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## **Moral Performances: Melodrama and Nineteenth-Century American Literature**

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The University of Southern Mississippi

MORAL PERFORMANCES: MELODRAMA AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY  
AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

Jeffrey Taylor Pusch

Abstract of a Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School  
of The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2011

## ABSTRACT

### MORAL PERFORMANCES: MELODRAMA AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY

### AMERICAN LITERATURE

By Jeffrey Taylor Pusch

December 2011

Despite a high number of ticket sales, theater reviews, and innumerable letters and diary entries detailing trips to the theater, the stereotype that theater in nineteenth-century America was almost culturally invisible continued well into the twentieth century. Indeed, a scan of anthologies of American literature fails to yield any examples of nineteenth-century drama, even though figures like Henry James were also theater critics and playwrights. Just as it did in American life, theater exhibits a strong presence in the literature of the time. Considering theater's pervasiveness, this dissertation seeks to restore it to its proper place in our study of nineteenth-century American literature. By contextualizing nineteenth-century literature within a framework of theater, specifically melodrama, we might be able to discern how writers of the period used theater as a vehicle to grapple with form, genre, and approach to audience. This dissertation examines the Catherine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*, and Louisa May Alcott's *Behind a Mask*. In their novels, these writers harness the power of theater for thematic or generic purposes while simultaneously exposing the inherent weakness of the dramatic form. There is strength in theater, they argue, but ultimately the effect is reduced to nothing more than shadows on the cave wall. For this reason, American writers utilized melodrama's strengths while, at

the same time, built a case for fiction's primacy and consequently made arguments for the existence of their own writing.

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MORAL PERFORMANCES: MELODRAMA AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY  
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by

Jeffrey Taylor Pusch

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School  
of The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## CHAPTER I

## SETTING THE STAGE FOR AMERICAN THEATER

In the second volume of *Democracy in America* (1840), Alexis de Tocqueville writes, “Although spectators and spectacles have increased enormously in the United States in the last forty years, the population still indulges in this genre of amusement only with extreme restraint” (468). The statement seems humorously paradoxical, implying that American theater in the early nineteenth-century was immensely popular yet rarely patronized. The theater, de Tocqueville seems to argue, is both everywhere and nowhere; it is a popular form of entertainment that is somehow occluded from national consciousness. Despite de Tocqueville’s assertion that theatrical attendance “increased enormously,” not just for imported European dramas (read: Shakespeare) but for native productions as well, theater itself seemed almost invisible.<sup>1</sup> The stereotype that theater remained invisible, despite evidence of ticket sales, continues into the twentieth century. Indeed, a scan of anthologies of American literature fails to yield any examples of nineteenth-century American drama. For example, both the Norton and the Macmillan anthologies of American literature include Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast* (1790), but neither anthology includes any drama from the 1800s, even though canonical figures like William Dean Howells and Henry James were also theater critics and playwrights themselves. The Norton Anthology’s next example of American drama, after *The Contrast*, is Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles* (1917), while the Macmillan’s next is *The Hairy Ape*

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<sup>1</sup> Theater historian and critic Susan Harris Smith argues that many factors, some originating in the nineteenth century and instantiated by twentieth-century universities work to subordinate drama’s position in the canon. She cites Puritan distrust for theater (a distrust that lingered far beyond the 17<sup>th</sup> century), the New Critics’ denigration of nineteenth-century drama’s simplistic language, universities’ fear of liberal/vulgar/subversive performances by students, and the primacy of poetry in college classrooms and anthologies. For a more in-depth analysis, see Smith, *American Drama: The Bastard Art*.

(1922), by Eugene O'Neill. A student who believes such anthologies to be an accurate cross-section of American literature might forget that drama existed altogether in nineteenth-century America.

Not only did theater exist in nineteenth-century America; it flourished. Indeed, the theater itself was a popular sight in pre-Revolution America, and became ubiquitous in the early decades of the subsequent century. While not a publicly subsidized institution as it was in France, the theater nevertheless constantly made its presence felt. Constance Rourke, for example, calls Americans a “theatrical race,” stating that even in some of the more far-flung towns of the American frontier, amateur actors would stage their own theatricals (110). Both William Dunlap and Dion Boucicault became renowned for their adaptations of European plays. The clamor for national literature in the early part of the century was echoed by the call for national drama as well. While the lack of an international copyright law made it more profitable for playwrights and theater managers to adapt European plays to the American stage, there was a push for more “American” drama. For example, actor Edwin Forrest offered a high price for any playwright who could write a distinctly American play with an Indian as the lead. Forrest chose Augustus Stone’s *Metamora; or the Last of the Wampanoags* (1829) as the prize-winner. The play was a hit, Forrest rode the success of his performance as *Metamora*, and the play helped incorporate its stereotypes of Indians into the broader American consciousness.

But no event is more indicative of the theater’s cultural significance than the 1849 Astor Place Riot. The Riot stemmed from a widely-publicized feud between American actor Edwin Forrest and English actor William Charles Macready. The two men had quite different styles of acting. Audiences would debate the relative merits of those acting

styles; fuelled by theater critics and newspaper editorials, those debates escalated into fights, public demonstrations, and eventually riots. While discussing the Riot's impact on Melville's *White-Jacket*, Joel Porte states that the Riot grew out of a disagreement about dramatic interpretation. Ackerman agrees but believes Porte is understating the case, calling the Riot a complex "combination of intense nationalist feeling, anti-intellectualism, and a profound class antagonism" (34-5). Bruce McConachie observes that for the first half of the century, the audience retained the right to talk, cheer, applaud or even throw food during the performance ("American" 123); the audience was "in the spotlight" as much as the actors. This mindset clashed with the more patrician theatergoers. The working-class patrons who enjoyed freedom to express themselves in the theater supported the dramatic stylings of Edwin Forrest. They saw Forrest as a national symbol, in opposition to England's William Charles Macready, who had a more refined, natural, and intellectual style. When Macready and Forrest were booked in rival productions of *Macbeth*, a group protesting Macready's alleged anti-American style congregated outside the Astor Place Opera House<sup>2</sup>. Eventually violence erupted; twenty people were killed and close to two hundred were injured.

While the Astor Place Riot might be considered one of the most critical episodes of nineteenth-century American cultural concern with the theater, it is just one example of the passion and interest many Americans had in that institution. As Ackerman notes, "Theater in America represented an important point of intersection for various cultural forms" (xii-xiii). Specifically, Americans understood theater as an active component in

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that this was not a spontaneous gathering of protesters. Macready's first appearance had been cancelled because of a similar protest. Also, the newspapers printed ads of Macready and Forrest's swipes at each other, and critics on both sides railed against the respective actors. In this way, the underlying antagonism of the Riot was enflamed by critics and journalists, all who had an opinion on the theater.

the creation and cultivation of American political and moral identity. For example, David Grimstead argues that both critics and proponents of theater were engaged in a decades-long debate on the viability of theatrical entertainment as a mechanism for social change. Grimstead singles out playwright, director, and theater manager William Dunlap, who believed all plays should be morally didactic, as “the father of American drama” (8). Dunlap felt that the theater should be a tool for moral improvement in society, and took up causes like temperance, abolition, and even the prohibition of dueling in his plays. Theater maintained a political component as well, becoming “a microcosm of American democracy,” with the play itself having the power to unite the audience into one mind or eliciting a unified emotion (Ackerman xii). With its powers to bring audiences together emotionally, as well as its powers to subsequently motivate or “improve” audiences in moral ways, theater becomes a cultural force in Americans’ lives in the nineteenth century. It is in this regard—an emotional and motivating powerhouse with built-in mechanisms for moral improvement—that made it such an effective tool for fiction writers at the time. Indeed, these writers’ patronage of the theater led to a certain familiarity with drama’s conventions, and as a result they were more than capable of incorporating those conventions into their fictions.

The political dimensions of theater, coupled with its influence over audiences, make it a powerful vehicle for nineteenth-century writers specifically interested in examining the ways in which their own novels manage their readership. Elizabeth Barnes, in her study of nineteenth-century understanding of sympathy, contends that drama, like sympathy, requires a subject and an object—performers and an audience—and can work to blur the lines between the two. Utilizing “sympathetic identification,”

which Barnes calls “the building-block of the democratic nation,” theater is able to unite individual spectators into one body: the audience (Barnes x). Therefore, we might also understand what happens at theater to be exercises in identity; spectators begin to see similarities (as well as distinct differences) between themselves and the performers, but also see those similarities manifested in the other members of the audience. Theater additionally has the power to emotionally move audiences, and when the drama elicits the same emotion from each audience member, the audience becomes united into one sympathizing mass. Barnes’s description about theater’s influence is pertinent because it demonstrates the advantages a writer might utilize in investigating the moral and political dimensions of American life and highlighting the ways in which audiences can be managed by the writer’s text itself.

Just as it did in American life, theater exhibits a strong presence in American literature of the time. Some novels contain actors and actresses as major characters. For example, Mrs. Farrell in William Dean Howells’s *Private Theatricals* (1875) and the title character in Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) become successful professional actresses. Howells’s novel, in particular, focuses on theatricalism in social situations and thematizes theater as what women do when they are thrust into society. The Duke and the King, conmen in Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), embody the seamier side of actors as they attempt to fleece townspeople along the Mississippi River. Even Wieland, in Charles Brockden Brown’s novel of the same name, is described as having the voice of an actor as he practices classical oratory, prefiguring the professional actor characters of later novels. In addition to actors, the theater itself figures into the plot of nineteenth-century stories and novels. In “The Spectacles” (1844), by Edgar Allan

Poe, the narrator first sees the object of his affection while at the theater. A similar scene occurs in Henry James's *The Ambassadors* (1903), where Strether sees Chad for the first time in a theater box. For James, the drama is in the audience, not on stage. As theaters and actors were parts of the fabric of American life, so too are they woven into the plots of American novels.

Even if American novelists do not incorporate literal actors and theaters into their plots, they often create a dramatic atmosphere by utilizing the language of the stage. For example, the Marsh girls of Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-9) stage their own dramas. Even less literal are the "stages" of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineaux" (1831), Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), and Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno" (1856). Hawthorne's story climaxes in a revelry through the streets, echoing the actual theatrical, political-themed parades of the pre-Revolutionary colonies. In Poe's novel, Pym appears on the deck of the whaling ship *Grampus* dressed in a dead man's clothes. Pym becomes a figurative actor, playing the role of a corpse. Melville also turns the deck of the ship into a stage; in fact, the plot of the slave mutiny is couched in theatrical terms. Even the scaffold in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is described as a stage, with Dimmesdale's voice marking him as a kind of actor-figure. Writers often use these theatrical conceits to thematize such ideas as appearance vs. reality or the dangers of illusion. In Melville's *The Confidence-Man* (1857), for example, the narrator argues that staged characters are more "real" than actual people because it is clear they are acting; real people, the narrator says, have much more ambiguous motives and presentations. These are just a few examples of theater's manifestation within the texts and themes of American literature.

Considering theater's pervasiveness, I believe that it is important to restore it to its proper place in our study of nineteenth-century American literature. By reestablishing theater's place as an essential element of nineteenth-century American life, we can further see how, as an artistic genre, drama intersects with other literary forms in interesting ways. More specifically, when we identify the importance of theater in nineteenth-century American literature, we see that it can become a vital means in which writers investigate their own roles as writers. The theater becomes an opportunity for them to reflect on fiction and what they do as writers of fiction. In other words, theater makes possible meditations about fiction, authorship, and audience. In this dissertation, I undertake an investigation of such mediations in the work of four mid-century writers: Catherine Maria Sedgwick, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Louisa May Alcott. In their novels, these writers elucidate theater's particular power. Each novelist harnesses that power for thematic or generic purposes while simultaneously exposing the inherent weakness of the dramatic form. In these four instances, the writers are demonstrating both what theater can do, and also how their fiction can do it better.

It is difficult to discuss theater in its historical context without acknowledging the slipperiness of the language. I will try to avoid using the terms "drama" and "theater" interchangeably, though some theater historians do. As I will be using it, "drama" refers to the text of the play itself. Additionally, I refer to "theater" as not just the performance of the text, but to the space in which that performance is carried out and the audience that receives that performance. I will take my cue from Alan Ackerman, who, argues there are five ways in which theater "manifests itself":

(1) the forms taken by the drama (the written play-text), (2) the human voice or “utterance,” (3) the gestural body, (4) *mise-en-scène*, and (5) audience (understood broadly as a set of economic, social, and artistic relationships). (xv-xvi)

By making this delineation, I attempt to reunite text and performance; aspects of performance—the theater space or the actor’s body and voice—are just as important for my analysis as the text of the play. For this project, I am less concerned with the way “drama” or the play-text appears within American literature than with in the ways “theater” manifests itself in that same literature. For example, I am less interested in the ways in which Melville incorporates Shakespearian dialogue into *Moby-Dick* than I am by the way Melville models Ahab after the paradigmatic nineteenth-century melodramatic actor.

Indeed, melodrama’s prominence in the early half of the nineteenth century marks it as powerful force in the novels examined, and the genre thus requires a specific definition. Melodrama is a dramatic genre that gained prominence in America in the 1820s (partially born out of the fusing of William Dunlap’s moral agenda with his experiments in Gothic sensationalism) and enjoyed its heyday between 1850 and 1870.<sup>3</sup> Ackerman argues, “Most writing for the theater until 1870, from romantic ‘tragedy’ to nationalistic comedy, manifested some aspects of melodrama” (6). Melodrama embodies a worldview that the universe is inherently moral, and the characters within the melodrama are archetypes that exemplify specific and readily identifiable moral forces.

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce McConachie also cites 1870 as a year of transition, as the decorum and intimacy of realist theater (as in Howells’s parlor dramas) had begun to replace the bombast of melodrama (“American Theater” 174). On the other hand, Gary Richardson argues that melodrama retained primacy between 1860-1900 despite the burgeoning realism movement, with Howells’s realist theories not being fully realized until Herne’s *Margaret Fleming* was staged in 1890 (“Plays” 153, 189).



The morality of melodrama's universe is spiritual, "beyond the world of the senses" (Hauptman 283). Audiences would understand that the world (re)presented by melodrama is not "what is" but what "ought to be." Ackerman defines the forces at work in the melodramatic world as "transindividual," allowing audience members to place themselves at the nexus of the moral forces struggling onstage (xiii). As the century progressed, playwrights began to dramatize this play of cosmic or moral forces on the individual in more sensational ways. For example, a play's text might contain descriptions of frightening storms or exciting shipwrecks, events that caused theater managers to find creative ways of staging them. The language of the play itself became highly ornate, as did the gestures and utterances of the melodramatic actor. In this way, melodrama attempts to convey a truth that exists beyond the arena of the physical body or voice.

The purple prose, overcooked romance, contrived plot twists, and overblown performances and sets—often used by contemporary scholars as evidence of melodrama's lack of artistry—is what actually allowed melodrama to be a pointed agent for social change. Unlike modern audiences who see melodrama as unrealistic, "all [nineteenth-century audiences] seemed to agree that [melodrama] presented a reality that was somehow more real than real life" (Ackerman xiv). William Sharp builds on this idea, arguing that melodrama sets itself apart from either tragedy or comedy by dramatizing a change either in characters or the moral universe.<sup>4</sup> For example, a temperance melodrama might dramatize the series of misfortunes that ultimately cause an

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<sup>4</sup> In his article "Structure of Melodrama," Sharp posits that neither society nor the outsider character ever change in tragedy or comedy; in tragedy the outsider is exiled or killed while comedy ends with the outsider re-entering society through marriage. Melodrama, by contrast, depends upon either the outsider or society fundamentally changing.

alcoholic to stop drinking. By dramatizing the theme of “how a man can change” within “a world that ought to be,” melodrama becomes the vector by which the playwright can transmit his moral lesson. In this way Dunlap and others would explicitly use melodrama as a tool for social change.

By the 1870s, proponents of a realist style of drama, most notably William Dean Howells, began to advocate for theater that was antithetical to the melodramatic model. Not so much a genre as it is a part of a broader aesthetic movement, realist drama attempted to relocate the dramatic conflict from the external world to the interior world of psychological states. In other words, this type of drama attempted to represent as realistically as possible the world on stage. This adherence to strict mimesis led to more psychologically complex plays with elaborate dialogue, muted or “natural” styles of acting, and plots that audiences could more easily relate to. Furthermore, these plays became “more self-consciously private,” and were often set in domestic or private spaces (Ackerman xiii). In fact, the 1860s saw the parlor theatrical become a most fashionable form of middle-class entertainment. These plays often dealt with issues or plot complications intrinsic to the private arena and commented on the self-consciously theatrical nature of middle-class social intercourse. Therefore parlor theatricals became pointed meta-commentaries on parlor culture.

In addition to complications arising from discussions of melodrama as a genre, overlap in language occurs because melodrama, as a theatrical genre, shares many characteristics with the genre of the sentimental novel. This is particularly in melodrama’s use of emotion and sympathy. While I will not discuss the sentimental novel as a genre specifically in this project, I will refer to sentiment or sentimentality as a

crucial element in melodrama. Like the sentimental novel, melodrama is most effective when it evokes a strong and unifying emotional response. The emotional reverberations of melodrama are designed to be both strong and singular. As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, the melodramatic constructions in Sedgwick's and Melville's novels especially demonstrate the unifying and de-individualizing force of melodrama. Like the sentimental novel, melodrama relies on effect, and as these novelists demonstrate, the strength of the effect hinges upon the singularity of the particular emotion.

In melodrama, like in the sentimental novel, the particular emotion evoked is sympathy. This is especially true in the social melodramas of the 1830s and 40s, which elicited sympathy with characters stricken by a particular malady or under the influence of a specific social evil. This is not to say that this was the first time sympathy was used in this way. Julia Stern, in her examination of sympathy, explains that early American novels, such as Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, connected "vision and emotion, spectacle and sympathy" (7). She further describes sympathy as "a collective practice acutely engaged in by a community whose members are united" (19). Therefore, in Stern's definition, sympathy becomes a force that presumably allows those who feel it to come closer together. Yet, as Cindy Weinstein notes, sympathy is produced "not only through a foundational moment of identification but through a recognition of difference" (*Family* 3). By sympathizing with another we also come to realize our differences. In this way, a spectator watching Aiken's 1852 stage adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* might sympathize with Tom's plight and recognize some similarities between Tom's position and her own as a free white woman, but by acknowledging those similarities she still conceivably identifies the differences between herself and the slave. Consequently,

sympathy is a circular exercise; we sympathize with and judge others by our own moral standards, but those standards are partially formed by sympathizing with others.

Sympathy requires both emotional attachment with and psychological distance from a subject.

Metaphors of theater are effective and illuminating when they are used to examine sympathy's efficacy because both sympathy and theatrical performances require a subject and object. In this relationship, the subject—the audience—ideally maintains attachment with and distance from the characters. Indeed, the power of theater to move audiences effectively grows in proportion to the ease with which theater-goers sympathize or identify with the characters, plots, and themes represented on stage. This is especially true of melodrama, since nearly all of melodrama's components are designed to elicit the strongest emotion possible. Theater historian Bruce McConachie explains that sympathetic identification with a character will allow a spectator to experience, on some level, the emotions exhibited by the character on stage. This "sympathetic response" to the emotions or the situation can allow the spectator to identify with the character depending upon to what degree the spectator agrees with the character's subsequent actions (*Engaging* 66). This is, McConachie argues, one way audiences form sympathetic bonds with the hero. In other words, the hero seems that much more heroic the more he embodies the morals and standards of the audience. Since melodrama is crafted in such a way that characters are clear-cut in their allegiances—there is little to no moral ambiguity in nineteenth-century melodrama—the heroes and heroines become emblematic of their respective virtues. Furthermore, since spectators tend to mirror the emotions displayed by other audience members (*Engaging* 71), the audience as a whole can potentially

experience the same overwhelming emotion. Thus, sympathy becomes an important factor in how melodrama is able to generate a monopathic response.

Theater historians contend that melodrama, or at least aspects of it, maintained primacy on the American stage throughout the 1800s. Still, the years leading up to 1870 saw a rise in realist drama, which partially softened the overwhelming emotional exhortations in favor of eliciting psychological responses. In other words, drama began to become more psychological than emotional, more about character and less about plot and spectacle. With the “shift in emphasis from plot to character” taking place on stage, actors began to develop more nuanced techniques (Ackerman 10). Theater historians highlight Edwin Booth as the actor most emblematic of this shift from the bombast of melodrama to the thoughtful and introspective acting of realist drama. Booth, for example, was known for his subtle portrayal of Hamlet. Yet it was in the role of Iago that George William Curtis, editor of *Harper's*, called Booth “admirable,” claiming that “Iago was perhaps never more articulately represented” (133). In this review, Curtis describes taking two friends to see two different performances on one night in 1863: Booth’s and Edwin Forrest’s. Curtis mocks Forrest, saying that while some of the ladies swooned over Forrest’s impressive calves, his acting was mostly “roar” and bluster (132). It was Booth, with his “refined” and “cultivated” performance, who truly impressed Curtis, and the editor felt that Booth’s performance was reflected in the quality of the audience (133). In other words, those watching *Othello* that evening in 1863 were just as refined and cultivated as Booth’s Iago. For this reason, Lawrence Levine, to name one theater historian, marks Booth as emblematic of the movement away from the overwrought

*acting* in melodramas, which further signaled an increasing awareness on the part of middle-class Americans about their own modes of “acting” in social situations.

At the same time professional actors began to adopt a more realistic style of acting, their middle-class patrons began to understand how that realistic style mirrored many of their own real-life habits and foibles. Therefore, the latter half of the century saw a cultural shift wherein Americans began to publicly acknowledge the theatricality of social mores. According to Karen Halttunen, Americans began to admit that the *appearance* of virtue was just as important as the virtues themselves.<sup>5</sup> Halttunen examines many ways that this mindset manifested itself in the 1860s, not the least of which is the parlor theatrical. Those refined, cultured Americans who so loved Booth’s performance as Iago began to acknowledge the theatrical elements of parlor society. That is not to say that social interaction was not theatrical before this moment; Americans simply began to widely accept social theatricalism as fact. Parlor theatricals were the concretization of the idea that parlor culture was inherently theatrical, and middle-class Americans began to stage theatrical performances in their own homes as social entertainment. In fact, how-to manuals began to roll off the presses, teaching Americans how to put on a fun and realistic theatrical performance. These guidebooks coached readers on everything from acting to costume and set design. By the 1870s, then, parlor theatricals, emphasizing genteel acting, became fashionable entertainment within the homes of many middle-class Americans.

By 1870, the theater, in a very literal way, had been brought into the home of many middle-class Americans, the culmination of a 50-year period when drama, a strong presence in the early republican era, became increasingly omnipresent in American

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<sup>5</sup> See *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870*.

culture. As a result, theater's presence is felt strongly in much of literature of the same time. In this project, therefore, I examine the relationship between nineteenth-century literature and theater. I examine four novels from the heyday of melodrama: *Hope Leslie* (1828), *Moby-Dick* (1851), *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), and *Behind a Mask* (1866). In all of these novels the theater figures in the plot, to varying degrees and in divergent manners, and serves to provide thematic elements. A theatrical performance is bound by temporal and spatial constraints; a play has a certain runtime and takes place in a designated area ("the stage"). But as theater historians have demonstrated, the theater in nineteenth-century America had a rather fuzzy definition of "the stage." Of course there were theaters, buildings designed for the sole purpose of staging theatrical performances. And there were para-theatrical spaces; for example, pastors (like Father Mapple in *Moby-Dick*) might utilize theatrical conventions like the actor's utterance or Forrest-like gestures when presenting their sermons. Yet Americans, as that "theatrical race," allowed the theater to sprout up whenever the desire for dramatic entertainment manifested itself in any given town. I would argue that the four authors I listed above are attempting to carve out a theatrical space within the landscape of their own writing. By erecting this metaphorical stage within their novels, these writers are allowing the theater to perform some work that fiction could not. Unsurprisingly, I find that these writers also critique theater's power, allowing them to point out drama's shortcomings as it relates to their own literary endeavors. In other words, I believe that these moments where the theater manifests itself in the novel permit the author to comment on his or her own authorial authority.

I want to make clear that I am not interested in talking about “theatricality,” as the term was used by literary theorists in the early 1990s. I will attempt to avoid this word as it is connected with “performance studies” or “performativity,” where modes of cultural behavior or rituals that exist outside the realm of theater or art are analyzed using a metaphor of performance. While I find value in these theories, and rely on their ahistorical approach to performance within a text, I find that they can become too inclusive. For example, there is a scene in *Hope Leslie* in which the title character attempts to change her sister’s identity (from Indian to English) by removing her sister’s Indian garments. The scene is clearly making a statement about appearances and identity/nationality; does Hope believe her sister is performing being an Indian? While performance studies would be helpful in illuminating this scene, it falls outside of the boundary of my study, which focuses more insistently on the historical element of theater in nineteenth-century America. More fully linked with the historical moment is a scene from the novel like Magawisca’s trial, in which the Indian maiden defends herself using rhetoric and gestural techniques specific to the nineteenth-century American actor. The courthouse is established as a theater and Magawisca an actress in specific and interesting ways. So while I may use the term “theatricality” intermittently, I am attempting to limit myself to a narrow manifestation of theatrical space in the text, rather than a broader definition used in performance studies.

It should also be noted that many of the elements associated with theater that are featured in these novels overlap with other nineteenth-century literary tropes. For example, Magawisca in *Hope Leslie* exhibits many of the characteristics of the trope of the eloquent Indian, characteristics which would have been familiar to Sedgwick’s



audience by other frontier romances in print and on stage. My purpose is not to deny the existence of these tropes, or necessarily challenge their characteristics, but rather to explore the ways in which that trial (and her eloquence during it) as crafted by Sedgwick uses theatrical elements. Additionally, Magawisca's eloquence during that scene is, for my purposes, a function of her proficiency as an actress. It is that construction of staged theatrics that interest me in the following chapters.

Chapter II is focused on Catherine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*. Grounded firmly in the genre of historical romance, *Hope Leslie* tells the story of friendships and romance between Hope Leslie, the family friend Everell Fletcher, and the Indian maiden Magawisca. Set in the years following the Mystic Massacre (1637), the novel addresses the historical tensions between the English settlers and the remaining Pequod Indians. Into this historical framework, Sedgwick plants traditional melodramatic and romantic plots like love triangles, villains in disguise, and sensational events like storms and explosions. Working within the genre of the frontier romance, Sedgwick is able to investigate the efficacy of historical narratives to accurately or truthfully explain contemporary events vis-à-vis the Puritan record. In fact, Sedgwick challenges the reliability of historical records, and through the figures of Hope and Magawisca, offers alternatives to well-known historical events. Sedgwick is able to counter the strength of traditional historical narratives via the monopathic power of melodrama. Indeed, *Hope Leslie* demonstrates that historical narratives contain emotional components similar to melodrama, and their effect, while strong, are equally reductive. Therefore, Sedgwick's novel implies that it is fiction, with its ability to offer the reader multiple viewpoints and

numerous voices that can more truthfully reflect history's record than either historical or melodramatic narratives.

Chapter III examines *Moby-Dick*, which, unlike *Hope Leslie*, is rife with explicit theatrical (mainly Shakespearian) allusions. My concern is less with the allusions themselves, however, than with the significance of Ishmael's conception of himself as a tragic dramatist, with the tale of the Pequod's fate as being his grand drama. By framing the events of the novel as a stage production, Ishmael is able to manage the reader's experience with *Moby-Dick* in much the same way a stage director manages the audience's experience during a play. Specifically, Ishmael is able to harness the power of a staged performance, attempting to enchant his reader in much the same way the theater might bewitch its audience. This enchantment, Ishmael argues, allows him to more fully and completely convey the wonder and awesome power of the sea and the turbulence and malevolence of the whale. Ishmael imbues Ahab with this theatrical power, and the captain comes to embody the tyrannical dangers of theater's authority. Ishmael avoids becoming a tyrant himself by advocating narrative distance as much as Ahab demands narrative control. In this way, Melville entwines two narrative strands: Ahab's wondrous theatrical power and Ishmael's disinterested scientific and philosophical tangents. Both strands work together in *Moby-Dick* to condition the reader as he is reading, with the novel becoming both a guidebook to reading, and a demonstration of the force *and* limitations of the theatrical genre.

In many ways, Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*, the subject of Chapter IV, offers similar presentations of the theater to those of *Moby-Dick*. The novel's narrator, Coverdale, is like Ishmael in that he sees himself as participating in a theatrical endeavor.

