Such conventions are inescapable, but they are signs that may be questioned, altered, just as Lucy alters her stage costume “in her own way.” It is this revelatory vision that gives her the internal, if not actual, empowerment of vision and consciousness. Lucy feels in this evening, encountering Mme. Beck’s tyrannical authority, that “the whole woman was in my power,” recognizing Mme. Beck’s “habitual disguise, her mask and her domino” to be “a mere network reticulated with holes,” and detects underneath “a being heartless, self-indulgent, and ignoble” (647).

All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players. Indeed, there may be no outside of the stage, no outside of ideology and gender, just as there is no outside of language; all that art can do might be only to dream an impossible dream. After her discovery of her own performing power, Lucy retreats from the stage, saying—as if awakened from a dream—“it was time I retired into myself and my ordinary life”; she returns to her usual seat as a “mere looker-on at the life” (197). Even after that revelatory carnival night, Lucy returns to her ordinary life in the prison-like pensionnat, feeling, the next morning, that the “Freedom” and “Renovation” she finally gained “had died in the night suddenly” (670). Lucy’s decision to remain quietly in the margin seems to signal her retreat to a passively feminine role in Victorian society. But her constant emphasis on her role as an observer bespeaks the very real power associated with this position. It is from this “quiet nook” where “unobserved I could observe” (197) that she sees

through, and inscribes in her narrative, the very machinery of society and power lying behind the scenes. Perhaps this very position of observing the world and society with an acute eye is what Lucy has sought in this *Bildungsroman*. Significantly, this is exactly where an artist, especially a novelist, stands, in order to re-present on the canvas what she sees. To be sure, the novel offers one way to see the world. With a novelist's detached eye, Lucy knows that everyone, including herself, is acting in a drama entitled "society." But insofar as one knows the world is a stage and even power is performance, she can consciously wear a mask and act her role while allowing herself a margin for the possibility of subversion. Lucy is able to act herself out undercover, telling this "heretic narrative" (228), as she calls it when she sets her storytelling against the intruding authority of Father Silas. By so doing she offers her painfully-gained view to her audience while not wholly exposing herself to society's judgment.

Earlier in the novel, Ginevra wonders about Lucy's social identity, which seems to her ambiguous and elusive. For Ginevra, Lucy's identity can only be defined by what she is not: "I suppose you are nobody's daughter, since you took care of little children when you first came to Villette: you have no relations; you can't call yourself young at twenty-three; you have no attractive accomplishments—no beauty" (170). When Ginevra frustratedly asks: "Who are you, Miss Snowe?", Lucy, "amused at her mystification," responds with further equivocation: "Who am I indeed? Perhaps a personage in disguise" (440). Pressed further by Ginevra's persistent questions, Lucy answers: "I am a rising character: once an old lady's companion, then a nursery-governess, now a school-teacher" (442). Yet her ambiguous answer still frustrates Ginevra, for whom Lucy is above the register of understanding, indeed an "incognito" with no "name or connection," nor a "pedigree, [a] social position" (443). No name, no mask, no position fits Lucy entirely, as she defines herself by those miscellaneous identities, so that Ginevra

continues to call her by various names of both genders, like Dragon, Diogenes, Timon, Tim, and Grandmother, accentuating Lucy's shifting position on the social scale and her evasion of identifiable signs of class or gender. In other words, through her masquerade performance—and through her life and her narrative—Lucy circumvents the univocal grasp of the perfectly “fitting” language and role. Indeed, as she paraphrases her own history and identity here, she is a figure of mobility, constantly in the process of “rising,” making herself over, naming herself anew.

Critics have noted the peculiar narrative style of *Villette*, which is marked by the occasional withholding of significant information and a narrative reticence about Lucy's family and herself, and, in particular, the deliberate equivocation of the novel's denouement, including the fate of Paul and Lucy's life after the novel's ending. Robyn Warhol, following Dorrit Cohn's narratological terms (862-863), explains the peculiarity of the first-person narration and the literary genre of *Villette* in terms of the gap between the experiencing self (in the past) and the narrating self (in the present). To put it another way, in narrating past events, the narrating *I* is imitating, recasting, or *performing* the experiencing *I*. The narrating *I* makes the events and performance of the subject coherent and intelligible to the reader or audience. However, the act of narrating, like the act of performing, necessarily involves a gap or historical dissonance between the two selves over time. The novel abruptly ends with equivocation: “Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope” (596). But of course, for most nineteenth-century readers, enough is not said. By deliberately making the narrative chasm audible and throbbing between the narrating *I* and the experiencing *I*, the novel ends itself with a sense of the incomplete and the unfinished. The ending caused many readers of its day to be frustrated, to yearn for the intellectual, intelligible grasp of a conclusion, in particular in the form of the conventional happy ending (that is, marriage and its concomitant

gender stability). But by keeping the narrative gap wide open, the narrator is creating, beyond the pages of the novel, an interlocutory, dialogical, defamiliarizing space that invites the reader's active participation in creating the ending to the novel, or a new beginning to a woman's life. In her conscious reticence, the narrator demands that the reader think and imagine what is "a happy succeeding life" (596), what a woman's life could be, beyond the novel's ending. The narrator explicitly assumes that marriage is the happiest possible ending for Lucy or for any woman, and that a life ending in spinsterhood would trouble the "kind heart" of the reader. But by leaving space for a "happy" ending that does not include marriage, the narrator leaves space for readers to question or internally critique this assumption. By retelling, imitating or performing the past self with a significant difference, the narrating subject thus gains control, not only over her self-representation, but also over the imaginative possibilities of a woman's life, beyond the strictures of literary and social conventions.

Brenda Silver argues that the narrator of *Villette* addresses the "double" reader, who is both conventional and "reflecting." Following the bitter experience of being blamed by some reviewers as "unchristian, unfeminine, and unsexed" for her writing of *Jane Eyre*, Brontë deploys here an "unreliable," equivocating narrative voice, which is at once a defense against socialized, conventional readers and a strategic communication with new, more responsive readers (90-111). Interestingly, Lucy herself comments on her way of reading thus:

I dearly like to think my own thoughts; I had great pleasure in reading a few books, but not many; preferring always those in whose style or sentiment the writer's individual nature was plainly stamped; flagging inevitably over characterless books, however clever and meritorious: perceiving well that, as far as my own mind was concerned, God had

limited its power and its action—thankful, I trust, for the gift bestowed, but unambitious of higher endowments, not restlessly eager after higher culture. (313)

As this passage shows, for Lucy, the pleasures of reading come from the interactive process of one's own mind and thoughts responding to the "writer's individual nature," from this intimate and intersubjective relationship between the writing subject and the reading subject. Here she seems to offer one way of reading to the female reader, at a time when the culture of letters and intellectual activities are considered "ambitious," belonging to the "higher culture" and hence not a "feminine" occupation. Rather than the indifferent consumption of the performative utterance, the act of reading is a dynamic, challenging intercourse between the receiver and the text in which neither reader nor text nor even "author" is in a privileged position. Significantly, the ending of *Villette* itself demonstrates the largest challenge to the reader for the production of meaning. At once manifesting and suspending its conclusion by evasively suggesting Lucy's fiancé's death at sea, the novel allows the reader an alternative, more optimistic possibility for the novel's ending. According to Silver, with this enigmatic narrative closure Brontë defies her father's advice for a "happy ending." In other words, Brontë resists the normalizing and power-performative tendency of narrative closure, skirting the reader's expectation for the heroine's life to be defined by her relation to a man's presence. Instead, she entrusts her book to the reader's mind, which can flexibly and endlessly imagine a woman's life beyond the ending—a woman's independent life with her vocation in hand.

As an observer at the periphery of society and simultaneously as the center of consciousness in an autobiography, Lucy thus offers herself and her reader a way to survive, a way to inscribe or perform selves within an androcentric society and representational tradition that has worked towards the preemption of the female subject, while opening a space for the

“ontological affirmation of self” (Silver 102). Rather than escaping convention, they rework it for their purposes. In her representation of Lucy’s cross-gender acting and masquerade, Brontë is thus able to flirt with the subversive possibilities inherent in performance—including, of course, novel writing—by way of the performative power of language itself.

CHAPTER FOUR

“If She Was Theatrical, She Was Naturally Theatrical”:

Female Performance and Queer Desires in *The Bostonians*

In Chapter 8 of *The Bostonians*, an unknown speaker named Verena Tarrant addresses a gathering of reform-minded Bostonians at the home of local reformer, Miss Birdseye. The beautiful young woman’s speech is “all about the gentleness and goodness of women, and how, during the long ages of history, they had been trampled under the iron heel of man. It was about their equality—perhaps even...about their superiority. It was about their day having come at last, about the universal sisterhood, about their duty to themselves and to each other” (*The Bostonians* 60). Although her words suggest a strong feminist subjectivity, Verena herself insists otherwise, claiming in front of her listeners, just like Christie in *Work*, that “it is not *me*” who is responsible for her words, but a spirit speaking through her. Her father, a mesmeric healer, has told the assembled crowd that the source of her eloquence is “some power outside—it seemed to flow through her; he couldn’t pretend to say why his daughter should be called, more than any one else. But it seemed as if she *was* called” (55). Indeed, Verena’s address to the high-class Boston crowd begins more like a séance than a speech, with Selah Tarrant “strok[ing] and sooth[ing] his daughter” to put her ““in report”” with the unknown entity that inspires her words (59).

The strange performance arouses a variety of reactions in the spectators. The scene is focalized around Basil Ransom, a conservative Mississippian who is visiting his cousin Olive, and who regards progressive Boston culture with skepticism and bemusement. While he cares little for the content of Verena’s speech, her appearance and manner fascinate him: “The effect was not in what she said, though she said some such pretty things, but in the picture and figure of the half-bedizened damsel (playing, now again, with her red fan), the visible freshness and purity

of the little effort” (60). Meanwhile, Olive Tarrant, an ardently progressive “female Jacobin” who “would reform the solar system if she could”(5), is equally affected by the speech. She becomes determined to become friends with the young woman, even though she doubts her sincerity: “[Olive] might have been satisfied that the girl was a mass of fluent catch-words and yet scarcely have liked her the less” (79).

This ambiguous portrayal of Verena—a character whose performances seem both spontaneously inspired and deeply artificial—exemplifies *The Bostonians*’ ambivalent attitude toward theatricality. In the novel, James depicts a female-dominated Reconstruction-era social world in which old divisions between the sexes are dissolving. And he uses the motif of the theatrical as a way to dramatize the anxieties raised by women with a public identity. As I have argued in the introduction, the stage has long been used as a metaphor for social anxieties about the fluidity of gender and identity as a whole. *The Bostonians*, one of James’ most theatrical novels, takes place in an 1880s milieu in which women’s increased public visibility and calls for equality were bringing new urgency to these anxieties. For James, a master of the novel of manners, social behavior is a stage on which individuals live out, and struggle with, social conventions and expectations. Although Verena’s speech at Miss Birdseye’s is specifically marked out as a performance, social performance is seamlessly embedded in every act of Jamesian subjects, both internally and externally. As women begin to gain visibility and upward mobility in society, they are increasingly associated with theatricality, just as with Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance*. And the questions this raises play out on the body of Verena Tarrant, a character who embodies both the attractions and the anxieties of theatrical social performance.

In James’s writings, American women and progressive social phenomena are often intimately connected. In his notebook, he writes, as a “germ” for *The Bostonians*, that he wants

to write “a very American tale” that reflects contemporary social conditions: “the situation of women, the decline of the sentiment of sex, the agitation on their behalf” (47). By “sentiment of sex,” James means an intuitive belief that men and woman have opposing natures and properly inhabit separate spheres. *The Bostonians* depicts women assuming public identities, and the resultant extinction of the uniquely feminine private sphere. James thus associates women’s public presence with a decline in gendered division of space in America. Women in James’ novels become a visible index of contemporary American culture and democracy.

The Bostonians dramatizes the opposition between this newly progressive world, exemplified by outspoken feminists like Olive Tarrant, and the older worldview held by her cousin Basil Ransom, a southerner and “the stiffest of conservatives” (61). This cultural clash corresponds to multiple dichotomies endorsed in the novel: public and private, North and South, men and women, heterosexual and lesbian desire, theatricality and authenticity. The novel’s progress is triggered and motivated by the struggles among these oppositions. Indeed, *The Bostonians* epitomizes this contemporary American dissolution of the public/private division, and the associated gender dichotomy—a dissolution that Basil refers to as “the most damnable feminization” (333). The traditional gendered dichotomy of male public domain and female private domesticity is dissolved and inverted from the novel’s beginning. We witness, in Boston, a handful of powerful public women, such as Mrs. Farrinder, Mrs. Burrage and Miss Birdseye, presiding over a public gathering. The men around them have a diminished and subordinate role. If there is any publicly outstanding man, he is the contemptible “carpet-bagger” Selah Tarrant, a character valued only for his daughter’s rhetorical gifts. This inversion of gender roles will continue throughout the novel, prompting Basil to reassert his patriarchal male authority.

Thus in *The Bostonians*, opposing narrative forces—a traditional narrative plot of romance and a contemporary theme of the women’s movement, which is presented on, and represented as, a public stage—constantly collide with each other. The novel depicts an unconventional love triangle, in which Olive and Basil compete to win Verena’s allegiance. The novel devotes sustained attention to Olive and Verena’s peculiar relationship, referred to by James as a Boston Marriage or as “one of those friendships between women which are so common in New England” (*Notebook* 19). However, in a novel Alfred Habegger calls “James’s most reactionary book” (190), such gender inversion is corrected at the end, and gender hierarchy appears to be restored.

The novel’s structure thus follows a familiar nineteenth-century narrative convention in which an ambitious hero rescues an innocent maiden from the morally questionable anti-hero or love rival (as in *The Blithedale Romance*). While the novel portrays a world in which dichotomous distinctions, including those of gender, have broken down, the novel’s plot—which ends in Basil and Verena’s marriage—seems to reinstate these dichotomies. But the novel’s uneasy and ambivalent portrayal of the theatrical works to undermine them. While it appears that the novel’s feminism ultimately gives way to masculinism, James infuses into the novel’s conventional plot dissonant elements that undermine this heteronormativity, in particular by depicting what Kathleen McColley terms the “liberating possibilities inherent in female friendship” (151). The novel’s depictions of theatricality and the stage, both mesmerist and feminist, are central to the way non-heteronormative desires and relations function in the text as opposing and resisting elements that counter the nominal “message” of the story. Furthermore, Olive’s aesthetic mentorship of Verena is associated with a realist aesthetic that values interiority and true self-expression, aligning it more closely with the novel’s own realist representational

techniques. And while Basil's conservative southern values mark him out as antitheatrical, by the end of the story he has been drawn into the novel's web of performative sexualities, taking on the qualities of a melodramatic stage manager and mimetically re-enacting Olive's pursuit of Verena.

Verena Tarrant, the novel's central object of all kinds of desires, personifies the ambivalent potential of theatricality. She first appears in the text as a theatrical figure from Basil Ransom's point of view. Though her speech will be depicted as a theatrical spectacle, her performance begins even before she takes the stage, during her conversation with the other guests. When Basil first hears her talking to Mrs. Farrinder, the narrator observes, from behind the consciousness of Basil, how she speaks with "a promptness and assurance which gave almost the impression of a lesson rehearsed in advance." At the same time, "there was a strange spontaneity in her manner, and an air of artless enthusiasm, of personal purity. If she was theatrical, she was naturally theatrical" (52). Verena is thus defined from the outset as an oxymoronic entity, the contradictory combination of "natural" and "theatrical." Verena's theatricality is also emphasized by Basil's persistent references to Verena's public oration as an "exhibition" (58, 59, 61, 263, 319, 392, 430), an object of spectatorial desire and entertainment, allowing no space for him to be influenced or persuaded by the speech. As Caroline Field Levander argues, Basil simply disregards the content of her speech, and is attracted to her voice and body (479). Not surprisingly, Basil hereafter repeatedly describes Verena's public oration as "exhibition," "performance," "picture" (Ch.8) and "entertainment" (Ch.28), focusing on its personal appeal to "*his* starved senses" (61). In viewing the speech as a theatrical performance—an "intensely personal exhibition" (61)—he strips it of any social or political content.

While Basil views her speech as a successful piece of theater, he is fascinated not simply by her theatricality, but by her "queer" or paradoxical blending of theatrical and non-theatrical

qualities. Upon seeing Verena speaking with the other women in the salon, Basil observes: “He had never seen such an odd mixture of elements. She had the sweetest, most unworldly face and yet, with it, an air of being on exhibition, of belonging to a troupe, of living in the gaslight which pervaded even the details of her dress, fashioned evidently with an attempt at the histrionic.... It must be added that, in spite of her melodramatic appearance, there was no symptom that her performance, whatever it was, would be of a melodramatic character” (58). What is emphasized here is the “odd mixture” of Verena’s unworldliness and vulgarity, innocence and histrionics, naturalness and theatricality, realism and melodrama—her hybridity. After Verena’s speech, Basil continues to observe her, unable to decide whether she is acting or not: whether her appeal is affected or authentic. “Yet she smiled with all her radiance, as she looked from Miss Chancellor to him; smiled because she liked to smile, to please, to feel her success—or was it because she was a perfect little actress, and this was part of her training?” (68). Her performance is often labeled, by the narrator and Basil (as a focalizer), as “queer” “peculiar” and “quaint,” “strange” “odd” and “singular.” Her speech is a “strange, sweet, crude, absurd, enchanting improvisation” (61), and Basil concludes that “Miss Tarrant’s peculiarity was the explanation of her success” (64). This oddity is not simply due to a superficial eccentricity in her manner and clothing. Rather, it is attributable to Verena’s “singular hollowness of character” (61), which allows a contradictory coexistence of innocence and worldliness.