But whereas Ishmael takes on the mantle of playwright in earnest, Coverdale is mocked for his literary aspirations. Rather than influencing or re-presenting the narrative as a theatrical drama, as Ishmael does, Coverdale resorts to voyeurism and interpretation, assigning himself the role of the chorus in a Greek play of his creation. Hawthorne himself prepares the reader for theatrical conceits of the novel. In the preface, for example, he directly links the theatrical to the purpose of the Romance, maintaining that he is using his experiences at Brook Farm as a theatre to play out his Romance. This allows Hawthorne to comment on the social melodramas of the 1840s, the predominant staged melodramas of that time. Social or reform melodramas were designed to elicit sympathy for a particular cause, moving the audience to subsequently join a particular reform movement. Hawthorne implicitly critiques these melodramas by examining, through Coverdale's machinations, the nature and efficacy of sympathy itself. By allowing young Coverdale to fail in his sympathetic endeavors at Blithedale, Hawthorne is able to demonstrate the lack of success melodrama has in eliciting sympathy. It is the Romance genre, he argues in *The Blithedale Romance*, which can more effectively evoke sympathy.

Representing an example of the cultural shift in how Americans understood the strengths (or dangers) of sympathy, Louisa May Alcott's novella *Behind a Mask* is the focus of chapter V. Jean Muir, the novella's protagonist, is an out-of-work actress masquerading as a governess. *Behind a Mask* serves as a capstone to this project, as it was written during a time when melodrama's prominence on the American stage was beginning to wane. Instead, a new, more realistic style of acting was becoming fashionable—a style embodied by Jean Muir. Additionally, Alcott incorporates the idea

of the parlor theatrical, also in vogue at the time. As I have already suggested, the parlor theatrical was a literalization of the emerging idea that might be called “social theatricalism,” a self-conscious awareness of the theatricality of social interaction.

Alcott’s novella wrestles with these theatrical and cultural shifts, attempting to find a place for melodrama’s overt emotionality in a society where sincere emotional displays were regarded with suspicion. By defending Jean’s dangerous and subversive theatrics, the novel is, by extension, defending its own reliance on sensation as a force for change. Instead of undermining the family unit, Jean’s theatricalism, as evidenced by her actress’s body, actually reinvigorates the Coventry family as she dupes them. *Behind a Mask* makes a claim that it can produce similar changes, as the consequences of Alcott’s sensationalism are akin to the effects Jean’s theatricalism has on the Coventry family. The novella also serves as a fitting bookend to this project, as it marks the transition from an era where melodrama dominated the American stage to one where realist drama was beginning its ascent.

Despite de Tocqueville’s assertion that “still only a few [Americans] go there” (468), the theater itself was a popular institution of entertainment and moral edification in mid-nineteenth-century America. It allowed Americans one way to establish national and cultural identity, had the potential to move audiences emotionally to such an extent that they might be compelled to join particular social causes, and existed as a social outlet for Americans of all classes. Due in large part to theater’s omnipresence, its language and ideologies seeped into not just para-theatrical forms like sermons or lectures, but also literature. As a result, shifts within American literature (and, more broadly, the American culture that literature is describing or addressing) can be charted by understanding the

shifts in theater and in the way the theater is manifested in those works of literature. These works endeavor to harness the power of the theater by attempting to manage readers in much the same fashion in which theater manages its audiences. Theater fuels these texts even as the texts themselves attempt to transcend drama's shortcomings. In doing so, these texts lay bare the power of theater while simultaneously instantiating fiction's primacy in molding and influencing audiences.

## CHAPTER II

RESTING ON PERFORMANCES: ENACTING MELODRAMA IN *HOPE LESLIE*

By the time Catharine Maria Sedgwick published *Hope Leslie* in 1827, American writers had been scrambling to respond to Sydney Smith's infamous 1820 indictment in the *Edinburgh Review*, "In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book? Or goes to an American play?" (Smith 301). Edward Foster, author of Sedgwick's biography, identifies her as one of the four major American writers, along with Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and William Cullen Bryant, who responded to Smith's charge by crafting what would come to be called the foundation for American literature. With two distinctly American novels under her belt, Sedgwick would turn to the genre of the historical romance for her third novel, *Hope Leslie; or, Early Times in Massachusetts*, a genre that allowed her to answer Smith's indictment. In the Preface, Sedgwick argues that the novel's purpose is "to illustrate not the history, but the character of the times."<sup>6</sup> Despite this disclaimer, Sedgwick references (sometimes quoting outright) the histories of William Bradford, John Winthrop, Benjamin Trumbull, and William Hubbard. Therefore the novel seems almost schizophrenic in its presentation of history; it contains an almost slavish reliance on actual Puritan histories—texts which found a wide audience during the 1820s—while simultaneously activating ahistorical romantic and adventure plots.<sup>7</sup> In this way, the novel becomes "a patent investigation," according to the Preface, of historical materials themselves in order to depict the "character of these early times" (3).

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<sup>6</sup> Sedgwick, Catharine Maria. *Hope Leslie; or, Early Times in Massachusetts*. Ed. Carolyn L. Karcher. New York: Penguin, 1998. 3. Subsequent citations will be parenthetical.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Insko argues that the novel directly employs anachronisms as romantic elements.

By working within the genre conventions of the frontier romance, Sedgwick is able to examine historical records as narrative conduits between colonial times and the early republic. As a genre, frontier or historical romance permitted writers to respond to Smith's indictment by formulating a distinctively American literature. In attempting to realize her vision of "the character" of the colonial era, Sedgwick must grapple with the problem of how contemporary Americans understood that character via historical texts. The task of conceptualizing contemporary American "character" vis-à-vis the Puritan precedent becomes problematic for Sedgwick, critics argue, since *Hope Leslie's* depictions of "the character of the times" often clashed with popular notions of Puritan life. For this reason, many critics interpret the novel as directly challenging historical records' efficacy in laying the foundation for understanding Puritan (and, by extension, 19<sup>th</sup>-century American) identity. For example, Philip Gould contends that, by citing Winthrop and Hubbard so frequently (their histories had been reprinted in the few years prior to the composition of *Hope Leslie*), Sedgwick is able to question the veracity of those historians' accounts. Sandra Zagarell, too, argues that the novel indicts these early histories as suppressing stories of (male) violence while offering a (female) nonviolent alternative. T. Gregory Garvey offers a metafictional reading, arguing that the tension between female characters' desire to rebel and their "fears of male reprisal" mirrors Sedgwick's desires and fears in writing (289). Thus critics situate Sedgwick as a writer who is attempting to wrestle with Puritan historians' accounts vis-à-vis the "character" of her own time.

Unfortunately for Sedgwick, audiences were predisposed to reject her presentation of colonial "character." This is especially true in the novel's portrayal of the

Indian characters. Magawisca in particular conflicted with the image of Indians held by Sedgwick's contemporaries, images that were created and reinforced by popular historical narrative. Any disputants' harsh reactions to Sedgwick's portrayal of the Indians and colonials could be greatly amplified considering the emotionality underlying their identification with Puritan history. In other words, since historical narratives, whether directly or not, play such an important role in the conceptualization of American character, adherents to that conception defend it with emotional zeal. For this reason, Sedgwick must appeal to emotion as much as reason when her investigation into American character clashes with the popular historical narrative. She finds the model for effective emotional appeal in American melodrama.

During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, playwrights answered what Gary Richardson labels the call for "American Drama" (*American Drama* 70). Richardson contends that there were two main responses to this call: one by the "cultured elite" who demanded that American playwrights and directors follow the "dominant literary aesthetic," which was more or less the British model; and one by those he calls the "romantic playwrights," who sought to realize contemporary American character by understanding the emotions of Americans, past and present (*American Drama* 70). The former model normally manifested itself on stage as high tragedy. By the time *Hope Leslie* was published, tragedy's popularity had been sidelined in favor of Richardson's other model, which took the form of melodrama.

In America, staged melodrama had a very narrow definition. The term was first used to describe French plays of the 1770s that added music to soliloquies in order to heighten the emotional impact of the scene. In America, melodramas similarly focused on



eliciting emotion rather than contemplation, and by 1820 the term was used for any “drama of disaster” that focused on plot and action rather than character development and that privileges spectacle and pathos over psychological complexity.<sup>8</sup> While the plots themselves were often intricate, characters were reduced to mere types, the issues they confronted inordinately simple. Unlike tragedy, which seeks to know characters psychologically, melodramatic characters were defined by their moral designations. The moral issues the characters confront are often reduced to good-versus-evil equations; villains are unabashedly greedy, rapacious, and violent, while the heroes and heroines are virginal, honest, and self-sacrificing. Any melodrama’s central conflict revolves around the villain’s violation of the moral order and how that order is reestablished. While the outcome is never in doubt—good always triumphs, the villain is always vanquished—the hero is never simply destined to overcome. Instead, melodrama puts an emphasis on the control the individual, most often the “common man,” exerts over his own fate (Ackerman 8).

Furthermore, melodrama came to be seen as a tool for moral instruction, if not a concentrated means of social protest. In *Melodrama Unveiled*, David Grimstead chronicles the history and development of American melodrama, and analyzes its major characteristics. He argues that the disappointments of real life often belied the simple morality of melodrama, and that “[t]he stage as mirror and the stage as moral educator need not be contradictory” (39). In fact seeming disparity often allows melodrama to “inculcate accepted standards of morality,” he continues, by presenting what ought to be rather than what is (39). A melodrama’s moral vision took root in the hearts of audiences,

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Heilman distinguishes melodrama from tragedy by the location of the play’s conflict. Melodrama’s conflict is always external: man versus man/nature/things. Tragedy’s conflict is always internal, like the psychological turmoil of Hamlet.

Grimstead further states, rather than just their minds. The singular, universal emotional reaction to any given melodrama—what theater historian Robert Heilman calls “the pleasure of experiencing wholeness”—is often referred to as monopathy (84). It is this monopathy that permits melodrama to instantiate a selected moral imperative.

With its emphasis on the power of the individual, moral instruction, and the evocation of strong emotion, melodrama, according to theater historian Lawrence Levine, “became one of the mainstays of the American stage” (38). The unambiguous nature of melodrama’s themes also invited zealous patriotism and nationalistic (even jingoistic) morality, and playwrights and stage managers turned to melodrama for the “propagation of national identity” (Madden 13). Furthermore, melodrama could investigate the character of the present by (re)presenting a unified view of some historical moment and evoking a very specific emotional response. In other words, melodrama’s singular and unambiguous moral vision can be used to create an understanding of (and an emotional response to) a particular historical moment that is shared by the entire audience. In this light, melodrama was a perfect tool for a writer like Sedgwick, who was interested in complicating traditional historical narratives by offering similarly emotional and focused alternative.

Parts of *Hope Leslie* defer to, or at least pay lip service to, popular historical narratives. More often, however, the novel challenges the received historical tradition. In order to neutralize or complicate history’s stranglehold on the depiction of American character, Sedgwick deploys carefully constructed moments of melodrama at key moments in the text. While critics like Philip Gould have taken note of the theatrical elements of Magawisca’s retelling of the Mystic Massacre, other major moments of

staged melodrama have gone largely unnoticed. These include Magawisca's trial and both of Hope's two jailbreaks. These three "dramas," along with Magawisca's dramatic recitation of the Mystic Massacre, contain elements of popular melodrama, including heightened emotion, emphasis on both voice and body, and a specialized relationship with the audience.<sup>9</sup> In the novel, significantly, moments of theater occupy moments of resistance. In other words, these theatrical instances are the vehicle for the resistance to patriarchal authority, Puritan history, and legally sanctioned violence that are the novel's main themes. The novel uses Magawisca to demonstrate the effectiveness of melodrama's emotional impact when staging resistance.

Even while suggesting melodrama's usefulness, however, the novel also argues that melodrama's emotional underpinnings are just as apt to be motivated by self-interest as they are by altruism. Thus, while melodrama can be used to combat the received historical tradition—for example, Magawisca uses melodrama to offer an alternative description of the Mystic Massacre of 1637—Sedgwick implies that it cannot be used as a *substitute* for history. In fact, *Hope Leslie*'s narrator exposes the prejudicial nature of melodrama even as she uses it to undermine the dominant tradition. Sedgwick might argue that she does not intend the novel to be "a substitute for genuine history," but she uses melodrama in such a way to demonstrate that fiction—*her* fiction—is more "genuine" than either history or melodrama. Ultimately, *Hope Leslie* suggests that melodrama and history are two sides of the same narrative coin: prejudicial, emotional, incomplete, and monovocal. It is fiction's polyvocality, the novel argues, that allows for a

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<sup>9</sup> The presence of an audience is necessary for such a theatrical performance to take place. So while technically Sir Philip witnesses Hope's graveyard meeting with Magawisca, they are unaware of his presence. Therefore, he is not technically *their* audience. So while both that meeting and Hope's reunion with Faith do have certain melodramatic elements, they are excluded from my rubric because they lack the specific audience-performance relationship that is found in the theater.

more informed and altruistic resistance to authority and a more rational—and republican—alternative to history or melodrama.

*Hope Leslie* and Theater: Sedgwick's Quarrel with History

Published anonymously in 1827, *Hope Leslie* was Catharine Maria Sedgwick's third novel. Edward Foster names it as her best novel, and both Foster and Carolyn Karcher argue that it was written in direct response to Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* (1826). Mary Kelley goes one step further, suggesting that while Cooper never admitted to reading *Hope Leslie*, he saw Sedgwick as literary competition.<sup>10</sup> The same year *Hope Leslie* appeared, the *New York Mirror* included Sedgwick in its list of "Distinguished Females" (Homestead 23). In "A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys," Nathaniel Hawthorne calls Sedgwick "our most truthful novelist" (qtd. in Foster 20). Indeed, until Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Foster asserts, "Sedgwick was the *only* woman who was widely considered a major American writer" by her contemporaries (21). And while the entire Sedgwick family "valued learning and considered the transmission of culture a responsibility, its possession a birthright," Catharine was especially concerned with the responsibility that was vested in her as a widely-read author (Kelley, "Introduction" 22). In an 1826 letter to her brother, Sedgwick states that she has a "moral purpose" to enlighten and educate her readers (Kelley *Private* 286). Sedgwick saw her literary purpose as aligned with that of the theater, Mary Kelley contends, in that the romantic elements of her novels, with their distinct emotional components, become the most efficient vehicle for the transmission of ideas (*Private* 286).

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<sup>10</sup> Opfermann argues that since Cooper's novel *The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish* (1829) contains a similar setting and timeframe as *Hope Leslie*, it was written as a challenge to the success of Sedgwick's novel as well as an attempt to ride on *Hope Leslie*'s thematic coattails (29).

It is not surprising that Sedgwick utilized theatrical techniques in *Hope Leslie's* moments of moral instruction, since she was, by all accounts, a great lover of the theater. In her autobiography, *The Power of Her Sympathy*, Sedgwick describes her early experience and attraction to the theater. Eleven-year-old Catharine was sent from her home in Stockbridge, Massachusetts to New York City, where she was to enroll in dance school. That year she “first went to the theatre that winter—an epoch in a child’s life” (*Power* 90). She recalls seeing John Hodgkinson and Thomas Cooper, both British actors who were quite popular on American stages. She gushes when she describes that first experience: “My first play was *Macbeth*. . . How much delight I had from the few plays I saw that winter. What an exquisite portion of the pleasures of imagination come or have come to the young through drama. To this day, the drying at the fire of a wet newspaper recalls the eagerness with which I dried the daily paper to read the play-bill” (*Power* 91). In stark contrast to the dancing school, theater educated the young Sedgwick in ways she could not articulate until later in life. She does admit that this love of the theatrical arts was folded into a more general love of literature; she describes her father Theodore Sedgwick, when he was home from his political duties, reading aloud to his children. By the time Sedgwick was thirteen, her sister was encouraging her to read. “‘It will be a great advantage to you to read,’ said [older sister] Frances, ‘with the motive of forming and communicating opinions of what you read’” (Kelley, *Private* 63). Sedgwick learned that literature allowed for a specialized form of communication, one that became a medium for conveying ideas. I argue that Sedgwick extended her love of theater into this philosophy of reading and writing, and therefore incorporated images of theater, specifically melodrama, into novels like *Hope Leslie*.

American melodrama in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, according to theater historians, often took up the mantle of resistance or protest in its morally instructive endeavors. This is especially true in the years leading up to Jackson's presidency; by 1830 melodramas increasingly focused on the common man as the embodiment of American values (with the heroine the locus of American virtue). The villain in melodrama offended the moral order in some way, and the hero or heroine, through an act of spirited (and often thrilling) resistance, foiled the villain's plans and reinstated moral order. "In literature," argues theater historian Robert Heilman, "melodrama is the principle vehicle of protest and dissent; or, more accurately, it is the vehicle for protestants and dissenters" (96). For this reason, social resistance in melodrama came to have a moral authority, and by "staging" their own dramas of resistance, Hope and Magawisca are able to mobilize melodrama's moral authority. Ultimately, this allows them to more effectively resist actions that they deem unjust.

What makes melodrama's arguments particularly effective, and what Sedgwick harnesses for her own purposes in *Hope Leslie*, is the genre's focus on eliciting a particular emotional response. Heilman defines the major psychological element of melodrama, monopathy, as "the pleasure of experiencing wholeness, [specifically] the sensation of wholeness that is created when one responds with a single impulse or potential which functions as if it were his whole personality" (84). Because melodrama's moral universe is so simple—there is no moral complexity or ambiguity—it becomes easy to identify with the melodramatic hero or heroine. As a result, audiences are more easily persuaded to melodrama's argument because they instinctively and emotionally respond *as* the character with whom they are identifying. This monopathic element is

evident in *Hope Leslie*, particularly in Magawisca's "dramas." As Everell listens to Magawisca's recitation of the Pequod War, for example, he becomes so emotionally involved in her story that he is instantly convinced that her version of the events is more truthful than the accounts he has heard from Digby. The same can be said of the spectators at Magawisca's trial; her melodramatic performance causes her audience to leap to their feet, shouting for her immediate release. As these two examples show, melodrama's persuasive power is born out of its ability to move audiences so completely that emotional truth overrides everything else.

When experiencing monopathy, the audience identifies completely with the hero. Since an audience's sense of historical identity is so ingrained—just think of the generations of American school children who stage Thanksgiving pageants involving friendly pilgrims and Indians—it takes the strength of a monopathic response to complicate or even reverse that identity. As I will more fully articulate later, Sedgwick recognizes that the historical tradition she is resisting carries an emotional force that is as strong, if not stronger, than that of the most melodramatic of performances. If nineteenth-century readers identify with the Puritan colonists, and if there is one monumental and overwhelming *single* colonial narrative, then adherents to that narrative cling to it with emotional fervor. Because it is part of her readers' very identities—or, more significantly, their single, collective identity—the historical tradition would be immune to any of Sedgwick's opposing rhetoric based in logic. Instead, she harnesses the emotional power of melodrama, deploying it in key moments in *Hope Leslie* in order to complicate her audience's understanding of Puritan relations with the Indians.

These moments of melodrama are in a very real way staged within the novel. For every moment of drama in the novel, Sedgwick incorporates an actor (either Hope or Magawisca) and an audience. As Ackerman points out, “theater *only* happens in the presence of other people” (xiii). For Ackerman, the unique relationship between melodramatic actors and audiences allows for the formation of some kind of public “objective” reality (xiii). He claims that melodrama and the audience work together, albeit implicitly or unconsciously, towards the creation of a collective understanding about the way the world is and what it means to exist in that world. I would argue that the work melodrama does in creating an objective reality is specifically fueled by the emotional charge it elicits. By presenting a single, unified vision of a specific historical moment or idea and connecting it with an overarching emotional response, melodrama creates an almost Pavlovian response to that historical moment. By continuous exposure, the memory of that historical event becomes inextricably linked to every single audience member—in essence, nearly the entire community—and therefore becomes part of what Joseph Roach calls “cultural memory” (“Emergence” 347). In order to combat the emotional weight of that cultural memory, Sedgwick must stage dramas within her novel. The cultural memory of Sedgwick’s readers is partially but effectively fortified by the understanding or conceptualization of their own (Puritan) history that they have received via historical narratives.<sup>11</sup> One of her tasks in *Hope Leslie*, then, is to revise her readers’ cultural memory, and she can do this with the emotional impact that melodrama provides.

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<sup>11</sup> Other components of cultural memory might include personal family histories, cultural events like ceremonies, celebrations, pageants, or by objects like souvenirs and heirlooms. For example, the annual Spring Pilgrimage of Antebellum Homes in Natchez, Mississippi, culminates in a parade and costume ball celebrating Natchez’s pre-Civil War years. The yearly celebration reinforces, for residents and tourists alike, the cultural memory of the town itself, which once used “Where the Old South Still Lives” as a tourism slogan.



While most critics home in on Magawisca's recital of the Mystic Massacre as the most dramatic instance of rebellious rhetoric in the novel, I would first like to focus on the second of Magawisca's "moments of drama": her trial. Unlike the recitation, I feel that the trial scene is more easily dissected, the different theatrical elements more easily distinguished from one another, and the melodramatic effects are more clearly observed *as* the results of a staged drama. In other words, by demonstrating how Sedgwick structures the trial as theater, we can more easily interpret Magawisca's recitations (and Hope's jailbreaks) as self-consciously melodramatic performances.

Betrayed by Sir Philip and captured by the Puritan authorities, Magawisca is being tried for witchcraft. Prior to her incarceration, Magawisca had been working to effect a reunion between Hope and her sister Faith, who has been living among the remaining members of the Pequot tribe and who is married to Magawisca's brother Oneco. Engineering her capture, Philip insinuates to the Indian maiden that she has been betrayed by her friends Hope and Everell. As a result, Magawisca enters the Boston courtroom filled with defiance and burning with anger at the alleged betrayal. During the course of her testimony, she outs Philip as a Catholic, reveals Rosa to be a major witness to Philip's misdeeds, listens as John Eliot, a missionary to the Indians and actual historical figure, offers testimony as a character witness in her favor, and defends herself using inflammatory religious and Revolutionary rhetoric. Although she wins the approval of most of the courtroom's gallery, the Puritan magistrates—including Governor Winthrop—side against Magawisca and sentence her to death.

In addition to the basic melodramatic conventions, like the revelations of Philip's true nature or Magawisca's anachronistic echoing of Patrick Henry, Magawisca's trial

seems specifically crafted to reflect a staged melodrama: the courtroom is described as a theater, emphasis is placed on Magawisca's voice and body as if she were an actress, and the text of her testimony has many of the hallmarks of a melodrama's play-text. Even the audience to her testimony—the official judgment notwithstanding—is affected by her performance in the same monopathic manner that the audience of a melodrama would be. Taken as a whole, then, Magawisca's trial recreates or stages a melodramatic performance, with Magawisca's spirited resistance being further fueled by melodrama's status as a vehicle for protest.

In the days before Magawisca's trial, Boston is buzzing with gossip concerning Everell's attempt to free Magawisca from the jail. In fact, the narrator describes the trial in terms coinciding more with entertainment than civic duty: "The audience listened eagerly" and "seats were provided for those who might have claims to be selected from ordinary spectators" (302, 297). It is as if the courtroom has been transformed into a theater, complete with its social element. "The theater," claims David Grimstead, "was a social club where people went to be seen, to talk together, and to indulge in other nondramatic pleasures" (58). Imagining that "ordinary spectators" might become participants in the drama adds to the overall social atmosphere of the courtroom, indicating that the Puritans came not only to gawk at the Indian maiden or to see justice enacted, but to converse with friends while doing so.

Just as the narrator describes the courtroom as a theater, so too does she describe Magawisca as an actress. The narrator focuses on both Magawisca's voice and body, two of the most important acting tools. "[I]n the early days of the America theater," notes Ackerman, "the voice was particularly emphasized. The utterance in the first half of the

nineteenth-century achieved a mythical status” (12). In this context, it is notable that special significance is placed on Magawisca’s voice throughout the novel. Most often it is described as “sweet” or “like a bird’s song.” For example, Mrs. Fletcher writes that the Indian’s “voice hath a natural deep and most sweet melody in it” (33). The anguish of the trial only enhances the lyrical quality of her voice; when lamenting the destruction of her people her voice “sounded like deep-toned music,” and it is not until her final speech rebutting Philip’s perjury does she speak “with a tone of impatience” (302, 308).

In addition to her voice, Magawisca uses her body to elicit sympathy from and to emotionally connect with her audience. Considering that “melodramatic dramaturgy privileges the human body as a medium of primary (and cosmic) significance” (Ackerman 20), it is intriguing that Magawisca utilizes her body’s gestures and poses for the maximum effect. As Magawisca enters the courtroom, for example, “her eyes were downcast [. . .] her erect attitude, her free and lofty tread, and the perfect composure of her countenance, all expressed the courage and dignity of her soul. Her national pride was manifest [. . .] she had attired herself in the peculiar costume of her people” (297). By making this a theatrical performance, Sedgwick is doing more than portraying Magawisca as the noble savage.<sup>12</sup> If the melodramatic actor’s gestures and utterances carry transcendental significance, as Ackerman contends they do, then Magawisca’s performance signifies more than the literal weight of her words. The narrator is keen to point out that Magawisca becomes the mouthpiece for the nearly-extinct tribe, and,

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<sup>12</sup> It could be argued that the narrator is describing Magawisca’s stately bearing as part of her innate character (contrasting it with Philip’s inherent savagery), rather than as part of her courtroom performance. Yet I would stress that performance and nature need not be mutually exclusive. For example, many parishioners “perform” piety in church by bowing their heads as they pray, crossing themselves, or kneeling. This performance of worship does not necessarily preclude any actual piety or worshipful nature, just as Magawisca’s noble nature does mean she cannot “perform” the outward signs of her civility.

indeed, Magawisca's performance represents much of Pequot history. For example, early in the novel the narrator describes Magawisca's face as expressive. Magawisca's demeanor and expression make "the eye linge[r] on [her] face, as if it were perusing there the legible record of her birth and wrongs" (23). In performance, then, Magawisca's body contains the historical record of the Pequods. With her performance—her emotionally evocative voice in particular—Magawisca is able to forge an emotional bond not just with the audience, but between the audience and the Pequods' historical experience.

The text of Magawisca's performance also bears out her goal of emotionally connecting with the audience. Taken by themselves, elegies like "My people! Where are they?" do seem overly melodramatic in the pejorative sense (302). Yet she couples these lamentations with the rhetoric of resistance. For example, she growls, "[N]ot one of my race has ever acknowledged your authority" (302). She is yoking her emotional argument—her grief—to her rational argument that Puritan authority is flawed. These bifurcated approaches are fused in her final argument: "Take my own word, I am your enemy . . . Can we grasp in friendship the hand raised to strike us? Nay" (309). This seems like a bleak conclusion, one surely to lead to her conviction and execution, if not for melodrama's influence. Magawisca has already built an emotional bridge to her audience, even before she echoes Patrick Henry with "I demand of thee death or liberty" (309).<sup>13</sup> Sedgwick's use of Revolutionary language also serves a melodramatic function.

Early American melodrama, according to Bruce McConachie, often contained

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<sup>13</sup> In addition to the Revolutionary language of Magawisca's trial, Jeffrey Insko lists many of the novel's anachronisms. For example, the narrator often superimposes the 17<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century landscapes (16), and links the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Housatonic Indians with their descendents, who visit 19<sup>th</sup>-century Stockbridge (90). Insko argues that this anachronism allows Sedgwick to redefine history. I see Insko's argument as invaluable in demonstrating that Sedgwick is commenting directly on the late-1820s conversations of Indian Removal. See Insko, "Anachronistic Imaginings: *Hope Leslie*'s Challenge to Historicism."

“reactionary nostalgia” that allowed audiences to experience a kind of “pre-Revolutionary bliss” (“American” 139). The universe of the melodrama almost always portrays the past as Edenic and the present as somehow flawed. Magawisca is tapping into that dramatic trend to finalize the emotional connection to her audience. Sedgwick is doing the same to her readers, since nostalgia in any form is a necessary ingredient in cultural memory. Magawisca’s testimony, then, works on two narrative levels. The melodrama of the courtroom generates a monopathic reaction for the characters *and* the novel’s readers.

Within the realm of the novel, Magawisca’s testimony has the desired effect. She is able to elicit a monopathic response from the entire audience in the courtroom. As soon as Magawisca finishes her performance, Everell springs to his feet and shouts for her freedom. He is not the only one: “The feeling was contagious, and every voice, save her judges, shouted ‘liberty!—liberty! Grant the prisoner liberty!’” (309). This is not the first time Magawisca has brought forth this kind of emotion in others. After her sacrifice to save Everell in Book One, “The voice of nature rose from every [Pequot] heart, and responding to the justice of Magawisca’s claim, bade [Everell] ‘God speed!’” (97). Both Everell’s “execution” and Magawisca’s trial are instances of patriarchal justice gone awry, and both are sabotaged by a monopathic response to Magawisca’s melodramatic rhetoric.<sup>14</sup>

One might argue that Magawisca’s staged melodrama was unsuccessful, since she was unable to procure a verdict of “not guilty.” The verdict is not particularly surprising;

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<sup>14</sup> The execution scene does have theatrical elements like those of Magawisca’s trial. I exclude it from my study because it is not really a “melodrama of resistance,” as Mononotto is the “actor” in the drama. For example, his manner of praising Everell’s character before “brandish[ing] his hatchet over Everell’s head” and screaming “exultingly” marks Mononotto as the actor in his own melodrama (96).

after all, the primary judge is Governor John Winthrop, who, the narrator admits, is not much of a fan of performance. Earlier in the novel Winthrop cautioned Mrs. Grafton, “we should take heed, my worthy friend, not to lay too much stress on doing or not doing—not to rest unduly on duties and performances, for they be unsound ground” (185). His suspicion of “performances” is partly based in his Puritan belief. One’s good works should flow directly from one’s essence as a “good person” rather than a person who “does good works.” Yet even Winthrop was moved by the performance. Magawisca directly addresses the Governor in her final plea, and “his heart was touched with the general emotion, and he was fain to turn away to hide tears more becoming to the man than to the magistrate” (309). Winthrop’s emotional response disrupts his hyper-rational nature. So while she’s found guilty of devil-worship and treason, Magawisca has succeeded in emotionally moving her audience.

While on an emotional level he knows that freeing Magawisca is the moral thing to do, “political, rather than moral or ethical considerations lead Governor Winthrop . . . to make potentially disastrous errors in judgment” (Garvey 291). Winthrop and the other magistrates act on their political “reason” rather than following their more charitable instincts, and they rule against Magawisca (310). Despite this ruling, it would be possible that the novel’s readers have monopathic responses to Magawisca’s performance similar to the characters’. Magawisca’s resistance is meant to generate a desire in the novel’s audience to see her set free. The desire to see Magawisca succeed is designed to be so emotionally powerful that it overrides the rational response that she has (allegedly) violated the letter of Puritan law. That is the power of melodrama’s monopathy. Melodrama creates a singular vision, and as that vision elicits an overwhelming

monolithic response, any similar visions elicit the same powerful reaction. What the trial scene does not reveal, however, is melodrama's inherent reductiveness. While its power comes from that singular perspective, that "pleasure of experiencing wholeness," is also what ultimately makes melodrama so reductive. Sedgwick wants to avoid simply replacing one reductive narrative (history) with an equally reductive narrative (melodrama). An examination of Magawisca's first "drama," her recital of the Mystic Massacre, can provide us with Sedgwick's narrative compromise. Magawisca's recital utilizes similar melodramatic modes of resistance to historical authority while simultaneously demonstrating that fiction—specifically *Hope Leslie*—bests melodrama as a medium for that resistance.

#### Magawisca's Recital: Sedgwick's Quarrel with Melodrama

Many critics who understand *Hope Leslie* as an indictment of Puritan history couple their analysis of Magawisca's recitation with Sedgwick's preface.<sup>15</sup> Most critics, in fact, understand the novel as attempting to rewrite or work against the received historical tradition. Even Edward Foster, who states that the Indian attacks on the English were "unprovoked," concedes that Sedgwick is trying to offer an alternative historical account. In the preface, Sedgwick maintains that *Hope Leslie* is not meant to be read as a "historical narrative, or a relation of real events" (3). Yet she consistently incorporates quotations from historical sources. While Sedgwick offers these quotes as support for the Puritan historical records, as many critics note, she criticizes those accounts even as she uses them. For example, Sedgwick quotes Puritan records immediately after Magawisca's

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<sup>15</sup> Susanne Opfermann, for example, suggests that Sedgwick's novel argues that Puritan historical record is biased and that the preface stands as both a testament against that bias and a recognition that the novel will clash with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century conception of the "Puritan appraisal of Native Americans" (37). This allows Sedgwick to implicitly question the justification for repossession of Indian lands, as that justification rests on that Puritan appraisal.

recitation, and in doing so “censures the genre of historical narrative as bigoted and unjust” (Szabo 276). The narrator pulls no punches, either, as she quotes from *Of Plymouth Plantation*: “it was a fearful sight to see them thus,” she quotes Bradford, “frying in the fire, and the streams of blood quenching the same, and the horrible scent thereof” (56). The narrator follows Bradford’s arresting description of the Massacre with the addendum that in Bradford’s version “the courage of the Pequots was distorted into ferocity” (56). The use of the word “distorted” illustrates that historical narrative can alter or pervert the truth of the account. And that objective truth may be impossible, the novel argues. When it is revealed that Hope and Faith remember the attack on Bethel in fundamentally different ways—Hope remembers it as a slaughter, Faith as a rescue—the novel affirms Sedgwick’s stance that historical narratives are elementally suspect because they are, fundamentally, subjective. The clearest example of this argument comes in the form of Magawisca’s recitation.

During her recitation, Magawisca demonstrates a skill in acting just as she does during her trial. As in the trial, both Magawisca’s body and voice come into play. In the moments before the recitation, Digby says to Everell, “Stand close—observe her—see, she lays her ear to the earth” (43). Magawisca seems unaware that anyone is watching her, but Sedgwick is highlighting the fact that Everell and Digby are an audience. The actions they see, like putting her ear to the ground, allow them to identify her as Indian. This seems too obvious, since Everell and Digby already know that Magawisca is an Indian. My point is that, like the significance that such actions have when performed by melodramatic actors, a similar identifying marker is present in Magawisca’s behavior.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> I would argue that a character lacking any other distinguishing features, like speech patterns or costumes, would still be understood by an audience to be “Indian” if she were to enter the stage and listen with her ear



The fact that the gestures are artificial—stereotypical “Indian” gestures—emphasizes the fact that she is performing a role for an audience. This is important considering that, as Dana Luciano asserts, the “charismatic authority of Indian eloquence . . . was tied directly to the Indian body” (51). Luciano’s point is that Magawisca’s body becomes the locus for her eloquence; her voice alone is not sufficient to make Indian rhetoric effective. I would argue that her body enhances her actor’s voice by literally “acting the Indian.” Her stealth and woodsmanship, like the stereotypical “laying her ear to the earth,” is Sedgwick’s indication of a *staged* Indian.

Magawisca uses her voice as well as her body effectively in the recitation. After presenting Everell with a prologue about friendship and history, “[s]he paused for a few moments, sighed deeply, and then began the recital of the last acts in the tragedy of her people; the principal circumstances of which are detailed in the chronicles of the times” (48). The pause and the sigh are part of her performance, and they work thematically with the “text” of the recitation to elicit emotion from Everell. Furthermore, the narrator yokes melodrama and history, labeling the “last acts in the tragedy” as part of Puritan “chronicles.” Thus the emotional impact on Everell of hearing Magawisca say, “None resisted . . . not a sound escaped, save the wailings of the dying children” is inextricably bound up in his understanding of Puritan history (55).

Unquestionably, Everell is emotionally moved by the recitation, much as is the audience at Magawisca’s trial. As he listens to her account, he is “touched by the wand of feeling” and is quickly stirred by sentiment. Wrapped up as he is in the story, he is easily persuaded that her version of the massacre—which contradicts Digby’s and others’

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to the ground. Similarly, a melodramatic character who twirls his mustache is labeled “the villain” while one who tosses her hair is “the coquette.”

reports—is the more truthful version. So, too, the novel’s readers are more likely to be moved by Magawisca’s account considering that the Puritan version, juxtaposed as it is with the recitation, seems cruel in comparison (Nelson 196). Furthermore, Everell’s constant interruptions draw the reader into Magawisca’s performance. For example, he asks for clarification and specifics—“was it so sudden” and “[h]ow did you escape”—which both propel further the plot of Magawisca’s story and give voice to the questions Sedgwick’s doubting readers would be asking (50, 51). Yet these outbursts would have also been recognizable occurrences in early nineteenth-century theatrical performances. Melodrama’s audiences, Grimstead states, often saw the performance as being simultaneously reality and fantasy. While audiences knew that what was being staged was not actually happening, the emotional bond between them and the performance was such that it *felt* real, inciting what Grimstead calls “unexpected acts of audience participation” (61). By asking his questions, Everell is participating in the recitation, and that participation further solidifies his, and the novel’s readers’, investment in Magawisca’s revisionist history.

Everell’s investment in Magawisca’s version of the events at Mystic is total. For Magawisca and for Sedgwick, the monopathic response to the story permits the presentation of an alternate historical narrative, one that runs counter to the Puritan tradition. Magawisca functions as a mouthpiece for an alternative history, persuading her audience that the attack on Mystic was unprovoked, rather than as retaliation for the deaths of Englishmen Stone and Oldham. Even her final line—“you know the rest”—implies that she is not revising the entire history, just that single event (55). Her statement acts as a cap to her argument, finalizing Everell’s conversion from skeptic to believer in

the Pequot version of the events. But it is more than her words that convince him; it is Magawisca's entire performance. Melodrama, Sedgwick argues, is an effective tool for combating the monolithic narrative of Puritan history. By generating a monopathic response, melodrama can undermine the biased but deeply influential incumbent histories.

Despite the apparent emotional resonance of Magawisca's recitation and the apparent success in persuading Everell (and, we suspect, the novel's audience) that the Puritan accounts are biased and suspect, complications arise in the wake of that scene, as Carol Singley observes. Singley notes the juxtaposition of the Mystic Massacre with the attack on Bethel, commenting that the latter can dilute or even counteract the emotional impact of Magawisca's performance. "The structural symmetry of the two attacks," asserts Singley, "renders the acts of male violence morally indistinguishable and underlines the falsity of assigning blame to the Indians" (115). Readers certainly sympathize with the Fletchers during the attack, and that sympathy might diffuse or at least complicate what they feel for Mononotto in the wake of his wife's death. This complication helps make the case for what Philip Gould calls the novel's "historical relativism," which undercuts the monopathic response to Magawisca's melodrama (644). If Gould is right, and the violence perpetrated against the Fletchers blunts any sympathy readers might feel for Mononotto, then we must assume that Magawisca's melodrama failed in creating a single, unified perspective and emotional response for the novel's readers.

Maureen Tuthill takes Gould's argument one step further. She suggests that since Magawisca relates the events at Mystic and the narrator describes the attack on Bethel,

the immediacy of the deaths of the Fletchers retains a power that Magawisca's version lacks. While Tuthill does not excuse the violence the English do to the Pequots, she notes, "the story of Puritan brutality is told in retrospect and through the subjective eyes of Magawisca; the tone is methodical, emotionless, punctuated slightly by the faint sounds of yelling and gunfire, the burning of huts and the images of Pequots throwing themselves into the fires. It is set in flashback mode—painful, but distant" (100). The violence of the English is "faceless," while the Indian violence at Bethel becomes incredibly vivid (Tuthill 100).<sup>17</sup> Therefore Tuthill sees Magawisca's recital as ultimately unsuccessful, since readers' monopathic response is obfuscated in the wake of more immediate and "felt" descriptions of Indian violence.

Tuthill's argument is worth considering because of her focus on the emotional impact of Magawisca's recitation. In essence, she contends that melodrama remains an ineffective rhetorical tool. In response to Tuthill's argument that the scene is emotionally lacking, I would argue that Sedgwick pulls a little narrative sleight-of-hand early in the recitation that allows her to make the Mystic Massacre just as "immediate" as the Bethel Massacre. Sedgwick is able to accomplish this by dropping the quotation marks around Magawisca's dialogue once she begins presenting the conversation between her mother and Cushmakin (49). In effect, the narrator steps aside and Magawisca actually narrates this scene. This decreases what Wayne Booth calls "narrative distance," as Magawisca is in fact speaking to the novel's implied audience directly.<sup>18</sup> I would argue that this does

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<sup>17</sup> It is significant that the most violent acts committed by Indians at Bethel are those committed by Mohawks. While this might let Mononotto off the hook slightly, allowing Sedgwick to avoid generalizing the Indians, it has no bearing on Tuthill's argument. Regardless of tribe, the attack on Bethel has an emotional immediacy that Magawisca's narrative lacks.

<sup>18</sup> See Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). Booth outlines different levels of audience. In the case of *Hope Leslie*, Magawisca's audience is Everell and Digby, while the novel's readers (or some ideal version of them) are the audience for Sedgwick herself (or some ideal version of her). But in this stretch of

not make her account “distant,” as Tuthill suggests, but allows for the delivery of a melodramatic emotional impact.

Sedgwick seems aware of this emotional component of history, for when she quotes from historical accounts such as Bradford’s, she does so in such a way as to highlight their melodramatic qualities. For example, when William Fletcher and Alice are in the process of fleeing England, the narrator quotes from Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation*. William and Alice’s escape is thwarted in melodramatic fashion, but the emotion is only heightened by the Bradford quote: “truly doleful was the sight of that sad and mournful parting, to hear what sighs, and sobs, and prayers, did sound amongst them” (11). Sedgwick sets William and Alice’s separation side-by-side with Bradford’s descriptions of the “tears” and “pithy speeches” of other lovers. This juxtaposition, like the one later when she quotes Bradford’s description of the fire at Mystic, draws attention to the melodramatic language of history. In this way, Sedgwick is demonstrating why historical narratives become so lodged in the national consciousness: they affect the heart as well as the mind.

If historical narratives yield monopathic responses similar to those of melodrama, then it also stands to reason that the two genres share similar prejudicial tendencies. According to Gary Richardson, since the primary goal is to generate a strong emotional charge, melodramas tend to “discourage” audience reflection (*American* 54). In other words, audiences become so wrapped up in the emotion of the moment that they fail to use reason to question the truthfulness of the performance. In fact, members of a melodrama’s audience often buy into the play’s implied ideologies “before they know

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the recitation, Magawisca becomes the narrator, who then is speaking directly to the novel’s “implied audience.”

what those tendencies/ideologies are” (Roach, “Emergence” 339). This is true of Everell during Magawisca’s performance; she indicts the Puritans’ religious beliefs concerning mercy and compassion as hypocritical. The narrator remarks, “Everell had been carefully instructed in the principles of his religion, and he felt Magawisca’s relation to be an awkward comment on them, and her inquiry natural; but though he knew not what answer to make, he was sure there must be a good one” (53). Magawisca’s performance has dulled Everell’s rational faculties to the point where he knows he *must* have an alternative answer—he has, after all, been “instructed” in Christian tenets—but is too emotionally involved in her story to offer a counterargument. In other words, melodrama’s inherent reductiveness obscures any potential claim Everell might make against Magawisca’s version of events. By the end of Magawisca’s recitation, Everell has stopped questioning completely. He does not even acknowledge that it would be possible to doubt her account at all. Dana Nelson uses Todorov’s schema of postcolonial narratives to further illuminate this scene. She argues that, unlike the “third-person” account of the Puritan records, Magawisca’s “second-person” or “me versus you” account of Mystic draws out more sympathy from Everell (Nelson 198). As a result, he is less apt to question her account because of the sympathy the drama is eliciting. Ultimately, the melodramatic approach does not simply offer an alternative to the historical narrative, but replaces it with a narrative just as emotionally-charged and as prejudicial as the original. And if Sedgwick is being honest in the preface when she claims that *Hope Leslie* is not “intended as a substitute for genuine history”—and, as I have established, she has already questioned the genuineness of history itself—then she must modify melodrama in such a way as to mitigate its disingenuousness (4).

Critics who examine the metahistorical element of *Hope Leslie* argue that the novel's use of "character" is what strengthens its purpose in embodying a more genuine historical narrative. Sedgwick presents historical figures as more or less fully-realized characters, and that allows her to "take into account the individual lives of women and men as they attempt to form themselves in the midst of larger social and economic transformations. Character, in other words, supplements history" (Emerson 39). The clearest example creating of creating "character" out of "history" in the novel is Governor Winthrop. The narrator takes pains to separate the myth of Winthrop—how her readers would have conceived of him after reading histories—from the man or "personage" (Insko 184). For example, the narrator states, "Mr. Winthrop is well known to have been a man of the most tender domestic affections and sympathies" (9). By making Winthrop a part of William and Alice's "love story," the novel is making the historical Winthrop a part of the novel's emotional core.<sup>19</sup> This elevates fiction above history by adding an emotional element without relying solely on that element as melodrama does.

Sedgwick also uses the narrator's voice to defuse the more incendiary emotional elements created by the novel's internal melodramas. This allows the narrative to retain the persuasive power that a "melodrama of resistance" brings to the table, while avoiding a situation where history and melodrama are reduced to polar opposites. In other words, fiction, by presenting multiple narratives as complimentary rather than contradictory, is exhibited as more truthful or "genuine" than either history or melodrama. Sedgwick typically accomplishes this by having the narrator step in to interpret or explain many of

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<sup>19</sup> I am certainly not suggesting that this technique of "characterization" is unique to *Hope Leslie*. On the contrary, weaving historical figures into a fictional narrative is one of the hallmarks of the historical romance as a genre.

the more emotionally-charged scenes. For example, after Magawisca finishes her recitation, the narrator admits, “It was an important event to the infant colonies, and its magnitude probably somewhat heightened to the imaginations of the English” (55). This has the effect of reminding readers that the versions of Mystic Massacre that they might have heard, including the account by Bradford that she will soon reference, may have been exaggerated. The narrator also implies that Magawisca’s version of events is more truthful. By eventually reasserting herself before the end of Magawisca’s performance, the narrator is able to deflect any charges of bias or hypocrisy by warning her readers not to believe the more inflated accounts. Fiction as a form allows Sedgwick to have it both ways: she harnesses the emotional power of melodrama but without its overly reductive perspective.

Sedgwick uses the attack on Bethel as a way to further instantiate fiction as just as “crucial to an understanding of the past” as historical narratives were seen to be (Emerson 39). The violence carried out during the Indian attack is vivid and visceral, certainly capable of moving audiences emotionally. Yet after the attack the narrator quickly steps in to staunch any severe emotional reaction:

We hope our readers will not think we have wantonly sported with their feelings . . . such events, as we have feebly related, were common in the early annals, and attended by horrors that it would be impossible for the imagination to exaggerate. (75)

The narrator’s voice is almost facetious: her description is “feeble” and she wants it to seem inconceivable that she has crafted this scene in order to wreak havoc with readers’ emotions. The narrative breaks the spell that it has over any reader who might “have



forgotten the present and to have entered into the seventeenth-century world of the novel” by somewhat neutralizing the emotional effect of the account (Insko 193). Sedgwick also overlaps her narrative and history at this moment, and in conjunction with the supposed disclaimer about our “feelings,” this passage implicitly argues that her fictional account is more truthful or “genuine” as any other record. She follows this argument with a reminder that “the noble pilgrims lived and endured for us,” which reinstates the “character” that she finds lacking in traditional historical records (75). Ultimately, Sedgwick utilizes melodrama to counter history’s prejudicial nature but simultaneously exposes it as an insufficient alternative to history. Melodrama, she seems to be arguing, offers an efficient vehicle for resistance to historical authority. On the other hand, only fiction can effectively furnish a “genuine” alternative to history.

#### Hope’s First Melodrama: Emotion and Rebellion

In addition to Magawisca’s recitation and trial, two of Hope Leslie’s actions function as staged melodramas. Hope’s two melodramatic rebellions, both culminating in jailbreaks, utilize the emotional fervor of melodrama while demonstrating fiction’s ability to avoid reductiveness. Hope’s letter to Everell in Chapter 8 exhibits melodramatic characteristics and serves to make the novel’s audience, along with Everell, the direct recipient of that melodramatic force. She calls the series of diary-like entries “my Bethel chronicles,” which carries overtones of historical accuracy and longevity (115). She also associates the dramatic arts with this historical narrative; following Cradock’s instruction, the letter, “according to the rules of art, [has] a beginning, a middle, and thank heaven, an end” (115). The letter has three distinct “acts”: the scene of exploration and nation-

building interrupted by the snakebite, Nelema's trial, and Nelema's escape and subsequent promise.

The letter partially describes the climax of Hope's melodrama—the jailbreak—and consists of many of the hallmarks of the genre. For example, melodramas favor spectacle, and melodramas throughout the nineteenth century used the most technologically advanced special effects to enhance that spectacle. Hope uses sulfur in much the same way. By leaving behind traces of brimstone in Mr. Pynchon's cellar, Hope is promoting the idea that Nelema escaped with the help of the devil. She also leaves “on the ground marks of a slight scorching,” which further cements the idea that Nelema was aided by “the enemy of mankind” (116). Hope uses these illusions to create a singular effect that will forestall any attempt by the Puritans to immediately begin a search for their missing captive. She knows that this “effect” will be persuasive because, like Magawisca's Revolutionary rhetoric, her audience is predisposed to believe it. She admits that the spectacle plays into the Puritans' superstitions:

[T]he singularity of the case only served to magnify their wonder, without, in the least, weakening their faith in the actual, and, as it appeared, friendly alliance between Nelema, and the evil one. Indeed, I was the only person present whose belief in her witchcraft was not, as it were, converted into sight. (116)

Hope has sussed out the Puritan prejudice that Indians are satanic and she plays to that prejudice. Here, she seems well aware that both history and melodrama are persuasive because they manipulate preexisting emotions and she herself is more than willing to harness this manipulative power.

Like Magawisca's defense at the trial, Hope's melodrama here has the desired emotional effect. While the narrator may claim that it is Hope's precocious nature that keeps men like Winthrop and Pynchon from punishing her for her misdeeds, the narrative also bears out melodrama's effect on those men. For example, Mr. Pynchon is, contrary to what Hope might believe, not fooled by her performance. In fact, she is not a very capable actress; she attempts to "mask her feelings" in the aftermath of the jailbreak, but is unable to stifle her amusement at the Puritans' collective head-scratching (125). And though Pyncheon recognizes the part Hope played in the jailbreak, he "probably felt an emotion of joy at the old woman's escape" (125). Like Winthrop at Magawisca's trial, Pynchon is emotionally persuaded by Hope's performance in the aftermath of the jailbreak.

The narrative makes it clear that Hope only breaks Nelema out of prison because her first attempt to have the Indian woman released is unsuccessful. In a kind of pre-drama, she attempts to reason first with Mr. Fletcher and then with Mr. Pynchon, but neither man will be persuaded by her logic. When Mr. Fletcher accuses her of borderline blasphemy when she contends that the Indians are entitled to their own religious beliefs, she seems stunned. She finally is forced to admit "that bad spirits were only permitted to appear on earth" where they were opposed by God's agents (112). She makes even less headway with Pynchon, who does not even pretend to want Hope's opinion. In her letter to Everell, Hope describes Pyncheon's disregard of her petition to free Nelema:

My testimony was extorted from me . . . Mr. Pynchon thought necessary to rebuke as presumption:—"Thou art somewhat forward, maiden," he

said, “in giving thy opinion; but thou must know we regard it but as the whistle of a bird; withdraw, and leave judgment to thy elders.” (113)

She cannot convince Pynchon that Nelema saved Cradock not with witchcraft but simple herbology. He refuses to listen to her estimation; her language is ineffective. Therefore, she must resort to melodrama to drive her point home. Hope turns to melodramatic action when language is “insufficient” (Ackerman 9).

Melodrama in *Hope Leslie* is always the vehicle for characters’ struggles with authority. When Hope uses melodramatic tactics to free Nelema, as Suzanne Gossett and Barbara Bardes note, “She rejects the authority of the religious sect over her personal judgment. In this Hope stands for the author, who editorializes [about Puritan severity] early in the book” (Gossett 22). Winthrop, like Pynchon, recognizes Hope’s complicity in Nelema’s escape. When Mr. Fletcher defends Hope’s actions, the Governor responds, “I have thought the child rests too much on *performances*; and you must allow, brother, that she hath not, I speak it tenderly, that passiveness, that, next to godliness, is a woman’s best virtue” (160, Sedgwick’s emphasis). Critics often cite the second half of this statement as evidence for Hope as the novel’s emblem of resistance. But critics often omit the first clause, which sets up a significant dichotomy between performance and passivity. Winthrop’s word choice is interesting. “Action” may be just as diametrically opposed to “passiveness” as “performance.” After all, Winthrop’s argument rests on the belief that if a person “is good,” they will “do good.” But “performance” has the connotation of illusion or artifice that “action” lacks. Therefore, I believe Winthrop is criticizing the artificial nature of Hope’s actions, rather than the fact that those actions are rebellious ones.

While Hope links her melodrama to resistance, she also makes that resistance part of her duty as a member of the Springfield community. As her melodrama begins, Hope is self-consciously taking part in nation-building activities that are typically reserved for only men. The first “act” of the melodrama describes an excursion to Northampton. Hope reports that when she lobbies to join the scouting party, Mrs. Grafton opines that it is unladylike “for a young person, like me, to go out exploring a new country. I urged, that our new country developes [sic] faculties that young ladies, in England, were unconscious of possessing” (102). Hope’s response reveals her belief that women not only have the ability to engage in the development of the “new country,” but a duty to do so as well. Sedgwick even allows Hope to more fully enter the colonial mythos by having her suggest the name of Mount Holioko. The novel presents this scene as a kind of historical footnote, offering an alternative narrative for the christening of that particular landmark. *Hope Leslie*, then, presents this as a “citation of women’s participation with men in a national past” (Emerson 26). And if the novel purports to be something more genuine than “genuine history,” then Hope’s “Bethel chronicles” become another narrative thread to be woven into the larger tapestry of historical consciousness. Lucinda Damon-Bach observes that one major “strategy in Sedgwick’s consideration of nation building is a pervasive polyvocality”; Sedgwick places Hope’s voice alongside the more well-known historical accounts to achieve that polyvocality (xxvii). Hope’s acts of resistance and insistence on political involvement are not lost amid the other (masculine, conservative, traditional) voices in the text precisely because they rest on performances. Sedgwick has Hope infuse her performances with melodramatic characteristics so as to

allow them to be, if not completely accepted, not dismissed outright by nineteenth-century audiences.

More interestingly, Hope's letter to Everell is a performance in itself. Regarding the novel's polyvocality, Judith Fetterley notes that letters in *Hope Leslie* are where we learn the truth about the characters. For example, it is in a letter that readers learn of Sir Philip's true loyalties and intentions. For Fetterley, Hope's letter reveals that she acts as she truly is ("My Sister" 72). What Fetterley does not underscore, however, is that some of Hope's letter is a smokescreen. Certainly, Hope reveals to Everell that she believes that Nelema was wrongfully imprisoned; Hope's moral fiber is not being questioned. Yet part of the letter is designed to deceive and obfuscate. For example, Hope does not admit to Everell that she and Digby have freed Nelema. Instead, she claims that she experiences "a strange dream" in which Nelema promises, in return for her freedom, to get word to Hope of her sister (116). Would Everell really take this comment at face value? On the heels of her description of Nelema's disappearance, the reader infers that Hope is responsible for the Indian's escape. Still, a "schism" opens between what the characters say and what they do, and the novel has "a certain degree of faith that the 'accurate' reader will fill this schism in a desirable manner" (Ford 81). This "accurate" reader will see Hope's letter for what it is—a melodrama of resistance—and will side with Hope's ideology. Yet this ideal reader will not be the naïve Everell, who becomes so emotionally affected by the melodrama that he becomes almost useless in his bias. Instead, Sedgwick reasserts her own narrative authority. Now that Hope has installed writing as an act of resistance and political duty via her letter, Sedgwick's narrator builds on that foundation, establishing *Hope Leslie* as a similar artifact of resistance.