If Verena’s social performance suggests “hollowness of character,” so does the context of her speech. What makes Verena’s oration and personhood at once queer, theatrical and unworldly is also the séance setting of her performance, in which she acts as a medium at the will of her father Selah, a mesmeric healer. While Verena’s speeches are on the controversial current-day topic of women’s liberation, Selah Tarrant curiously suggests to the audience that

her words are not her own opinions, but come from “some power outside—it seemed to flow through her” (55). He proceeds to put her into a hypnotic trance in full view of the assembled crowd. This performance curiously theatricalizes its own behind-the-scenes preparations, by directing the spectator to Selah Tarrant’s “grotesque manipulations” (59) of his daughter. Before Verena begins her speech, Selah Tarrant invokes the presence of “the spirit” with mesmeric hands: “It will come, my good child, it will come. Just let it work—just let it gather...you’ve got to let the spirit come out when it will” (59). These words suggest erotic as well as spiritual control over his daughter’s body:

She proceeded slowly, cautiously, as if she were listening for the prompter.... Then memory, or inspiration, returned to her, and presently she was in possession of her part.
(60)

Selah, like Westervelt in *The Blithedale Romance*, thus makes a spectacle of his own behind-the-scenes stage-managing, demonstrating not only Verena’s power of speech, but also his own power of control over his daughter’s body and mind, under which she becomes a mesmeric automaton. The deliberate presentation of performance as something artificial—and controlled by a subject other than the performer—indeed highlights “staginess” and theatricality, although Selah’s words explicitly suggest that Verena’s speech will be inspired and spontaneous. And both Olive and Basil find it at once strongly fascinating and grotesquely vulgar. In this sense, the mesmeric platform conforms to what Parker and Sedgwick call queer performativity, “the perverted, the artificial, the unnatural, the abnormal, the decadent, the effete, the diseased” (5)—adjectives that often modify both theatricality and queer sexuality.

The “queerness” of the speech is enhanced by uncertainty over who is speaking. Once inspired to speak in public, Verena immediately gains control of her own speech, drawing the

audience into the magnetic field of her powerful feminist oration. The “passive maiden” (59) delivers the speech with striking “impertinence” and “pert[ness]” (63). In this curious spectacle of passivity (as a remotely controlled female medium) and activity (as an inspiring public orator), mesmeric exhibition and erotic exhibitionism coexist with a powerful feminist platform, making Verena’s performance a showcase of double possession—by a father (as indicated in Selah’s words “my good child”) and by the quasi-divine spirit who inspires her words. As Susan Wolstenholme points out, the text emphasizes that Selah must use his daughter as a mouthpiece because he cannot speak for himself (582). Though he is ambitious for a public voice (just as Basil himself is), Selah “couldn’t hold the attention of an audience, he was not acceptable as a lecturer,” since, according to his wife, he “didn’t know how to speak” (74). In other words, Selah as well as the “spirits” speaks through his daughter’s body, voice and consciousness.

Verena’s performance as a medium at the beginning of the novel is suggestive of her role throughout the novel. Her body and her “brilliant head” (49) are exhibited as empty receptacles of others’ ideas. Her first speech in the novel, in which her voice and gestures convey ideas coming from outside her, is performative in Judith Butler’s sense. In Butler’s definition of the performative, an actor’s gestures and speech acts do not express an internal essence or identity, but create an identity through repeated performance (“Performative Acts”). Contrary to the feminist, politically oriented content of her speech, Verena’s performance conveys just such ontological emptiness to her spectators; Basil notes that Verena seems “hollow” and that her identity is made up of irreconcilable opposites. While Verena’s speech incites desire in her spectators (particularly Olive and Basil), it is a desire propelled by this hollowness—as if each were longing to fill the woman’s lack with his or her own plenitude. Thus, Verena is not only a medium for her father and the “spirits” he summons, but for Olive and Basil, who, as we shall

see, cause her to speak and act differently according to what they desire her to be. The meaning of Verena's performance is detached from its ostensible content, its true significance springing from a radical performativity in which the performer has no identity of her own, but functions as mouthpiece for others' ideas. Thus on stage—as in the primal scene—Verena's body functions as a visible proof of her father's mesmeric control to the viewers who desire her to similarly “mediate” their own social identities.

However, Verena's performance resists psychoanalytic oversimplification. The queerness of Verena's performance is one which makes the performer into the object, rather than the subject, of the very performance. At a glance, this position as an object—or an empty, disembodied subjectivity, a receptacle of other's desires—seems to reiterate the conventional position of a woman, as demonstrated in the Veiled Lady's performance in *The Blithedale Romance*. In fact, Verena as performer acts as a decentering locus of desires, luring beholders to mimic the mesmeric/ventriloquial performance and to participate in the battle for her voice and body. The beholders are drawn to repeat the performance, over and over, in order to possess her as an object, to occupy the subject position. Her performing body thus possesses a hollow but irresistible centripetal force. Verena's subjectivity, marked with a singular emptiness, constantly demands and dismantles the performative reinscription of her identity-as-object by others. In this sense, the subject of desire is paradoxically subjugated by Verena's queer performativity.

At the same time, Verena/Selah's performance functions as a metaphor for novel-writing, a dramatization of authorial control over characters in a novel. James makes this parallel clear in his prefaces to the New York Edition, a reissued series of James' works from which *The Bostonians* is deliberately omitted. He repeatedly describes himself as an expert Mesmer, who “goes behind” each character in order to mediate their consciousness to the reader/audience, and

to inspire the characters to act and speak.¹ As described by James, this authorial act resembles the act of a prompter or ventriloquist. Like Selah, James contrives and stages artistic effects by using others' bodies, minds and voices as his mouthpiece. And just as Selah has the power to entrance Verena and put her in contact with spirits, the author has the power to enter each character's subjectivity. Like Selah, James in the 1890s was seeking public success on stage as a dramatist. Like an author who seeks a literary and dramatic reputation, Selah seeks renown, ambitiously promoting himself in the world of journalism via his daughter's body and voice. Like Selah, James is also gifted with what John Carlos Rowe calls an "uncanny ability to represent the complex psychologies of women" in Victorian culture (90). James's prefaces to the New York Edition set up a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* or "laying bare the device," a stage effect betraying the authorial contrivance behind the literary realism.

Whether it is a male ventriloquist or a literary author, the act of speaking or self-promoting through the body of a woman rests on his will to (gendered) power. At the same time, however, the act of authorial ventriloquism necessarily involves the danger of cross-dressing and cross-gendering, as summarized in Flaubert's queer authorial identification, "Madame Bovary, *c'est moi*"—words that convey simultaneous self-empowerment as an author and self-queering as a man.² The staginess of Verena's performance thus emphasizes the implicit but grotesque vision of a stage-manager's cross-dressing and cross-gendering. Perhaps this gender ambiguity accounts for Basil's inexplicably phobic reaction to Selah. When Basil first sees Selah on the parlor platform at Miss Birdseye's, Basil mentally describes him with strongly negative and homophobic language, even more phobic than his immediate distaste for Olive Chancellor when

¹ For example, see James's preface to *The Tragic Muse*: "I never 'go behind' Miriam; only poor Sherringham goes, a great deal, and Nick Dormer goes a little, and the author, while they so waste wonderment, goes behind *them* (9).

² For discussion of James's cross-gender impersonation, see Henke. He argues that James regards gender "as role, performance, the practice of social conventions"(237) and concludes: "Ultimately, it is not that the Jamesian author is neither male or female, but that he is simultaneously (or at least consecutively) both" (240).

they first meet: Basil “simply loathed [Selah], from the moment he opened his mouth. . . he was simply the detested carpet-bagger. He was false, cunning, vulgar, ignoble; the cheapest kind of human product” (57). Although Basil’s hatred of carpet-baggers suggests north-south animosity, his description of Selah as “false, cunning” suggests a further level of hatred in which he despises Selah for being inauthentic, or other than what he appears to be. These extremely negative adjectives correspond with those in homophobic hate speech. They also reverberate with antitheatrical adjectives of abject queer theatricality—“the perverted, the artificial, the unnatural, the abnormal, the decadent, the effete, the diseased.”

Basil’s reaction to Selah’s ambiguous male power reflects his political as well as gendered subject position. Leland Person argues that Basil’s instant hatred of Selah is due to the fact that Basil, upon seeing the mesmeric performance, simultaneously desires to occupy the subject-position Selah occupies (as a figure of patriarch/slave-master), and fears that he might instead find himself “in the feminine position that Verena occupies” (108). The fear of failing to enact patriarchal male authority is a salient one for a Southern man during the Reconstruction period, a time when traditional values (of race, of gender, of economy) no longer stand. In making this argument, Person has no doubt that Selah’s subject-position is a normative marker of male gender. However, Verena’s/Selah’s performance is deeply and doubly queer, foregrounding the erotic spectacle of a female performer’s interior emptiness and powerful oration, and at the same time, of the paternal stage-manager’s cross-gendering self-presentation.

This queerness is further evident in the fact that it arouses an audience of both genders, both sexually and politically. Olive and Basil are equally struck by the “queer” lure of Verena when they witness her peculiar performance. The exhibition of spiritual and parental possession of a beautiful daughter easily excites sexual and erotic, submissive-dominant fantasies in the

audience, inspiring the urge to possess or to be possessed. Both characters' internal monologues use similar language to express their desire for Verena, language that suggests sexual as well as spiritual control. Shortly after the speech, Olive decides to take "possession of her" (79); and later, to take "a more complete possession of the girl" (129); while much later, in seeming imitation of Olive, Ransom also goes to Marmion to "take possession of Verena Tarrant" (319). The staginess of Selah Tarrant's performance—in which he demonstrates his spiritual and quasi-erotic power over his daughter—thus triggers a chain of mimetic desire, setting the stage for a text in which desire is queer, fluid and theatrical.

This dynamic of male mimetic desire is complicated by the presence of a female desiring spectator. Person, by focusing on Basil's oedipal drama (and triangulation of desire among Selah, Verena and Basil) in viewing the performance, ignores the importance of Olive in the novel's psychosexual theater of desires. After viewing Verena's speech, Olive is fascinated by her, and the two women soon enter an intimate relationship that James terms a "Boston marriage." The novel's lesbian elements have been noted by many critics, at first negatively and recently more affirmatively. Shortly after the novel's publication in 1886, critic Horace E. Scudder noted in the *Atlantic Monthly* that the novel marks a departure from the "old, familiar predicament of one heroine and two heroes"; in *The Bostonians* "the two heroes are a man and woman, but the struggle is of the same general character." Scudder concluded that "we hesitate about accepting the relation between [Olive and Verena] as either natural or reasonable" (Hayes, 170). As Terry Castle's summary suggests, early critics tend to read Olive as a figure of "perverse sexuality" (F.W. Dupee), using such homophobic terms as "unnatural" (Irving Howe), "horrid" (Edmund Wilson), and "twisted" (Tony Tanner, quoted in Castle, 151). Thus, early critics have read the text as a heteronormative tale in which nature triumphs against unnatural, perverse lesbianism.

Only recently have Olive's presence and sexuality been discussed more affirmatively. Castle states that Olive is "English and American literature's first lesbian tragic heroine" (171) and that James is the "first major modern writer...to open a space for a sympathetic reading of a lesbian character" (177). As David Van Leer points out, "the failure of normality" signals more prominently than the failure of lesbianism in the text (108).

Olive's presence in the text destabilizes the typical heterosexual economy of desire. Following the Girardian theory of love triangles and mimetic rivalry, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out that the rivalry of two men for a woman and the exchange of a woman between men, which consolidates patriarchal heteronormativity, is in fact a disguised form of desire on the part of the men for each other.³ But *The Bostonians* is a demonstration of Girardian triangulation with a gender twist, in which a woman and a man compete for another woman. The novel thus involves a further crisscrossing of genders and sexualities than the traditional formula of desires: Rather than expressing coded desire for another man, Basil will end up inhabiting a female role by emulating Olive. Thomas Bertonneau calls the novel a "study in desire" that demonstrates a paradigmatic play of Girardian triangulation of desires (45). It portrays desire, not as flowing from a person's inner being, but as fundamentally mediated by others' desires and social performances.

After seeing Verena, still "uncontaminated" (84) by Selah's self-promoting mesmeric show, Olive decides to take up a parental, or, more precisely, tutorial role by bribing Selah off from Verena. Olive soon begins to regard herself as a "protectress," and wishes "she could only rescue the girl from the danger of vulgar exploitation" (83). She also sees in their relationship a "romance of the people," a romance of saving a girl from poverty and parental abuse (34). Needless to say, this romantic metanarrative already carries conventions of gender, in which a

³ See Sedgwick, *Between Men*.

heroic man rescues an innocent maiden about to be sacrificed. Olive reenacts this convention, queering it in the process. By desiring to take Selah's place as his daughter's protector, Olive inverts the gender-coded romance, and takes over the traditionally male position in both the Girardian love triangle and the Freudian oedipal triangle.

However, Olive does not simply replicate Selah's relation to Verena. Rather than a father-daughter, possessing-possessed dyad, Olive engages herself in a mother-daughter, or more precisely, a mentor-pupil relationship. Olive takes the role of an older authority figure; the narrator repeatedly refers to the age difference between the two women, suggesting that Olive is much older and knowing than the innocent, young "girl," despite the fact that there is in fact only a few years' difference between them. For instance, Olive tells her that "You are so simple—so much like a child" (80). Because of the similarities in Olive's and Basil's attitude toward Verena—each desires (like Selah) to take possession of her and shape her for their own ends—critics such have argued that Olive and Basil are the mirror images of each other. For example, Bertonneau claims that "Olive and Basil become rivals from [the moment they meet Verena]. More than models and rivals, they become doubles, converging disastrously on the same object" (65). But as I will argue below, Olive's desire is qualitatively different from Basil's normative heterosexual relationship with Verena; while Basil values her as an object, Olive values her as a potential subject.

While the novel presents a variation on the conventional love-triangle narrative, a closer look will reveal that Basil and Olive are far from simply doubles. True, Olive and Basil try to inscribe their will on the girl's innocent body and mind, as on a *tabula rasa*. Both Olive and Basil want to install Verena on stage, one as a mouthpiece for women's emancipation and the other on a parlor stage as an icon of domestic femininity. (Trying to persuade Verena to give up her

vocation as an orator, Basil insists that “the dining room itself shall be our platform, and you shall mount on the top of that.... You won’t sing in the Music Hall, but you will sing to me; you will sing to everyone who knows you and approaches you” [390]). But their approaches are quite different. While Olive is struck by Verena’s eloquence and power of speech (i.e., content), Basil is attracted by her voice and body. In chapter 34, he tells her that “I don’t listen to your ideas; I listen to your voice” (331). While Basil is fascinated by the spectacle of Verena’s sheer passivity as a medium, Olive is attracted by Verena’s actively inspiring power of feminist oration. Basil wants Verena’s passivity as it is, a feminine receptacle of male ideas: “It isn’t *me*.” Conversely, Olive wants to transform Verena’s passive subjectivity into an active feminist mind.

Since Olive falls in love at first sight with Verena on stage, and their relationship develops through their theatrical construction of a female collective voice, one might expect the relation between the two women to be the most prototypically “theatrical” in the text. Instead, though Basil demonstrates a strong antitheatrical attitude, it is his desire for Verena that is more closely aligned with traditional definitions of the theatrical, since his interest is in her appearance and the sound of her voice, and not with her subjectivity and inward identity. By contrast, Olive wants to transform Verena from a purely “theatrical” performer to one whose performances reflect her inner being. Olive’s desire is not only to possess Verena. Though she is attracted to Verena’s emptiness, she fills it with ideas and women’s history to cultivate her subjectivity, while Basil wants it to remain empty so that it can reflect only his own image of himself. By “purchasing” Verena from the “vulgar” hands of her father, Olive is now free to mold Verena into an ideal cultural form, improving her taste and educating her about women’s history. Olive desires to put Verena “in complete possession of the subject” (181). She wants her to become an inspiring orator, who in turn can educate the audience, via the educational and transformative

potential of the stage, as envisioned in Alcott's *Work*. As a result of Olive's "educative process" (180) and "soft influences" (173), the American Girl undergoes "civilisation" (174). Verena thus turns into a confident public speaker, completely erasing the presence of the visible hands of a mesmeric prompter. Verena is indeed "in complete possession of the subject," and can now make a speech "without the co-operation of her father" (180). Olive's training of Verena is not only to make her an object—a feminist icon who will attract others to the cause—but also someone with a feminist subjectivity. She wants Verena to believe what she says, and act out what she believes.

The Bostonians thus aligns homosexual desire with a form of love that values inwardness, authenticity and sincerity. Because of this greater authenticity, the two women's "Boston Marriage" offers the possibility of a genuinely transformative relationship. The education of Verena by Olive is described as a Utopian moment, however fleeting. It frees Verena to speak without the need of a Mesmer-like figure. The process of Olive's education, or, in Basil's words, her "train[ing]" and "polish[ing]" (115), yields one of the novel's few felicitous moments of love and friendship, which is more persuasive as domestic bliss compared to the domestic life offered by Basil. In Olive's townhouse,

...Olive often sat at the window with her companion before it was time for the lamp. They admired the sunsets, they rejoiced in the ruddy spots projected upon the parlour-wall, they followed the darkening perspective in fanciful excursions. They watched the stellar points come out at last in a colder heaven, and then, shuddering a little, arm in arm, they turned away, with a sense that the winter night was even more cruel than the tyranny of men—turned back to drawn curtains and a brighter fire and a glittering tea-tray and more and more talk about the long martyrdom of women.... They read a great deal of

history together, and read it ever with the same thought—that of finding confirmation in it for this idea that their sex had suffered inexpressibly.... (175)

In Charles Street, the two women create a female household where there is no boundary between self and other. The repeated pronoun “they” as subject suggests a merged subjectivity and consciousness.

This dynamic reflects an ongoing theme in James’ work of same-sex tutorship. Critics of James have focused on the homoerotic relationships between men, in works such as *Roderick Hudson*, *The Tragic Muse*, *The Ambassadors*, “The Pupil,” “The Author of ‘Beltraffio,’” and “The Middle Years.”⁴ In *The Bostonians* James portrays equally strong erotic tension between women, suggesting that the pedagogical relation is a potentially queer one that can occur between subjects of any gender. In *Vice Versa*, Marjorie Garber suggests that the erotics of pedagogy are based in relations, not in individuals, and thus can arise regardless of one’s gender or sexuality: “a structure of teaching and learning is itself ‘bisexually’ erotic” (336). She goes on to claim that “scenes of instruction are potentially always scenes of seduction” (343). By teaching Verena women’s history, Olive is practicing a seduction that is both intellectual and potentially erotic. She is trying to become one with Verena, to create a shared subjectivity and identity. Between the two women, the relational erotics of tutelage are thus entwined with the intellectual and sensual pleasure of teaching and learning—pleasures which lead the pupil to intellectual subjectivication and self-empowerment.

In this sense, Olive acts like a realist author to Verena. The traditional realist author “goes behind” the character and merges with their consciousness while keeping his own authorial intervention invisible. In his essay on Flaubert, James famously states that a realist author should remain “invisible and almighty, everywhere felt, but nowhere seen”—the opposite

⁴ See, for example, Lane, Person, and Haralson.

of Selah's coercive and heavy-handed interventions (295). Olive's tutelage results in performances that seem natural and self-directed, like those of a character in a Jamesian novel. These similarities between Olive as tutor and the Jamesian realist author further position the relation between the two women as an ideal moment of creation, aligning them with the text's values.⁵

Thus, though the novel's plot ends in the closure of a heterosexual marriage, its quasi-utopian portrayal of a lesbian relationship is at cross-purposes with this narrative drive. In a further irony, it is Olive's teaching that brings about the end of this relationship. Though Olive's tutelage is successful, it ends up leading Verena to break the box of Olive's own quasi-parental authority, only to be pushed back into another "box," that of Basil Ransom's authority. The goal of Olive's queer tutelage is, using Verena's metaphor in her speech in Chapter 28, to break through the glass box of male control over women: "We require the lid to be taken off the box in which we have been kept for centuries" (267). But as Alan Ackerman observes, Verena's speech in Chapter 28, on the theme of boxed women, is reused by Basil as a sexual metaphor in chapter 33: "He kept talking about the box; he seemed as if he wouldn't let go that simile. He said that he had come to look at her through the glass sides, and if he wasn't afraid of hurting her he would smash them in. He was determined to find the key that would open it, if he had to look for it all over the world; it was tantalizing only to be able to talk to her through the keyhole" (318). Basil describes women as a box to be opened by with a hidden (and phallic) key, for the enjoyment of men rather than for their own benefit.

⁵ The similarity between Olive and the author has been pointed out by several critics, including Kristin Boudreau and Michael Anesko. Anesko argues that they share in particular an ambivalent relation to audience: "[Olive's] frustrated desire to find an audience for her feelings is surprisingly similar to James's, just as she shares his distaste for the vulgarizing influence of incessant publicity" (90). Boudreau also finds Olive's resemblance to the author not only in their shared aversion to marriage but also in their ambivalent feelings toward audience: Olive, like the author, "serv[es] an ideal that threatens to alienate her from her audience" (22).

If it seems that Verena's relationship with Basil forecloses the subversive possibilities opened up by the same-sex relationship, this novel does not simply portray the heterosexual affair as a normative "solution" to queer desire. Rather, it "queers" the heterosexual romance, both by complicating Basil's gender identity and by portraying his desire for Verena as imitative of Olive's. Judith Fetterly and other critics have pointed out that Olive and Basil are not only rivals but also doubles or mirror images of each other. Bertonneau, for instance, argues that Olive's desire for Verena is aroused after the manner of Basil, imitating his initial and immediate attraction to Verena (72). However, such a view implicitly subscribes to the conventional view of lesbian desire as a secondary, inferior imitation of heterosexual, normative love. On the contrary, as Garber points out, Basil's desire for Verena is distinctly mimetic, taking shape *after* Olive's desire does, rather than vice versa (466). Basil's desire for Verena is not so prominent at first. True, he is intrigued and fascinated by her appearance and her "brilliant head," but the "sweet grotesqueness" (63) of her performance, as well as Selah Tarrant's "grotesque manipulations" (59), also repel him, and her speech and ideas are unacceptable to him. As a result, his desire remains dormant for the most of the first volume, and Basil himself completely disappears from the text and Boston, leaving Verena under Olive's care for more than one year. Having moved to New York, he doesn't think about Verena "at all" (202). It is only when Mrs. Luna happens to mention Verena, that "his glimpse...of the strange, beautiful, ridiculous, red-haired young *improvisatrice*, unrolled itself in his memory like a page of interesting fiction," which is "fading" (201-202). Thus, it is only after Basil hears from Mrs. Luna about the ever-growing "intimacy" between the two women and Verena's transformation under Olive's tutelage that Basil suddenly becomes obsessed with Verena. Informed that Verena is living with Olive and that the two women went to Europe "to form [Verena's] mind" (199), he feels an increasing desire to possess

the girl. Intrigued by the “growth of their intimacy” (200), he is urged to visit Boston to see how “united” these women are, and how Verena’s “mind is formed”(199) by the hands of Olive. His desire for Verena takes the form of a fascination, not simply with her, but with the two women’s relationship.

Basil is also specifically attracted by the changes brought about by Olive’s tutelage. When Verena appears in the foyer of the Tarrant residence to receive Basil, he notices that “she had developed and matured”: “She had appeared to him before as a creature of brightness, but now she lighted up the place, she irradiated, she made everything that surrounded her of no consequence” (223). After her change under Olive’s influence and education, Verena is now more acceptable and more desirable in the eyes of an old-fashioned Southern gentleman.

Basil imitates Olive, not just in his chosen object of desire, but in his treatment of her. After seeing her at Olive’s home, and seeing how successful she has been at “forming” Verena’s mind, Basil tries to emulate Olive. Basil’s desire for Verena, or more precisely his desire to model his pedagogy after Olive’s, culminates in Chapter 28, in which Verena makes a spectacular debut in front of a New York audience at the salon of Mrs. Burrage. She makes a more confident self-presentation, seamlessly and eloquently expressing thoughts and ideas, and appealing powerfully to the audience. Witnessing how Olive has succeeded in making a powerful orator out of the automaton-like mesmeric medium, and how full of the new age’s modern ideas she is, Basil longs for Verena even more than before, and realizes for the first time that he is in love with her. Just as straight men are fascinated by lesbian sex, Basil is fascinated by the traces Olive’s training has left on the malleable girl. Though Verena still has “capitally bad” (268) ideas in her head, her manners and taste have been enhanced by her intimacy with Olive, and there is no longer any visible trace of the hands of Mesmer. This suggests not only the

powerful effect Olive's tutelage has had, but also the malleability of Verena's character, and the possibility of replacing previous learning with new content. De-vulgarized, yet still impressionable, Verena is qualified now as an object of Basil's desire for acquisition.

On the surface, Basil's aspirations might seem like quintessentially male fantasies of power over a woman. But instead, his desire to emulate Olive has entrapped him in what Leland Person terms a "homoerotic matrix of desire," wherein the boundaries between homosexual and heterosexual desires are blurred: he is an emasculated figure envious of Olive's power and influence. Shortly after meeting Verena, Basil, well aware of the particular existence of the female rituals of love and friendship widespread in nineteenth-century Boston, wishes he were a "Boston lady" (68) so that he too could invite Verena to visit, as Olive actually does. Thus, Basil's courtship is subconsciously imitative of Olive's, and, like Olive's, Basil's desire also crosses genders and sexualities.

Though Basil can be read as an embodiment of masculinism and heterosexual imperative, his own gender identity is not as stable as his traditionally masculine "tall, dark and handsome" characterization would suggest.⁶ He is beset by insecurities that make his claims of masculinity seem all the more desperate. Seeking financial success, Basil enters the female world of Boston, in which upper-class women have money and power in society (resources that he lacks). Basil's identity is distinctively marked with negativity: as a figure of "American dispossession" (Bowen 18), this defeated Southerner has no home, no money, no name, no job, and no tangible future or financial security: "His family was ruined; they had lost their slaves, their property, their friends and relations, their home; had tasted of all the cruelty of defeat....He had a millstone of debt round his neck" (13). Throughout the novel, he feels most comfortable associating with women, like the androgynous Dr. Prance or a "little variety-actress" who is his cohabitant in his New

⁶ For example, see Leer and Person.

York tenement house (190). But his relationships with women suggest not masculine power, but powerlessness. Starting his life from scratch, he can count only on the resource of his gender. He feels he must “[look] for a way to reclaim his manhood” (283), in Aaron Shaheen’s words. The possession of Verena becomes an index of his reclaimed masculinity: “What he wanted, in this light, flamed before him and challenged all his manhood” (441). He tries to win a woman in order to secure his manhood, as well as his economic and psychological stability. It is precisely because of his deep-seated gender anxiety that he endeavors to establish a traditional gender and public/private spatial hierarchy, in particular through the possession of Verena.

Although Basil endeavors to exert his subjectivity over Verena’s apparent passivity, he often views himself as a commodified object. Entering the society of Boston, or what Basil calls the “market-place” (50), he himself is immersed in nineteenth-century feminine psychology: He often regards himself as a piece of merchandise exchanged in the marriage market. Immediately after entering Olive’s upper-class home, he favorably imagines selling himself into the marital “firm” with Olive, in order to secure his financial status. Similarly, he hypothetically considers securing his future by marrying Mrs. Luna, conforming to her desire for him. His imaginative conception of himself as a commodity in the marriage “market-place” of Boston further associates him with feminine-coded subjectivity. His identity thus approximates the nineteenth-century conceptual formula of homosexual man as “a female soul in a male body.” The text often labels him with feminine traits; for instance, we are told he speaks with a “curious feminine softness” (7). Frustratingly caught between his masculine ambition and his feminine state of being, Basil unsurprisingly reacts against both Selah and Olive with strongly phobic repulsion. Because they subvert gender roles, they mirror his insecurity about his own lack of masculine virtues. Basil, who has no land or property and schemes to marry a wealthy woman, may see in

himself the traits he despises in Selah, whom he describes as “false, cunning, vulgar, ignoble” and a “[cheap]...human product” (57). As Person suggests, his strong reaction against the Selah-Verena mesmeric performance also suggests that, rather than traditionally identifying with the paternal/male figure of the primal scene, he sees himself in the position of Verena, another commodity to be possessed by the mercenary social marketplace (108).

Basil lacks power and influence in Boston. His need for Verena is thus a need for her performative ability. At once theatrical and natural, her body and voice have the inspiring power to create a reality and authenticity. As Mrs. Luna aptly summarizes, Verena is a “walking advertisement” (259) and just as with advertising, her persuasive gifts can be applied to any product—she is equally effective as a feminist orator who inspires a feminist consciousness, or as an ideal domestic wife who creates a patriarchal domestic space. It is as such a wife that he imagines her: “It was no possible basis of matrimony that Verena should continue for his advantage the exercise of her remunerative profession; if he should become her husband he should know a way to strike her dumb”(320). Although Basil’s conservative ideals are profoundly antitheatrical—he values authenticity, hereditary aristocracy, and “natural,” unchanging identities—these values’ threatened status means he needs a performer with Verena’s talents to promote them. Basil longs for Verena precisely because she can realize his fantasy of good old Southern manhood. Like Selah and Olive, Basil needs Verena in order to make himself a public man, whose “old-fashioned ideas” (91) will be embodied and advertised in her.

Critics discussing sexuality in *The Bostonians* have typically focused on Olive and Basil, the characters whose desires propel the novel’s plot. As a passive receptacle of others’ will, and as the novel’s centripetal object of multiple desires, Verena’s subjectivity and sexuality tend to

be disregarded by critics, as well as by the novel's characters. For instance, ~~Person focuses on the blurring and overlapping of heterosexual desire (of Basil) and homosexual desire (of Olive).~~ Wai Chee Dimock reads the novel as a narrative of desires and anxiety over their categorization, mainly focusing on Olive as a figure of sexual "unmatchability" or impossibility of explanation (28). Nevertheless, an understanding of Verena's sexuality is crucial to the novel's portrayal of sexuality and theatricality. Just as her performance and character are characterized by a queer oddity that escapes the viewer's desire for categorization ("Is she acting or not?" "Is she innocent or worldly?"), her sexual identity is also marked by queer indeterminacy. The question Dimock poses about Olive—"Is she a lesbian or is she not?"—is in fact more appropriately asked of Verena.

Verena's true sexual preferences remain ambiguous throughout the novel. Ultimately, she is a figure not for any fixed sexual orientation, but for queer *performative* sexuality. She is deeply queer, not just because she forms relationships with both men and women, but because her sexuality lacks an inner "true" essence. Her subjectivity is marked with peculiar "hollowness." Because of this, she responds to others' desires in a way that is both passive and active. Like a "spring," which is a frequent metaphor used to express the psychology of James's subjects, Verena's desire is always ready to respond to others' pressure, and not controlled or controllable by a core sexuality. For instance, shortly after Basil's attraction to her becomes apparent, she notices that "He made her nervous and restless; she was beginning to perceive that he produced a peculiar effect upon her" (316). As we have seen, she attracts and responds to intense desires. As Marjorie Garber claims, Verena can be regarded as "bisexual," responding "to the attentions of both men and women" (462). Unlike Mrs. Farrinder's feminist platform, which appeals mainly to women, Verena's performance attracts and affects both women and men, both sexually and

politically. Verena's indecisive, floating subjectivity is a proof that her character, as well as her sexuality, is constantly formed and reformed by exterior forces: her surroundings and her associates.

Verena's sexual identity is elusive within the dichotomy of heterosexual versus homosexual. Like her speech, her sexuality is deeply improvisational, changing its object moment by moment. Her desire is "kinetic", rather than something driven internally, in that it responds to any pressure given from the outside. The narrator describes Verena's new "love" for Basil thus: "It was simply that the truth had changed sides.... She loved, she was in love—she felt it in every throb of her being.... It was always passion, in fact; but now the object was other" (384-385). As such, "love" and "passion" are here presented as something very precarious, something that can suddenly change sides (like Verena's), or something that can be abruptly created after the fashion of the other (like Basil's). David Van Leer has argued that in this equation, Verena "admits that there is no qualitative difference between her two allegiances" (101). Throughout the novel, Olive repeatedly describes Verena's heterosexual attraction to men as a "phase" in her life (116, 135, 139, 146, 148, 169, 171, 375)—a word suggesting a sexuality that is mutable and unanchored within one's identity, or that is just one of many identities. What Olive describes as the girl's "phase" of attracting men, is in fact Verena's ambiguous, fluid sexuality responding to the advances of any kind of courtship, regardless of gender. In this sense, Verena's sexual subjectivity appears most "queer" among the novel's characters, in that it eludes definable categorization.

Verena is a screen onto which spectators project their ambivalent feelings about the crossing of lines and blurring of boundaries. This is true not only because of her fluid sexuality and ambiguous class origins; as some critics have argued, her racial identity also appears

ambiguous in the text.⁷ Verena is described, from others' points of views including the narrator's, as not only theatrical, but also exotic and oriental. Both Basil and Olive see her as an exotic Other. As Shaheen points out, Olive projects on Verena a romance of not only the "people" of the lower class, but also of the racial other, like a fugitive mulatto under a white woman's protection. Olive "liked" Verena because:

she was so strange, so different from the girls one usually met, seemed to belong to some queer gipsy-land or transcendental Bohemia. With her bright, vulgar clothes, her salient appearance, she might have been a rope-dancer or a fortune teller; and this had immense merit, for Olive, that it appeared to make her belong to the "people," threw her into the social dusk of that mysterious democracy which Miss Chancellor held that the fortunate classes know so little about, and with which (in a future possibly very near) they will have to count. (79)

So strange and so different, Verena is indeed a figure of difference, metaphorically made into a free-floating, nomadic signifier as a gypsy. Similarly, Basil also associates her at first glance with a racial other, regarding her as "an Oriental, if it were not that Orientals are dark" (58). Verena is paradoxically described as looking eastern, "were it not for" her white features. Verena's vulgar appearance and theatricality thus metaphorically establish her as a racial, social and sexual other—which makes her all the more desirable.

In this sense, Verena is a metaphoric figure for American democracy as Lynn Wardley argues, a national embodiment symbolizing the heterogeneity and indeterminacy of class, race, and gender changes in the contemporary society. (Verena resembles an American "My Fair Lady," climbing up a social ladder with the help of cultural tutelage in manner, speech and taste.)

⁷ For example, see Shaheen. Person also points out Selah's and Basil's resemblance to a slave-holder, arguing that the novel "supplements gender subordination with racial connotations" (106).

The daughter of an abolitionist and a mesmeric healer, Verena is a hybrid creature, and her identity, at once exotic and melodramatic, symbolizes the force of an American democracy that level the boundaries between private/public, high/low, black/white, heterosexual/homosexual, and even domestic/foreign. Indeed, as a “flower of the great Democracy” (109), Verena is a figure of at once subversive potentiality and mass-conforming tendency.

Therefore, as Wardley and Shaheen argue respectively, the novel, by setting Basil as the “most important persona” and its moving force, ensures that Verena’s body “must be married, managed” (Wardley 646), making her ambiguous identity both “heterosexual and white” (Shaheen 292). Olive’s tutelage toward fashioning a feminist and lesbian subjectivity is thus overturned by Basil’s elopement by “muscular force” (Habegger 219) with Verena. Verena’s ambiguous sexuality thus incites in her wooers the urgent need to pin it down, whether in the form of her pledge to Olive that she will never marry a man, or her legal pledge to marry Basil. The persistence of courtship by Olive, Basil and her other admirers in fact eloquently indicates the degree to which Verena’s sexuality is elusive. As the narrator observes, “It was in her nature to be easily submissive, to like being overborne” (328). Basil is also well aware of Verena’s queer nature. He knows that she will respond when he makes advances and courts her persistently. In Basil’s mind, “The essential was to show her how much he loved her, and then to press, to press, always to press” (387); he is aware that “so long as he should protest she was submissive, helpless” (441). And he also knows that Olive can easily take Verena back at any time when she has a chance to press her again. This is why he makes her fly immediately to New York, out of reach of Olive, to fix her identity permanently as his legal wife by getting married first thing in the morning. Legal marriage is the only way to pin down Verena’s identity and sexuality, confining it in the domesticity in which women should be “private and passive” (41)

and always loving toward men. If he waits, he knows that Verena will waver again with the advances of men and women. Marriage is presented as an artificial solution to the inherent fluidity of desire, effective only because it is legally binding, and thus will coerce Verena into performing consistency.