Just as the narrator “interprets” Magawisca’s recitation, she begins the chapter following Hope’s letter with a similar rereading of the events:

There are hints in Miss Leslie’s letter to Everell Fletcher, that require some amplification to be quite intelligible to our readers . . . with the inconsiderate warmth of youthful feeling, she had, before the grave and reverend magistrates, declared her belief in Nelema’s innocence and thereby implied a censure of their wisdom. (123)

On one hand, the narrator is validating Hope’s action. Sedgwick is aligning the text’s ideology with Hope’s and against the Puritans’. The narrator supports Hope’s decision to act in freeing Nelema. On the other hand, she is wresting narrative authority from Hope, allowing the narrative to have the last word on Hope’s actions. This adds to the novel’s polyvocality, and undermines any monopathic reaction readers might have to Hope’s escapade.

In addition to partly diffusing the melodrama’s influence here, Sedgwick also takes similar jabs at history. She states that she is “bound by all the laws of decorum” to try to be as historically accurate as possible when describing Boston and the Winthrops (149). But by calling this description of seventeenth-century Boston “a long digression” and labeling a description of a typical Saturday night in Boston a “long skipping-place,” Sedgwick is humorously undercutting the historical digressions (151, 166). On one hand she is admitting that, by writing within the conventions of the historical romance, she is “bound” to include these historical detours. Yet the narrator devalues them as inferior to the emotional core of the novel. Therefore, fiction in general (and *Hope Leslie* specifically) resists the reductive genres of emotionless historical narrative and

emotionally overwrought melodrama. In a way, Sedgwick is validating her profession as a writer as well as defending a writer's duty in producing novels of resistance.

#### Hope's Second Melodrama: Emotion for the Common Good

As some critics note, Hope evolves between Books One and Two, between what I am calling her first and second drama of resistance. Specifically, Hope learns to temper her emotions with considerations of communal good. This is not to minimize Hope's status as a symbol for resistance; Magawisca and Hope consistently "represent Sedgwick's ideal citizen: rational, articulate, and self-confident . . . [but] not always right" (Harris 279). And while Hope is obviously the novel's protagonist, she is never portrayed as unconditionally virtuous, like a melodramatic heroine. The narrator even implies that Hope is not perfect when she asks, "Who has the resolution to point out a favourite's defects?" (128). Sedgwick is acknowledging that readers tend to side with Hope because of emotional, rather than rational or legal, reasons. As a result, she can be forgiven for any forays into selfishness that are brought about by the fact that her "faith and creed do not come from the Bible or any other text," but her own heart (Gee 165).

In Book One, Hope acts in accordance to what she feels is right; she follows her heart and satisfies her personal needs at the same time. For example, she frees Nelema partly because she feels ethically bound to do so, but also partly because of her ulterior motives. Nelema, once liberated, will be able to bring back news of long-lost Faith. Hope's mode of resistance, then, exemplifies Jacksonian ideology, which suggests that "the public good can only be served through attention to the needs and desires of the individual" (Karafilis 329). Nelema and Hope are the only ones who *directly* benefit from



Hope's rebellious act. Hope even admits her privileging of individual needs over the community after returning late one night:

I surrender myself to the laws of the land, having no hope, but from the mercy of our magistrates. I have offended, I know, but I could commit a worse offence—an offence against my own conscience and heart—if I explained the cause of my absence. (184)

Hope, sopping wet from being caught in a storm, is apologizing to Winthrop and Fletcher for throwing the whole household into a panic by her absence. She recognizes that she has done something wrong, but further argues that to reveal her whereabouts—she had been meeting in secret with Magawisca—would betray a confidence. She honors Magawisca's needs as an individual over the community's piece of mind.

Strangely, Hope seems uncomfortable with this identification with others' individual feelings. It is not as if she is purely selfish, but her actions seem to conflict with Winthrop's ideology of putting the public good above the individual's. Eventually, "Hope learns a more temperate form of sympathy in the course of the novel," one that takes into account the public good (Emerson 29). On the eve of her reunion with Faith, Hope recognizes how she has been manipulating her friends in order to allow herself the opportunity to speak with her sister in private. This causes her to worry that she is being too willful, and she sighs, "Perhaps you think, Digby, I have been too headstrong in my own way" (235). Though Digby asserts that having one's own way is an American "privilege," Hope learns from her friends how to be more selfless (235). By the time Hope stages her second drama of resistance, Magawisca's jailbreak, she has learned that any act of unlawful rebellion should "never [be] committed for the direct gain of the

perpetrator” (Zagarell 56). Instead, Hope’s melodrama is for the benefit of the individual *and* the larger community. She vows, “If all that I love are happy, I must be happy too” (234). Her next act of resistance straddles the line between individualism and communalism, providing Sedgwick’s readers with a model for a specific kind of sympathy-based resistance that she presents as a facet of republican duty.

Hope’s second major act of resistance is preceded, like her release of Nelema, by a pre-drama in which she brings her concerns to Winthrop. She appeals to Winthrop’s rationality, hoping to reason with the magistrate in him to secure Magawisca’s emancipation. “I would have your warrant sir,” Hope calmly states, “for her release; her free passage to her poor old father, if indeed he lives” (387). She proceeds to base her plea on Magawisca’s “merits” and “rights,” and reminds Winthrop that the Governor himself had admitted that he had made a pledge to take care of Mononotto’s family in the aftermath of the Mystic Massacre (287). Winthrop’s immediate response (“there is some touch of reason in thy speech, Hope Leslie” (287)) is certainly more encouraging than Mr. Pyncheon’s curt dismissal of Hope’s testimony in Book One. He is admitting that Hope’s rational faculties have developed over time. However, Winthrop is not persuaded; “I have but once voice in the commonwealth,” he tells Hope, “and I cannot grant pardons at pleasure” (287). Puritan law remains inflexible in the face of female rationality.

Sedgwick does not limit the rigidity of male law to the Puritans. The magistrates’ condemnation of Magawisca echoes Mononotto’s earlier sentiments concerning Pequot justice. When Magawisca responds passionately yet rationally to her father’s desire to execute Everell, Monototto replies, “My purpose is fixed, and here it shall be accomplished” (87). Male law, whether English or Indian, remains unmoved by female

rational influence. And even the most rational and disinterested of women cannot seem to penetrate the shell of masculine rationality when it comes to community matters. For example, Esther attempts to act as a missionary to Magawisca. Esther believes that if she can prove to her uncle that the Indian woman does not represent a religious threat to the community—if she will renounce any connection with devils—then he will lift the death sentence. When Esther’s plan fails, Everell chides her, “You see, yourself, . . . by your own experience, there is but one way of aiding Magawisca” (294). This passage echoes earlier passages about Hope’s experiences being insufficient warrant for Magawisca’s release.

Ultimately, this pre-drama forces Hope to recognize that she must act in accordance with her heart, despite the inherent dangers associated with too much emotional involvement, in order to offset the rationality of political matters. When Winthrop attempts to comfort Hope by saying, “Be not thus disquieted, my child; cast thy care upon the Lord, He can bring light out of this darkness,” he is using religion as the basis for his so-called rational behavior (288-9). Yet Hope’s response is revealing. “‘And *he* alone,’ she thought,” in answer to Winthrop’s assurances (289, emphasis mine). The lower-case “h” indicates that Hope is *not* suggesting that God will be the one to alleviate Magawisca’s suffering. She is placing Magawisca’s plight firmly in the realm of mankind, and her almost plaintive and resigned demeanor at this point suggests that she believes that Winthrop will not do the right thing. In other words, the novel is asserting that Christian benevolence is not born of rationality but from an emotional desire to act.

The emancipation of Magawisca is a confluence of the novel’s three other melodramas. Hope has learned the ability to act proficiently, and she is able to disguise

both Magawisca (already been portrayed as a skillful actress) and Cradock. Of course, Cradock is a “man rather acted upon than acting,” so Hope takes on the role of stage manager or director, giving her tutor instructions on how to best disguise himself as Magawisca (29). Hope has taken into account how to quickly exchange Magawisca’s and Cradock’s “costumes,” and the jailer, Tuttle, is nearsighted enough that the exchange is easily successful. Tuttle is also Hope’s sole audience member, and therefore she plays on his sympathies in order to assuage any doubts or suspicions he might have. The novel has already presented Tuttle as a man who indulges in sympathy; regarding his responsibilities as jailer, Tuttle tells Philip, “there is a pleasure in a pitiful feeling, let your outward work be ever so hard” (267). Hope knows from experience that melodrama is more successful when it validates audiences’ preexisting emotional states, and Tuttle is primed to be sympathetic. As Cradock remarks during the jailbreak, “They say too, ‘men’s hearts melt in women’s tears,’ and I believe it; come, come along, you shall have your way” (325). Hope’s act of resistance is successful because she understands emotion’s persuasive element, and therefore she uses a melodramatic model for that act.

Furthermore, while the jailbreak is shown to successfully resist patriarchal authority with emotion, she neutralizes the inherent self-serving nature of melodrama by resisting for the common good. In other words, her rebelliousness was actually in the community’s best interest. Certainly, Hope has a personal agenda in freeing her friend. Yet the narrator also notes that the Indians were still seething about recent violence as well as the Puritan’s harboring of Faith. Magawisca’s imprisonment was a catalyst, causing the Indians to cease their infighting. The narrator argues that Magawisca’s execution would have had “the probable effect” of forcing the Indians to band together

and retaliate (362). As such, “Hope’s plot to liberate the captive thus fills the gap between communal good and oppressive institutional law” (Karafilis 333). The magistrates’ strict rationality and adherence to the letter of the law, while ostensibly intended to protect the best interests of Boston, was in fact detrimental to the public good. As “Governor Winthrop perceived that Magawisca’s escape relieved them from much and dangerous perplexity,” he realizes that Hope’s melodramatic act of resistance actually follows his own (Christian) model of placing the needs of the community above the desires of the individual (362).

The novel then finds a benevolent middle ground between the overbearing emotional power of historical narratives and melodrama. In fact, *Hope Leslie* places itself within Sedgwick’s rubric of having a “moral purpose” to enlighten readers (Kelley, “Introduction” 22). The frontier romance, the novel implies, can carry a more capacious vision of Christian benevolence and emotional resistance than either melodrama or history, both of which are persuasive due to their emotionally powerful, but deeply biased, perspectives. Sedgwick is not alone in her assessment of the romance as a genre. In 1833, Massachusetts statesman Rufus Choate delivered a speech in Salem, Massachusetts entitled “The Importance of Illustrating New-England History by a Series of Romances like the Waverley Novels.” In this speech, Choate argues that historians’ previous attempts to envision colonial times were insufficient, biased, or incomplete, and concluded that a more fully developed history is within the power of the romance writer:

History shows you prospects by starlight, or at best by the waning moon . . .  
 . [In romance], you see the best of everything;—all that is grand and  
 beautiful in nature, all that is brilliant in achievement, all that is

magnanimous in virtue, all that is sublime in self-sacrifice; and you see a great deal more of which history shows you nothing. (qtd. in Maddox 89)

The frontier romance, argues Choate, fuses the “factual” elements of history like names and dates with the moral superlatives—“the best of everything”—of melodrama. It fleshes out the characters of historical personages, showing their virtues, sacrifices, frustrations and failings. Fiction, Choate contends, has the capability to instantiate a narrative much more effectively than the most often-read histories of the early nineteenth century, not because it is monolithic in nature, but because it offers a multiplicity of viewpoints. History and drama are reductive; historical romance is all-encompassing. Furthermore, since they are backed with the emotional and moral of melodrama, romances like *Hope Leslie* can convey not only the where’s and when’s of history, but also the lessons in Christian benevolence those historical moments demonstrate. Writers like Catharine Maria Sedgwick, in illustrating the “character of the times,” can more clearly and effectively comment on the morality of their own times (and how to act in accordance with that morality) than either historical narratives or theater.

## CHAPTER III

THE *THAUMATIC EXPERIENCE*: DRAMA AND AUDIENCE IN *MOBY-DICK*

Traditionally, critics who have examined Herman Melville's use of drama in *Moby-Dick* (1851) have focused on the ways in which Melville echoes, mimics, or undermines the language, plots, and ideas of Shakespearian plays. While Walter Bezanson argues that Shakespeare is "an immense, unnamed presence" in the novel (172), it is F. O. Matthiessen who probably provides us with the most well known reading of Shakespeare's influence on Melville. In *American Renaissance*, Matthiessen argues that "Melville thought of Ahab's actions in dramatic terms" and that he delays in revealing Ahab in order to enhance "the dramatic effect" (415, 417). Yet Matthiessen uses the term "dramatic" quite freely here, linking it more to the topic of style or feeling than actual drama. In fact, Matthiessen argues that by 1850 "the tradition of Elizabethan tragedy was dead" (414). While technically true, Lawrence Levine and David Grimstead have shown that American stages had appropriated and widely adapted Shakespearian drama; Shakespeare's plays were modified for the American stage, their language was revised to suit American nationalistic agendas, and their plots molded into countless parodies, burlesques, and melodramatic send-ups. Melville would have been familiar with those theatrical conventions and adaptations. So while Matthiessen points to "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850) as proof that Melville believed Shakespeare to be "the profoundest of thinkers," his use of the term "drama" is so inclusive as to distance it from any real connection with the theater as Melville experienced it ("Mosses" 522).

Critics such as John Bryant, Robert Schulman, and Luther Mansfield follow Matthiessen's model.<sup>20</sup> Some critics focus on Ahab's similarities to Shakespearian tyrants while others argue that the Shakespearian allusions and rhetoric exemplify Ishmael's decision to cast himself as the "tragic dramatist."<sup>21</sup> These arguments ask valuable questions: what do these dovetailing of Shakespearian and Melvillian themes tell us? How is Melville attempting to deflate the Cult of Shakespeare?<sup>22</sup> In general, though, these critics do not attend to the problem of genre and theater in an historical context. What did Shakespeare's plays—or *any* play—mean to Melville himself?<sup>23</sup>

We might be able to formulate some answers to such a question, as Melville scholars have heavily documented Melville's affinity for the theater. Bezanson, who argues for a more historical understanding of theater as it applies to Melville's novels, traces Melville's theatrical pursuits during his 1849 European trip: "In London he went to the theater nine times in three weeks, in Paris he saw 'three comical comedies,' went to the Opera Comique and twice tried to get to see the great actress, Rachel, without success" (Bezanson 174). Melville certainly seems to have had a good deal of familiarity with, if not appreciation for, dramatic conventions. More than simply incorporating those conventions, Melville is writing his narrative using specific dramaturgical techniques. For

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<sup>20</sup> John Bryant argues that Ahab's address to "thou vast and venerable head" in "The Sphynx" is less an allusion to Hamlet's graveyard soliloquy than it is to Oedipus (86). Schulman's argument rests on the similarities between Ahab and King Lear and notes that whenever Ahab speaks "he does so in the measured blank verse of a Shakespearian king" (284). Mansfield connects Starbuck to Hamlet in that he seems to be fighting destiny and constantly hesitating, while Fedallah mirrors the prophesying witches in *Macbeth* (146-7).

<sup>21</sup> Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick*. Eds. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New York: Norton, 2002, 127. Subsequent citations are parenthetical.

<sup>22</sup> Bryant states, "Melville's use of Shakespeare is self-consciously bad" (82).

<sup>23</sup> Ray Browne examines popular (non-tragedy) theater as it appears in Melville. He casts a wide net, listing the influence of burlesque, farce, melodrama, and minstrel shows as influencing the drama of *Moby-Dick* and working as counterpoint to the Shakespearian elements. For example, he calls Bildad and Peleg burlesque characters, and Bildad's "sepulchral reply" to Peleg is a specific technique of the straight man in a farce (101).



example, Fred Schroeder stresses Melville's use of "focusing," using characters to describe an object that the audience could not normally see, noting that "Melville's methods are remarkably similar to those of the director" (224). The director's main goal is to create a unifying vision, and he does this by directing and focusing the audience's attention, often immersing them in the world of the play.

Melville, in much the same way, uses theatrical techniques to manage a reader's experience with *Moby-Dick*. In particular, he harnesses the atmosphere of enchantment that seems particular to dramatic performance. The spell that theater casts over its audiences is akin to the monopathy that Sedgwick invokes in *Hope Leslie*. Not limited to melodrama, the wonder generated by most theatrical productions holds audiences spellbound. By making available to him this peculiar kind of wonder, drama provides Melville with two advantages: it allows him to convey the meaning inherent in symbols like the sea or the whale more completely than narrative alone, and it allows him to control unruly audiences who may or may not be invested at all in the meaning he is trying to convey. In fact, his audience might be missing the point completely, and drama's enchantment allows Melville to more or less control his readers to the point that they do not miss it. Yet "Melville exposes the dangers of spectatorship," via the character of Ishmael (Laufer 24). The characters that become too enthralled by Ahab lose themselves completely, which ultimately makes Ahab a tyrant. In order to avoid becoming a tyrant himself, Ishmael counters Ahab by advocating disinterest as much as Ahab commands total interest. The two strands of the novel—Ishmael's narrative and cetological ramblings and Ahab's drama—actually condition the reader to read correctly. Much like Sedgwick's narrator in *Hope Leslie* who finds the middle ground between the

equally reductive and totalizing poles of history and melodrama, Ishmael must navigate between the totalizing nature of Ahab's narrative power and his own confounding and often obscure scientific disinterest. *Moby-Dick*, then, becomes a reading primer, training readers to find the middle ground between the resistance and distance of narrative and the tyrannical wonder of drama.

### Melville and the Nineteenth-Century Stage

During the first few decades of the nineteenth century, theaters were places of social congregation for Americans of all classes. By the end of the 1840s, however, the class divide for theater-goers had become wider. And while Americans still indulged in Shakespeare much more than they did up-and-coming American playwrights, different sections of society became interested in different facets of Shakespearian performances. This is reflected in the architecture of the theater buildings themselves. For example, the Bowery Theater in New York City opened in 1826 and was later viewed as a populist alternative to New York's elite Park Theater. Actors like Forrest took advantage of the Bowery's high ceilings, wide pit, and large capacity to act in as bombastic a style as possible. The Astor Opera House, by contrast, opened in 1847 and was, at the time, the pinnacle of theatrical elegance and opulence; it allowed for a more intimate setting and consequently enabled the performers to utilize a more natural style of acting. The Old Broadway Theatre across town from the Astor had a huge pit and was popular with the working class men and boys. The Astor could seat 1,800; the Old Broadway 4,500.

By 1849, theater-goers were separated by class, with critics, playwrights, and authors—Herman Melville not the least among them—complaining about the common man's lack of taste. "The judicious few," bemoaned American actor and playwright John

Howard Payne, “are very few indeed. They are always to be found in a Theatre, like flowers in a desert, but they were nowhere sufficiently numerous to *fill* one” (qtd. in Grimstead 57). Melville agreed with Payne’s assessment and, in “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” calls the majority of Shakespeare enthusiasts “those mistaken souls, who dream of Shakespeare as a mere man of Richard-the-Third humps, and Macbeth daggers” (522). He pities the audience members who are only interested in Shakespeare for the spectacle, thrills, and titillation, lamenting that for Shakespeare’s (and Hawthorne’s) audiences, it is “the least part of genius that attracts admiration” (520). As critics like Lucas, Schulman, and Ackerman have suggested, this attack in “Hawthorne and His Mosses”—that Shakespeare’s audiences and Hawthorne’s readers essentially miss the most important part of those artists’ works—appears to grow out of Melville’s anxieties about his own writing. Melville had a vexed relationship with his audience that sprang, at least in part, from the way he viewed himself. As a seaman and author of adventurous sea tales, Melville fancied himself in touch with the thoughts and desires of the common man, but as a member of the “Duyckinck Crowd” and son-in-law to the Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court Melville retained the position of the elite.

For Melville, so sensitive to the apparent superficiality of the majority of readers, this class division in theatrical audiences had direct impact on his writing. So while a part of him could sympathize with John Howard Payne’s assessment of a theater audiences’ lack of discerning taste, his own experiences as a theater patron taught Melville the power theater had in enchanting an unruly audience cut from a wide swath of social and economic backgrounds. His adventure stories providing him with enough of a readership to make a tidy income, he nevertheless lamented the fact that those novels appealed, like

the theater's popular entertainment, to the lowest common denominator. On the other hand, Melville quickly learned that the general reader had no patience for (or the inclination to buy) a novel that unabashedly discussed weighty intellectual and philosophical concerns. Even if he were to write a novel that was spiritually akin to a Shakespeare play, Melville fears that his audience would enjoy only the engaging, albeit artistically superficial, spectacle and not the literary or philosophical underpinnings. His goal for *Moby-Dick*, then, is a novel that directs the reader to look past the sensational or superficial in order to recognize the novel's true aim.

In addition to dealing with passive or lazy readers, Melville is also concerned with narrative's efficacy as a vehicle for completely transmitting meaning. In fact, one of *Moby-Dick*'s central themes is the failure of language to adequately capture the majesty of the whale or the transcendental magnificence of the sea. For example, Ahab tells Starbuck that Moby Dick is an "inscrutable thing," something that must be destroyed because it cannot be fully understood or even sufficiently described in words (140). Similarly, Ishmael argues that no one has ability to describe the "heartless immensity" that is the ocean; to understand it, one must experience it firsthand (321). Melville, then, must find a way to supplement his narrative during those moments when Ishmael's voice cannot adequately convey the meaning he wishes to express.

Melville turns to dramaturgy to handle both problems of unengaged readers and to supply meaning when traditional narrative is not sufficient in conveying it. While they might focus their attention on the play itself, nineteenth-century audiences also found no problem with talking to neighbors, jeering the actors, or merely marveling at the theater

itself.<sup>24</sup> And unlike a book, which can be closed when the task of reading becomes too boring or challenging, a play generally preserves its audiences due to social constraints and the ability to enchant spectators. Furthermore, a skilled director knows how to even further constrict the audience's focus and subsequently manage its collective emotional response. Theater scholars deploy various terms to describe the difficulty audiences have in resisting theater's forced perceptions and foregone emotional reaction. Anthropologist Bruce Kapferer articulates the idea of "deep play," which performance theorist Marvin Carlson defines as drama so powerful that audiences become "so involved in the activity . . . that reflection does not occur" (Carlson 24).

In short, theater can offer audiences a combination of emotional impact and sheer spectacle that theater that a written narrative cannot. While a novel can present numerous (and even contradictory) viewpoints to the reader, nineteenth-century theater usually offered only one perspective.<sup>25</sup> As I discussed in the previous chapter, this is especially true of melodrama, wherein the singular perspective was often overwhelming in its emotional impact. Since most antebellum plays contained some element of melodrama, many of the plays contained one overarching viewpoint that resisted multiple interpretations. Or, as theater historian Gary Richardson explains, *all* theater (not just melodrama) "discouraged" audience reflection in favor of the emotional charge (*American Drama* 54). This, Melville implies in *Moby-Dick*, is the true power of theater.

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<sup>24</sup> Bruce McConachie claims that despite the myriad distractions in a nineteenth-century theater, most audience members were able to remain mostly focused on the play. He calls this a result of "cognitive multitasking." For a description of this phenomenon in scientific terms, see *Engaging Audiences*, pg 28.

<sup>25</sup> "Viewpoint" and "perspective" are telling terms for Marc Robinson. In *The American Play* (2009), he argues that theater in American, especially before 1890, privileged sight more than anything else. He explains that line-of-sight was often controlled by the theater and the performance, arguing that there was a technical (rather than emotional) lack of subjectivity. In other words, not only did the theater physically limit audiences to seeing certain things, but the plays themselves thematically reflected that limiting of viewpoints.

Melville, then, incorporates theater into *Moby-Dick* in order to express what narrative alone cannot. Theater becomes a medium for the transmission of meaning that is otherwise indescribable. Since a theatrical performance holds such overwhelming power over its audience, there is a kind of emotional or pre-verbal connection between the drama and the audience. This is most clearly analogous to Ahab's power over the crew; the crew is held in thrall in much the same way audiences are enthralled by drama. There does not seem to be a single term for this phenomenon: Ackerman refers to Ahab's "influence" over the crew, but that does not connote the strength of that power (130). Some critics attempt to describe the phenomenon by explaining the crew's/audience's reaction; Marilyn Patton calls it "impassioned, sympathetic identification" (294), while Matt Laufer refers to it as "absorption" (24). Both of these terms attempt to describe the deindividualization that takes place, since the crew, under the spell of Ahab, becomes one mass or "mob." But neither gets to the heart of the inexpressible, almost magical, source of this phenomenon akin to Bruce Kapferer's idea term "deep play."

Combining the connotations of all these terms, I prefer to use Plato's term *thauma*, normally translated as "the wonder that draws and holds one's gaze" (Weber 35). *Thauma*, used by Plato in *The Republic* to describe the power that mimetic poets have over the populace, is cited as a threat to democracy when used incorrectly. The term is translated as "wonder/amazement" or "to wonder/marvel at" in Biblical texts.<sup>26</sup> In relation to drama, this term allows for the connotation that the stage is literally marvelous. I prefer *thauma* not only because of this enchanting or inexpressible component—what holds audiences in thrall—but also for its political undertones. Plato

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<sup>26</sup> For example, *thauma* appears as a verb in Revelation 17:6 and is translated as "wondered with great admiration" (KJV) and "marveled greatly" (ESV).

argued that the poet or dramaturge was no different from the demagogue, and *thauma* allowed the poet to transform individual followers into a single mob. Monopathy, cited in the previous chapter, is a subset or facet of *thauma*. While monopathy refers to the monolithic emotional response specifically to melodrama, *thauma* is at play in any theatrical genre. Therefore *thauma*'s two main components—its ability to pre-verbally express the inexpressible and its deindividualizing nature—makes it an apt term for the way Melville deploys drama in *Moby-Dick*.

In addition to harnessing the power of *thauma*, Melville also uses the dramaturgical technique of “focusing” to manage the reader’s attention. The clearest example of focusing in the novel occurs in “The Doubloon.” In this chapter, Ishmael describes the coin using Ahab’s voice, and the voices of other crewmembers, rather than simply within in the narrative itself. Whereas the narrator in *The Scarlet Letter*—to cite a contrasting example—uses his own authority to report on how others may interpret Hester’s A, Ishmael abdicates his own narrative authority by allowing multiple characters to muse on the coin in a series of soliloquies. Ishmael does not need to do so, but the effect of this focusing is highly theatrical. It draws attention to what Ishmael is doing *as a writer*. Furthermore, by using dramaturgical techniques rather than traditional narrative methods, Ishmael is changing the way readers experience the novel. In other words, “The Doubloon” becomes a showcase for how information is transferred from character to audience. Instead of acting as mediator (like the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter*), Ishmael minimizes his presence and allows, as much as possible, the Pequod’s crew to directly

communicate their conceptions of the coin to the novel's readers. This is a distinctly theatrical technique; in a play, the characters essentially speak directly to the audience.<sup>27</sup>

This episode in "The Doubloon" is just one example of Melville's distinctly dramaturgical techniques. Others include the use of characters who seem markedly charismatic in the theatrical sense; characters like Ahab and Father Mapple act in ways strikingly similar to nineteenth-century actors like Edwin Forrest. Melville's use of soliloquies and actual dramatic form—where the traditional narrative is replaced with what seems like a play's script—have been widely discussed. Yet I think it is important, however, to note that some of these techniques are *Ishmael's* as much as they are Melville's. After all, Ishmael admits that he intends to craft a dramatic tragedy out of the Pequod's final voyage; his use of theater grows directly out of his self-identification as a writer. Therefore we can frame the dramatic elements in terms of authorship (how Ishmael sees himself as a writer) and audience (how readers are supposed engage the writing).

#### How to "Tell the Truth": Ishmael's Problems with Audience and Interpretation

In "Hawthorne and His Mosses," Melville describes a writer's mission as similar to the duties of a prophet:

For in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a sacred white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth.

(523)

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<sup>27</sup> One may argue that the director and stage manager act as mediators in theater in a manner similar to a novel's overt narrator. For example, the choice of lighting determines the audience's gaze, drawing attention to certain elements. Yet I would argue the burden of interpretation remains with the play's audience, and many directors will minimize their presence. Ishmael's abdication of authority in "The Doubloon" renders him similarly invisible; readers tend to forget that Ishmael is still narrating.



It is of paramount importance, then, for writers to “tell the truth,” or to “see things as they really are and to portray all aspects of human life accurately” (Lucas 642). Critics such as Alan Ackerman and Michael Gilmore see Melville’s use of drama as part of his attempt to “tell the truth.” Drama has the ability to convey ideas that Ishmael otherwise finds inexplicable or indescribable. When Gilmore argues, “the playwright is Melville’s model for the absent truth-teller,” he omits the element of prophecy that seems so prevalent in Melville’s essay: the truths prophets speak are often so radical that they are often disbelieved (Gilmore 128).<sup>28</sup> Ishmael, too, sees himself as a writer, with the story of *Moby Dick* comprising his prophecy. His anxiety, then, is that his tale of truth, like Biblical and Classical prophecies, will be dismissed.