The novel's ending seems to restore conventional order to the novel's queer energies. But it is only a provisional solution. The narrative follows a conventional romantic rescue plot, but is governed by the non-heteronormative desires of Olive, Verena, and even Basil—desires which ultimately remain unfulfilled, and thus unresolved. The reader is left with uncomfortable silence and unanswered questions. Basil believes that Verena “was meant for something divinely different—for privacy, for him, for love” (268). However, is the final union between the hero and heroine a happy ending, as Bertonneau suggests, with the hero rescuing the heroine from the anti-hero's “coercion” (90)? Does Verena act out the “love of her own bondage” like her own mother, as Wolstenholme states (589)? Is she given by the author, as Brooks Thomas claims, “the traditional definition of a woman as an empty vessel, waiting to be filled and given identity by her union with a man”(735)? Is the “queer, bad lecture-blood in her veins” (247) destined to vanish magically? Verena, as she vanishes from the Music Hall with Basil, says: “Ah now I am glad!” And the narrator continues: “But though she was glad, [Basil] presently discovered that, beneath her hood, she was in tears” (449). Verena's queer performance, and her status as a signifier of difference and contradiction, are still vibrant at the novel's end. Her words and act suggest the disparity between performance and reality, the signifier and the signified—a contradiction that will persist even beyond the ending. With heterogeneous American democracy underway, the domestication and privatization of Verena—the novel's most prominent exemplifier of democratic currents—thus appears as only a wish-fulfillment.

If Verena's essential nature remains unchanged, Basil is ultimately drawn into the very theatricality he had regarded with loathing. In the final scene, Basil blames the audience's vulgarity and uncontrollability, exclaiming "What do they care for you but to gape and grin and babble?" (441). But it is Basil who ultimately steps into the role of the melodramatic, possessive stage manager, speaking of Verena in such terms as "She's mine or she isn't, and if she's mine, she's all mine!" (442). In the final scene, Basil resembles Selah Tarrant in the "grotesque manipulations" (59) through which he controls Verena, manipulations like the ones that mark her early performance. He persuades her to abandon her speech and run away with him with a combination of soothing words and impassioned exclamations, ultimately ignoring her reluctance: "He perceived, tossed upon a chair, a long, furred cloak, which he caught up, and, before she could resist, threw over her. She even let him arrange it and, standing there, draped from head to foot in it, contented herself with saying, after a moment: 'I don't understand—where shall we go? Where will you take me?'" (446). Basil's heterosexual control, then, is not far from a form of queer theatricality in which a man speaks through a woman's body.

At the last scene, the reader is left to wonder, not only whether Verena's choice was the right one, but also what will become of Olive, left to make a speech in Verena's place. When Basil leaves the novel with Verena, Olive is left alone on stage, completely without the author's ventriloquizing; as Basil skeptically observes, "the great public waited, and whatever she should say to them...it was not apparent that they were likely to hurl the benches at her"(449). At this moment Olive certainly becomes the first tragic, substantiated heroine of lesbian literature, as Castle claims. And yet, however "tragic" she appears, she remains a figure of pure potential, a potential for a woman's self-fashioning and self-representation. Though Basil's view of Olive's

oratory prospects is distinctively pessimistic, the inconclusive ending suggests James's own indecision about whether Olive's performance will lead to success or tragic failure.

Leaving the future of the feminist/lesbian stage in suspense, the novel points to the theater's potential for self-fashioning. Phillip Page argues that the novel creates a "necessity for the reader to create or imagine" the lives of the characters beyond the novel's ending (382). This imperative is most evident in the Music Hall scene:

As if with a sudden inspiration, she rushed to the approach to the platform. If he had observed her, it might have seemed to him that she hoped to find the fierce expiation she sought for in exposure to the thousands she had disappointed and deceived, in offering herself to be trampled to death and torn to pieces. She might have suggested to him some feminine firebrand of Paris revolutions, erect on a barricade, or even the sacrificial figure of Hypatia. (448)

Indeed, though Basil as a focalizer foresees a rather grim result of Olive's speech, feminist critics have read the novel's ending more optimistically than James himself seems to imply: Leslie Petty argues that Olive, at the last scene, becomes "a potentially brilliant, persuasive orator" after her existential change in accepting Verena as she is (397). Sara Blair also reads the scene more sympathetically, arguing that in this moment Olive "becomes a newly heroic figure of feminist passion," with her performance opening up the possibilities "for some genuinely democratic but regulated kind of cultural exchange" (165-6). Similarly, McColley finds in the scene "a glimpse of a rising star," arguing that "Olive's future appears very promising" (166). And contemporary female writers eagerly imagined these possibilities. Petty points out that, as early as 1887, author Celia B. Whitehead, using the pseudonym Henrietta James, published a short sequel titled "Another Chapter of 'The Bostonians'" (398). This parodic sequel responds critically to the

novel by writing Olive as a character who performs her first feminist public oration with success. While the novel ends in Basil's usurping power, the public stage as women's self-empowerment is imagined vividly as it "might have been" for both Verena and Olive. Although these possibilities are negated in the novel, they were imagined positively and repeatedly by readers like Whitehead and other feminist critics since its publication. And they would later be dramatized in another novel on a theatrical theme, *The Tragic Muse*, in which James himself responds to the frustrating ending of *The Bostonians* by having Miriam Rooth find artistic success as an actress. Verena's theatrical identity creates the possibility for her to become an influential and successful speaker, while also attracting Basil Ransom to her and leading her to assume the role of a conventional, domestic wife. In this sense, the text itself becomes a queer performative space: Like Verena's body, it arouses readerly and writerly desires to fill the blank, perpetually demanding the reader's participation in weaving the characters' lives beyond the ending.

Ultimately, the question of whether theatricality enables or subverts social, cultural and psychological mechanisms of power remains unanswered. In the *The Bostonians*, theatricality and the public visibility of women are associated with a feminist/lesbian platform and women's empowerment. But in a Jamesian twist, the stage is also entangled with a coercive subjugation of the will of the performer to the other that reproduces conventional male/female power relations. Theatricality is represented as a contested space for queer subjects and transgressive desires—one that allows for the possibility of cross-gendered social performances and public identities. At the same time, theatricality is potentially a repressive force that disallows the possibility of authentic personal expression or sincerely held progressive beliefs. If the theater is a microcosm

for social performance as a whole, the novel simultaneously celebrates and criticizes its ability to subsume the will of an individual.

CHAPTER FIVE

“A Great Actress Can Never Be Anything But a Great Vagabond”:

Miriam Rooth’s Queer Identity and Performance in *The Tragic Muse*

In Chapter 11 of Henry James’s 1890 novel, *The Tragic Muse*, Peter Sherringham sets up a dichotomy between “pure” and “impure” forms of art and speech. Peter is a young diplomat and theater buff who has encountered the aspiring actress Miriam Rooth while on a trip to Paris. Impressed by her beauty and raw talent, he becomes convinced that he can mold her as an artist, purging her of the traces of her bohemian upbringing: “There are little queernesses and impurities in your English, as if you had lived abroad too much. Ah you must work that. . . . You must speak beautifully” (*Tragic Muse* 134). In addition to “purity of speech,” he urges purity of performance, telling Miriam to learn “any style that is a style, that’s a system, a consistency” (134). He proposes to achieve this through exposure to pure art: “passages of Milton, passages of Wordsworth” (135). He will use her to raise the standard of the “vulgar” and “abominable” English theater, a goal he views as “a mission full of sanctity” (134). Miriam accepts Peter’s offer of help, but by the novel’s end, his education for purity has failed. *The Tragic Muse* portrays Miriam’s “queernesses,” not as things that must be purged, but as qualities that she develops into a unique artistic voice. Miriam the successful actress is not a stylistic purist but “sensitive and dense. . . . underbred and fine. . . . very various” (109-110).

Miriam embodies the shifting, ambiguous boundary between refinement and vulgarity. Her identity is presented as always in performance, always shifting from one persona to another, frustrating the viewer’s desire to understand or possess her. Her acting is characterized by mobility and elasticity, as is her own identity, as suggested by her desire to be known by multiple *noms de guerre*, such as “Maud Vavasour, or Edith Temple, or Gladys Vane” (49).

Her self-created talent does not just happen to be expressed through acting, but is deeply theatrical. Theatricality has historically acquired negative connotations, including those of artifice, falsity, imitation, deceit, emptiness, illusoriness and inauthenticity. Theatrical art is false because it is drawn from other art, not “from Nature her-self,” in the Earl of Shaftesbury’s words (quoted in Davis and Postlewait, 17). In particular, it has been associated with the feminine. Davis and Postlewait note that culture has portrayed women “as duplicitous, deceptive, costumed, showy, and thus as a sex inherently theatrical” (17). This novel follows that tradition by associating theatricality with femininity, vulgarity, and non-natural sexuality (male and female homoeroticism and autoeroticism). But this novel surprisingly reverses the typical connotations of these qualities, presenting a positive version of theatricality as a successful artistic style and social identity, allowing a brilliant woman artist to shape her own life and career.

Peter’s attempts to purge and refine the vulgarity of Miriam’s bohemian identity coincide with James’s own to produce refined writing, to purge “the ‘vulgarity’ out of his theatrical subject” and dissociate “the ‘loathsome’ theater” from “the ‘admirable’ drama” (Litvak, 243, 253). In his preface to the work, James writes of his efforts to preserve his work’s artistic purity against the novel’s rampant energies that constantly threaten to wash away its structure. Ultimately, these efforts failed, as reflected in the novel’s privileging of the theatrical over the non-theatrical, in its content as well as its form. In his preface, James laments that he failed to achieve a balanced structure: “The first half of a fiction insists ever on figuring to me as the stage or theatre for the second half... my halves have too often proved strangely unequal” (6). The unequal halves of *The Tragic Muse* result from the increasing importance of Miriam, who comes to eclipse the other protagonist, painter Nick Dormer. The increasing allure of the actress over the more traditional male artist is a problem James attributes to the “perverse” appeal of the

theatrical. This appeal is echoed by the novel's increasingly theatrical and "stagy" approach to telling its story. For instance, the story's two main romance plots do not come to fruition, while the final chapter quickly pairs off six of the characters into couples in a way that feels rushed and arbitrary. It is as if the Jamesian narrator were performing conventional narrative closure. The unconventional theatricality of the characters ultimately infects the novel, undercutting its conventionally realist elements.

The novel's noticeably artificial depiction of heterosexual romance is entwined with its depiction of queer desire and identity. The concept of the theatrical embodied in the novel is exemplified by Miriam's continually shifting identity. This kind of radically unstable identity is in accord with the critical concept of queer performativity—a form of social existence in which there is no "true," permanent identity underlying the roles a person takes on. This trait aligns Miriam with the novel's most discussed "queer" character, Gabriel Nash, a Wildean aesthete who sees his life as his art and his social life as an aesthetic performance. Although Miriam has not been critically considered as a queer figure, her sexuality and social identity are similarly ambiguous. She is immersed in a homosocial female artistic tradition, and takes pleasure in imitating multiple female mentors, rather than expressing a desire for a male suitor.

Although Miriam will end up married by the end of the novel, her marriage does not define her identity nor end her career as an artist. Miriam's never-ending performance suggests not only the performative but also the transformative model of subjectivity, allowing her to refuse or endlessly defer the telos of a totalized identity: In her own words, "a great actress can never be anything but a great vagabond" (385). James presents Miriam's process of self-formation as one that allows her to control her own identity and the "meaning" she expresses. And although theatricality, as a "vulgar," female and queer trait, is typically associated with

ontological hollowness and lack of interior meaning, in Miriam James presents a positive version of queer performativity that is able to authenticity and attain the highest level of artistic expression. Miriam's performances create an enabling space on stage where female desires, aesthetic traditions and ambitions can survive and be realized.

James's presentation of an artistically and commercially successful actress in *The Tragic Muse* conflicts with cultural stereotypes of the performative as unreal and inauthentic. This pro-theatrical representation is all the more noteworthy because it differs drastically from his previous novel on the subject. In *The Bostonians*, the feminist political/performative platform ends in tragic failure: Verena Tarrant, the gifted orator and performer, is virtually kidnapped by the novel's hero, leaving her former mentor Olive Chancellor alone on stage (and anticipating a potentially tragic failure in her first public performance). The public stage as a vehicle for women's self-empowerment, which was only presented as unrealized dream, as "what might have been," is depicted as reality in *The Tragic Muse* just four years later. Critics have noted James's surprisingly positive portrayal of the theater. Litvak calls the novel, after Jonas Barish, a work of "protheatricalism" that celebrates the theater and its art (241). While one character, Gabriel Nash, repeatedly denigrates the theater as "the lowest of the arts" (48) due to its commercial and audience-oriented quality, James himself seems to differ, as critics including Barish observe. James "links the fate of the theater firmly with that of all the arts, makes the theater into a paradigmatic case for the arts, and sees society's downgrading of it as a symptom of its hostility to art in *any* form that presumes to be serious" (Barish 385). By representing the theater as a site "of taste and discrimination" (385), rather than of tasteless commercialism, James explicitly opposes the assumptions of antitheatrical discourse.

This protheatrical stance has particular significance because of theater's traditional status as an art form with feminine connotations. James takes up once again the stage as a platform for female subjects, making use of the traditional conflation of theatricality and femininity to render the theater as an enabling space for female homosocial aesthetics. In creating the heroine who is described as James's "most triumphant representation of a character's complete devotion to art" (Funston 345), James speculates on a question that carries over from *The Bostonians*: What if a woman acquired the agency and ambition to pursue her own vocation? But there is a key difference between this novel and its predecessor. In *The Bostonians*, Verena's talent is a spontaneous and natural trait that is molded according to the intentions of her teachers (her father Selah, Olive, and Basil). By contrast, Miriam's aesthetic influences are mostly female (Mrs. Rooth, Madame Carré, and Mademoiselle Voisin), and the novel repeatedly emphasizes that she has made herself into an artist through her own hard work. Peter comments that "I think of her absolutely as a real producer, but as a producer whose production is her own person" (352). Miriam is the creator not only of the characters and roles she plays, but also of the versatile artistic talent that underlies these performances. *The Tragic Muse* portrays the genius of a great actress, not as innate, but as something *performatively* acquired through repeated practice and experience.

Unlike Verena Tarrant's natural "gift" for speech, in which there is no agency, Miriam's talent for performance is not a God-given gift. She appears in the text an utterly talentless young girl: Nick feels "embarrassed...to watch a poor working-girl's struggle with timidity" (86). At first, the esteemed retired French actress Madame Carré, for whom Miriam gives a trial performance, doesn't see any hope or talent in the young girl. She tells Miriam "You oughtn't to be an actress—you ought to be a governess" (87). However, Miriam does not give up, and takes

up Madame Carré's philosophy of work ethic as a key to becoming a great actress. Madame Carré cites "the great Rachel" (Rachel Félix, a legendary French actress known for her work ethic) as an ideal, and insists that acting is "a talent...essentially formed by work, unremitting and ferocious work" (94): "'Work—work—work!' exclaimed the actress" (95). Miriam, following this advice, improves her acting, until finally Madame Carré admits her mistake: "She has most things. She'll go far. It's the first time in my life of my beginning with a mistake" (150). Miriam's growth as an artist is central to the novel's second half. Just as in Alcott's *Work*, "work" in *The Tragic Muse* is presented as a self-transformative, self-inventive practice in a woman's life. John Carlos Rowe claims that Miriam Rooth is "James's most successful and emancipated feminine character" (76). Indeed, Miriam is an exceptional character among James's heroines, most of whom are enmeshed in the web of social performances and expectations. Miriam's self-fashioned ability sets her apart: In contrast to other Jamesian heroines, Miriam is always in control of herself and her offstage performance.

As presented in the novel, Miriam is a personification of theatricality, as described by such critics as Glen McGillivray: "empty, amorphous, unlocatable" (110). She is endlessly "various" and capable of slipping quickly in and out of different roles: Peter sees her as a "queer jumble" who "had no countenance of her own," and who "was always trying [the roles], practising them for her amusement or profit, jumping from one to the other and extending her range" (126). And just as Miriam's "acting" is not limited to her onstage performances, but encompasses her social identity and way of being in the world, the theoretical concept of theatricality "can be abstracted from the theater itself, and then applied to any and all aspects of human life" (Davis and Postlewait 1). A theatrical representation, like gender performativity, is not drawn from some pre-existing original; in Butler's words, it "constitutes—some might say

performatively—the phantasm of the original in and through the mime” (“Imitation” 319). And it takes no predetermined form. Postlewait and Davis define theatricality through its very resistance to definition: “It is empty of meaning; it is the meaning of all signs” (1). Miriam’s choice of art form is not an arbitrary one: Her identity and artistic temperament are deeply theatrical.

Both Miriam and her mother enter the novel already strongly associated with theatricality. They appear to the other characters as “strange women” (30) and “persons theatrical” (48). And the novel’s descriptions of Miriam, as focalized by other characters, emphasize her lack of fixed identity and style: “The image she was to project was always incalculable” (359). Peter perceives her as made up of “differences,” as “something richly constructional, like the shifting of the scene in a play or like a room with many windows” (359). Miriam’s actions off the stage do not reveal some deeper emotion or passion (such as desire for Peter or Nick), but are an extension of her onstage abilities. James creates a subjectivity always performing, always in rotation, which is marked by self-differentiation rather than self-identification. Miriam’s “always acting” subjectivity entails the reproduction of masks, selves and identities that perpetually defer the original.

The ambivalent conflation of femininity and theatricality that can be seen in James’s portrayal of Miriam is a recurrent theme in the nineteenth-century novel. As Michael Wilson argues, the figure of the actress is a symbol of the Victorian debates over the Woman Question, because of her paradoxical relation to nineteenth-century gender norms: While an actress represents an ideal image of femininity, she is also “defeminized” because of her public exhibition of herself (2000, 122). In choosing the theater as her vocation, Miriam, Wilson argues, engages in “a renunciation of gender norms and an emphatic reinscription of gender identity”

(2000, 119). She achieves this, not through specifically feminist content or messages, but by refusing to be confined to a single role: She is always longing for “a new part...all impatient to show her big range” (309). Rather than questioning the Victorian gender norms themselves—as represented in the ideally feminine roles she plays, like Shakespeare’s Constance and Juliet—Miriam’s performances present a subject as a set or a series of beings without a stable, fixed core, as something artificial, mixed, and hybrid. She does not represent “the truth” as a uniform, unitary entity, but instead represents multiple lives and identities “truly” (421). The emptiness at her core is a quality traditionally attributed to women, who are seen as superficial and lacking in substantive qualities. But in her case, it is not a lack, but a productive emptiness that compels the viewer to believe.

Acting in the novel is presented as an ambivalent pursuit for a woman: the most feminine of art forms, yet the most at odds with the private nature of the ideal woman. This ambivalent attitude informs other characters’ reactions to Miriam. Peter Sherringham, a lover of theatrical arts, comments on a woman’s chance of becoming a successful artist: “It’s as the actress that the woman produces the most complete and satisfactory artistic results” (407). Successful female artists that appear in the novel are all actresses, including Madame Carré, Mademoiselle Voisin, and Miriam herself. However, though Peter is a lover of theatrical arts and acting, the thought of being “the husband of an actress” inspires “disgust” in him (236). The theater may be a uniquely female art, but it also makes a woman less suitable for the private and quintessentially feminine role of wife. The traditional antitheatrical dichotomy between the private role of wife and the public role of actress still persists in the novel.

As if to emphasize the actress’s nature as a public figure, Miriam is presented as an object of gaze, constantly on view through the novel’s multiple focalizers, most of them male

“satellites” of observation (to use James’s term). As Wilson points out, the effect of this narrative device is to make Miriam a spectacle (2000, 122). It is through the male observer’s gaze, not her own narration, that we witness her dramatic self-transformation. At first, she appears in the novel as talentless and ignorant: Gabriel Nash comments, when introducing Miriam to the novel, “The girl’s splendidly stupid” (49). Gabriel’s appraisal of Miriam echoes James’s own view of the heroine in his original conception of the novel. In his notebook James himself describes the young actress, later named Miriam, as “crude,” with “no *general* superiority of mind,” and “an ignorant, illiterate Rachel” (*Complete Notebooks* 28). The effect of this external portrayal is to emphasize both Miriam’s lack of a fixed subjective identity (since her interiority is never directly portrayed) and the dramatic extent of her self-transformation.

Miriam’s fluctuating identity is a screen for ambivalent conceptions of the theater as a feminine art. But theater is also viewed as dangerous or threatening in nineteenth-century discourse because of its lower-class connotations. Theater is distinctively an open space (both literally and figuratively), highly dependent on reception and consumption by a mass audience (the “essentially brutal nature of the modern audience” in Gabriel Nash’s words [54]). Because of this mass-oriented aesthetics of theater, James sees it as a space that invites the merging of art and life, performer and society, high and low. In his 1877 essay, James comments on the increasing visibility of theater and actors in London society: “It is as if the great gate which formerly divided the theatre from the world had been lifted off its hinges.”¹ The expansion of theater beyond the theater invites the democratization of class and society. But at the same time, it invokes anxiety by allowing lower-class actors to simulate upper-class identities (being “received” in society along with real gentlemen and ladies). As we shall see, this blurring of

¹ See “London Theatres,” *Scenic Art* 120.

class identity also takes place in *The Tragic Muse*: Performers of obscure background, including Mademoiselle Voisin and Miriam, are able to successfully feign aristocratic identity on stage.

Miriam's growth as an actress is deeply "theatrical" because it results from her own self-fashioning labor, and is observed by an attentive audience. But it is also theatrical because of its hybrid and "impure" nature—a quality the novel imputes to the theater and not to more traditional (and traditionally male) forms of art like poetry and painting. Like Gabriel Nash's disdainful description of Miriam, James's first conception of the novel as "a study of the histrionic character" (28) is filled with condescending antitheatricalism, in which theatricality and femininity are always already conflated. However, as the idea of the story matures in the actual novel, Miriam gradually gains narrative weight and maturity as a female theatrical subject of action and desire, who is "sincere" in her art as well as in her dealings with others. James approvingly and defensively describes her in his preface as "central then to analysis, in spite of being objective" (10-11). Miriam's development from a "histrionic" character study into a brilliant artist entrances not only the other characters, but James himself, who admits in the preface that Miriam's role in the novel did not develop the way he intended. As the novel progresses, Miriam begins to take over center stage whenever she appears. Her presence invites the novel's structural flaw by growing too large, as Litvak notes: "No sooner had James complained of the risks to 'health and safety' of certain nineteenth-century novels he calls 'large loose baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary' (1:x) than he implies that *The Tragic Muse* may come close to joining this unhealthy company: for the looseness of his own literary structure is embodied, ironically, in its central character" (244). Miriam becomes ultimately "too central" (245), and James in his preface expresses his own uneasiness: He writes of the novel "defying and resisting me" (5). As Miriam grows from a

novelty for Bidy and others to puzzle over to “the English Rachel,” her character, and the novel itself, grows larger than its original design. Her lack of represented interiority does not prevent Miriam from serving as the protagonist of a realist novel, but is paradoxically a qualification. Sincerity and performance, authenticity and theatricality, naturalness and artificiality have been traditionally antithetic terms; in fact, this ethical antithesis is the source of antitheatricalism. But these terms can coexist in Miriam without contradicting each other, or the antitheses breaking down in her performance. “I represent, but I represent truly,” Miriam says in Nick’s studio (421).

It is noteworthy that Miriam assumes the role of central artistic figure in the novel despite sharing the stage with a male artist who practices a more rarefied and traditionally elite art form, oil painting. *The Tragic Muse* is a *Kunstlerroman* featuring two artists, Miriam (whom James calls “my theatrical case” in his preface [4]), and Nick Dormer (“my political case” [4]), a young man torn between the familial obligation to become a politician and his own desire to become a painter. While James wanted to write a novel about art by juxtaposing the two artists, Nick is gradually eclipsed by Miriam, “the artist who happens to have been born a woman” (150). Although Nick is presented as a talented artist, he fades from prominence. James laments in his preface that “It strikes me, alas, that he is not quite so interesting as he was fondly intended to be, and this in spite of the multiplication, within the picture, of his pains and penalties” (13). James suggests there is nothing compelling about Nick’s life as an artist except the objects he produces: “All we then—in his triumph—see of the charm-compeller is the back he turns to us as he bends over his work. ‘His’ triumph, decently, is but the triumph of what he produces, and that is another affair” (13). A key difference between the characters is that James portrays Miriam as actively creating her own talent; in contrast, Nick’s artistic talent is described as being evident, without the need for much practice. Upon seeing Nick’s work, Gabriel Nash scolds him for

concealing it from the world, referring to him as “A regular Stradivarius!” and insisting that “you’ve a talent of a wonderfully pure strain” (253), despite the fact that Nick has not yet had the chance to practice painting more than sporadically. But his spontaneous genius makes him comparatively uninteresting as a protagonist. Despite his success in producing great art, Nick is comparatively passive: He is constantly acted on by others, and his choice of vocation is persistently influenced by Julia and Gabriel. If, as Peter Brooks notes, “doing”—in the sense of “playing a role, enacting a part, giving a represented version of some way of being”—is invested with key importance in the novel (80), Miriam is the person not only of “doing,” but also of action. Miriam’s performative self-fashioning is, in this novel, a more compelling quality than Nick’s natural genius.

Notably, James’s ideas about what constitutes a good actress parallel his ideal of a well-written fictional character. In writing about actors, James praises those who are “disciplined, controlled, reined-in, and yet capable of abundant consciousness” (Jobe, 36). This description can also be applied to James’s major characters in his late novels, most of whom exhibit great control and discretion, but whose inner lives are presented as infinitely rich and subtle. Miriam’s consciousness is most fully presented to the reader in the second half of the novel, through her conversation with Peter and Nick, rather than through her represented thoughts or perceptions (a more novelistic technique). She is especially eloquent in reacting to Peter’s repeated plea to “give it [i.e., acting] up” in chapter 46, embodying precisely the kind of qualities—abundant consciousness, intelligence, and sincere devotion to art—that antitheatrical discourse presents theater as lacking. Here, as Storm observes, Miriam’s “authenticity and sincerity in defense of her art are, by now, unquestionable” (147).

After her triumphant performance as Juliet, Peter visits Miriam's residence and tries to persuade Miriam to renounce the stage and to marry him:

I'll give you a larger life than the largest you can get in any other way. The stage is great, no doubt, but the world's greater. It's a bigger theatre than any of those places in the Strand.... You were made to charm and console, to represent beauty and harmony and variety to miserable human beings, and the daily life of man is the theatre for that—not a vulgar shop with a turnstile that's open only once in the twenty-four hours.... You were never finer than at this minute, in the deepest domesticity of private life (432-3).

Like Basil Ransom in *The Bostonians*, Peter tries to lure Miriam out of the world of theater, using sophistic metaphors of the world as a stage in order to push her into a woman's proper role as a "charming" wife. To Peter's manipulative words, Miriam replies:

You're dishonest, you're ungrateful, you're false! ...It was in the name of the theatre that you first made love to me; it is to the theatre that you owe every advantage that, so far as I'm concerned, you possess.... You say to-day that you hate the theatre—and do you know what has made you do it? The fact that it has too large a place in your mind to let you disown it and throw it over with a good conscience. It has a deep fascination for you, and yet you're not strong enough to do so enlightened and public a thing as take up with it in my person....But it won't do, dear Mr. Sherringham—it won't do at all.... Leave her alone altogether—a poor girl who's making her way—or else come frankly to help her, to give her the benefit of your wisdom. Don't lock her up for life under the pretence of doing her good. What does one most good is to see a little honesty. (434-8)

Miriam's long, impassioned but controlled crisscrossing conversation with Peter in this chapter forms the climactic "action" of the novel, a trait that characterizes James's later works. This

scene of their verbal and psychological confrontation comes close to a dramatic representation on stage, intensified by Miriam's theatrical dress and demeanor. In this moment, the novel gives way to the theater Miriam is presenting before Peter and the reader. Miriam's insight lays bare the deep contradiction of Peter's desires (he wants Miriam to give up the theater, yet loves her for being a great actress) and their basis in male-centered exploitative logic (he wants to "save" her by confining her in private domesticity). "You were never finer than at this minute, in the deepest domesticity of private life," Peter insists (434). His preference for "the representation of life" over "the real thing" (62) is demonstrated in an ironical way, as he prefers a woman's staged domesticity (representation) over an actress on stage (the real thing). Peter's antitheatrical language shows that a woman's proper place, "the deepest domesticity of private life," is nonetheless a stage, a theater in which women perform for the benefit of men. Their confrontation thus lays bare the deep-seated contradiction of the nineteenth-century ideology of true womanhood.

Miriam's encounter with Peter reveals her to be an adept, insightful reader of other characters. She is also an expert rhetorician, possessing a peculiar "manner of speaking" truths through "untruths" (408, 409), and in this point she also resembles other late Jamesian characters, like Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove* or Maggie Verver in *The Golden Bowl*. For example, in chapter 43 Miriam urges Nick to come to see her performance in the theater by saying that she doesn't want him to come. Later, Bidley and Peter talk about her "special language":

"Oh because she meant just the contrary."

"Is she false then—is she so vulgar?"

"She speaks the special language; practically it isn't false, because it renders her thought and those who know her understand it" (408).

Although Miriam grows more and more sophisticated, it is not by abandoning such “vulgar” traits as falseness, but by refining them into sophisticated tools of communication. Miriam’s sophistication also extends to her understanding of her own art. As Emily Rosenbaum suggests, she is the primary audience of her own performance, objectively observing herself (203). For instance, she says to Peter, who is impressed by her theatrical performance: “My dear fellow, I do [see myself]. What do you take me for? I didn’t miss a vibration of my voice, a fold of my robe” (218). This heightened awareness makes her uniquely in control of her works’ reception: she is not only an object of other’s gazes, but herself an active gazer.

Miriam’s self-fashioned identity not only marks her as the prototypical artist; it makes her uniquely able to free herself from others’ expectations. Whereas the naturally gifted Verena in *The Bostonians* ultimately capitulates to Basil’s demands, Miriam ultimately frustrates Peter. Peter attempts to make her act “like a Englishwoman” (135). However, after all his aesthetic and cultural education, Miriam, at the culmination of her artistic success, still remains a symbol of hybridity that escapes any conventional definition of words or ideas: She is, as Peter describes her on stage, “a beautiful actual fictive impossible young woman of a past age, an undiscoverable country, who spoke in blank verse and overflowed with metaphor”(425). Miriam’s performance is described as “a thing alive, with a power to change, to grow, to develop, to beget new forms of the same life” (315). Because of Miriam’s “infinite variety” (359), her “incalculable” (462) persona, Peter’s desire is continually frustrated. For instance, watching Miriam’s acting lessons with Madame Carré, Peter suddenly realizes that she has been “always acting,” that her face is a “splendid mobile mask,” that Miriam’s identity consists of a “series of parts assumed for the moment, each changed for the next” (126).

It struck him [Peter] abruptly that a woman whose only being was to “make believe,” to make believe she had any and every being you might like and that would serve a purpose and produce a certain effect, and whose identity resided in the continuity of her personations, so that she had no moral privacy, as he phrased it to himself, but lived in a high wind of exhibition, of figuration—such a woman was a kind of monster in whom of necessity there would be nothing to “be fond” of, because there would be nothing to take hold of...she positively had no countenance of her own, but only the countenance of the occasion, a sequence, a variety—capable possibly of becoming immense—of representative movements. (126)

Her “countenance of the occasion” suggests a singular mode of identity as performance, which comes close to the notion of haecceity (*this*-ness), nonpersonal individuation, indicated by Deleuze and Guattari—“a mode of individuation very different from that of a person, subject, thing or substance,” consisting instead “entirely of relations of movement and rest and between molecules or particles, capacities to affect and to be affected ” (287-8). In this sense Miriam’s identity (or nonidentity) in perpetual performance comprises a radically nomadic subjectivity. Her versatility, to her would-be suitor, represents a lack of material to “take hold of.” Though she presents the image of a desirable, beautiful woman, her performance of the woman is the act of repetition with a difference, performance that does not produce a stable self-identity, always “becoming.” Again, to quote Deleuze and Guattari’s words, “becoming produces nothing other than itself” (262) as a purely kinetic phenomenon. The ambiguous nature of her desires, along with her ironic usage of language and performative identity, frustrates any observer who tries to “take hold” of her, including the novel’s reader.

The same quality that makes Miriam a brilliant theatrical artist makes her less than ideal as a traditional wife. Peter, an avid lover of theater, falls in love with her “natural” gifts, her perpetual performance both on and off stage. However, what Peter wants is an actress who follows Mademoiselle Voisin’s “evolution” into a gentlewoman, and confines herself to social performance of perfect ladyhood or wifedom on the domestic stage. As with Basil Ransom in *The Bostonians*, Peter expects that Miriam, as the perfect actress, would reflect her husband’s social status and identity like a polished mirror. In fact, as the wife of a diplomat, Miriam would reflect not only Peter’s identity but British identity as a whole. She would embody a heteronormative domestic role, facilitating Britain’s imperialist, nation-building project in Central America. And Peter wants to purge her of “foreign” qualities, just as he desires to purge her of unfeminine qualities that would make her an unsuitable wife. The metaphor of turning an “impure” colonial or exotic identity into a British one resonates in Peter’s courtship of Miriam. As Rowe points out, Peter’s courtship throughout the novel is filled with the rhetoric of imperial conquest of an unknown world (85): “He was most conscious that, at the best, even the trained diplomatic mind would never get a grasp of Miriam as a whole. She was constructed to revolve like the terraqueous globe; some part or other of her was always out of sight or in shadow” (351). Here her failure to be conquered by a male wooer is analogically related to her wide array of contrasting qualities—she is not like one exotic country that can be conquered, but like the whole globe. And while (as the famous patriotic slogan proclaims) “the sun never sets on the British empire,” Miriam is an entity who is always partially in shadow, unknowable and thus uncontrollable.

Miriam’s status as a superior artist marks her as ambiguously gendered: adept both at portraying ideal womanhood, and at existing in the public space that is typically reserved for

men. It also marks her sexuality as ambiguous. J. Hillis Miller points out that in *The Tragic Muse*, “heterosexuality is coded with the respectable vocations of politics and diplomacy, while homosexuality is, to some degree covertly, coded with devotion to art” (33). However, Gabriel Nash has served as the novel’s primary example of a “queer” artistic figure. As Oscar Cargill and other critics have pointed out, the character of Gabriel Nash is specifically modeled on Oscar Wilde, whom James had met some years prior to writing the book. In choosing to abandon politics for painting, Nick Dormer abandons his fiancée Julia in favor of Gabriel, who had encouraged him to pursue art. Miller suggests that James’s complaints about the impossibility of making Nick interesting are “a cover for the implicit admission that he could not make Nick interesting because he could not treat openly the theme of his homosexuality,” a subtext that is perhaps implied in James’s reference to the painter “[turning his back] to us as he bends over his work” (40). Similarly, Eric Haralson discusses Gabriel Nash as an “Oscar Wilde figure” (54), and S. I. Salamensky identifies him as “a sexually problematic social performer” whose presence dramatizes “the propensities, problems, and permutations of performance itself” (62). Michael Wilson also states that Gabriel embodies “the late nineteenth century’s ‘crisis of masculinity’” that helped connect “artistic identity” to “an unconventional, even transgressive desire” (1993, 258). As in Miller’s essay, critical discussion of art, aestheticism and queer sexuality in the novel has concentrated on the aesthetic (and implicitly sexual) relation between Gabriel and Nick, and on Gabriel as “the Oscar Wilde figure,” as an advocate of the novel’s aesthetics and aestheticism.