With the Biblical Jonah and the novel’s Ezekiel as models, Ishmael-the-writer implicitly defines the prophet as an outsider with a near-manic insistence on one great truth, a truth that seems crazy to most who hear the message.<sup>29</sup> The prophet’s ability to tell the truth springs out of his ability to make sense of the world’s seeming randomness or absurdities; his effort to “tell things as they are” often seems incoherent to those without the ability to properly interpret those signs. Therefore, there is a confluence of

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<sup>28</sup> Two Biblical prophets, Jonah and Ezekiel, loom large in *Moby-Dick*. Even those characters who are named by Ishmael as prophets, like Gabriel or Fedallah, are either disbelieved (i.e., their prophesies are either too incredible or undesirable that the recipients of those prophesies willingly disregard them) or are seen as rambling lunatics. For example, Ishmael disparages the novel’s character Ezekiel by saying, “what all this gibberish of yours is about, I don’t know, and I don’t much care for it seems to me that you must be a little damaged in the head” (87). Therefore it is ironic that Ishmael, in his quest to become a truth-teller himself, dismisses a true prophet’s statements as a fanatic’s rantings.

<sup>29</sup> As an interdiegetic narrator (a narrator who is also an agent within the story he is narrating), Ishmael poses problems when describing his multiple roles. As Lawrence Buell and others point out, the Ishmael that has “written” the novel is not the same Ishmael who experienced the journey. They are separated by time/experience. For example, Ishmael-the-sailor dismisses Ezekiel as a lunatic while Ishmael-the-writer implies (and eventually validates) him as a true prophet. In this light I will try to be specific when it comes to Ishmael’s different roles, since my argument deals directly with what Ishmael is attempting to do as a writer/dramatist.

characteristics in which the dramatist-writer and prophet seem to be as one.<sup>30</sup> Yet it appears that Ahab, more so than Ishmael, has those qualities of the prophet: a seeming madman who separates himself from his own crew, he rants about the diabolical nature of the White Whale. On the surface, then, Ishmael is attributing prophet-like characteristics to Ahab, and it looks as if Ishmael-the-sailor believes, along with the crew, in Ahab's charismatic mission. Yet it is Ishmael-the-writer who ultimately assumes the mantle of true prophet. The dramaturgical elements that Ishmael employs initially seem incoherent, but they are eventually validated as he is confirmed to be telling the truth.

Ishmael's argument that his act of employing drama within his writing is akin to prophecy is further borne out in his discussions of whaling. By arguing that whaling is a metaphor for writing, he is, by extension, arguing that his knowledge of whaling informs or girds his ability to "tell the truth." The opening section of "The Blanket" contains the most obvious example of Ishmael's philosophy on reading's relationship to whaling:

I have several such dried bits, which I use for marks in my whale-books. It is transparent, as I said before; and being laid upon the printed page, I have sometimes pleased myself with fancying it exerted a magnifying influence. At any rate, it is pleasant to read about whales through their own spectacles. (245)

Here, he is arguing that whales help him "read the truth" as much as they help him "tell the truth." Throughout the novel, whales are analogous to books and whaling to reading and writing. Yet in "The Glory and Honor of Whaling," his history of great whalers and

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<sup>30</sup> It is also interesting to note that dramatic heroes, like those played with gusto by Edwin Forrest, were often seen as of the people but not part of the people, with the added element of being "more real" than "real life people" (McConachie, "Theater" 11). Thus there is a sense that Ahab, as an actor-figure, is labeled by Ishmael as a (false) prophet.

allegory on authorial influence and lineage, Ishmael refers to the whalers as “prophets” (284). Ultimately, then, Ishmael casts himself in the role of prophet or truth-teller as well, via his interest in whaling and his emphasis on interpreting his experience on the Pequod. But while Ishmael may strive to engage in “the Great Art of Telling the Truth,” his early attempts at truth-telling using conventional narrative fall short of its intended goal.

“The Town-Ho’s Story” is a valuable touchstone for demonstrating Ishmael’s inexperience as a writer because it takes place chronologically before the writing of *Moby-Dick*. After introducing the circumstances of the story, Ishmael remarks, “I shall preserve the style in which I once narrated it at Lima” (200). In this way, the chapter itself is not simply a telling of “The Town-Ho’s Story,” but a *re-telling*; Ishmael is telling a story about the time he shared a tale in Lima. The scene itself, in which Ishmael attempts to relate the account of Steerkilt to a group of half-drunken dons, exemplifies Ishmael’s frustration in trying to utilize traditional storytelling methods. Specifically, the problem lies in the way he seems to equate “facts” with “truth” in this chapter. Sheila Post argues that all classes of nineteenth-century readers—the common reader interested in adventure stories as well as the cultivated literate interested in more aesthetic endeavors—favored the purported scientific or historical accuracy of the text.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, it seems natural for budding writer Ishmael, in his initial attempt to tell the story of the Pequod during the “Town-Ho’s Story,” to include the constant claims of veracity and the overly detailed descriptions of terms. For example, when the dons ask him to define “Lakeman,” Ishmael gives entirely too much information. He justifies that overindulgence by saying, “I mention all these particulars so that you may understand

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<sup>31</sup> For example, she argues that Poe’s “The Gold Bug” was widely popular not because of the mystery, but because of its claims that it was based on a true story and the pseudo-scientific elements of that story (108).

exactly how this affair stood between the two men” (204). On one hand, this seems to fall in line with Ishmael’s cetological chapters, providing some readers with information unnecessary to understanding the main narrative. Yet I read this as analogous to Melville’s earlier tales, like *Typee*, where the narrators feel compelled to explain nautical terms and geographic oddities. Ishmael’s pretentious and learned tone is meant to pander to his audience’s presumed interest in such abundant details, but instead is ineffective in completely capturing the dons’ attention.<sup>32</sup>

In fact, it seems that the dons miss the point of the story completely. Or, perhaps more precisely, they are more interested in the *event* of the storytelling rather than the *content* of Ishmael’s story. For example, Ishmael’s insistence that “a swordfish had stabbed” the Town-Ho generically marks the story as a tall tale, yet the dons continuously question the story’s veracity (200). Melville himself was familiar with a similar reaction from his readers; “the participation of the Spanish Dons . . . materializes as a body of responses which in essence mirror the reactions Melville had endured earlier to certain of his works, and which he anticipated again in response to *Moby-Dick*” (Putz 168). For Melville, readers needed to focus more on the content of the novel and less on questions such as “did this really happen?” Ishmael feels a certain amount of frustration in this regard. He tells readers of *Moby-Dick* that he originally had heard the story from Tashtego. At the conclusion of the story, the dons badger Ishmael for the source of the story. He mocks them by parodying an Inquisition-style testimony and answers with “I know it to be true; it happened on this ball; I trod the ship; I knew the crew; I have seen

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<sup>32</sup> Ishmael never truly gives up this pedantic challenging tone during the course of the novel, especially in the cetological chapters. In “A Bower in the Arsacides,” for example, Ishmael puts words in readers’ mouths, anticipating resistance to his nautical authority. In answer to his own “Explain thyself, Ishmael,” he lists museums that contain whale skeletons so doubting readers can witness for themselves (344). Asides such as this one, I contend, are aimed at readers who insist in gauging the novel’s level of fictiveness.

and talked with Steerkilt since the death of Radney” (214). Ishmael must ultimately resign himself to his audience’s desire to know about the origin of the story, a response much like the one Melville himself made in reply to questions surrounding the fictiveness of his earlier novels. Cindy Weinstein argues that Melville “vacillates between blaming himself and his reviewers” in regards to misreadings of his novels, and Ishmael, too, seems to take accountability for the don’s misplaced attention (“Melville” 210). As a result, he begins the writing of *Moby-Dick* with a concentrated effort to direct the attention of his audience.

If Ishmael errs on the side of being too loose with the narrative reins in “The Town-Ho’s Story”—he allows the dons to control the story and its telling—then he errs too far to the other side in the novel’s early chapters. In the pre-Pequod chapters, Ishmael tends to exert as much narrative control as possible, attempting to deny his readers any interpretation but his own. If Ishmael believes that, as Wai-Chee Dimock suggests, “readers everywhere are tyrannous and despicable,” then his opening chapters of *Moby-Dick* are his attempt to exert his ultimate authority (185). The first line of the narrative, “Call me Ishmael,” is arresting in a few respects, not least of which is its commanding tone (18). Also, the command “call me” could imply that Ishmael is an identity that the narrator wishes to adopt. Unlike Ahab, who, as Peleg asserts, “did not name himself,” Ishmael is exerting his authority by giving himself his name (78). We might understand, then, that by adopting the persona of Ishmael, the narrator is immediately implying that the whole narrative is a performance and that by commanding us to accept that performance, we are implicated in the entire story. The illocutionary force behind the command robs readers of any authority in the narrative. Just as the illocutionary act of

saying “I do” implies the act of wedding oneself to one’s spouse, so too the illocutionary act of writing “Call me Ishmael” forces the reader to do just that.<sup>33</sup> Readers have no other alternative, just as they cannot resist the series of commands that follow:

“circumambulate the city,” “but look!” and “Nantucket! Take out your map and look at it” (18, 19, 64). Unlike the dons, who constantly strain against Ishmael’s narrative authority, readers of *Moby-Dick*’s landbound chapters have no way of exerting their own authority as readers. Ishmael’s point of view dominates.

By asserting such complete narrative authority, Ishmael also forces his readers to accept his own interpretation of the narrative. For example, when describing the interior of the Spouter Inn, he details an oil painting that looks like “chaos bewitched” and says that only through “earnest contemplation, and oft repeated ponderings” can you make out the “boggy, soggy, squitchy, picture truly” (26). While the picture’s griminess hampers interpretation, Ishmael eventually states that it is “a Cape-Horner in a great hurricane,” a theory that overrides other interpretations (26). Manfred Putz argues that the passage actually focuses on the reader: the description “centers upon the viewer’s ruminations and responses which run the whole gamut from confusion, irritation, and challenge to spontaneous interpretation, speculation, doubt, and opinion mongering” (162). But what Putz does not take into account is the shift in Ishmael’s narration. At the start of the chapter, Ishmael switches from the first-person “we” to “you.” “You found yourself” in the Spouter Inn, “you viewed” the picture, and “you came to the conclusion” that “chaos bewitched” is a good description of the painting (26). Much like the illocutionary act of

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<sup>33</sup> It has been noted that “I do” is in answer to a question, which means that another answer (“I do not”) is theoretically possible whereas there is no theoretical “I will not call you Ishmael” possible. My point is that the force of the illocutionary act is present whether it is carried out by the subject (“I do”) or the object (“Call me Ishmael”) of that act.

the novel's first sentence, this chapter forces the reader to adopt a very specific point of view and interpretation. Ishmael exerts his narrative authority so completely that his audience cannot resist. Readers are, for the moment, overwhelmed.

Unfortunately for Ishmael, his narrative authority shows signs of weakness when he encounters people and things he cannot adequately interpret. Queequeg, for example, represents an obstacle to Ishmael's attempts at maintaining absolute narrative authority because so much about the harpooner's tattoos, shrunken head, and small idol "consistently defy the narrator's understanding" (Boren 3). Ishmael attempts to assert his authority by providing pseudo-scientific justification for his rational conclusions, much like his overexplanations to the dons. For example, he argues that he can tell how long a man has been at sea by the depth of the sailor's tan. Yet Queequeg stymies this approach; "[b]ut who could show a cheek like Queequeg?" he asks, since the harpooner's dusky skin resists that interpretation (40). With Queequeg's coloring it is impossible for Ishmael to divine how long the harpooner has been at sea. Queequeg's Ramadan is similarly unreadable. Ishmael admits, "I never could find out, for, though I applied myself to it several times, I never could master his liturgies" (69). Since he cannot interpret Queequeg's actions, the reader is able to slip the yoke of narrative authority and apply his or her own interpretation. Ishmael ultimately realizes that his overly rational narration is ineffective in arenas, such as religion, where logic does not necessarily apply. As Ishmael's rational argument fails to convince Queequeg that fasting is unhealthy, he admits the reasons why a strictly rational narrative may be ineffective in the transmission of ideas:

I do not think my remarks about religion made much impression upon Queequeg. Because, in the first place, he somehow seemed dull of hearing on that important subject, unless considered from his own point of view; and, in the second place, he did not more than one third understand me, couch my ideas simply as I would and finally he no doubt thought he knew a good deal more about the true religion than I did. (83)

Queequeg shares characteristics with Ishmael's theoretical audience. For example, Queequeg, like any typically resistant reader, initially resists any interpretation or argument that does not take into account his own point of view. Second, there is no certainty that Ishmael's rhetoric can convey accurately and completely his argument to the harpooner specifically or to the novel's readers. Finally, when it comes to elements beyond his experience—like Queequeg's religion—Ishmael must at least partially abdicate his authority to a more learned source. Thus, Ishmael begins to understand that his rigid narrative stance is as ineffective as his pandering to the dons. He must find an alternative narrative model. He finds it in drama.

Just as a discussion of religion led Ishmael to seek an alternative standard, it is a performance of religious ritual that provides him with that new authorial model. Chapters 7-9 are set in Father Mapple's chapel and provide in miniature the narrative structure for the novel as a whole. Chapter 7, "The Chapel," opens with the parishioners reading plaques silently to themselves. Ishmael describes the scene:

[E]ach silent worshipper seemed purposefully sitting apart from the other, as if each silent grief were insular and incommunicable. The chaplain had



not yet arrived; and there these silent islands of men and women sat steadfastly eyeing several marble tablets. (43)

In this scene, reading is defined as private and silent. There is a singular relationship between the reader and the text, and there is no communication between readers. Ishmael is unable to penetrate the shell of privacy that reading affords these worshippers. Each is holding to his or her own personal interpretation of the texts on the tablets. He calls their grief “incommunicable,” which is as much of a description of it as he can provide. He cannot convey to us the meaning or significance of their (private) grief. This is analogous to Ishmael’s inability to communicate to Queequeg his rational beliefs on fasting or the inability to portray the immensity of the sea, the charisma of Ahab, or the excitement of his first lowering to his readers.

The tone changes when Father Mapple enters the chapel in “The Pulpit.” Noting the ways in which Mapple’s worship is performative, Ishmael observes that “with both hands grasping the ornamental knobs of the man-ropes, Father Mapple cast a look upwards” (46). The pause to look skyward is a traditional pose representing piety. Furthermore, Ishmael notes that the pulpit’s stage-like qualities, and Mapple’s separation from the congregation, are not unlike an actor’s separation from the audience. Ishmael immediately suspects that theatricality might hold the answers to his problems of unreadability and narrative authority. “I could not suspect him of courting notoriety by any mere tricks of the stage,” Ishmael says, “it must symbolize something unseen” (47). By saying that Mapple is “courting notoriety,” Ishmael reveals his initial prejudice against dramatic flair. Yet he cannot deny that Mapple’s theatrical techniques allow for explaining “something unseen,” the heady theological discussions of faith and duty that

cannot be effectively explained in words alone; dramatic action is integral for the full force of Mapple's sermon. The theater of the church, then, becomes the preferred vehicle for disseminating Mapple's religious truth, and is crucial for Mapple as a truth-teller.

Chapter 9, "The Sermon," begins with Mapple commanding the congregation to move towards the center of the chapel. The worshippers slide down the pews towards the center, going from a number of individual worshippers to one undifferentiated mass. Next, Ishmael transcribes Mapple's sermon, from his reading of the text of Jonah to the exegesis of that text. It is through that recitation—a performance of Jonah, if you will—that Mapple conveys the truth of his sermon. And the sermon itself is about being a prophet; Mapple tells how Jonah's troubles stem from his attempting to avoid God's command to become a prophet. In other words, Jonah (and Mapple) have a duty to "tell the truth." Mapple thunders, "Jonah did the Almighty's bidding. And what was that, shipmates? To preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood! That was it" (53). In words that echo Melville's own in "Hawthorne and His Mosses," Mapple talks of what it means to be an effective prophet or truth-teller:

Woe to him who seeks to please rather than to appall! Woe to him whose good name is more to him than goodness! Woe to him who, in this world, courts not dishonor! Woe to him who would not be true, even though to be false were salvation! (53)

In "Mosses," Melville insists that Hawthorne engages in the same kind of prophecy, by showing the "blackness of darkness beyond" rather than simply writing with "sunlight" ("Mosses" 521). Mapple's message, which includes the subtext that both light and dark need to be included in prophecy, coupled with the dramaturgical aspect that unites the

parishioners into one congregation, offers Ishmael the counteragent to his previous, ineffective attempts at narration. It is in the chapel, then, that Ishmael learns that if he wants to engage in the most effective truth-telling possible—if he wants to become both prophet and writer—then drama offers an effective alternative to traditional, and limited, narrative.

#### Explaining the Unexplainable: Ishmael, Ahab, and *Thauma*

Once the Pequod leaves port, Ishmael immediately realizes that his narrative is completely insufficient to describe the immensity of the ocean. The departure of the Pequod brings Ishmael no small level of anxiety; as they set sail he says, “Already we are boldly launched upon the deep; but soon we shall be lost in its unshored, harborless immensities” (115). Here Ishmael-the-narrator is admitting that Ishmael-the-character is about to have experiences that he will subsequently have trouble describing. Only through a generic shift to drama and the *thauma* that it elicits will Ishmael be able to describe the sea’s immensities. In fact, when he describes the first lowering, he says the sea “was a sight full of quick *wonder* and awe” (186, my emphasis). The wonder Ishmael feels when encountering the sea during his first lowering is likened to the *thauma* he feels when he first spies the charismatic Ahab.

Ahab’s presence is felt in the narrative long before he actually appears. In fact, Ahab’s materialization on the deck confounds Ishmael’s faculties as a spectator. His sheer charisma, combined with his terrifying scar, overwhelms Ishmael’s senses:

So powerfully did the whole grim aspect of Ahab affect me, and the livid brand that streaked it, that for the first few moments I hardly noted that not

a little of this overbearing grimness was owing to the barbaric white leg upon which he partly stood. (109)

Ishmael initially does not even notice Ahab's ivory leg, despite that being one of his most obvious identifiers. It is Ahab's demeanor, his "aspect," that Ishmael first observes.

Ahab's physical presence is not unlike that of actor Edwin Forrest, who was known for his physique just as much as his personality or charisma. Forrest's "sheer size, his 'herculean proportions', and his physical strength were among his most important theatrical attributes" (Ackerman 17). Ahab, too, is immediately recognized for his potent physicality, to the extent that Ishmael is initially blind to Ahab's missing leg.

Furthermore, Ahab's physicality reveals his mindset in the scene in "The Quarter-Deck." Here, the mates remark that they can almost see Ahab's thoughts inside his head (137).

Like a theatrical performer, Ahab is communicating with his body instead of words. As Gary Richardson notes, an actor's body language—physicality and gestures—is significant "in the way [spoken] language sometimes is not" ("Plays" 261).<sup>34</sup> In this way, even when Ahab's words are "strangely muffled and inarticulate," as they are as he paces the deck, Ishmael is able to convey the captain's meaning in a description of his physicality (138). Indeed, that physicality is part and parcel of the aura of *thauma* that surrounds the captain. Like Magawisca, whose physicality during the trial scene conveys unspoken arguments that unite spectators in the belief in her civility and honor, Ahab uses his body to *thaumatic* ends.

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<sup>34</sup> Richardson is specifically describing how the pervasiveness of American melodrama has influenced even the actor's gestures, and that the gestures themselves become encoded through overuse. For example, the villain need not admit to his audience that he is hatching a dastardly plan. He only needs to twirl his mustache. But this type of encoded gestures is not limited to melodrama, of course, and I argue that Ishmael imbues Ahab's actions with the same kind of gestural significance.

With his theatrical hero stepping onto the stage, it seems only natural for Ishmael to blur genres a bit, incorporating theater into his narrative. Or, as he says, “how, then, with me, writing of this Leviathan? Unconsciously my chirography expands into placard capitals” (349). The narrative itself swells with the grandness of its topic, attempting to incorporate the *thauma* normally associated with theater. Chapter 29, “*Enter Ahab; to him, Stubb,*” is the first to introduce the generic conventions of stage directions. Chapter 36, “The Quarter-Deck,” also has stage directions, and is more clearly within the theatrical arena. The subsequent chapter, “Sunset,” is one long soliloquy by Ahab. By the time we reach Chapter 40, “Midnight, Forecastle,” Ishmael has disappeared completely as the narrative gives way to play format. The slow introduction to the drama has a “familiarizing effect,” allowing the reader to slowly adjust to the shift in genres (Laufer 33). Readers become acclimated to the new genre so gradually that by the time the crew is carousing at midnight, they are unaware that Ishmael and Ahab are not present. The script format makes the action immediate; put another way, the dramatic form decreases the narrative distance between text and reader. This is especially true during scenes like the one in “The Quarter-Deck,” as the immediacy of the scene makes readers feel as if they are in Ahab’s presence. As Robert Milder argues, “We are exposed to Ahab’s spell as much as Ishmael had been” (42). This is not to say that readers are unaware that they are *reading*; after all, reading drama is much more jarring than seeing it performed, and I will return to this point shortly. My argument here is that Ishmael is altering the traditional role of the reader by shifting from prose narrative to drama, allowing his audience to experience more directly the *thauma* that Ahab’s presence elicits.

Though “Midnight, Forecastle” is the chapter that conforms most strictly to the generic conventions of drama, other chapters engage in similar and just as effective theatrical techniques. For example, chapters that contain Ahab’s soliloquies utilize the same dramaturgical elements as Chapters 36-40. The soliloquies are often written in blank verse, even if they are not presented as such, and there is an undeniable theatrical quality when they are read aloud (Schroeder 228). Similarly, the tableaux in “The Candles” function like one of the popular elements of nineteenth-century theater.<sup>35</sup>

Tableaux, often used as the curtain rises or falls on a scene, are static presentations that convey a single, powerful emotion or idea. Sometimes tableaux were used as interludes between acts, or as codas designed to heighten or extend a scene’s emotional impact, or even as a series that presents a brief narrative arc. “The Candles” begins with a storm suddenly buffeting the Pequod. As the crew hastens to batten down the hatches, St. Elmo’s fire appears above the three masts. The fantasmagoric shadows cast by the fireballs deliver the first of the chapter’s tableaux: Daggoo looks three times larger than normal, Tashtego’s teeth gleam, and Queequeg’s tattoos “burned like Satanic blue flames” in the “preternatural light” (181). Like stage lighting, the lightning dims for a moment, but then when the fireballs reappear the tableau has shifted. This second tableau reveals Fedallah kneeling before Ahab, the doubloon glowing and Ahab’s blood-forged harpoon seemingly tipped with fire. The crew members do not speak, but “remained rooted to the deck; but all their eyes upcast” (382). These two scenes are typical tableaux; without words or actions they present a single, powerful message. These

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<sup>35</sup> Marc Robinson says the tableaux in “The Candles” are anti-theatrical, since they “resist time.” Robinson’s strict definition of theater demands the passage of time a necessary component. Since a tableau is comprised of a static image, a moment frozen in time, Robinson excludes tableaux as non-theatrical. I would argue, however, that such tableaux were (and still are) useful and emotive theatrical elements.

silent, motionless scenes allow Ishmael to demonstrate that Ahab is still acting as monomaniacal captain, even as the quest becomes more demonic.

The tableaux in “The Candles” are just one example of the ways in which Ishmael applies dramatic elements to his description of Ahab. As the narrator continues circumscribe Ahab and his quest in the language of the theatrical, Ishmael necessarily gives up narrative authority. Even the chapters depicting the three-day chase, in which Ishmael seems to have reasserted himself as narrator, take on a decidedly theatrical cast. During those days he states, “three days flow together in one continuous intense pursuit . . . future things swim before me, as in empty outlines and skeletons; all the past is somehow grown dim” (422). Despite the fact that by this time in the novel drama has given way back to narrative, the immediacy of the theater still exists. Ishmael exists only in the moment of the chase, which has the temporal effect similar to that which occurs in the theater. Unlike a novel, where the reader can flip back to reread or skip ahead, the drama of the chase means that Ishmael’s perception is limited to the present. The past is “dim” and the future is “empty outlines.” So while he is ostensibly the agent responsible for the narrative, in becoming an actor in that narrative he has abdicated some of his truth-telling authority. In particular, he cedes much of that authority to Ahab.

Ahab believes that his domination of the crew and his overwhelming passion are a part of his search for what he sees as “truth,” and Ishmael conditionally grants him the authority to commandeer the narrative. Ahab’s search for meaning, via the destruction of *Moby Dick*, leads him to roar, “There’s a riddle now might baffle all the lawyers backed by the ghosts of the whole line of judges:—like a hawk’s beak it pecks my brain. *I’ll, I’ll* solve it, though!” (419). The implication is that only Ahab has access to the “Truth” that

confounds everyone else. Ishmael agrees, to a certain extent, because he knows that his narrative is incapable of conveying what Ahab can. Or, as Ackerman argues, Ahab's soliloquies "represent the inadequacy of language to express psychological content" (123). Ishmael cannot explain Ahab's drive for vengeance, so he allows the drama to illustrate it. Assuming the mantle of dramatic authority, Ahab sees himself as "the prophet" as well (143). Yet Ahab's truth-telling is much more domineering than Ishmael's. The stage, too, limits point of view. Like the people in Plato's cave, the audience in the theatrical performance cannot resist the performance's viewpoint (Weber 7). Ishmael is held in thrall by Ahab's *thauma*. So while it has the benefits of conveying ideas and explaining concepts that traditional narrative cannot, once it escapes Ishmael's control the *thaumatic* experience overpowers the narrative and exerts an unhealthy control over the reader.

There are two interrelated characteristics of the thaumatic experience: deindividualization and the limiting of perspective. These two attributes are fueled by the passion or "magic" of the theater. *Thauma* limits audience members to a single point of view, usually eliciting sympathy for or identification with the hero or heroine. Since all audience members identify with the same character, they become of one mind. In other words, *thauma* blurs the individual audience members' identities into a single mass. In *The Republic*, Plato argues that *thauma* is the tool of demagogues, easily uniting disparate individuals into a single political ideal. Ahab's use of *thauma* illustrates "the platonic critique of theatricality: theater is dangerous because it induces assent" (Weber 11). Ishmael's initial example of this element of *thauma* occurs during Father Mapple's sermon. The worshippers enter the chapel as individuals and sit in the pews at intervals,



spaced away from each other. Mapple's command to move towards the center of the chapel makes the worshippers one mass in space; they are all grouped together. Then by theatricalizing his sermon Mapple is able to unite the worshippers ideologically.

Ahab is also able to unite his crew under the thrall of *thauma*. Ahab's tyrannical nature is well-established; he seems to overwhelm his crew through sheer force of will.<sup>36</sup> What makes Ahab's tyranny particularly interesting, especially when compared with earlier characters like Jackson in *Redburn* or Selvagee in *White-Jacket*, is his ability to unite the crew into one mind.<sup>37</sup> Even Ishmael admits to being ensnared by Ahab's spell. After the drama of "The Quarter-Deck," he states, "A wild, mysterious, sympathetic feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine" (152). If the motive for killing Moby Dick is vengeance, then the quest should belong to only Ahab. After all, the whale did not maim Ishmael before this voyage. However, the crew is initially united in their desire for vengeance. When Ahab asks, "will ye splice hands on it," indicating their blood oath to help destroy Moby Dick, the response is nearly unanimous: "'Aye, aye!' shouted the harpooners and seamen" (139). Yet as Ishmael demonstrates, shouts of "aye" might as well be "I," for the crew has taken Ahab's quest as their own.

Eventually, Ishmael reveals the darker side to such "sympathetic feeling." As the chase draws to a close, he illustrates the crew's physical and emotional exhaustion at being imprisoned by *thauma* for so long. Of the crew he says, "Like machines, they dumbly moved about the deck" (401). They are like machines insofar as their humanity has been diluted, their souls crushed by Ahab's influence:

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<sup>36</sup> For a detailed description of Melville's argument concerning Ahab's theatricality and demagoguery, see Ackerman's reading of "The Specksynder," *The Portable Theater* p 109-17.

<sup>37</sup> Starbuck is the notable exception. He is unmoved by *thauma* and only acquiesces after Ahab provides a logical argument for the quest (139-40).

Ahab's purpose now fixedly gleamed down upon the constant midnight of the gloomy crew. It domineered above them so, that all their bodings, doubts, misgivings, fears, were fain to hide beneath their souls . . . Alike, joy and sorrow, hope and fear, seemed ground to finest dust. (400)

Here Ishmael presents the inevitable downside to the thaumatic experience. Once the exhilaration of deindividualization wears off, the enthralled audience is left with no emotional foundation. Zombie-like, all but Starbuck exist solely as an extension of Ahab's will, unable to express any emotion of their own. Ahab becomes the star around which the rest of the crew orbits.

Mid-nineteenth-century theatergoers had their own stars, and the power that the actors had over their admirers was just as strong as Ahab's power over his crew. In fact, the most violent act in American theater history, the Astor Place Riot of 1849, would not have occurred had the American star system, begun in America early in the nineteenth century, not forged such a strong bond between the actors and their devotees.<sup>38</sup> The managers of the Park Theater in New York would handle the itineraries of visiting English actors, and some patrons became more interested in the actor than the play itself. Patrons were so familiar with *Hamlet*, for example, that they were less concerned about seeing the particular play than they were how a certain actor would perform the role.<sup>39</sup> This became especially true after the rise in popularity of American actor Edwin Forrest, who became known for his grandiloquent style and imposing presence. This style contrasted sharply with the demeanor of English star William Charles Macready, who

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<sup>38</sup> For a more in-depth history of the star system in America, see Simon Williams, "European Actors and the Star System in the American Theatre, 1752-1870," Joseph Roach, "The Emergence of the American Actor," Bruce McConachie, "The Theater of Edwin Forrest and Jacksonian Hero Worship," and Gary Richardson, *American Drama from the Colonial Period Through World War I*.

<sup>39</sup> See Williams, 310.

was “known for his cerebral acting style, aristocratic demeanor, and allegedly anti-American comments” (Ackerman 35). Macready and Forrest also engaged in a public feud, a rivalry that sparked the infamous riot. This riot, which occurred on May 10, 1849 outside of the Astor Opera House, ended in bloodshed and was certainly on Melville’s mind as he was composing *Moby-Dick*.

As an American-born actor, Forrest had to contend with the popularity of already established stars such as Edmund Keane and Junius Booth (father of John Wilkes Booth). Initially, Macready openly supported Forrest, but when Macready’s private doubts about Forrest’s acting ability became public—some journal entries and letters were published—the feud began in earnest. David Grimstead argues that the actors’ respective stage personas carried over into their private lives, and as such Macready began to be viewed as elitist, aristocratic, and ultimately anti-American. While the rivalry was initially “funny,” it became more serious and heated as the newspapers began take sides in the feud (Grimstead 71). The seriousness of the feud was only exacerbated by the cultural climate of the moment, where actors like John Howard Payne were vocal in lamenting most theater-goers’ indiscriminating tastes. And since theater was a medium for popular expression and nationalistic sentiment, some New York patrons especially saw Macready as the poster boy for British elitism (Ackerman 98). Of course, Macready had supporters in America’s artistic elite, and as a member of the Duyckinck Crowd, Melville was ostensibly a Macready supporter. Duyckinck himself famously noted, “If a bull could act, he would act like Forrest,” and he threw his weight behind Macready (qtd. in Porte 203). After an interruption ruined Macready’s performance on May 7, 1849 and convinced the actor to leave the country, Duyckinck published an open letter in the *New York Herald*

urging Macready to stay. Many celebrities and socialites signed the letter, Melville and Washington Irving among them.<sup>40</sup> Thus in the days leading up to May 10, the Forrest-Macready quarrel became infused with class conflict. The working classes supported Forrest as a national hero and the cultural elite viewed Macready as the epitome of artistic taste.

“When theater rules,” writes performance theorist Samuel Weber, “people forget their proper place,” and supporters of Forrest saw their place as united in their violent opposition of Macready (Weber 38). This ideological accord is partially due to the *thauma* that theater creates, the mob mentality that arises in the wake of theater’s wonder. Audiences are assimilated into one like mind, and Forrest’s fans were united in seeing Macready as a threat to their nationalistic pride. Melville, too, understood that the theater created a herd mentality. “The Grand Armada” contains the novel’s only specific mention of an actual theater, and addresses the dangerous mindlessness that the space of the theater can create:

Witness, too, all human beings, how when herded together in the sheepfold of a theatre’s pit, they will, at the slightest alarm of fire, rush helter-skelter for the outlets, crowding, trampling, jamming, and remorselessly dashing each other to death. (300)

While Ishmael is not specifically talking about the aftermath of a performance in this passage, he does use animalistic imagery throughout. People in the theater’s pit—perhaps a reference to the huge pit at the Bowery Theater and its working class patrons—are initially like sheep, malleable and tame. But when audience members are threatened, as

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<sup>40</sup> This is not to say that Melville was a complete Macready fan. In a letter, Melville admits, “Didn’t like him very much upon the whole—bad voice” (qtd. in Ackerman 108).

some seemed to be by Macready's alleged anti-American sentiments, they can react blindly and violently.

On the evening of May 10, 1849, a huge crowd gathered outside of Astor Place hoping to gain admittance to see Macready play *Macbeth* while Forrest was performing *Spartacus* in the Broadway Theatre across town. The crowd was initially muted, despite the overt desire to disrupt Macready's performance. While there were hisses and shouts as Macready stepped onstage, it was the mob that had gathered outside in support of Forrest that was the real danger. The play continued despite nearly being drowned out by the audience, but outside police and militia attempted to disperse the crowd. Ackerman argues that the mob outside was not initially that threatening (108). Reports indicate that the militia assumed that the mob was more dangerous than it actually was. Considering the venom spewed in the newspapers against Macready, the police were expecting a violent mob. Similarly, Forrest supporters assumed that the militia's presence was mere show, and a rumor circulated that the guns contained blanks. The rumor about blanks was proven false as the militia fired into the crowd. Violence erupted and by the end of the evening, twenty-five people were dead and over a hundred were injured.

Melville, so attuned to the culture of the theater, was no doubt aware of the many facets and implications of the Astor Place Riot. The event and its undercurrents of class struggle, with Macready's elitist sentiments antagonizing the throng supporting Forrest, was surely on Melville's mind as he transitioned to the more self-consciously theatrical chapters in *Moby-Dick*. It is not surprising, then, that the chapter that most rigidly adheres to dramatic conventions, "Midnight, Forecastle," ends in a "row" not unlike the Astor Place Riot itself (151). With the exceptions of Tashtego, Daggoo, and Pip, the characters

in this chapter are not named. This creates that deindividualizing effect, making the sailors on some level interchangeable.<sup>41</sup> Violence looms as the stoic Daggoo responds to the Old Manx Sailor's comment on blackness. The Spanish Sailor mutters "the old grudge makes me touchy," and proceeds to threaten the harpooner (150). Interestingly, Daggoo is connected to Macready here, his grim reserve in contrast with the fiery physicality of the Spanish sailor. When it becomes clear that the two will fight, "ALL" begin shouting "a row! A row! A row!" (151). By using the label "ALL" and not "SAILORS" or "HARPOONERS," Ishmael blends the crew into one undifferentiated mass. The "row" that follows is utter mob violence. The fight is only stopped by a squall, a force of nature that seems like the ocean's crowd control. But since Ishmael is providing this scene in play format, readers have no way to measure how long the fight actually lasts. Like the Astor Place Riot, the scale of the fight is not clearly reckoned by the participants. The Old Manx Sailor muses that the whole horizon becomes the ring of the battlefield, hinting that the row has larger implications than any of the sailors can anticipate. And just as the violence of the Astor Place Riot directly led, according to David Grimstead, to a change in how audiences approached a night at the theater, the violence in "Midnight, Forecastle" changes how Ishmael approaches the writing of *Moby-Dick*.<sup>42</sup> While Ishmael does not completely give up the dramatic elements that complement his narrative, Chapter 40 is the last time he so completely gives the novel over to generically dramatic form.

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<sup>41</sup> Of course, the characters are not merely clones of one another. The focus on ethnic difference complicates this issue of individualization. My point is that few names are used, and there only seems to be more than one Nantucket Sailor. The others are identified only by their place of origin. But it is neither "a French sailor" nor "the French sailor," making identification different. In a theatrical performance the only identifying element for each sailor in this scene would be his dialect or accent.

<sup>42</sup> Grimstead argues, "It ended the old kind of audience control. Plays did not change appreciably, nor did spectators give up the reins of applause, hissing, and patronage. But something of the edge and imperativeness of audience sovereignty was lost." (74).

### Achieving Balance

The row that ends “Midnight, Forecastle” marks a turning point for Ishmael as narrator. It is the last time that his narrative voice disappears so completely, the narrative itself shanghaied by Ahab’s *thauma*. The subsequent chapter, “Moby Dick,” begins with “I, Ishmael, was one of that crew” (152). Not unlike the moments in *Hope Leslie* where the narrator steps in again after a long quotation or letter from one of the characters, the chapter’s opening line acts as a reemergence of Ishmael as narrative authority. It is as if Ishmael is snapping his fingers in front of our eyes, trying to break Ahab’s spell. Some of the following chapters, such as “The Whiteness of the Whale” and “The Affidavit” eschew the main plotline in favor of pure Ishmaelian rhetoric. While this has the effect of weakening *thauma*’s hold on the readers, Ishmael recognizes that his didactic tone—so ineffective when deployed in the “Town-Ho’s Story”—is just as oppressive as Ahab’s *thauma*. Therefore Ishmael realizes his predicament: to effectively describe and explain the wonder of his experiences on the Pequod he needs to find the balance between rational, controllable, but resistible narrative and emotional, thaumatic, irresistible but tyrannical drama.

It is the image of the doubloon that supplies Ishmael with the symbol for this kind of artistic balance.<sup>43</sup> On the coin, the zodiacal sign of Libra is featured prominently. If Libra, as scales, represents balance, then the coin’s origins are also similarly significant. The doubloon is from Ecuador, stamped with the capital city of Quito, adding another level of balance and centeredness. As argued above, Father Mapple provides Ishmael with the balancing structure that he later utilizes in *Moby-Dick*. Mapple ends his sermon

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<sup>43</sup> Wai-Chee Dimok argues that the doubloon is the “emble[m] of the literary masterpiece Melville would like to produce.” Flask even jokes that the doubloon is the ship’s navel or omphalos, explicitly linking the doubloon to (artistic) creation (335).

with an exaltation of Truth containing both light and dark aspects. Ishmael later echoes that sentiment, saying “that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true—not true, or undeveloped. With books the same” (328). If Mapple is correct, and a prophet must have both joy and sorrow—dark and light—then a book must be the same if it wants to be truthful. A book must be balanced, and Ishmael tries to achieve that balance generically by alternating and finally blending narrative and theater.

In fact, once Ishmael reasserts his identity after “Midnight, Forecastle,” he strategically deploys his didactic narrative in order to counteract Ahab’s *thauma*. The narrative “unwrites,” to use Milton Stern’s term, the meaning inherent in the drama (438). Ishmael’s interfering narrative often presents alternative explanations to Ahab’s monolithic dramatic vision. For example, he occasionally provides logical explanations to seemingly preternatural events that rob them of their wonder. For example, one evening the crew hears an eerie sound coming from over the foggy water. The initial thought: ghosts. But Ahab laughingly “explained the *wonder*” by saying that seals are the source of the sound (393, my emphasis). This has the effect of diluting the wonder of the ghost stories. The same is true for Fedallah’s appearance. His manifestation on board, seemingly from nowhere, would have been more frightening had Archy not circulated rumors that the Pequod had stowaways. Archy’s rumor “had in some small measure prepared them for the event,” explained Ishmael. “It took off the extreme edge of their wonder” (183). Ishmael uses “wonder” in both of these examples with purpose, demonstrating that narrative has the capacity to blunt or dilute the *thauma* created by



drama. Insufficient on its own, narrative counteracts the spell of drama that holds audiences in thrall.

Thus the interplay between narrative and drama becomes what Ackerman calls an “unresolvable paradox,” but what might be more accurately described as an emulsion of genres (113).<sup>44</sup> Ishmael understands that this back-and-forth is necessary for balance. For example, Flask comments that when a ship hangs the head of a right whale off the side to counterbalance its sperm head whale, “that ship can never afterwards capsize” (259). This allows Ishmael to discuss the relative merits of Locke’s rationalism and Kant’s idealism. This analogy extends to genre as well, with narrative acting as a rational influence in *Moby-Dick* while drama provides a conduit to the inexplicable ideal. Ishmael cannot decide which philosophy is superior, so he concludes that both heads should be thrown overboard (261). Ishmael resigns himself to the fact that both genres are necessary in the Art of Telling the Truth, even if that leads to a frustratingly paradoxical form.

Eventually, Ishmael is able to blend the two genres, shifting from one to the other so subtly that it becomes difficult to pick out the individual strands. For example, “The Grand Armada” alternates between the excitement of the chase and the Ishmael’s explanations of certain whaling terms. Ishmael details a thrilling scene in which a whale, already wounded, “plunged forward” and Queequeg, undaunted, prepared a harpoon as the whale “threatened to swamp us” (301). Ishmael then pauses the scene, almost painfully to the reader caught up the in excitement, to explain the origin and use of “druggs” (301). While the druggs have meaning for whalers, and might have some sort of

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<sup>44</sup> Sheila Post argues that *Moby-Dick*’s form is not that unique, listing it as typical of the “mixed-form” or “metaphysical” novels of the 1850s. Citing Richard Kimball’s *St. Leger* (1850) as an example, she says the mixed-form novels created a world of scientific fact, and then used metaphysical ideals to undermine that world. She also argues that the Shakespearean language so prominent in *Moby-Dick* is characteristic of the mixed-form, as it meshed well with the novel’s idealism. See “Melville and the Marketplace,” pgs 111-113.

significance to readers who are interested in making them into literary symbols, the effect is to destabilize the emotional intensity of the scene. Any reader captivated by Queequeg's daring finds herself shocked out of that thrall by Ishmael's explanation. Much like the vertigo or disorientation that Ishmael feels coming to his senses in "The Mast-Head" or at the helm in the "Try-Works," the reader experiences a kind of generic unsteadiness, unsure of how to proceed.

Luckily for readers of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael provides them with the keys to finding the "middle way" (Laufer 18). The method of reading, Laufer explains, hinges on the reader's awareness of distance. Laufer argues that Ishmael is conditioning readers to not become so invested in Ahab's story. I would like to extend Laufer's argument a little further. This investment in Ahab's plot is induced by the *thauma* of drama, and therefore Ishmael directly counters the very characteristics of drama that separate it from the act of reading, namely perspective and time. As argued above, theater limits perspective; the audience is unable to resist the point-of-view offered by the drama. In addition, theater occurs in time. Audiences experience the performance as it unfolds. They cannot rewind or skip ahead; like perspective, they are limited to the immediate present. Ishmael's explanations attempt to counter the ways Ahab's drama limits perspective and evokes temporal immediacy. Thus the novel is offering itself as both wonder and anti-wonder, teaching readers how to explain the inexplicable.

Many critics discuss the ways in which Ahab attempts to reduce the terror and violence of *Moby Dick* into a single symbol. Interestingly, we could suggest that Ahab's main character trait, his monomaniacal vision, has its roots in drama. Melodrama especially reduces complex ideas into a black-or-white moral universe. Ahab does the

same, attempting to paint the whale solely as an object of vengeance and the repository of meaning. But “Ishmael never lets us rest secure in our reliance upon” Ahab’s vision; by “alternating command with question, Ishmael throws us back on our own resources” (Patterson 297). One of our resources, as Patterson might argue, is our ability to understand Ishmael’s explanations as alternatives to Ahab’s vision. In fact, Ishmael even plays coy about what *Moby Dick* means to him. After chronicling Ahab’s history with *Moby Dick*, Ishmael remarks, “What the white whale was to Ahab has been hinted; what, at times, he was to me, as yet remains unsaid” (159). Readers then must speculate about its meaning to Ishmael. Furthermore, with the novel itself being named *Moby-Dick*, readers are left to wonder what the *text* means to Ishmael. What is the “Truth” or truths that Ishmael so desperately is trying to convey? The answer, says Ishmael, relies in multiplicity. For example, when Pip is thrown into the “immensity” of the ocean, Ishmael offers alternatives (320). While “never leap from the boat” is a good rule, Ishmael suggests that “never” is too strong a word in a world with no absolutes. In fact it is *Moby Dick*’s (and *Moby-Dick*’s) unknowability that counters the Ahabian vision. It is in the whale’s “indefiniteness” that it traverses the “immensities of the universe” (165). By continually demonstrating that there is no one single interpretation for any given symbol, Ishmael is conditioning readers to combat the perspective-limiting influence of Ahab’s drama, and therefore not to look for or attempt to define one Ahabian “Truth.”

In addition to resisting point of view, Ishmael’s narrative resists time. As Matt Laufer notes, reading drama does not have the same effect as viewing drama. Reading drama is jarring and awkward, and “allows for, and even encourages, re-reading and flipping ahead and back” (Laufer 37). In a sense, Ishmael is directing readers to go back

and forth in the novel, resisting the immediate “present” that always exists when watching a performance. For example, at the beginning of “Stubb and Flask Kill a Right Whale; and Then Have a Talk over Him,” Ishmael reminds readers that the Pequod has a sperm whale’s head hanging off one side. That information directly relates to Stubb and Flask’s conversation, so it seems appropriate for Ishmael to include it. But then he remarks, “But we must let it continue hanging there a while till we get a chance to attend to it” (257-8). The statement implies that, by attending to it, Ishmael is creating the scene. He acknowledges the scene’s fictiveness. Also, by using “we,” Ishmael is implicating readers in that creation, as if they can do something about the whale’s head in the future. The reminder of the head has the power to make readers flip back—*where did that sperm whale’s head come from again?*—and the implication of an Ishmael-reader collaboration on the future of that head could make the reader skip ahead. In fact, Ishmael advocates doing just that. When explaining a sailor’s duties on board a ship, he remarks:

There is no staying in any one place; for at once and the same time everything has to be done everywhere. It is much the same with him who endeavors the description of the scene. We must now retrace our way a little. (254-5)

Much like Catharine Sedgwick, whose narrator in *Hope Leslie* would explain scenes previously dramatized, Ishmael is admitting that narration itself does not always run in a straight line. Reading, too, requires never staying in one place. The reader is encouraged to revisit earlier sections, especially when new information comes to light that has bearing on the drama. Thus a reader may initially be thrilled by Ahab’s speech in “The Quarterdeck,” but upon learning of Moby Dick’s ferocity may revise his or her opinion of

the captain. Similarly, the Christ-like imagery in “The Symphony,” with the solitary tear and the “Father-remove-this-cup-from-me” soliloquy, mitigates the diabolic portrayals of Ahab in “The Forge,” “The Candles,” and “The Needle.” By constantly moving backward and forwards in the narrative, readers become enthralled, resist, and become enthralled again, hopefully arriving at some middle ground ideal for reading.

And the novel is trying to exert that influence on its readers. Readers who have no trouble with the early chapters are sometimes stymied once the Pequod leaves port. But since Ishmael “indoctrinates” readers in how to read, first through Father Mapple’s sermon and then later through the interplay of genres, readers soon develop the faculties to read *Moby-Dick* as Ishmael intended (Bezanson 189). When teaching the novel to undergraduates, Robert Milder states that he will address the novel’s difficult form. He argues that the form “indicates a governing intention to *do* something to us as we read, to remake us” (41). Like Milder, I contend that the novel does remake us, if we let it. Ishmael teaches us how to be effective readers. But he also puts the burden of learning that lesson on us. If readers do not understand *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael blames them, not himself. In fact, he issues a challenge to readers. During a discussion of phrenology, Ishmael comments on the difficulty of “reading” a whale’s skull. He admits that the white whale—*Moby-Dick*—that readers hold in their hand is hard to interpret, but he has given them the key. “‘I put that brow before you,’ he intones. ‘Read it if you can’” (275).

And we do. Armed with a multiplicity of interpretations, we read and teach and discuss *Moby-Dick*. Ishmael’s form, interweaving drama and narrative, is both confounding and rich. Ishmael admits that his comic form, so appropriate for the early chapters, is insufficient to capture the majesty and wonder of the whaling adventure.

Drama can embody that wonder, conveying meaning through emotion that simple language cannot. That same drama, however, has a limiting effect, tyrannically limiting audiences to a single vision, which violates the great Art of Telling the Truth just as surely as traditional narrative. Therefore Ishmael carves out a middle way, performing a balancing act between the rational and limited voice of narrative with the emotional but tyrannical thaumatic experience. He then hands readers a map, challenging them to navigate the tumultuous currents of drama and narrative. The novel finally blends genres, allowing for the recovery of a single plot and a tidy conclusion (Buell 67). I am no tyrant like Ahab, Ishmael assures his readers. My middle way offers both resistance and wonder, where the reader is free to interpret as he desires.

Or is he? The final twist to *Moby-Dick* once again relies on its understanding of theatrical performance. “All performance,” argues Marvin Carlson, “involves a consciousness of doubleness, through which the actual execution of an action is placed in mental comparison with a potential, ideal, or remembered original model” (Carlson 5). The novel is the “actual execution,” being held up to the original model of a theatrical performance. Ishmael never denies his theatrical intentions; his first command of “Call me Ishmael” implies the theatrical nature of the character and narrator. He even imagines the voyage as advertised on a theatrical playbill, wedged between a war and an election. That line of thought also leads him to admit his entire experience is a performance: “I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part that I did” (22). So in Chapter 1 Ishmael reveals that his knowledge of theater will completely inform his performance. That performance, if you will, is *Moby-Dick* itself.

The Epilogue bears that out. After the destruction of the Pequod Ishmael's voice reemerges, directly addressing his readers. He admits, "*The drama's done,*" fully acknowledging that the entire reading experience has been a complicated performance (427). Like a series of nesting dolls, Ishmael has packaged drama inside a mixed-form narrative inside a theatrical performance. One question remains: does the performance of the novel as a whole retain the characteristics of drama utilized within the novel? In other words, it seems as if *Moby-Dick* as a whole induces the kind of *thauma* normally reserved for the most enchanting of theatrical performances. Personally, I find the final line, "*It was the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan*" as elegiac and haunting as the end to any play which is crafted to elicit a similar effect (427). I close the novel, eyes blinking as if I have just emerged from a darkened theater into a sunny afternoon.

## CHAPTER IV

SHOWING LIKE AN ILLUSION: THE FAILURE OF SYMPATHY IN *THE  
BLITHEDALE ROMANCE*

As Catherine Sedgwick and Herman Melville demonstrated, one of theater's greatest assets is its emotional immediacy. Melodrama specifically is designed to elicit the strongest emotional response possible, and this monopathic response has a de-individualizing and unifying effect on the audience. While twentieth-century patrons might scoff at the alleged inartistry of early American melodrama, they cannot deny the emotional impact. A 1909 report by British Joint Select Committee on Censorship and Licensing admitted the power of the monopathic response: "the existence of an audience, moved by the same emotions, its members conscious of one another's presence, intensifies the influence of what is done and spoken on stage" (qtd. in Freshwater 41). Sedgwick demonstrates the unifying power of melodrama during Magawisca's trial in *Hope Leslie*, and both Father Mapple and Ahab deploy theatrical techniques to unite their followers into their respective ideologies.<sup>45</sup> Sedgwick and Melville both understood the melodramatic rule-of-thumb: the stronger the emotional impact, the more emotionally unified audiences become. Nathaniel Hawthorne, similarly, came to understand melodrama's evocative power even before he turned writing his own tales.

In September 1821, shortly before leaving to study at Bowdoin College, Hawthorne saw an adaptation of *King Lear*, with English actor Edmund Kean in the title role. Soon after, Hawthorne described the event in a letter to his mother: "I have been to

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<sup>45</sup> Theater historian Bruce McConachie uses the term "emotional contagion" to describe how awareness of other audience members' similar reactions to a melodramatic performance feeds that very same emotional response (*Engaging* 96). For a scientific discussion of melodrama's emotional and cognitive effect on spectators, see *Engaging Audiences*.



Boston and seen Mr. Kean in *King Lear*. It was enough to have drawn tears from millstones” (qtd. in Eisen 255). It should be noted that Hawthorne saw Kean perform Tate’s 1681 highly melodramatic adaptation of Shakespeare’s play, which Kurt Eisen calls “an archetype” of the drama favored most by Americans in the 1820s, the melodrama (Eisen 255). Whether the plays contained gothic elements (like Barker’s *Superstition* [1824]) utilized European history (like Bird’s *The Gladiator* [1831]) or imported traditionally European trappings to comment upon recent American history (like Dunlap’s *André* (1798)), the melodramatic elements remained the same: a simplified version of life, a “perfectly moral universe,” and stock or psychologically consistent characters (Richardson, “Plays” 260). It is in this “moral universe” that the grand concepts of Good and Evil do battle, with the excitement arising from seeing the villain’s dastardly plans, all the while knowing that Good will always triumph. Ultimately, though, Hawthorne notes that a play’s conflict is inert without the ability to emotionally impact the audience.

But by 1850, melodrama had taken a new form. The type of melodrama that some critics call melodramatic tragedy had all but vanished (Bank 111). While Grimstead argues that playwrights had always, on some level, viewed melodrama as socially enriching, it was not until the 1840s where the genre took an explicitly reform-minded turn.<sup>46</sup> Reformers saw the value in eliciting sympathy, an emotion they believed to be critical for someone to become immersed in reform movements against alcohol abuse or slavery. Regardless of a specific play’s social goal, the message that ““there is an instinct

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<sup>46</sup> Grimstead’s entire argument is dependent upon melodrama’s inherent educational value. In his discussion of William Dunlap, Grimstead states that Dunlap’s plays were crafted “to present truth and to inculcate accepted standards of morality” while the stage itself existed primarily to be a “moral educator” (39).

in the heart which will not be deceived' was repeated in melodramas," and audiences believed following one's heart was synonymous with doing good (Grimstead 212). For some reform-minded stage managers, the idea that "the performance is 'good for you'" was logically extended to the idea that melodrama could "enable critical and ethical engagement, to awaken a sense of social responsibility" in the audience (Freshwater 55). Some of these plays, like *The Drunkard*, became "texts of personal reform (diet, sexual conduct, exercise, manners, and the like)" (Bank 139). Others, such as George Aiken's theatrical adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (first produced in 1852), desired broader social reform. Especially in the latter, melodramas depicted the world not as "what is" but "what ought to be." Yet, as Grimstead notes, melodramas all contained an element of unrelenting hope that the world will improve. The explicit argument in social melodramas, however, makes that improvement contingent upon audiences' taking action upon the evoked sympathy by enacting reforms. Like the frontier melodramas utilized by Sedgwick and the more generalized *thauma* incorporated by Melville, social melodramas relied upon monopathic responses. Unlike the frontier melodrama, however, that response is not the ultimate end. Social melodramas explicitly desired a specific communal action. The monopathic response designed to trigger that action, at the most basic level, is sympathy.

Social melodramas catalyzed sympathy by depicting harsh or unpleasant acts or images—the cruelty inflicted upon slaves, for example—that emotionally united the audience. These images were often portrayed in shockingly realistic detail in order to fully affect the desired emotional impact. For example, the Preface to *The Drunkard* indicates that William Smith based the titular character's decline on "deep knowledge" of

alcohol's effects (Smith, *Drunkard* 3). This is especially true of the opening of Act IV, which contains a "terribly real" depiction of *delirium tremens* that, the Preface states, "appear[s], to those unacquainted with the disease[,] to be overstepping the bounds of nature," but in fact "was true to the letter" (3). Thus Smith insists that the hallucinations of snakes that Edward, the drunkard, experiences are, while admittedly sensational, nevertheless faithful representations of the DT's. It is this verisimilitude upon which social melodrama's proponents rested their arguments for the plays' edifying nature.<sup>47</sup> In other words, Smith believed it was the most mimetic elements of melodrama that yielded the most powerful emotional response, a response garnered for the purpose of cultivating sympathy and subsequent interest in rectifying a particular social malady.<sup>48</sup>

In this vein, it is no surprise that Miles Coverdale, narrator and aspiring reformer of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1851), appropriates melodramatic language in describing the events of the novel. "It was our purpose," Coverdale writes, "to [show] mankind the example of a life governed by other than the false and cruel principles, on which human society has all along been based," demonstrating that the

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<sup>47</sup> This is not just in the writing, but in the performance as well. Smith writes in the preface to *The Drunkard* that, during the first performance of the play, "No unprejudiced person will attempt to deny that it was the cause of much good, and materially aided the Temperance movement it was meant to advocate. In the representation it was a powerful and living picture, and all that saw it, felt it, for IT WAS TRUE" (3). Smith is arguing that, in terms of acting, the performance was *both* a "representation" and "true." By claiming that all who saw it "felt it," he contends that it is the emotional impact, combined with the truthfulness of the actions, had a positive effect on the Temperance movement.