Indeed, the novel’s association of aestheticism and homosexuality can be seen in other characters’ homophobic reactions to Gabriel. Lady Agnes describes modern aestheticism as “a horrible insidious foreign disease...eating the healthy core out of English life (dear old English life!)” (361), and blames Gabriel for having introduced Nick to it. Characters’ reactions to Nash

suggest the equation of foreignness, queerness and art. Julia Dallow, politically ambitious on Nick's behalf, is also the novel's enforcer of the heterosexual law. Julia comments on Nash as "the vulgar little man": "I remember he abused theatrical people to me—as if I cared anything about them.... I thought him disgusting!" (287). She is disgusted both by his unmanly enjoyment of gossip, and by the subject matter. In Julia's phobic reaction against Gabriel, homophobia and antitheatricity are implicitly associated. Julia's contemptuous reaction to art and aestheticism obviously stems from her bitter experience with her late husband, an art collector who was not interested in politics ("poor George's treasures...he made too much of them—he was always talking" [182]). Discovering both Miriam and Nash gathered at Nick's art studio, with Miriam sitting for her portrait, Julia decides to break her engagement with Nick. "I hate art, as you call it. I thought I did, I knew I did; but till this morning I didn't know how much" (279). Nick senses that Julia's reaction betrays "an old irritation, an old shame, almost—her late husband's flat inglorious taste for pretty things, his indifference to every chance to play a public role. This has been the humiliation of her youth" (280). Their childless marriage, and his early death, implicitly attest to the view that art is non-(re)productive and unhealthy.

Although Julia responds angrily when she finally discovers Miriam's modeling for Nick's portrait, it is not due to jealousy of Miriam, as one might expect, but rather to her disgust for art and its sexual implications. Julia accuses Nick: "That's what you like—doing what you were this morning; with women lolling—with all their things half off—to be painted, and awful people like that man [Gabriel Nash]... That's your innermost preference, that's your secret passion" (278). Julia's grammar ambiguously suggests that spending time with "awful people" like Gabriel is just as much a "secret passion" for Nick as viewing partially-dressed women. And her reference to an "innermost preference" and "secret passion" suggest a concealed but deeply

rooted sexual secret. Julia here conflates art and obscene (vulgar) sexuality. Tellingly, in her confrontation with Nick, Julia asks about his relation to Gabriel, rather than his relation to Miriam:

“Do you like him?”

“Very much.”

“Mercy on us!” Julia strongly breathed. (277)

Julia’s revulsion to Gabriel and Nick’s complicity in the crime of art springs from her equation of the “horrible insidious foreign disease” of aestheticism and the decline of “healthy” heterosexuality.

The novel’s portrayal of Gabriel reinforces its conflation of the queer, the *exotic*, the aesthetic, and the performative. As Salamensky points out, Gabriel’s queerness is accentuated by his foreignness and theatricality (62-63). When he is first introduced to the novel through Bidy’s point of view, he is described as “foreign,” though he is obviously a native Englishman:

[She] placed him as a gentleman, but as a gentleman unlike any other. She would have taken him for very foreign but that the words proceeding from his mouth reached her ear and imposed themselves as a rare variety of English. It was not that a foreigner might not have spoken smoothly enough, nor yet that the speech of this young man was not smooth. It had in truth a conspicuous and aggressive perfection, and Bidy was sure no mere learner would have ventured to play such tricks with the tongue. He seemed to draw rich effects and wandering airs from it—to modulate and manipulate it as he would have done a musical instrument....

While the stranger spoke he looked cheerfully, hospitably, at Bidy; not because it was she, she easily guessed, but because it was in his nature to desire a second auditor—a

kind of sympathetic gallery. Her life was somehow filled with shy people, and she immediately knew she had never encountered any one who seemed so to know his part and recognize his cues. (28-29)

Gabriel plays his social role with the skill of an actor, always aware of his audience and cues. Paradoxically, his highly developed social skills are perceived as unappealing or unsettling by women like Bidy and Julia; his performative awareness of his audience is a foreign trait that no Englishman would possess, and that makes his “performance” unappealing to an antitheatrical English audience.

This passage also hints at the way Nash’s performative style of communication will come to permeate the novel, by suggesting the parallels between a social performer like Nash and a novelist like James.² James’s prose became known for the polished perfection of its style, and for creating rich effects with the English language through unusual stylistic features like double negatives, obscure word choice and elaborate multi-clause sentences. Like Nash, James “play[s] tricks” with the English tongue that few speakers would attempt. James’s distinctive style is usually framed not as virtuosity for its own sake, but as a search for subtle truths. Thus in his essay “The Art of Fiction” James scorns any writer who “admits...that he can give his narrative any turn the reader may like best” and who is not “occupied in looking for truth” (31), but the implied comparison with Gabriel Nash’s speech frames James’s verbal dexterity as a “performance,” directed outward at a reader whose attention James desires, rather than inward at his characters’ psychology. Gabriel’s queer theatrical aesthetic is thus revealed to have affinities with the novelist’s own practice.

² Leon Edel has noticed verbal similarities between Gabriel Nash and James, calling Gabriel a “spokesman” for James’s view: “Gabriel Nash talks undiluted Henry James.... The ‘conspicuous and aggressive perfection’ of Gabriel’s manner of speech corresponds to what we know of the speech of the novelist during the 1880’s” (xiv-xv).

The novel's conflation of foreignness, theatricality and same-sex desire extends to Miriam as well. Salamensky points out that Gabriel's "foreign" and "weird" (32) manner of social performance and speech is equated with the foreignness and theatricality of Miriam and her mother. However, Salamensky, like other critics, focuses solely on the queer relation between Gabriel and Nick, and ignores the relationship between Miriam and other women. In fact, the queer relationship between women is just as revealing of the novel's attitude toward sexuality and performativity. Immediately after observing Gabriel, Bidy (the only female observer of Miriam in the novel) turns her eyes to "the strange women" (30) who are Gabriel's "queer female appendages" (32), and thinks they are like "people whom in any country, from China to Peru, you would have taken for natives" (28). Like Gabriel, Miriam and Mrs. Rooth visually appear to be cosmopolitan, belonging nowhere or everywhere in the world. Just as with Gabriel's queer performance, the description of the Rooths is also marked by a sense of "strange" (140), "formidable" and "appalling" (126), "odd" or even "dangerous" theatricality:

Bidy's slightly agitated perception travelled directly to their shoes: they suggested to her vaguely that the wearers were dancers.... [Miriam] stood where their escort had quitted her, giving all her attention to his sudden sociability with others. Her arms hung at her sides, her head was bent, her face lowered, so that she had an odd appearance of raising her eyes from under her brows; and in this attitude she was striking, though her air was so unconciliatory as almost to seem dangerous. Did it express resentment at having been abandoned for another girl? Bidy, who began to be frightened—there was a moment when the neglected creature resembled a tigress about to spring—was tempted to cry out that she had no wish whatever to appropriate the gentleman. Then she made the discovery

that the young lady too had a manner, almost as much as her clever guide, and the rapid induction that it perhaps meant no more than his. (29-30)

Miriam's queer social performance, associated in the novel with foreignness and theatricality, is described in the same way as Gabriel's.

Miriam has been read as a heterosexual, exploitative female figure who uses male romantic interest and financial power as career stepping stones. Interestingly, in the passage quoted above, Bidy first reads Miriam's expression through a heteronormative frame, thinking that Miriam is jealous of Bidy for monopolizing Gabriel's attention. However, the discerning observer Bidy soon realizes that she is performing, just like Gabriel. Miriam's apparent heterosexual interest is only a performative gesture, one which invites a conventional interpretation but in fact is purely a matter of style. Her "manner," just like Gabriel's, is done for its own sake, rather than as a vehicle to convey an inner meaning. Her manner "meant no more than his," inviting but at the same time forestalling the spectator's further interpretation based on gendered and sexual conventions. This description of Miriam, in her first appearance in the novel, encapsulates her social performance throughout. Spectators desire to pierce through her performance to find a fixed meaning or intention (specifically, they desire to guess her preference for one of her possible suitors, such as Peter or Nick). As a result of her perpetual flirtations with heterosexual performatives and conventions, this desire is never fulfilled. Miriam's opacity is emphasized by the fact that she is never used as a focalizer: We have no direct exhibition of her consciousness whatsoever, but we glimpse it all "inferentially and inductively, seeing it only through a more or less bewildered interpretation of it by others" (preface, 8). Because the narrative never "goes behind" her—another trait she shares with Gabriel—each is more like a theatrical performer than a traditional realist protagonist.

Critics (including Miller, Haralson, Salamensky and Lane) have viewed the relation between Nick and Gabriel as the key site for studying the novel's conflation of art and homosexuality: The two men's homoerotic relationship, which allows Nick to fully devote himself to painting, suggests that the ideal form of art exists in the figure of the celibate or unmarried artist. Miller, for instance, sees the Miriam/Peter romance plot as an attempt to distract from this homoerotic content: "This plot obscures somewhat, perhaps deliberately, the not so covert concern of the novel for the association of an artistic vocation with homosexuality" (33). However, in *The Tragic Muse*, this concern is not limited to male homosexuality. Critics have ignored the significance of female homoeroticism, although it is also strongly associated with art in the novel. A good example is Bidley Dormer, Nick's sister, who aspires to be a sculptor. When this would-be female artist gives up her love for Peter, and decides to devote herself to art, she goes to live in a flat with Florence Tressilian, her best friend. Because female ambition and heterosexual romantic love cannot be reconciled with each other, and because a Victorian woman could not live alone and have an independent studio like Nick, Bidley and Florence form a female bond—a perfect example of a Boston marriage like that of Olive and Verena in *The Bostonians*. Florence has got a flat of her own

that they might have a happy old maids' (for they were old maids now!) house-warming together. If Florry could by this time do without a chaperon—she had two latchkeys and went alone on the top of omnibuses, and her name was in the Red Book—she was enough of a duenna for another girl. Bidley referred with sweet cynical eyes to the fine happy stride she had thus taken in the direction of enlightened spinsterhood; and Nick hung his head, immensely abashed and humiliated, for, modern as he had fatuously supposed himself, there were evidently currents more modern yet. (479)

Biddy and Florence thus create an enabling female autonomous space, a “room of one’s own” where a woman’s independent life and artistic ambition can be realized. Though this “enlightened spinsterhood” is short-lived, since Biddy ends up marrying Peter and will live as an ambassador’s wife at the end of the novel, the text thus suggests a logical link between pursuing art and giving up male love for female companionship.

Same-sex artistic households proliferate in the novel, making clear the association between the artistic vocation and queer or non-heteronormative modes of life. Like Biddy, Miriam forms a temporary female household with her fellow actress, Fanny Rover. Fanny comes to live with her, and her presence in the Rooths’ residence is described as “the principal complication of Balaklava Place.” Critics have ignored the presence of the “improper,” “dreadful Miss Rover,” who is “the only person [Miriam] appears to take any pleasure in” (316) other than her own mother. Though Fanny’s appearance in the novel is very brief, her presence should not be considered insignificant. Fanny is important because of the way she reifies ideas about art and sexuality. Miriam at first appears in the novel as a “vulgar” girl (146) who needs training not only in acting but in sophisticated taste and culture. Like Miriam, Fanny is a “rank *cabotine*,” an affected and not entirely respectable, refined actress. She is depicted as a sexually liberated New Woman, with whom Miriam builds a “liberality of...comradeship”:

Miss Rover was a little actress who played at Miriam’s theatre, combining with an unusual aptitude for delicate comedy a less exceptional absence of rigour in private life. She was pretty and quick and brave, and had a fineness that Miriam professed herself already in a position to estimate as rare. She had no control of her inclinations, yet sometimes they were wholly laudable, like the devotion she had formed for her beautiful colleague, whom she admired not only as an ornament of the profession but as a being

altogether of a more fortunate essence. ...She knew how much her mother feared the proper world wouldn't come in if they knew that the improper, in the person of pretty Miss Rover, was on the ground.... She didn't pretend to be anything but what she meant to be, the best general actress of her time; and what had that to do with her seeing or not seeing a poor ignorant girl who had loved—well, she needn't say what Fanny had done...and when Fanny Rover had asked her quite wistfully if she mightn't come and see her and like her she hadn't bristled with scandalized virtue. (316)

Fanny's past sexual misdeeds are ambiguous: "[Miriam] needn't say what Fanny had done." James's use of aposiopesis is cleverly vague on the subject of Fanny's past, suggesting she has done something forbidden without stating what. The statement that she "had loved" can suggest a conventional story of a girl seduced and abandoned, while also hinting at other, even more taboo possibilities: the love whose object cannot be fixed or named. Like Gabriel, she embodies wayward, moment-by-moment improvisational sexuality. What is threatening about Fanny, who has "no control of her inclinations," is the very fact that her sexuality is not tied to any one object of desire, and is thus unknown. (Fanny's name, "Rover" suggests nomad, wanderer and migrant, echoing Miriam's and her mother's nomadic identities).

Because of Fanny's ambiguous sexuality, she poses a twofold danger to Miriam: both of potential bad example and potential seducer.

It would have made in his spirit a great difference for the worse that the woman [Peter] loved, and for whom he wished no baser lover than himself, should have embraced the prospect of consorting only with the cheaper kind. It was all very well, but Fanny Rover

was simply a rank *cabotine*, and that sort of association was an odd training for a young woman who was to have been good enough...to be his admired wife. (316-317)

The language suggests that Peter may regard Fanny not just as an improper friend, but as a potential rival: Miriam is “the woman...for whom he wished no baser lover than himself,” yet she has “embraced the prospect of consorting only with the cheaper kind.” Merely by being present, Fanny, with her ambiguous sexuality, prevents Peter from “training” Miriam to be his ideal “admired wife.” Later, at the end of Miriam’s successful premier performance in an unspecified play, Miriam reappears on stage, hand in hand with Basil and Fanny, suggesting a threesome-like artistic and personal collaboration between Miriam, her friend and her future husband, who will take charge of the business aspect of her art. This scene suggests that Miriam’s theatrical and aesthetic success cannot be attained without her “association” and “odd training” with other women.

While Fanny is a relatively minor character, the most significant influence on Miriam is another woman, her mother. Miriam’s relation to other women has been ignored by critics, and above all, they have tended to minimize Mrs. Rooth’s importance in the novel. She has not been taken seriously, but has been consistently disregarded and downgraded as comic relief. But Miriam’s career could not have been successful without the presence of her mother, whom Miriam refers to as “really a delicious woman” (109). She is the first advocate of Miriam’s artistic talent, as Gabriel is for Nick’s. In fact, the two women’s relationship, with one mentoring the other, is strikingly similar to that of Gabriel and Nick. The two women are strongly identified with each other throughout the novel. Miriam’s ambition is her mother’s ambition. When Madame Carré tells Miriam that “You oughtn’t to be an actress—you ought to be a governess,” Mrs. Rooth responds “Oh don’t tell us that: It’s to escape from that!” (87). Just like Gabriel, Mrs.

Rooth is a force that moves an aspiring artist's fate. Considering the striking resemblance of the Nick-Gabriel dyad and Miriam-mother dyad, we cannot simply interpret the relation of the two women simply as traditional mother-daughter bonding. Mrs. Rooth is a figure for the transmission of the hybrid, bohemian and performative female culture that is an alternative to canonical male culture, and to the heterosexual marriage offered by Peter.

This is significant given that the traditional marriage plot is a story of a woman choosing a suitor, and thus an identity. In an article on mid-Victorian marriage plots, Ruth Yeazell notes that "in the fiction of courtship, the choice 'which gives a unity to life' retrospectively confirms the coherence of past history as well. A conventional heroine loves only once; from the perspective of that single and final choice, past alternatives prove to have been mere illusions" (143). The nineteenth-century novel of courtship often features an orphaned or motherless female protagonist, in order to more strongly dramatize her search for an identity (James' own *Portrait of a Lady* is one example). By contrast, *The Tragic Muse* depicts a woman who has already acquired a social identity from her mother and the homosocial world of theater—thus rejecting the narrative necessity for a woman to forge an identity (and to deny past "incorrect" identities) by choosing a husband.

The novel subtly conflates Miriam's devotion to art with devotion to her mother: In rejecting Peter, she is choosing both. Robert Falk argues that James decides against the romance between Miriam and Nick in favor of the abrupt marriage between Miriam and Basil in order to preserve Miriam as a "dedicated and wholly committed artist-actress" (158). Lyall H. Powers also states that, after rejecting Peter's suit, Miriam chooses a husband who "in no way detracts from Miriam's life as an artist" (273). Basil, by taking care of the business side of the theater, safeguards the female realm of theatrical art. True, by marrying her fellow-actor and manager,

Miriam ensures that she does not have to give up her art, theater and vocation. However, one should not forget that, by marrying Basil, Miriam also avoids giving up her mother. Had she chosen Peter, becoming the wife of a diplomat in a distant country would mean she would have had to give up not only the theater career but also their life together.

In trying to educate and woo Miriam, Peter tries to enact a conventional narrative of male mentoring. The presence of Mrs. Rooth, even more so than that of Fanny, frustrates and blocks any progress toward this Pygmalion-like narrative resolution. Thus the presence of a queer female artistic tradition blocks the development of a conventional narrative structure for this novel. In reading the Peter-Miriam plot, critics have focused on Peter's choice between the love of Miriam and the theater and his social obligation as a diplomat.³ But the first half of the Peter-Miriam plot can be read as a choice foisted upon Miriam—Peter's repeated (and futile) attempts to educate and “form” Miriam against the maternal influence. Miriam “had never had a friend but her mother—her mother was greater fun than ever now” (311). Peter disapproves of the nomadic life of the two women. The Rooths “rove, drift, float,” and before coming to France, they had moved around Europe together as “wanderers” in “exile” (98), and as “vagabonds” (415)—strongly associated with the “wandering Jew” iconography. The Rooths' nomadic life is regarded negatively by Peter as the source of Miriam's “queernesses”: her impure mixture of languages, nationalities and tastes. Mrs. Rooth's vulgar taste also comes from the circulating library filled with women's fictions, rather than the male-centered literary canon. He hopes to purge this defect by having Miriam read canonical male authors: “You must learn passages of Milton, passages of Wordsworth” (135). Peter hopes to encourage Miriam to choose him, and his aesthetic preferences, over her mother.

³ See, for example, Bellringer and Funstone.

At the same time, he regards Mrs. Rooth's taste for novels and theater dangerously vulgar and anti-domestic. He sees Mrs. Rooth as a negative cultural influence because she is an avid consumer of romantic fictions written by women. Viewed through Peter's eyes, Mrs. Rooth, in limp garments much ungirdled, was on the sofa with a novel, making good her frequent assertion that she could put up with any life that would yield her those two conveniences. There were romantic works Peter had never read and as to which he had vaguely wondered to what class they were addressed.... She had always a greasy volume tucked under her while her nose was bent upon the pages in hand (148-9).

Her "vulgar" literary taste is implicitly linked with the domestic disorder and her "vulgar," wayward sexuality with "limp garments much ungirdled." Sarah Blair points out that Mrs. Rooth's love for books "embodies the reading woman" who voraciously and endlessly consumes and demands pleasure from books, and whose "autonomous female pleasure" comes from a "sofa" and a "novel," two "conveniences" sufficient to yield romantic and sexual pleasure for women that doesn't require a male presence (1996, 499).

Not only is Mrs. Rooth a promiscuous reader of women's novels, embodying the danger of autonomous sexuality and pleasure in reading women, but she is also the embodiment of a vulgar, histrionic aesthetics and a promiscuous user of language. Mrs. Rooth "delighted in novels, poems, perversions, misrepresentations and evasions" (143). "She [Mrs. Rooth] made even the true seem fictive, while Miriam's effort was to make the fictive true" (144). As Blair points out, Mrs. Rooth's "dangerously vulgar" aesthetics and sexuality stem from the tradition of women's fictions (499). Mrs. Rooth is a voracious consumer of "vulgar" romantic novels, and lives on female authors' "romantic works," which are mysterious to men like Peter. Peter also notices and is disgusted by the disorganized rooms of Mrs. Rooth: "the barbarous absence of signs of an

orderly domestic life,” the “vulgarity of Mrs. Rooth’s apartments.” For him, this disorderly (and thus un-domestic) home is “most characteristic of histrionic life” (358): a way of life that is associated with improper women and with the world of theater.

Both Miriam and Peter are consciously aware of her mother’s influence. “Don’t make me vague and arranged and fine in this new view,” she tells Nick as he paints her portrait: “make me characteristic and real; make life, with all its horrid facts and truths, stick out of me. I wish you could put mother in too; make us live there side by side and tell our little story. ‘The wonderful actress and her still more wonderful mamma’—don’t you think that’s an awfully good subject?” (420). Though Miriam’s request is a “wanton humor,” this suggests that Miriam regards her mother’s presence as essential in forming her identity as a successful actress, portraying reality “with all its horrid facts and truths” (410). By contrast, Peter thinks to himself disapprovingly that “It was her mother—the way she talked—who gave the idea that she wanted to be elegant, and very moral, and a *femme du monde*, and all that sort of trash” (109). When Miriam observes that “She’s a tremendous reader; she’s awfully up in literature. She taught me everything herself. I mean all that sort of thing. Of course I’m not so fond of reading; I go in for the book of life,” Peter “wonder[s] if her mother had not at any rate taught her that phrase—he thought it highly probable” (109). But although Mrs. Rooth lacks taste, Peter begins to see that “dramatic talent” evolved in the passage from her to Miriam. “The figurative impulse in the mother had become conscious, and therefore higher, through finding an aim, which was beauty, in the daughter (144). However, this makes it all the more necessary to separate Miriam from her influence.

What Peter tries to inculcate in Miriam is not only aesthetic, but also heterosexual education. His project of wooing Miriam and developing her talent is inextricably connected to his project of separating her from her mother. Peter sees her mother’s presence as a hindrance to

the aesthetic and sexual education necessary to become a great actress, and feels “a certain desire to disconnect and isolate Miriam” from her family heritage (144). Peter takes up Miriam’s “artistic education” (145) with the purpose of the “formation of taste” (149) in her, but it is in fact his attempt to break Miriam away from Mrs. Rooth’s “vulgar” influence, or the “education” she had given Miriam (415), including Miriam’s “gift of tongues” which is “the sign of your true adventurer”, the mark of a vagabond (415). In order to become a proper English wife, Miriam must not only be purged of foreign mannerisms, but of the homosocial female aesthetic influence of her mother.

While Peter wants to become Miriam’s sole influence—shaping her taste and skill, and determining her life path—he is stymied not by a single rival, but by a multitude of female influences. He tries to compete not only with Mrs. Rooth and Fanny but with Miriam’s acting mentor, the legendary actress Madame Carré, who is responsible for “breaking [Miriam] in” (145). Madame Carré’s Wildean belief that “art was everything and the individual nothing” (131) aligns her, too, with Gabriel Nash. Peter becomes jealous of her influence over Miriam, and anxious to make certain that “she wouldn’t taste this experience without him, [he desires to] not let Madame Carré, for instance, take her in his absence” any more (222). In Peter’s reference to “taking her,” artistic experience is translated as sexual experience. The description of Miriam’s training as an actress and awakening as an artist is indeed filled with homoerotic, sensual contacts between women. Madame Carré’s acting lessons take the form of “innermost counsels” (147), suggesting spiritual and physical intimacy. Madame Carré, Miriam’s “terrible initiatress,” “undressed this young lady, as it were, from head to foot, turned her inside out, weighed and measured and sounded her” (129). And Miriam “took it all as a bath, a baptism, with shuddering joy and gleeful splashes, staring, wondering, sometimes blushing and failing to follow, but not

shrinking nor wounded; laughing, when convicted, at her own expense and feeling evidently that this at last was the high cold air of art, an initiation, a discipline that nothing could undo” (131). Finally approving of Miriam’s performance and admitting her talent, “Madame Carré folded her pupil to her bosom, holding her there as the old marquise in a *comédie de mœurs* might in the last scene have held her god-daughter the ingénue” (216), “resting her hand caressingly on one of the actress’s” (217). As we have seen in the previous chapter, artistic training takes the form of sensual pleasure when it is given by another woman.

The world of the theater is a homosocial, queer space where multiple objects of desire and imitation can coexist. Yet another female mentor is Voisin, a celebrated actress from whom Miriam learns that being an elegant lady is a matter of gesture and performance. This worldly and experienced performer demonstrates the proper performance of social class. Observing her on stage, Basil Dashwood interprets her onstage manner as follows: “See how I walk, see how I set, see how quiet I am and how I have *le geste rare*. Now can you say I ain’t a lady?” He continues, “She does it all as if she had a class.... She shows them [*femmes du monde*] how to act in society” (223). And Miriam says that “tonight I’m her class” (223): Just seeing her act in society is a form of acting training for Miriam. If Madame Carré teaches Miriam the technique of being an actress, Mademoiselle Voisin shows her how to behave in society as *femme du monde*. Miriam is fascinated and greatly influenced by Mademoiselle Voisin: “I want to be what she is—I want it more than ever” (233). Miriam’s ambition and desire is characterized throughout by this mimetic, identificatory desire for other women; she also “want[s] to be the English Rachel” (135). And she is impressed by Mademoiselle Voisin’s lack of an evident “true” identity. She gushes to Peter that “She’s strange, she’s mysterious.... She showed us nothing—nothing of her real self” (234). Her relationship with this female role model is an imitative, self-transformative

infatuation with the other, in contrast to the possessive love of Peter, who tells Miriam, “What I want is you yourself” (234).

In desiring to imitate Mademoiselle Voisin, whose ladyhood is artificial (as implied by the lower-class grammar Basil attributes to her), Miriam engages in an imitation of femininity that has no origin. This unsettles the essentialist notion of origin/imitation, original/copy, subject/object that an aesthetic purist like Peter might endorse. Instead of an origin or essence, what these women’s art reveals is a tradition, a learned body of styles and techniques.

Mademoiselle Voisin expresses “an impression of style, of refinement, of the long continuity of a tradition” (232), while Madame Carré embodies what all great actors and actresses must ultimately exhibit, the “miracle” of continuity, of having “reconciled being alive to-day with having been alive so long ago” (83). In the feminine theatrical tradition, artistic training is associated with the pleasure of self-transformation.

Though Peter desires to detach Miriam from this female tradition, he soon realizes the futility of his efforts. “He had fine ideas, but she was to act them out, that is to apply them, and not he; and application was of necessity a vulgarization, a smaller thing than theory” (147). The application is a “vulgarization” both because his ideas do not seem as fine in practice as in his idealized imagination, and because Miriam “vulgarizes” them by refracting them through her own cosmopolitan, female aesthetic. As we have seen, Peter’s “education of the taste” (54) to make Miriam into a sophisticated actress is paradoxically conflated with his antitheatrical efforts to eradicate Miriam’s vulgar theatrical “queernesses.” As if exemplifying Andreas Huyssen’s analysis of modernists’ antitheatrical opposition to mass culture as debasingly “feminine,”

vulgarity, embodied in Mrs. Rooth and reflected in Miriam, works as a counter-force against the traditional Anglo-Saxon and male-centered aesthetics of high art.⁴

Anticipating the modernist opposition to the theater, mass culture and audience, Gabriel, theatrical as he is, famously criticizes the contemporary theater's dependence on audience as a proof of its vulgarity, denouncing the theater as "a commercial and social convenience," a form "too limited" to be "important artistically, intellectually" (53). Himself a prose writer, Gabriel speaks here as a purveyor of the modernist belief that painting, along with the novel, is the supreme form of art, while downgrading the theater as an embodiment of mass culture, and hence implicitly feminine.⁵

As portrayed by James, however, Miriam's "vulgar" hybrid style—at once "sensitive and dense... underbred and fine... very various"—is not inferior to the "pure" style endorsed by Peter, but is rather the pinnacle of art. In the climactic scene of Miriam's career, an English Rachel is born, as Nick witnesses her success. "She was beauty, melody, truth, she was passion and persuasion and tenderness." Miriam carries theatrical art into "the high places of poetry, of art, of style.... And she had such tones of nature, such concealments of arts, such effusions of life, that the whole scene glowed with the colour she communicated, and the house, pervaded with rosy fire, glowed back at the scene" (423). Art and life, theatricality and authenticity, become one on Miriam's stage. Nick is as equally impressed with "the crowd, the agitation, the triumph, the surprise, the signals and rumours, the heated air" (423) as with Miriam's performance. Miriam's success as an actress is measured by the audience's applause: theater functions as a communal space shared between art and audience. Though Miriam is now a sophisticated actress and a social performer offstage, her success is also vulgarized by the mass

⁴ See Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, 44-62.

⁵ Gabriel's diatribe against theater curiously anticipates Michael Fried's criticism of minimalist art for its dependency on beholders, a trait he sees as theatricalizing and vulgarizing visual art. For details, see Fried.

audience and commercial aspects of theater. Rather than being diminished by the crowd, though, her triumph affirms the “vulgar” side of theatrical art, turning it from “low” to high art. At this moment Miriam’s performance democratizes art, making it into something shared with the audience.

Miriam’s public triumph is particularly dramatic in contrast to the more modest success of Nick’s painting. While Miriam “represent[s] truly,” Nick’s painting is comparably ineffectual and unable to represent the world. At the end of the novel, Nick’s only completed painting is his portrait of Julia, which, as the narrator suggests on the final page of the novel, garners “general attention” at a “private view” exhibition (491). In contrast, his two portraits of Miriam (which should be the novel’s promised “satisfactory ‘symbolic action,’” in Kenneth Burke’s words [quoted in Miller 34]) remain unfinished, against the reader’s expectations. Similarly, Nick’s portrait of Gabriel is left unfinished, because Gabriel abruptly disappears from Nick’s life. The failure of Nick’s paintings to serve as symbolic action equal to Miriam’s performance is parallel to his comparably minor role as a character in the novel. And yet again, this suggests the greater power and agency of Miriam’s performative art. Portraits contain static images, controlled objects. In contrast, the art of performing one’s identity is filled with transformative, “incalculable” movements. Miriam’s self is presented as a series or variety, not one stable, unitary image, and therefore it is unsurprising that her art—her self—cannot be contained in the static frame of fine art. Both the novel’s ending and the ending of Nick’s career indicate James’s need to accept that art must garner an audience’s approval and response.

While Miriam ultimately follows Victorian novelistic convention by marrying, the novel does not present her marriage as bringing an end to her homoerotic aesthetic practices. In having Miriam marry Basil, the novel allows Miriam and her mother to preserve the new aesthetic space

of theater, as a same-sex, collaborative project. Though James in his preface suggests that Miriam is in love with Nick, and critics have read Miriam's sexual interest accordingly,⁶ what is outstanding in the novel is that Miriam in fact shows no sexual interest in men. John Carlos Rowe suggests that Nick's interest in Miriam is purely aesthetic rather than romantic (92). Similarly, Miriam's interest in Nick seems to be that of a fellow artist, possessing no romantic element despite the speculations of male satellites such as Peter or Gabriel.⁷ Miriam's lack of heterosexual interest in men is also evident to the reader even in her marriage to Basil Dashwood. In choosing Basil, she is actually marrying her art, choosing the theater as her muse—comparable to a celibate artist, such as James himself.

Accordingly, Miriam's aesthetic awakening is also a queer or autosexual awakening. Peter describes the improved performance he witnesses at Madame Carré's residence (when she plays Constance in Shakespeare's *King John*) as follows:

Miriam had found the key to her box of treasures. In the summer, during their weeks of frequent meeting, she had only fumbled with the lock. One October day, while he was away, the key had slipped in, had fitted, or her finger had at last touched the right spring and the capricious casket had flown open. (216)

Rowe interprets this passage as Miriam's masturbatory awakening for art (91). Indeed, this passage records Miriam's artistic improvement metaphorically as an autoerotic sexual awakening, a box unlocked by a key she found or by her own hand, which does not necessitate a male presence or assistance. This passage is in stark contrast to Basil Ransom's heterosexual metaphor

⁶ For example, see Miller and Brooks.

⁷ After the manner of James in his preface, Gabriel tells Peter that Miriam is in love with Nick. However, other than Gabriel's repeated verdict that Miriam will be, or is, in love with Nick, we don't see much romance going on between the two artists. As Rachel Brownstein points out, her passion is "for her art and herself as an artist" (258). The novel's heterosexual plotting thus fails in the actual, or "scenic" (to borrow James's word) representations of characters.

of the box (in which Verena is caught) and the key to open it in *The Bostonians*. The metaphor of a box reappears when Peter proposes to Miriam on the condition that she will give up the stage. Miriam points out the egotism in Peter's proposal: "I please you because you see; because you know; and because I please you, you must adapt me to your convenience, you must take me over, as they say. You admire me as an artist and therefore you wish to put me into a box in which the artist will breathe her last" (431). Here, Miriam suggests that the closed box, or the male imposition of heterosexual marriage, will destroy her as an artist. Miriam's ambition as a performer challenges constrictive forms, and, unlike Verena in *The Bostonians*, she refuses to be "boxed" by marrying Peter.

In this novel, "vulgar" theatricality is not only the counterforce to high art (such as the literary canons Peter introduces to Miriam as part of her aesthetic education), but is also suggested as a counterforce to normative sexuality. Litvak observes that "vulgarity" in James is coded "not only as that which is 'low' in terms of class hierarchy, but also—in anticipation of more recent usage—as that which is "low" (i.e., disreputable) in terms of sexual behavior or sexual representation" (237). Miriam not only embodies aesthetic vulgarity but also sexual vulgarity. The recurrent representations of women's auto/homo-eroticism show James's attempt to represent the subject of homoerotic desire in women. But while Gabriel Nash is expelled as an abject being from the novel, Miriam remains at center stage. Gabriel vanishes as an icon of negativity, suggesting the failure of the attempt at homosexual representation. As Christopher Lane observes, "The removal of Nash's body represents the novel's frantic erasure of homosexual meaning.... By leaving the group, Nash relieves the group of its surplus member: the confirmed bachelor whom the novel cannot pair off" (755, 759).

The presence—or the outstanding absence—of this queer character might suggest the failure of homosexual representation, but it also necessitates a departure from traditional novel form, which dictates that major characters should remain until the end so that readers can learn their fates. But this negative structural feature is not the only way in which queer sexuality exerts its force on the novel's structure. James represents the same-sex aesthetic project of life-as-art as failing in the relation between Gabriel and Nick. For *The Tragic Muse*'s female characters, it remains possible because of the very openness of performance/theatricality to otherness, and of the ontological complexity of the actress. Miriam differs dramatically from other Jamesian characters who defy gender and literary conventions. As Richard Salmon observes, James abandons the nineteenth-century convention of the immorality and negativity of actresses, theater and female performance in *The Tragic Muse* and as a result, "Miriam breaks through the medium of her objectification, and is able to exercise a subjectivity which is denied to Verena" (41).

Sarah Blair interprets James's representation of Miriam's cosmopolitanism as both a challenge to English culture and, at the same time, James's own reaction to the threatening elements of modernity; "...a defense against the 'contagion' inherent to cosmopolitanism itself metonymically links up not only with the Jew, but with related figures: decadents, anarchists, homosexuals" (510). The symbol of all the negativity rampant in late nineteenth-century literature—"more than half a Jewess"(49), a "poor working-girl," "foreign," theatrical, vulgar, and sexually ambiguous—through Miriam's performance magically becomes a positive icon, a symbol of positive heterogeneity.