<sup>48</sup> It should be noted that I am not arguing that Smith (nor most 19<sup>th</sup>-century audiences) would believe that *all* elements of melodrama are realistic. Indeed, much of melodrama, in both content and performance, would not be considered representative of real-life situations. Yet much of melodrama's power stems from its inclusion of realistic depictions of real-world problems into its perfectly moral (and therefore idealized) universe. To this end I use the term "mimetic" to identify those *elements* of melodrama that attempt to represent recognizably real-world events or problems. Social melodrama's intended effect, an emotional response strong enough to spur audiences to take action, is provoked by the combination of (unrealistic) simplified and pure morality with the representations of realistic issues. In calling melodrama "mimetic," I am certainly not equating melodrama with realism (or even suggesting that melodrama is overall realistic); instead, I use the term to point to melodramatists' reliance on accurate representations of real-world problems.

Blithedale reformers share goals with melodramatic playwrights.<sup>49</sup> Hawthorne himself prepares the reader of *The Blithedale Romance* for the novel's numerous theatrical allusions; in the Preface he states that "his present concern with the Socialist Community is merely to establish a *theatre* . . . where the creatures of his brain may play their phantasmagorical antics" (1, emphasis mine). The reader is primed to think about the setting of the novel in theatrical terms, and Coverdale upholds that assumption by beginning his narration as he is leaving a theatrical event. He peppers the narrative with theatrical terminology like "taking the part," "show," "company," and compares his group to "denizens of Grub-Street" in London, known for housing hack writers and playwrights (58-9). He even uses an extended theatrical conceit, calling Hollingsworth, Zenobia, and Priscilla "characters" in his "private theater" (65). He sees himself as the Chorus, observing and commenting on the actions of the other three, and calls destiny "the most skilful of stage-managers" (90). Even Coverdale's final "confession" sounds like the epilogue to the play, as it directly addresses the audience. While the language fits thematically into the novel's general discussions of performance and reform, I feel that by inundating the reader with these theatrical terms, Hawthorne is asking us to grapple more specifically with what melodrama means within the context of his presentation of sympathy and reform.

Hawthorne's notion of the Romance is central to his exploration of the role of sympathy in moving people to action.<sup>50</sup> In the Preface to *Blithedale*, Hawthorne contends

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<sup>49</sup> Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Blithedale Romance*. Eds. Seymour Gross and Rosalie Murphy. New York: Norton, 1978. pg 19. Subsequent citations are parenthetical.

<sup>50</sup> Frank Christianson argues that Hawthorne is anticipating the realist novel in *Blithedale* by denigrating Coverdale's melodramatic imaginings as they dovetail with sentimental culture's reformist goals. He contends, "I would prefer to understand *The Blithedale Romance* as a transitional novel that offers a critique of romanticism in particular and sentimental culture in general. In so doing, it anticipates realism as a literary mode" (245). I disagree with Christianson's formulation, because he seems to be equating

that Blithedale is a “Faery Land, so *like* the real world” of Brook Farm, yet not actually based on that particular community (2, emphasis mine). He goes on to say that this Faery Land is obligated to share space with 1850s America, and as such it “renders the paint and pasteboard of their composition but too painfully discernable” (2). This, however, is not a failing or weakness of the Romance. On the contrary, the Romance constructs “an enchanted atmosphere . . . remote from reality” while melodrama “pretend[s] to match that reality” (Auerbach 96). In *The Blithedale Romance*, melodrama, ostensibly mimetic and sympathy-inducing, fails to evoke the requisite sympathy needed to compel audiences to join the cause. And it is the self-consciously artificial atmosphere of the Romance, argues Hawthorne, which instead offers readers a more far-reaching and powerful model of sympathy than melodrama ever could.

Indeed, Coverdale’s constant references to sympathy dovetail with his theatrical allusions. Understanding that melodrama, sympathy, and reform are inextricably linked for Hawthorne’s audiences illustrates why Coverdale, in his project of sympathy and reform, feels compelled to view the erotic drama that occurs among Hollingsworth, Zenobia, and Priscilla in explicitly melodramatic terms. In attempting to superimpose a melodramatic structure over events in which he does not participate (and which, to some extent, he does not even understand), Coverdale the reformer fails to engender the sympathy necessary for social change. Coverdale the narrator, twelve years removed from the events of *Blithedale*, uses theatrical allusions and a confounding narrative to demonstrate that Romance, not melodrama, is the ideal vehicle for provoking effective

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romance/romanticism with sentimentalism, and, to a lesser extent, melodrama. While it is true that both melodrama and sentimental fiction are designed to evoke particular emotions, I believe that melodrama in particular does this by claiming “truthfulness” over “realism.” I do not want to associate the Romance’s self-conscious “fairy-land” or nonmimetic elements to 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century opinions that melodrama is inherently unrealistic or unbelievable.

and powerful sympathy. The Romance, Hawthorne contends, can “draw tears from millstones” even more effectively than melodrama, without insisting that the events depicted are grounded in reality.

#### Turning the Affair into a Ballad: Coverdale’s Melodramatic Project

Sympathy, or “sympathetic identification,” as Frank Christianson designates it, is a crucial ingredient in both social melodramas and social reform movements. Coverdale states early in the novel that the goal of Blithedale was “reformation of the world,” an objective that can only be attained by cultivating a sophisticated ideology that inculcates deep and active sympathy with individuals within and outside the community. This sympathetic bond is inextricably tied to Coverdale’s (and the other Blithedalers’) ideologies of brotherhood/sisterhood and familiar/familial love. For example, in describing the purpose of the community, Coverdale states, “we had divorced ourselves from Pride, and we were striving to supply its place with familiar love” (19). Blithedale participants, then, will build fraternity and sympathy through shared experiences. The community would subsequently become a model “for the advancement of our race” (19). Melodrama shares this process of identification through shared emotional experiences, with the goal of showing audiences not only that civilization will improve, but *how* to enact that improvement. For Coverdale (as well as for melodrama and reform initiatives), sympathy is key; the term appears more than thirty times in the novel (Miller 3). Furthermore, Coverdale admits to seeing a *Veiled Lady* performance on the evening before embarking to Blithedale, a show that preached of “a new era that was dawning upon the world; an era that would link soul to soul” (185). So even before he arrives at

Blithedale, Coverdale's head is filled with notions of the power of sympathy in forging bonds between people and helping bring about the reformation of American life.

Unfortunately for Coverdale, he finds it almost immediately impossible to sympathize with his newfound friends. John N. Miller argues that the erotic dynamics of the group—dynamics that Coverdale seems naively unaware of—blunt Coverdale's attempts at sympathy (12). Other critics assert that Coverdale's voyeurism, his way of trying to figure out his friends' emotions and motives, is what gives his own life purpose (Millington 155). While I disagree with neither of these assessments, I feel they tend to focus more on the psychological makeup of the characters rather than on the role of sympathy itself. Critics run the gamut when it comes to judging Coverdale's motivations, from challenges that he is trying to deceive the reader to more congenial evaluations.<sup>51</sup> No matter how harshly one judges Coverdale as a narrator, I feel that it is impossible to disregard his utter reliance on sympathy as the most vital element in Blithedale specifically, reform in general, and his narrative as a whole.<sup>52</sup> In fact, Coverdale baldly states his frustration in being unable to sympathize with his friends, which gives strength to his belief that it is his role to be the sympathizer. After Zenobia, upon catching the narrator spying from his hotel window, closes the curtains with theatrical finality, Coverdale writes:

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<sup>51</sup> Kurt Eisen, for example, believes that Coverdale is attempting to obscure the facts of the Blithedale failure. Coverdale's confession then becomes "an attempt to evade narrative responsibility" in an effort to absolve himself of guilt over Zenobia's suicide (269). Laura Tanner and Richard Millington similarly see Coverdale as actively trying to hide his guilt. Keith Carabine and Jonathan Auerbach, on the other hand, attempt gentler readings of Coverdale; they do not ascribe to him any narrative maliciousness. Michael Colacurcio amusingly argues that Coverdale blithely goes about the narrative without any real grasp of what is going on around him.

<sup>52</sup> In a moment reminiscent of Othello's self-proclaimed eulogy, Coverdale writes "It now impresses me, that, if I erred at all, in regard to Hollingsworth, Zenobia, and Priscilla, it was through too much sympathy, rather than too little" (143). I believe that critics' judgments are based on how much faith they put in that statement.

For, was mine a mere vulgar curiosity? 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 (often against my own will, and to the detriment of my own comfort) to live in other lives, and to endeavor—by generous sympathies . . . to learn the secret which was hidden even from themselves. (147-8)

In this passage, Coverdale is justifying his role as sympathetic judge. Regardless of whether we doubt his self-serving tone, we do notice that he references both sympathy and the heart, the organ within which sympathy was understood to reside. Thus Coverdale sees sympathy as revelatory; it allows the sympathizer to *identify* with another so completely as to be able to read their hidden secrets.

In order to facilitate the forging of the sympathetic bond, Coverdale superimposes a melodramatic structure over the group dynamic. He attempts to take characters filled with “doubtful guilt and possible integrity” and reconceptualize them as “definitive heroes and stark villains” (Anderson 37). In other words, by viewing his friends as melodramatic types and their interaction at Blithedale as adhering to a melodramatic structure, Coverdale hopes to find a ready framework for the building of a system of sympathy.<sup>53</sup> Coverdale seems to relish the role-playing this structure provides. At the Veiled Lady show late in the novel, he speaks to Hollingsworth in a “sepulchral, melodramatic whisper” (182). By this point in the novel, Coverdale’s melodramatic superstructure has become quite literal in his own mind, even as readers begin to doubt the veracity of those melodramatic shadings. Coverdale’s melodrama becomes so real

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<sup>53</sup> It should be noted that where I see melodrama, other critics see different theatrical elements. For example, one critic sees Coverdale’s spying as “pornographic theater” rather than melodramatic (Greven 134).



that he “is gradually swept up by the force of his own vision until that vision comes to assume the status of reality” (Tanner 4). His musings about Priscilla’s origins, for example, crystallize into reality within his mind. As Coverdale watches Priscilla sew, he thinks, “She had been bred up, *no doubt*, in some close nook, some inauspiciously sheltered court of the city” (33, emphasis mine). He describes that presumed “nook” in claustrophobic terms, surmising that “[her] house probably seemed to her adrift on a great ocean of the night,” which explains to his satisfaction, if not to the reader, the reasons behind Priscilla’s fear of the night’s storm (33). He observes her behavior—nervously sewing and flinching with each blast of wind—and bestows on her a melodramatic backstory, complete with orphanage and innocence about the wider world. His use of “no doubt” indicates that his melodrama has taken on an aura of reality in his mind. His insistence in the reality of the melodramatic structure is tied to melodrama’s ethos; with its claims of mimetic elements, melodrama presents its central problems or social concerns as realistically as possible, and therefore Coverdale’s reliance on this “private theater” begins to shape his understanding of the other characters.

Once Coverdale begins to take pains to distance himself from the other characters, Hawthorne allows Coverdale’s paradigm to be fully brought into focus; the narrator conceives of a way to interact with the others in much the same way he visualizes himself viewing a melodrama. Coverdale admits that he believes that constant interaction with the others results in losing “the better part of [his] individuality” (83). Interestingly, that is the precisely the result that he is looking for; as I have suggested in the previous chapters, sympathetic identification within melodrama creates a collective identity brought about by the monopathic experience. But Coverdale is so frightened by the

deindividualizing nature of the melodramatic experience that he alters his paradigm. Instead of engaging in actual sympathetic identification, he steps back to the role of spectator only. Theoretically, the spectator is able, like the chorus in a Greek play, to “besto[w] the whole measure of its hope or fear, its exultation or sorrow, on the fortunes of others” (90). After his convalescence and discovery of the hermitage, Coverdale actively adopts this role of distanced spectator, watching the melodrama unfold and judging the characters without interacting. Some critics argue that, by viewing Zenobia, Hollingsworth, and Priscilla as enacting melodramatic “roles,” Coverdale is more easily able to interpret his friends’ actions and therefore more easily sympathize with them (Auerbach 92). However, this does not take into account the dangers of this kind of typecasting. By reducing his friends to melodramatic types, and by removing himself from the action, Coverdale is unwittingly demonstrating that melodrama does not create the kind of sympathetic identification necessary to spur him to help his friends with their own pain, much less engage in the reformation of the world. Indeed, the fact that Coverdale is even able to step away from his friends’ emotional problems implies the failure of melodrama to effectively engage audiences’ emotions. Social melodrama requires sympathetic participation, and Coverdale’s self-imposed withdrawal from the melodrama he has created indicates he is willfully disregarding that participation. The novel’s critique of melodrama highlights these twin failings: Coverdale is a lax melodramatic spectator and melodrama itself is revealed to be emotionally inert.

In fact, Coverdale’s failure to sympathize at all with the other Blithedaleers demonstrates that his melodramatic project produces sympathy that is both reductive and narcissistic. The distance that Coverdale puts between himself and the others only

enhances the self-centeredness of his endeavor. For Coverdale, the sympathetic project becomes all about him. For example, Coverdale's initial thoughts about Priscilla's backstory are more a function of his predisposition to view his friends as characters within his own private drama than any kind of actual insight (Tanner 5). When Priscilla first appears at Blithedale, Coverdale sees her as "some desolate kind of a creature, doomed to wander about in snow-storms, and that, though the ruddiness of our window-panes had tempted her into a human dwelling, she would not remain long enough to melt the icicles out of her hair" (26). Zenobia mocks his "poetical" image of the maiden, and further undercuts his melodramatic tendencies by stating, "She is neither more nor less . . . than a seamstress from the city" (31). That does not stop Coverdale from imbuing his mental image of Priscilla with sensational color:

Priscilla! Priscilla! I repeated the name to myself, three or four times; and, in that little space, this quaint and prim cognomen had so amalgamated itself with my idea of the girl, that it seemed as if no other name could have adhered to her for a moment. (28)

Zenobia mocks Coverdale for this contemplation of Priscilla, for she knows that his "nature" means that he is inclined to cast his subjects in a melodramatic light. Indeed, by poeticizing Priscilla's appearance, Coverdale reduces the image of her to his impression of her name. *Her* name becomes subordinated to *his* perception of it. This early in the novel, melodramatic sympathy is exposed as ultimately self-centered. By utilizing the language of melodrama to describe the other characters, Hawthorne is demonstrating how Coverdale is robbing his friends of their individual characteristics. Coverdale's interpretation of the melodramatic roles of Priscilla, Westervelt, and Hollingsworth tells

readers more about his inclination to see things through the lens of melodrama than it does his friends.<sup>54</sup>

As far as casting the Blithedalers into melodramatic roles, Priscilla is the obvious choice as the melodramatic heroine. Grimstead describes the typical heroine as “‘a miracle of love and delicacy,’ ‘a paragon of excellence,’ indeed, ‘an earthly angel’” (172). By seeing Priscilla as the frail, helpless maiden who eventually becomes the emotional center of the community, Coverdale defines Priscilla by her virtue and her vulnerability. As far as Coverdale is concerned, she has “the heroine’s angelic passivity and sexual purity” that Grimstead lists as among the core characteristics of the melodramatic heroine (Eisen 267).<sup>55</sup> Coverdale also sees her as the “ideal Blithedaler” insofar as she is “an individual without individuality” (Gable 272). Priscilla’s meekness and apparent physical fragility, combined with her willingness to please the others, make it easy for Coverdale to conceive of her as the stereotypical melodramatic heroine. “Everybody was kind to Priscilla,” says Coverdale, “everybody loved her” (69). Of course, it is easy to like her when her personality seems so malleable.

By labeling Priscilla the heroine of his melodrama, Coverdale is superficially striving to build a sympathetic connection with her. Yet this sympathetic project is more clearly about Coverdale than it is about Priscilla. Her role as heroine comforts him,

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<sup>54</sup> Due to Coverdale’s status as first-person narrator, it becomes exceedingly difficult to separate the failings of his melodramatic project from the failure of melodrama. In other words, one might contend that melodrama itself is effective at evoking sympathy; Coverdale, however, does not deploy it correctly or lacks the necessary sympathetic faculties to do so. Yet I maintain that Coverdale, who is ostensibly writing the novel twelve years after the fact, is conflating the failings of his younger self with the failings of melodrama itself. He wants us to believe that he failed his friends at Blithedale not only because of his personal shortcomings (though critics see much evidence of this) but because melodrama is not as an effective vehicle for sympathetic identification as audiences might believe.

<sup>55</sup> Considering that so many critics see Coverdale as unreliable, some are bound to call into question Priscilla’s sexual purity. For example, Barbara Lefcowitz and Allan Lefowitz focus on the sexual connotations of the purse in “Some Rents in the Veil.” They argue that Coverdale is alluding to the sexual undercurrents of Priscilla’s work as a seamstress and as Westervelt’s subject, making her more like a prostitute than a paragon of virginity.

because she “offers him reassuring experiences of substituting individual but still universal feelings of love for materially specific (and often messy) understandings of the world” (Castronovo 106). Because she is so easy to love— as he watches her play, for example, he finds her coltish running charming—she becomes an entry-level exercise in sympathy. And because melodrama tends to reduce complex moral to single truths, Coverdale believes the amusement, protectiveness, or confusion he feels towards her is part and parcel of his overall sympathetic identification with her. Furthermore, it forces him to see her as constantly threatened, first by Hollingsworth, then by Westervelt. This means that protecting and nurturing Priscilla becomes a microcosm for the Blithedale project itself. If the defense of the heroine is the central concern of the melodrama, then protecting Priscilla becomes Blithedale’s priority, and Coverdale places himself in the position to witness that crisis. But instead of allowing her story of subjection and subsequent escape from Westervelt to elicit reform-inducing sympathy, Coverdale’s manufactured melodrama reveals the inherent narcissism in such a project.

If Priscilla is Coverdale’s ideal melodramatic heroine, then Westervelt is the ideal villain. As a “smooth,” shape-shifting “disruptor of innocence,” the melodramatic villain is the greatest threat to the heroine’s sexual purity (Grimstead 176). This threat often comes in the form of the villain’s physical mutability. Being able to disguise himself, like a wolf in sheep’s clothing, the villain was able to gain access to the heroine’s more intimate environs. Westervelt, too, displays a similar adaptability. Coverdale muses that Westervelt’s face “might be removable like a mask” and that when “he put on a pair of spectacles, which so altered the character of his face that I hardly knew him again” (88, 90). Even the moniker of “Professor” hints at Westervelt’s disguise; the mesmerist show

cloaks the seedier elements of Priscilla's bondage under the veil of education and the banner of brotherhood.<sup>56</sup>

Yet as with Priscilla's role in Coverdale's drama, Westervelt's appearance as villain tells us a lot about Coverdale. For example, upon meeting Westervelt in the woods, Coverdale admits to hating the professor immediately and for no discernable reason.<sup>57</sup> Then, despite being disconcerted by the thought that Westervelt was a "humbug," he finds the professor's laughter infectious (88). Coverdale admits that "the contagion of his strange mirth on my sympathies" caused him to laugh along with Westervelt (89). Like a spectator at a show, Coverdale finds himself mirroring Westervelt's emotions. It has been suggested that this "moment of unconscious mimicry" is evidence that Coverdale sees his own self as mechanical or mutable, like Westervelt's disguises (Millington 160). I would argue, however, that Coverdale the character (as opposed to the writer/narrator) does not see the self-reflexive nature of his project. Coverdale has situated himself as spectator, and as he watches the melodrama of his creation his sympathies are aroused willy-nilly. The audience is not supposed to identify with the melodramatic villain, yet sympathize on some level Coverdale does. In fact, he is charmed equally by Westervelt and Priscilla, demonstrating that the sympathy melodrama elicits can be flawed or faulty.

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<sup>56</sup> For a fascinating look at Priscilla's performance as the confluence of the ideologies of education, prison reform, and entertainment, see Jennifer Greiman's *Democracy's Spectacle*. In her chapter on *Blithedale*, Greiman links Priscilla to Laura Bridgman, a girl stricken deaf and blind in her youth. An "emblematic creation of antebellum reform movements," Bridgman was taught to "perform her solitude" to eager audiences by Samuel Gridley Howe, the physician and education activist who treated her.

<sup>57</sup> It should be noted that Coverdale lets readers assume that he does not know Westervelt's identity in the woods. However, Coverdale should be aware who he is since he admits to going to a Veiled Lady performance before going to Blithedale. Perhaps his enmity springs from already viewing Westervelt in that villainous role.

“Nothing but self, self, self!”: The Failure of Melodrama

While Priscilla, Westervelt, and Hollingsworth more or less fit into their assigned roles of melodramatic heroine, villain, and hero respectively, Zenobia provides Coverdale with a more difficult task. Her erotic nature, which can be seen as her way of retaining “a modicum of control,” resists easy categorization into a melodramatic framework (R. Levine 217). Her “fine, perfectly developed figure,” revealed so seductively, excludes her from the rank of melodramatic heroinehood.<sup>58</sup> In fact, her eroticism actually prevents Coverdale from acting as spectator. When she admits that she will not appear in “the garb of Eden” until May, while “shivering playfully,” the image of a naked Zenobia becomes so real to him that he has to close his eyes (16). He literally has to stop looking at her in that moment. When he is able to look at her plainly, her self-conscious theatricality—both Zenobia and Coverdale acknowledge she is adopting roles—prevents him from creating the kind of sympathetic identification he feels he has forged with the others. His desire to sympathize seems almost violent as he writes, “She should be *compelled* to give me a glimpse of something true; some nature, some passion, no matter whether right or wrong, provided it were real” (153, emphasis mine). The fact that Coverdale seems to want to experience a sympathetic connection to Zenobia underscores the narcissism of his project.

Coverdale’s narrative treatment of Zenobia is the first sign that his melodramatic project is doomed to fail. When Zenobia asks, “What are you seeking to discover in me,” Coverdale replies in frustration, “The mystery of your life . . . and you will never tell me”

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<sup>58</sup> Eisen argues that “Coverdale allows Zenobia the nobler stature of the tragic heroine,” but I feel that it is not really about “allowing” Zenobia to take the role (Eisen 267). Instead, he is foisting that role upon her. This has the added bonus, as far as Coverdale sees it, of absolving himself from any guilt in Zenobia’s suicide. If she truly is following the model of tragic heroine, her death is inevitable by melodramatic standards (the fallen heroine finds freedom in death). And who is Coverdale to act against destiny?

(44). While Coverdale is presumably attempting to forge a sympathetic bond with her, his statement “you will never tell me” demonstrates the self-centeredness of his brand of sympathy. Zenobia is not silent, however. She confounds Coverdale with performances, showing him multiple facets to her personality. This multiplicity is anathema to unambiguous melodrama; her theatricality contains a psychological depth that is too complex for melodrama’s black-and-white morality. Coverdale’s narrative strategy, then, becomes one of reduction, just as melodrama is morally and psychologically reductive.<sup>59</sup> For example, he first describes her as an actress, then an artist’s model, and finally as a work of art (Tanner 8). He is attempting to limit her erotic power by narratively stripping of her of agency. Even the flower he inextricably links to her character is a function of melodrama’s reductive tendencies. Coverdale argues that the flower in Zenobia’s hair “was actually a subtle expression of Zenobia’s character” (42). The use of metaphor rather than simile—the flower is equated to her character—allows Coverdale to reduce the multiplicitous nature of Zenobia’s personality to a single, inartful image. Like melodrama, which reduces its characters to types (often representing capital-letter concepts like Chastity or Evil), Coverdale attempts to rob Zenobia of her character by reducing her to an Eve-like figure, destined to fall.

Of course, Zenobia is not the only one who is pigeonholed in this way. As I argued above, Coverdale’s attempts to sympathize with Priscilla is a one-way street. It is as if his mental image of her could only go by the name Priscilla. And like Zenobia and her flower, Coverdale links her character to the image of the purse. It becomes a “simple

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<sup>59</sup> It should be noted that neither melodrama’s reductive morality nor its players’ exaggerated performance prevent the play itself from depicting recognizably realistic events. I do not wish to assert that melodrama is never realistic; in fact, I would argue that the reductive morality, coupled with realistic portrayals of specific events, is what makes melodrama so effective in encouraging a very specific course of action.



equation” of Coverdale equating Priscilla with the purse, all the while identifying the purse (or the flower) “as an emblem” (FitzPatrick 35). Priscilla herself even recognizes Coverdale’s tendency to reduce people to emblems or types. After Coverdale remarks that, by some strange coincidence, when Priscilla holds a letter from Margaret Fuller, she seems to *resemble* Fuller, Priscilla responds, “I wish people would not fancy such odd things in me!” (48). Priscilla resists Coverdale’s attempt to identify with her in this moment, though she does not seem to realize the irony of Coverdale’s sympathy. Coverdale chides Hollingsworth for being so single-minded, yet Coverdale’s own attempts at sympathy are just as reductive. Because they are framed by melodrama, Coverdale’s attempts at sympathy cause him to completely misapprehend the actual dynamics of the group.

The instances of Coverdale misunderstanding or misreading his friends, or generally just missing the point, are almost too numerous to be listed. When Hollingsworth visits Coverdale during his illness, to cite one example, he talks about the site where he plans to build his proposed prison. Coverdale, seeing his comrade as a player in a melodrama, assumes that the philanthropist is discussing the future home of the cottage he plans to construct for Zenobia. His bewilderment at realizing Hollingsworth’s true intentions is comical; of course he has been talking about prison the whole time. The idea that Hollingsworth and Zenobia are lovers is chalked up to “gossip,” yet Coverdale treats it as reality (74, 118). In fact, when he talks to Priscilla about the group’s future, he accepts that Zenobia and Hollingsworth are lovers as a foregone conclusion. Of course, he cannot read Zenobia either. Whenever she tilts her head in “that unintelligible gesture,” he realizes that he does not understand her after all

(70). Or, as in the case when she first arrives at Blithedale, he does not bother even trying to read that gesture. Instead, he simply keeps talking and dreaming, forestalling whatever she might actually reveal about herself with his own melodramatic musings.

In a similar fashion, he reduces not only the character of the other Blithedalers but also his entire understanding of what happened between them. On one hand, Coverdale seems to be aware of this. Before he describes the group dynamic he writes:

It is not, I apprehend, a healthy kind of mental occupation, to devote ourselves too exclusively to the study of individual men and women. If the person under examination be one's self, the result is pretty certain to be diseased action of the heart ... Or, if we take the freedom to put a friend under our microscope, we thereby insulate him from many of his true relations, magnify his peculiarities, inevitably tear him into parts, and, of course, patch him very clumsily together again. (64)

But this apprehension comes twelve years too late. Initially, Coverdale is unaware of the invasive nature of spectating and judgment. Only in retrospect that does he see that his scrutiny, the narrowing of the field of vision to the microscopic level, results in a distorted image of the subject. But this is what melodrama does: it condenses the spectator's perspective to a single point.

And that reduced point of view is designed to facilitate the presentation of a particular moral and elicit a specific emotion. Coverdale's attempt at sympathy has similar aims. If he can sympathetically identify with others, then he can judge the morality of their actions. Ultimately, he hopes to learn something. He states as much as he spies from his hotel window. "I would look on, as it seemed my part to do," he writes

as he peers into the drawing room across the way, “if my intellect could fathom the meaning and the moral” (145). He is not just people-watching to pass the time. Instead, he purports to find it potentially edifying as well as his particular mission. Earlier, he claims that he sees himself playing the part “of the Chorus in a classic play,” ordained to judge the morality of others (90). As he extends that theatrical conceit, he believes it is his duty to “to detect the final fitness of incident to character, and distil, in his long-brooding thought, the whole morality of the performance” (91). His purpose in the Blithedale experiment is to act as judge. And as Bruce McConachie argues, judgment only occurs after the audience sympathizes with the characters.<sup>60</sup> Coverdale’s judgment fails because he cannot properly sympathize because he tries to utilize melodrama in order to forge sympathetic bonds.