If, in this novel, high art unexpectedly takes the form of theatricality, the theatrical is also found in sites that are supposed to be purified of them. This is apparent in the novel's portrayal of Nick Dormer. Though Nick is a brilliant rhetorician and an ideal candidate for election, he is

aware of the staginess of his own political speeches and despises his own talent as insincere. While he is described as a talented speaker on the political platform, Nick admits: “I always [know how to speak perfectly]...and that’s what I’m ashamed of. I speak beautifully. I’ve got the cursed humbugging trick of it. I can turn it on, a fine flood of it, at the shortest notice. The better it is the worse it is—the kind’s so inferior. It has nothing to do with the truth or with any search for it, nothing to do with the effort really to understand or really to discuss—with intelligence or candor or honesty” (76). The narrator also refers to “his factitious public utterances” (197). Gabriel criticizes the hollowness of political speech, telling Nick that poets build cathedrals out of words because “*Their* words are ideas—their words are images, enchanting collocations and unforgettable signs. But the verbiage of parliamentary speeches!” (118). At the same time as the novel positively presents Miriam’s performative art, it portrays Nick’s speeches as hollow and valueless due to precisely the same quality. The effect of this is paradoxically to portray the patriotic male realm of politics, but *not* the queer, cosmopolitan world of the theater, as dangerously insincere.

This ontological hollowness also infects the novel’s portrayal of heterosexual romance. The novel presents marriage and politics analogously as respectable alternatives to art. In fact, for Nick, the two choices are linked. Nick’s political career is equal to a heterosexual marriage contract, as Julia accepts Nick’s marriage proposal only on the condition that Nick runs in the parliamentary election. On the day that they become engaged, Julia tells him “You must be a very great man.... If I didn’t think you could I wouldn’t look at you” (179). Therefore, his political speech performance functions almost as a marriage contractual speech. It is a performative utterance whose main function is to secure Julia’s hand in marriage, rather than to express Nick’s true feelings ~~or to represent anything in the real world~~. However, Nick is well

aware of the power of his speech and at the same time of its emptiness. The effect of this is to “queer” the novel’s most prominent heterosexual relationship. Devoid of sincerity, political and heteronormative speech takes on the status of empty gesture that carries no truth.

Ultimately, the novel’s most passionately antitheatrical character, Julia Dallow, is also presented as infected by stagy insincerity. Julia, who is the novel’s antitheatrical and homophobic advocate, is no exception to the overall theatricality of society. Nick comments to Julia: “You’re a very accomplished woman and a very zealous one; but you haven’t an idea, you know—not to call an idea. What you mainly want is to be at the head of a political salon; to start one, to keep it up, to make it a success” (77). For Nick, politics is just public performance without “truth,” superficial and hollow. Just as Julia wants Nick to become a political performer, Julia desires to be mistress of a political salon as a social performer. Nick asks her “Must you *always* live in public, Julia?” and criticizes “the appearances and imitations, the pretences and hypocrisies” of the political world she moves in (21). Julia knows the importance of following the conventions of this world: “The things I say are the right things” (173). Though Julia detests the theater as decadent and immoral, she envisions herself as a performer at the political salon without “an idea.”

Ultimately, the novel presents two traditional sites of meaning, politics and heterosexual love, as “queered” by their performative nature. In this case, it is a negative version of performativity that excludes sincerity. Nick’s skill at speaking elegantly does not transmit any deeply felt ideas or representative content (for instance, a political program that he wishes to advance). Instead, his very facility at producing “fine floods” of speech is presented as precluding such meaningful content. Similarly, Julia’s desire for a platform does not spring from some goal or idea, but substitutes for such an idea. Julia’s and Nick’s inability to perform with

sincerity is in stark contrast to Miriam, who is explicitly presented as succeeding because she is able to unite a variable, performative nature (she is “always acting”) with a deep sincerity—sincerity in art, vocation, her own desire and self.⁸ The difference lies in the self-fashioned nature of Miriam’s identity: While Nick has seemingly stepped into the preexisting role of political speaker, Miriam has created her artistic persona through “work.” The novel’s ambivalent portrayal of theatricality presents it as a negative feature of political life, while presenting the theater itself as, paradoxically, a space for sincere expression. All the characters’ identities are presented as performative; ultimately, though, Miriam represents a “positive” version of performativity because she has created her own identity as an artistic and social performer rather than stepping into a pre-fabricated slot.

The novel’s portrayal of theatricality is further complicated by the performativity inherent in the text itself. While the realist novel is often considered a referential genre that works to craft an illusion of authentic content, *The Tragic Muse* departs from this convention in several ways. Its textual practice undermines the concluding gestures that would normally give meaning to what came before. While the novel ends in conventional fashion with marriage, this heteronormative gesture is denaturalized. The multiple marriages (which consolidate the “natural” relationship between gender and sexuality) attained as the novel’s denouement appear unnatural or contrived. The final chapter, which informs the reader of the marriages between Miriam and Basil and between Peter and Bidy, and the reconciliation between Julia and Nick, one after another, is strangely brief, abrupt and inconclusive, almost to the level of improbability. While

⁸ Miriam can also be said to be at once “sincere” and “authentic” in Lionel Trilling’s terms, in that “sincerity” involves a moral and social imperative to perform one’s self truly to others, and authenticity is to be true to one’s inner self regardless of social conventions. In this sense, she destabilizes the moral dichotomy between true and false, authenticity and inauthenticity, sincerity and theatricality in nineteenth-century antitheatrical discourse. Her presence thus challenges the nineteenth-century notion of theatricality as something insincere, inauthentic and immoral.

the narrator for the most part remains invisible, “going behind” the characters in traditional realist manner to reveal their thoughts, here the narrator becomes voluble and works to tie up the loose ends. In particular, in the last paragraphs the narrator appears like a theatrical stage chorus, as if clumsily trying to put an end to the performance that has run wild. The narrator reveals Miriam’s marriage after the fact, when Biddy tells Nick “Why, she’s married—these three days. They did it very quietly.... All the same she’s Basil Dashwood’s wedded wife.” The text further mutes the emotional impact of the marriage by implying that it was done partly for business reasons: “He has come in just in time to take the receipts for Juliet. It’s a good thing, no doubt, for there are at least two fortunes to be made out of her” (487).

We are informed of Peter and Biddy’s marriage in an even more oblique way, by being told that Biddy “knew of [Peter’s presence in town] by his pressing the little electric button at the door of Florence Tressilian’s flat, one day when the good Florence was out and she herself was at home. He made on this occasion a very long visit” (491). And the novel implies that Nick and Julia will ultimately marry by suggesting that his rival will be disappointed: “I must not omit to add, this lady has not, at the latest accounts, married Mr. Macgeorge. It is very true there has been a rumour that Mr. Macgeorge is worried about her—has even ceased to believe in her” (492). This negative affirmation of Nick and Julia’s ultimate union suggests that this outcome is one of many arbitrary possible choices. The novel provides readers with the narrative closure they expect, while denying them the emotional engagement that would result from romantic scenes of proposals or weddings. In a sense, the novel *performs* the heterosexual ending of nineteenth-century fiction in a clumsy manner that shows that it is a performance, just like Miriam’s social performance at her entrance in the novel as observed by Biddy. Just as with Nick’s “factitious public utterances” (197), the last pages speak of the emptiness of the

heteronormative literary tradition, which does not necessarily convey “the truth” or “an idea.” And this abruptness is a blatant sign of the novel’s notorious failure to reach a proper ending in time and in place, which, as Miller observes, would “allow the work to serve as a satisfactory ‘symbolic action’” (34). The final chapter’s awkward abruptness suggests the difficulty of finding a satisfactory end to a work infected with the contagious power of non-heteronormative elements inherent in theatricality.

Not only the novel’s ending, but also its entire structure, eludes the author’s original vision, resulting in a textual version of “queer performativity” in which the original intention of language/narrative does not match with the result. *The Tragic Muse*, as James acknowledges in the preface, demonstrates what he calls a “misplaced middle.” James states: “Again and again, perversely, incurably, the center of my structure would insist on placing itself not, so to speak, in the middle...defying and resisting me.” James vaguely attributes this structural problem to “the usual difficulties,” and goes on to attribute this problem of a misplaced middle to his earlier novels as well: Narrative structure has come apart “time after time...in several of my compositions” (5). Tellingly, James attributes the problem to the need to infuse the novel with theatrical qualities: “The first half of a fiction insists ever on figuring to me as the stage or theatre for the second half, and I have in general given so much space to making the theatre propitious that my halves have too often proved strangely unequal” (6). His complaint that the novel’s “precious waistband or girdle...worked itself...to a point perilously near the knees” (5) figuratively equates the novel’s ungainly structure with Mrs. Rooth’s “much ungirdled” state of dress, further associating it with histrionic female theatricality. James portrays the theatrical as something that “insists” on appealing to him, and that overshadows properly novelistic qualities (such as balanced structure) despite his desire to the contrary. The eclipsing of novelistic

structure by theatrical appeal parallels the eclipsing, in this novel, of Nick by Miriam, suggesting that the inclusion of this theatrical character has made James's "usual" structural problem painfully evident.

Indeed, Miriam's qualities as a character carry over to the novel's text itself; her acting is described as "overflow[ing] with metaphor" (425), while James uses a series of metaphors to describe her: a globe, a box of treasures, "the shifting of the scene in a play or... a room with many windows" (359). If, as Litvak observes, James's novel takes on the qualities it attributes to Miriam, Miriam takes on the qualities of a work of art: She is presented as an art object, and also the object of (male) gaze, observation and desire, like Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance*. However, unlike Zenobia, Miriam's representation is never finished. She is presented as the perfect subject matter for a work of art, while also making it impossible for a static representation of her to be completed. Her portrait by Nick is described as "unfinished, simplified and in some portions merely suggested... strong, vivid and assured, [having] already the look of life and the promise of power" (303), bespeaking not only Nick's artistic power but Miriam's aesthetic way of being. It is no surprise that the two portraits of Miriam remain unfinished, as there is no end in Miriam's self-representations.

In fact, Miriam's mother suggests that one portrait cannot adequately capture her daughter. When Miriam decides to pose for Nick's second portrait, her mother requests: "The smile in her eyes—don't forget the smile in her eyes! ... That will make it so different from the other picture and show the two sides of her genius, with the wonderful range between them" (413). Mrs. Rooth's suggestion of making two different pictures of Miriam (one the tragic, the other the comic muse) to capture a more truthful representation of her identity and her "genius" is very apt one. A single image of her will never represent Miriam's self, consisting as it does of

a variety of faces and attitudes, nor her “wonderful range” of different performances. Mrs. Rooth’s words elucidate the fact that Miriam’s malleable identity resides in the very range of identities that she takes on. If, as Brooks says, theater is “a medium for the representation of character, character seized in motion,” the novel, by not finishing Miriam’s portraits, accentuates the actress as a character best represented “seized in motion” (93). Emerging as the decentering center, the actress fills the novel with her theatricality, her moment-to-moment performance revealing itself as “a thing alive,” constantly growing, changing, and becoming something else. This organic and loosely structured aesthetics corresponds to what James describes in the preface as the energies of “life” and their “queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary” in a “loose, baggy” monster called a novel (4).

In accord with Miriam’s growth as an actress, the novel’s structure thus gradually moves away from the author’s intention and control toward a theatrical vision, absorbing the theater’s improvisational impulse.⁹ The uniqueness of James’s protheatricalism and departure from literary conventions is somewhat less surprising considering that James wrote this work with the intention of giving up writing long novels in favor of a career as a dramatist (Powers, 270). Although James hoped for commercial success, his “dramatic years” ended in failure with the disastrous opening night of *Guy Domville* in 1894. If Miriam’s success as a dramatic artist reflects James’s own ambition, the novel also encodes, by focusing on Miriam’s life-as-art way of living, James’s attempts to represent the interconnection between aestheticism and homo/auto-eroticism through female theatricality. By endorsing Miriam, rather than Nick, as a successful artist who continues to grow beyond the novel’s structure and ending, James entrusts the

⁹ Michael Anesko aptly states that *The Tragic Muse* “betrays the absence of controlling authority (138). Adam Seth Lowenstein explains the novel’s lack of coherent structure as a result of its serial publication over the course of seventeen months in *Atlantic Monthly*. Serial publication, just like theater, depends on the reception of audience/readers. The oversized serialization’s “aesthetic possibilities of the mutable, improvisational, and spectacular vitality” (145) is also true of theatrical aesthetics embodied by Miriam.

novelist's power of representation to the actress's ability to "represent truly," without being caught in a fixed frame of meaning and (sexual) identity.

The Tragic Muse was not a noteworthy critical success for James; Miller points out that the novel was "in its own way as much a failure as *Guy Domville* was to be" (32). James himself complains in the preface that it received virtually no critical attention and marked the end of his ability to place his novels in journals: "The influence of *The Tragic Muse* was thus exactly other than what I had all earnestly (if of course privately enough) invoked for it, and I remember well the particular chill, at last, of the sense of my having launched it in a great grey void from which no echo or message whatever would come back" (2). This comparative failure may have sprung from James's inability to achieve his vision of imbuing Nick's story with interest and producing a properly balanced narrative structure. Nevertheless, the same qualities that made the book imperfect (in James's and others' eyes) as a novel also mark its protagonist, Miriam, as a successful performer: its privileging of "staginess" over traditional realist interiority and its performative lack of satisfying ultimate "meaning." This protheatrical work depicts a woman who is able to succeed in art and life because she creates, not only art, but the talent and ability from which her art springs. In portraying a woman whose portrait cannot be painted, James created a character whose genius is always in the process of forming, or becoming, itself.

CONCLUSION

“Something Huge and Fantastically Vulgar”:

Democracy and Female Theatricality

In an 1877 essay, “The London Theatres,” James notes the increasing predominance of theater in London, and the “mania” of theatergoing among Londoners: “It pervades society—it breaks down barriers.... Plays and actors are perpetually talked about, private theatricals are incessant, and members of the dramatic profession are ‘received’ without restriction. They appear in society, and the people of society appear on the stage; it is as if the great gate which formerly divided the theatre from the world had been lifted off its hinges” (*Scenic Art*, 119-120).

Theater, in James’s view, is conceived as an open space where society and theater, actors and people, private and public, high and low, get mixed up and merged. This radically open spatiality of theater and theatricality comes from the theater’s incessant negotiation between the stage and audience, self and other, an actor and a role, presenting itself as a dynamic phenomenon, rather than a static art. As a result, theater—as well as the performance and performer—does not produce singular or stable identities. This spatial dynamicity entails what James calls “democrat[ization]” (120) of theater, and thus society. Theater, an art form traditionally seen as less elite than painting, sculpture and poetry, creates space for “vulgar” subjectivities to be presented sympathetically. The ability of performers to be received in society is indicative of a wider trend in which people from a wide array of backgrounds claim space in public life. James’s observation keeps step with the general cultural awareness of changing norms in England and American in the nineteenth century.

In the nineteenth-century novel, this democratic, heterogeneous tendency is often indicated by the presence of theatrical women from ambiguous class or ethnically mixed

backgrounds, culminating in the figure of Miriam Rooth. In texts like James's, the appeal of the theater is connected to the ambivalent draw of the vulgar. Miriam Rooth's success, according to the aesthete Gabriel Nash, will be "something huge and fantastically vulgar. Its vulgarity would rise to the grand style, like that of a London railway station, and the publicity achieved by their charming charge be as big as the globe itself. . . . It would be splendid dreadful grotesque" (352). In *The Tragic Muse*, vulgarity—a trait traditionally associated with queer, ethnic and excessively female as well as lower-class identities—is presented not as a threat to art, but as an essential component of it.

The figure of female performer/theater is revealed something kinetic, non-static, overflowing limits and boundaries, just as theatricality potentially subverts the carefully inscribed boundaries of society. The theatrical elements thus serve to unsettle the notion of mimetic, static representation of realism by introducing a (post)modernist conception of the fluidity of the self—the self constantly in negotiation with others. It is not surprising then to find that this reflecting/deflecting, constructive/deconstructive power of theatricality and performance has been a vital element in the history of women's empowerment. As Susan Glenn observes in *Female Spectacle: Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism*, the expressive possibilities displayed by turn-of-the-century female performers such as Sarah Bernhardt, at once "agents and metaphors of changing gender relations" (3), as well as their effect on audiences, contributed to the emergence and development of modern feminism, opening the way for the widening cultural intelligibility of the "new," emancipated woman (6). The figure of the actress encapsulates many of the traits of the liberated woman, including her public presence and career success as well as her perceived ability to manipulate conventions of feminine behavior to her own advantage.

These subversive elements are present in the female performers within the novels surveyed here: Miriam, along with Zenobia, Jean Muir, Christie Devon, Lucy Snowe, and Verena Tarrant.

Theatricality has been traditionally conflated with vulgarity *and* femininity. Therefore, antitheatricalists view theatricality as unfeminine, inauthentic, insincere and artificial. In the novel, this antitheatrical attitude is sometimes apparent. However, these narratives also provide a space for female performers to be portrayed positively as the subjects of female *Bildungsroman*. In these texts, theatricality, just as much as gender performativity, can denaturalize and destabilize the coded gestures of gender and sexuality, allowing the women at the center of the texts to escape from stifling or oppressive expectations. The power of female theatricality comes from these “unfeminine” negative traits, transforming them into enabling possibilities for women’s self-empowerment or self-creation, and bringing out a positive vision of theatrical selfhood. Just as Miriam’s heterogeneous, nomad identity subverts the conventions of heteronormativity, performing women, as well as performing texts, creates a dynamic open space in which the text and the reader, the stage and the audience, the novel and the society, are in a transformative dialectics constantly mobilizing and mobilized in its infinite process.

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