It is not that Coverdale cannot sympathize with anyone, but that the sympathy that grows directly out of his propensity to see others as characters in a private melodrama is tainted by narcissism. On some level Coverdale recognizes this. For example, one night he dreams about Hollingsworth and Zenobia kissing over his bed. He sees the dream as an extension of their “private theater,” and realizes, “That cold tendency, between instinct and intellect, which made me pry with a speculative interest into people’s passions and impulses, appeared to have gone far towards unhumanizing my heart” (145). Melodrama, with its focus on moral judgment based on “speculative interest,” yields a “cold,” corrupted sympathy. By the time Coverdale needs to act on his sympathy, he feels almost powerless to do anything. As he watches Zenobia cry, he defends his right to witness it but doubts there is anything he can do to comfort her. This is the lie of melodrama, the novel argues; the sympathy melodrama allegedly evokes is supposed to compel audiences

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<sup>60</sup> For a discussion of sympathy’s role in judging a character’s motives, see *Engaging Audiences*, 76.

to go act toward the betterment of themselves and society. Instead Coverdale remains impotent in the face of Zenobia's despair. He even claims to feel for her as he writes, "I was listless, worn-out with emotion on my own behalf, and sympathy for others, and had no heart to leave my comfortless lair" (210). Instead of forging a connection with others, Coverdale's sympathy remains focused on himself. Instead of spurring him to action, the melodrama he visualizes at Blithedale leaves him inert and ineffective.

Since Coverdale is the novel's spokesman for melodrama, he becomes a stand-in for *Blithedale's* investigation of the genre's more far-ranging crimes. Zenobia charges Coverdale directly with melodrama's offenses. When they encounter each other in town, she replies, "It is dangerous, sir, believe me, to tamper thus with earnest human passions, out of your own mere idleness, and for your sport" (157). Contrary to what he might think about his own motives, Zenobia is accusing him of making a melodrama out of their personal lives for the purposes of entertainment. This subtly links Coverdale to the ensuing scenes, in which he visits the lyceum to first listen to "a pale man in blue spectacles" before Westervelt takes the stage (182). Coverdale paraphrases the lecturer's stories about "the miraculous power of one human being over the will and passions of another," stories with morals such as "the individual soul was virtually annihilated, and all that is sweet and pure in our present life, debased, and that idea of man's eternal responsibility was made ridiculous" (183). The lecturer is speaking about power such as that wielded by Westervelt over Priscilla, both of whom soon take the stage. After seeing how spiteful a mesmerist show can be, Coverdale begins to understand that melodrama can be "ridiculous." In fact, melodrama and mesmerist shows share similar dehumanizing effects. If "[t]he public who gazes with its 'straining eyes,'" as Greiman contends, is just

as complicit in “convert[ing] the Veiled Lady into a prisoner as Westervelt,” then melodrama, with its similar focus on perception and judgment, is just as dehumanizing (167). The novel thus indicts melodrama for eliciting the wrong kind of sympathy; *Blithedale* demonstrates that melodrama is a narcissistic and reductive endeavor that is actually counterproductive in bringing people closer together.

#### Showing Like an Illusion: The Romance as an Alternative to Melodrama

In retrospect, Coverdale realizes that his practice of viewing events through the lens of melodrama contributed to his failure to adequately sympathize with his friends; he may, in fact, feel partially responsible for Zenobia’s suicide. Twelve years after the events of the novel, as Coverdale puts pen to paper, he finds that melodrama is the root cause of his failure to sympathize all those years before. Granted, it is difficult to distinguish between Coverdale’s more generalized flaws and those that can be attributed to those aspects of melodrama that reduce complex moral issues into simple formulas. For this reason he eschews techniques associated with melodrama when telling this story in favor of a different genre, the Romance. Coverdale uses Zenobia as a model for his narration because he realizes that her fluid personality is what most effectively resists melodrama’s reductive constraints.<sup>61</sup> For example, by playing into and against Coverdale’s melodramatic assumptions she “self-consciously manipulates the very stereotypes that might be used to reduce her to a single identity” (Tanner 5). Her theatricality draws attention to itself; by being overtly theatrical, she is exposing the artificial nature of reformist melodrama, a genre in which melodramatists take great pains to include certain elements that represent very specifically realistic issues or events. In

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<sup>61</sup> Both Robert Levine and Laura Tanner use the terms “theatricality” and “theatricalization” to describe the way Zenobia self-consciously behaves like an actress on stage, which allows her to alter her personality as an actresses changes costumes.

doing so, her playacting reveals the truth about melodrama and offers instead a dramatic form that is multiplicitous in nature, offering a more human or formidable emotional connection.

As an actress figure, Zenobia consistently mocks Coverdale's poetic imagination. She gently ribs him the first night at Blithedale, for his "poetical" way of viewing Priscilla (31). She also repeats the gibe the last time he sees her alive: "Ah, I perceive what you are about! You are turning this whole affair into a ballad" (205-6). Her efforts to spotlight his tendency to rhapsodize bookend their relationship, underscoring Coverdale's static personality. He is just as monomaniacal as Hollingsworth, never wavering from his obsession with melodrama's form. Zenobia, on the other hand, finds herself "experimenting with rhetoric and disguise rather than [being] a romantic artist intent on defining a stable poetic identity" (Tanner 6).<sup>62</sup> While Coverdale's identity is static, Zenobia's is fluid. This fluidity necessitates an ever-changing interpretive schema for anyone, like Coverdale, who is attempting to characterize her. And it is that complexity that perplexes him; he just cannot figure her out. She exposes the failure of melodrama, in its attempts to reduce events to a single moral, in her farewell rant to Coverdale. "As for the moral," she says to him, "it shall be distilled into the final stanza, in a drop of bitter honey" (206). She then offers him *three* potential morals instead of just one. Confused and exhausted, Coverdale does not understand what is happening. He simply does not have the faculties to sympathize without her spelling it out for him.

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<sup>62</sup> Tanner uses the term "romantic artist" pejoratively, arguing that it is Coverdale's "romantic" personality that leads him to flights of fancy that, in his mind, become reality. For Tanner, it is Coverdale's "romantic" side that causes him such limited perspective. For this reason, I feel that her use of "romantic" is analogous to my use of "melodramatic," considering that, for Tanner, Coverdale's "romantic" nature leads him to see things as totalities, black or white, good or evil.

Frustrated with Coverdale's inability to reckon with her complexities, Zenobia recognizes his brand of sympathy to be inherently self-centered. She tells him that the world needs "intelligent sympathy," indicating that perhaps he is relying too heavily on an emotional connection rather than using reason to judge the morality of the situation (150). Her plea falls on deaf ears, and by the time she learns that her fortune has been transferred to Priscilla, and Hollingsworth's affections along with it, it is too late for Coverdale to do anything about it. Her rhetorical question, "It is a genuine tragedy, is it not," carries the subtle accusation that Coverdale's mindset—the melodramatic tragedy—is not all that genuine (206). Her condemnation of Hollingsworth's failures could just as rightly be leveled at Coverdale. Zenobia tells the philanthropist, "It is all self! . . . Nothing else; nothing but self, self, self! . . . you have embodied yourself in a project. You are a better masquerader than the witches and gispies yonder; for your disguise is a self-deception" (210). Furthermore, Zenobia wonders what Hollingsworth sees in Priscilla (other than the money), and she laments that no one can offer Hollingsworth "that proud, intellectual sympathy which he might have had from me" (207). Zenobia, in her theatric splendor, becomes the novel's model for true, heartfelt sympathy.

Finally, Zenobia's theatricality differs from social melodrama in its self-consciously artificial nature. Social melodrama purports to elicit a stronger emotional reaction because of its alleged real-world depictions of social ills.<sup>63</sup> Zenobia, on the other hand, wears artifice on her sleeve, being addressed by her pen name and adapting her demeanor to any situation. She becomes the mask she wears. Furthermore, she claims that her theatricality is more truthful than the actions of the others. "You are just playing

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<sup>63</sup> I would argue that this stereotype still exists. Melodramatic films are often touted as "being based on a true story," as if that somehow makes the emotional impact more effective.

at being reformers,” she demonstrates. Coverdale even admits it: “the presence of Zenobia caused our heroic enterprise to show like an illusion,” he realizes, “in which we grown-up men and women were making a playday” (21). In contrast to social melodrama’s efforts to be as realistic as possible, Zenobia shows that often the self-consciously artificial can be more accurate.

Zenobia’s representation of emotional truths via starkly artificial means is most clearly evident in her performance of “The Silvery Veil.” She ironically reveals her frustration with one evening’s theatrical amusements by saying, “Our own features, and our own figures and airs, show a little too intrusively through all the characters we assume” (99). By attempting to transform themselves into lifelike representations of Renaissance paintings, the participants’ tableaux reveal too much about the Blithedalers themselves. Zenobia then says that she will tell a “ghost story,” which sets the stage for something unrealistic (99). Of course, that story is embedded in Priscilla’s private truth. By framing it as a supernatural tale, however, Zenobia “resist[s] the temptation of realism” while staying “firmly rooted in the materiality of stagecraft and performance” (Greiman 184). The Blithedalers become enchanted by the story because of, rather than in spite of, her presenting it as a ghost story. Even the obviously unrealistic elements—the Veiled Lady’s pact with Theodore, the Wizard’s power—become vehicles by which emotional truths can be conveyed to the audience.<sup>64</sup> In this way Zenobia’s theatricality becomes a model for Coverdale’s Romance; it demonstrates the efficacy of choosing fancy over realism. Her theatricality offers multiplicity instead of reductiveness,

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<sup>64</sup> Regarding the Veiled Lady’s promise to marry Theodore if he has faith, Dunne argues, “this metadiegetic narrative has indirectly introduced the possibility of ideal love into the supposedly realistic world of imperfect lovers” (Dunne 92). He also says that by portraying Westervelt as a wizard, Zenobia is capturing his evil essence while rendering while at the same time assuring us he is just a showman. It is just a ghost story, after all.



intelligent sympathy instead of narcissism, and a self-consciously anti-mimetic presentation that reveals to be counterfeit those elements of melodrama that are presented in a realistic fashion.

Narrating the events twelve years later, Coverdale is determined to find a suitable alternative to melodrama. The Romance genre, which does not need to be grounded in a particularly real-world setting, becomes the model narrative form. In the Preface, it seems that Hawthorne laments America's lack of romantic settings, and therefore "the beings of imagination are compelled to show themselves in the same category as actually living mortals; a necessity that generally renders the paint and pasteboard of their composition but too painfully discernable" (2). At first glance, this seems like a complaint. After all, Hawthorne contends that Brook Farm is not the literal basis of Blithedale, but only that he draws from his memories in order to bring "a more lifelike tint to the fancy-sketch" (1). Yet the "painfully discernable" artifice of the Romance, set as it is in a realistic atmosphere, is a boon to the author who hopes to convey some emotional truth. Jennifer Greiman states:

Theatrical removal, [as Hawthorne defines it in the Preface], is not the distancing of an audience from a staged performance, but the preservation of distance between that performance and reality, which is defined to enhance the spectator's involvement . . . romance practices a paradoxical mimesis: it finds its closest approximations of "real lives" by locating a "suitable remoteness" from them. (171)

Greiman is arguing that Hawthorne is attempting to depict psychologically realistic characters and situations by providing them with a decidedly unrealistic setting. In other

words, Hawthorne is demonstrating that, in not adhering to a mimetic model, the Romance is able to get to the heart of the complicated and real-world problem of sympathy.

Coverdale uses “The Silvery Veil” as a model when writing the second metadiegetic narrative in the text, Moodie’s back-story.<sup>65</sup> In the time leading up to meeting Moodie in the pub, Coverdale muses on a number of realistic paintings. He catalogues these paintings, the subject of all of them being food:

[A]mong them an oil-painting of a beef-steak, with such an admirable show of juicy tenderness, that the beholder signed to think it merely visionary, and incapable of ever being put on the gridiron. Another work of high art was the lifelike representation of a noble sirloin; another, the hind-quarters of a deer . . . another, the head and shoulders of a salmon, and, still more exquisitely finished, a brace of canvass-back ducks. (161).

The list is comical, for Coverdale tells us that each painting was more lifelike than the next, to the extent that the paintings arouse his appetite. He quips that “a very hungry painter” must have created them, indicating that the realistic nature of the paintings was effective in transmitting the feeling of hunger from artist to viewer (161). Yet Coverdale then decides that though it seemed to be “the genuine article,” something in the paintings was lacking, the realism of the paintings making them somehow less than substantial. Much like the appearance of Silas Foster at the masque, who “did more to disenchant the scene . . . than twenty witches and necromancers could have done in the way of rendering it weird and fantastic,” the lifelikeness of the painting only underscores the elements that

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<sup>65</sup> A metadiegetic narrative is an embedded narrative, told by a character within the larger narrative. Zenobia and Moodie are both metadiegetic narrators; their stories are embedded within the larger context of Coverdale’s narrative.

make it unreal (194). Eventually his gaze lands on a painting of a drunk. This painting is so lifelike that “your only comfort lay in the forced reflection, that, real as he looked, the poor caitiff was but imaginary, a bit of painted canvass” (162). The mimetic quality of the painting is what ultimately undermines its ability to elicit sympathy. It is, Coverdale notes, just a painting after all. Like Smith’s production of *The Drunkard*, which portrayed scenes of alcohol abuse as realistically as possible, the painting of the drunk does *not* evoke sympathy in Coverdale.<sup>66</sup>

This emphasis on the failure of mimetic art is carried over into the retelling of Moodie’s story. Coverdale claims the intervening years, as well as the wine at the time of the telling, did much to render his memory of the moment hazy. He admits that he is allowing himself “a trifle of romantic and legendary license” telling Moodie’s back-story (167). But why make excuses at this moment only, and not anywhere else in the novel? I believe that Coverdale is modeling this incident of storytelling after Zenobia’s performance, priming his audience for the more unbelievable elements by claiming drunkenness or faulty memory. But these fanciful embellishments, these exercises in imagination, “serv[e] to justify the occurrence of bizarre coincidences within the decidedly realistic environment” (Dunne 93). By admitting that he is “sketch[ing] it, mainly from fancy,” Coverdale wants the audiences to not strain themselves in judging the veracity of the admittedly unbelievable story of sisters, wizards, and fortunes (176). Thus this story serves as a Romance in microcosm. Coverdale forestalls any objections to

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<sup>66</sup> Prior to a description of the paintings, Coverdale engages in a rant opposing temperance reformers. He claims that they should not ban alcohol but instead “must do away with evil by substituting good” (161). This statement, in combination with the accusation that the painting does not elicit sympathy, becomes an indictment of the efficacy of temperance melodramas like *The Drunkard*. I also find it amusing that Coverdale then claims the wine he shares with Moodie affects his recollections, making the following chapter an imaginative recreation of Moodie’s story rather than a transcription. Perhaps this is a subtle claim on Coverdale’s part for wine as a vital component in the creative process.

the truthfulness by admitting that he is working from imagination in much the same way Hawthorne, in the Preface, claims that the characters are not based on specific people but simply “the creatures of his brain” (2).

The Romance, like “The Silvery Veil,” is therefore truth draped in the trappings of fancy. Hawthorne is clearly thinking about this mediation between fantasy and realism from early on in his career. In “Fancy’s Show-Box” (1837), a morality sketch, he writes that:

Thus a novel-writer, or a dramatist, in creating a villain of romance, and fitting him with evil deeds, and the villain of actual life, in projecting crimes that will be perpetrated, may almost meet each other, half-way between reality and fancy. (“Fancy’s Show Box” 225-6)

In this conclusion to the morality tale, Hawthorne’s narrator is considering to what degree the artist is complicit in a potential crime just by imagining it. He concludes that, while the novelist or dramatist, in imagining a villain, is obviously not a criminal himself, he is part of the way there. The potential crime exists somewhere between reality and the artist’s imagination. Thus in Hawthorne’s mind the Romance is “represented less as a literary form than as the psychological and cultural place where his art happens, where the writer and reader meet in a special sort of interchange” (Millington 43). Therefore the audience plays an important part in the transmission of truth and the creation of sympathy. This is in contrast to melodrama, in which Hawthorne sees audiences as passive, condescended to by a didactic drama.

In addition to avoiding melodrama’s attempts at mimesis, Coverdale also follows Zenobia’s example and offers multiple interpretations for his work. According to Evan

Carton, the romance genre “highlights the act of interpretation” (1). Coverdale the character tends to misinterpret what goes on around him; Coverdale the narrator avoids spoon-feeding interpretations to his readers. Hawthorne himself decried such reductive moralizing in the Preface to *The House of Seven Gables* (1851) where he writes, “The Author has considered it hardly worth his while, therefore, to relentlessly impale the story with its moral, as with an iron rod—or rather, as by sticking a pin through a butterfly—thus at once depriving it of life” (*House* 4). Melodrama, Coverdale eventually realizes, does just that. By reducing an emotionally complex story to a single moral, melodrama effectively robs it of his sympathetic energies. Thus Coverdale ostensibly avoids that problem by either offering multiple interpretations of certain events, or, as more often is the case, simply avoiding passing any sort of judgment. For example, Coverdale begins the novel by alluding to the Veiled Lady performance. She even made a prediction about the future of Blithedale, but “[t]he response, by-the-by, was of the true sibylline stamp, nonsensical in its first aspect, yet, on closer study, unfolding a variety of interpretations, one of which has certainly accorded with the event” (6). Coverdale says that there are many interpretations of the Veiled Lady’s oracular reply to his question. And even though one of them ultimately came true, he does not reveal which interpretation that was. He leaves it up to the reader’s imagination.

Interestingly, despite his disavowal of melodrama’s reductive morality, Coverdale does offer a moral in his penultimate chapter. As he ties up all the narrative threads, Coverdale writes:

The moral which presents itself to my reflections . . . is simply this:—that, admitting what is called Philanthropy, when adopted as a profession, to be

often useful by its energetic impulse to society at large, it is perilous to the individual, whose ruling passion, in one exclusive channel, it thus becomes. It ruins, or is fearfully apt to ruin, the heart[.] (224)

At first it seems that Coverdale is breaking his own rule, that by offering a moral he is pinning the butterfly. And while the moral directly indicts Hollingsworth as the one with the ruined heart, the same indictment can be applied to Coverdale's reliance on melodrama. While reform melodrama was seen as being socially useful, Coverdale's retrospective narrative suggests that it ruins—or is “apt to ruin”—the heart. In other words, the moralizing he is currently engaging in does not have the intended effect. But juxtaposing this comment with his admission that “I exaggerate my own defects,” Coverdale is once again taking a play from Zenobia's book (227). Zenobia's theatricality pointed out the artificiality of her actions, just as Coverdale's overt moralizing here—moralizing about the wrongheadedness of moralizing—just reaffirms his stance that melodrama's reductive characteristics are a tragic flaw.

So while melodrama's components of overt moralizing obviates any need for audience interpretation, Coverdale is arguing that the audience needs to engage in the interpretive act in order to fully sympathize with the characters and events. For this reason he “merely wanders, as it seems, in search of clues from the outside, finding some and missing many others, leaving us to make things out, little by little, the best we can” (Colacurcio 4). But this is not a narrative failing on Coverdale's part. Instead, Coverdale's confounding and unreliable style is designed to only meet the audience halfway. Unlike melodrama, which serves up its own meaning, the Romance forces the audience to actively engage the text. Critics tend to view the final chapter as presenting

Coverdale at his most unreliable, and therefore Coverdale's profession that he was in love with Priscilla needs the most active engagement. Clearly he is in love with Zenobia, they claim, and interpret his confession as either a naïve acceptance of his own melodramatic worldview or, less maliciously, demonstrating a desire "to put the reader in his own accustomed position—adrift in the wake of mystery" (Millington 172). Millington, to cite an example of one critic who views Coverdale's confession as suspect, argues that Coverdale's final line, "I—I myself—was in love—with –PRISCILLA!" is discordant with all the preceding events (228).<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, that confession is preceded by Coverdale's declaration that "[t]he reader must not take my own word for it, nor believe me altogether changed" (227). While it seems as if Coverdale is saying that he has not gleaned any moral insights from the events twelve years ago, he is putting the burden of interpretation on the reader.

Coverdale even concedes that he is being intentionally vague or superlative at some points. During a discussion of Hollingsworth's character, and the flaws of philanthropists in general, Coverdale confesses, "I am perfectly aware that the above statement is exaggerated, in the attempt to make it adequate[.] . . . Let the reader abate whatever he deems fit" (66). It is the reader's responsibility, Coverdale states, to decide how and how much he is embellishing his descriptions. This forces the reader to evaluate not only the truth of Coverdale's statement that philanthropists like Hollingsworth "have no heart, no sympathy, no reason, no conscience," but judge Hollingsworth by those criteria (65). Thus the reader has to attempt to assess Hollingsworth by reading between

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<sup>67</sup> Not all critics share Millington's viewpoint. Kenneth Kupsch wants to test the validity of Coverdale's confession, rereading the text under the assumption Coverdale does love Priscilla. For example, Kupsch close reads Priscilla's coldness to Coverdale on his sick-bed, and decides that Coverdale is simply not revealing that he had previously propositioned her. The sick-bed scene reveals her frustration at having to reject him yet again (Kupsch 9)

the lines, sifting through what Coverdale only partially reveals. In this way, readers conceive of Hollingsworth somewhere between the picture of him as a melodramatic hero, saved from his flaws, or the admittedly exaggerated portrait of a soulless robot.

In this way, Romance becomes an exercise in “discovery,” furthering the idea that the genre itself is characterized by vigorous interaction between author and reader (Millington 43). This is in contrast to social melodrama, which imagines characters to be psychologically transparent. The simplicity of stock characters, especially when the play containing those characters is attempting to address some social ill, belies the “secret and individual histories” of actual people in the situations depicted (R. Levine 210).

While the term “melodramatic” is a baggy one in common parlance, Hawthorne is drawing strict distinctions between melodrama and the Romance as artistic genres, especially as they regard interactions between people. Social melodrama, with its adherence to mimetic realism and a morally unambiguous, thus reductive, universe does not come close in eliciting the requisite sympathy. Romance, however, evokes a more inclusive and effective sympathy; the scene Coverdale melodramatically conceptualizes as populated with purely heroic or utterly villainous characters is, rendered by the Romance itself, to be more morally ambiguous. By undercutting melodrama’s techniques, by replacing stock characters with morally ambivalent personages and reductive morals with an emphasis on personal interpretation, *Blithedale* teaches readers more about sympathy than melodrama ever could. Even the reform elements reverberate thematically with Coverdale’s mission. Coverdale does not disagree with social melodrama’s creed that sympathy, the power of the heart, is necessary for the reformation of the world. As he says to Priscilla, “Times change, and people change; and if our hearts



do not change as readily, so much the worse for us” (133). Yet it is the Romance and not melodrama, Coverdale eventually realizes, that demonstrates the ways in which art can help us change our hearts.

## CHAPTER V

## OF HEART AND HOME: LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S DEFENSE OF MELODRAMA

The years between 1860 and 1870 marked a gradual but inexorable transformation in the way the American public viewed theatrical entertainment. Audiences were less drawn to the jingoistic frontier melodramas of the first quarter of the century, and while melodrama by and large remained the most popular genre of the stage, dramas that dealt with social problems were not as popular as they had been in the 1840s and 1850s. As Lawrence Levine and Alan Ackerman have argued, the latter half of the nineteenth century saw the theater become less a venue for the common man—Ackerman argues that the Astor Place Riot of 1849 began this process—and by 1860 the theater was mostly a genteel form of entertainment. In fact, by this time middle-class Americans had begun to import staged theatrical entertainment into their private lives in interesting ways. This has particular impact in the middle-class social arena, and the 1860s saw a shift in American culture move towards a more self-consciously theatrical recognition of social interaction.

Karen Halttunen argues that the “sentimental typology of conduct” affirmed that “all aspects of manner and appearances were visible outward signs of inner moral qualities” (*Confidence Men* 40). In other words, sentimental culture was marked by an insistence on “sincerity,” which Halttunen defines as the opposite of hypocrisy. If a person was sincere, they did not merely tell the truth; their outer appearances and actions grew directly from inner virtue or character. Halttunen claims that, from 1830-1850, the American middle class by and large abided by this philosophy.<sup>68</sup> It quickly became

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<sup>68</sup> It is this sentimental typology that made con artists (and actors) so dangerous, according to Halttunen. Con artists were hypocrites; their outward appearances masked inner vice.

apparent, however, that appearances could be deceiving, and that the “sincere” form of social interaction that sentimental culture sought to instantiate was, in fact, highly artificial. So while sentimental culture initially critiqued “social formalism,” the ceremonial or performative aspects of middle class society, by the 1850s that critique had given way to “acceptance of the place of ritual” in social interaction (*Confidence Men* 167). Ultimately, the burgeoning reliance on “proper social form” as the clearest cultural indicator of gentility and sincerity led to the mid-century conclusion that the forms themselves were just as important, if not more so, as “heartfelt sympathy” (*Confidence Men* 188). Halttunen describes a culture that, I would argue, began to openly and freely utilize theatrical tropes as the foundation for polite social interaction. I contend that the parlor theatricals of the 1860s were a concretization of this cultural shift.

Parlor theatricals came into vogue largely because of this transition to a sentimental culture that was becoming increasingly immersed in theatrical tropes. By 1860, according to Halttunen, “American middle classes openly embraced theatricality for its own sake” (*Confidence Men* 174), and this reliance upon the shared understanding that all social interaction was inherently theatrical led middle-class Americans to literally turn their parlors into stages. In the late 1850s and into the next decade, amateur theatricals were the most fashionable form of middle-class amusement (Halttunen, *Confidence Men* 175). Theatrical guides such as Tony Denier’s *The Amateur’s Handbook and Guide to Home or Drawing Room Theatricals* (1866) and William Gill’s *Parlor Tableaux and Amateur Theatricals* (1871) rolled off the presses in order to feed the middle class’s appetite for this particular brand of popular entertainment.<sup>69</sup> These

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<sup>69</sup> The advertisements inside the front and back covers of S. A. Frost’s *Amateur Theatricals and Fairy-Tale Dramas*, printed in 1868, lists a number of similar guidebooks offered by the publisher. These include

guides explained, sometimes in intricate detail, how the reader could turn their parlor into an impromptu theater and gave instructions on acting and directing. The authors of theatrical manuals stressed the importance of a “natural” acting method, indicative of the move away from melodramatic style to a more thoughtful and “realistic” one.

Indeed, the cultural shift towards a more self-consciously theatrical culture coincided with a new breed of actor emerging on stage. As the stage was metaphorically brought into the private lives of American citizens via the understanding that social forms were performed rather than instinctive, American actors were engaging in an intimate and private mode of acting on stage. For example, Edwin Booth—whom a young Louisa May Alcott saw perform in 1855 and subsequently professed to be her favorite actor—was known for his portrayal of Hamlet, in which he “seemed unaware that there was an audience in the house” (Ackerman 22)<sup>70</sup>. This tonal shift in acting styles from bombastic action to quiet contemplation was also mirrored in the play-texts themselves. Instead of focusing on conflicts between characters, dramas began to concentrate on the “*internal complexity of character*” (Ackerman 11, original emphasis). Theater increasingly began, according to Ackerman, to focus on the private life of Americans. Where staged melodrama offered antebellum audiences a glimpse of an Edenic world that could be or ought to be, realist drama post-1870, exemplified, for example, by the drawing-room plays of William Dean Howells, generally contained plots that reflected the actual private relationships of many middle-class Americans at that time.

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many by Frost, such as *Parlor Theatricals; or, Winter Evenings' Entertainment, The Parlor Stage*, and *Frost's Book of Tableaux*. Floyd Wilson's *Book of Recitations and Dialogues* and Albert Spencer's *Book of Comic Speeches* are also offered. Tellingly, social guidebooks such as *How to Behave; or, The Spirit of Etiquette* are interspersed with the theatrical manuals.

<sup>70</sup> See *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals*. Ed. Ednah D. Chaney, pg 102. Alcott refers to Booth as “my ideal done at last.”

This is not to say that melodrama disappeared from the American theater. As Gary Richardson points out, some of the most memorable American melodramas, such as Daly's *Under the Gaslight*, were written in the 1870s. Melodrama maintained a kind of primacy on stage, says Richardson, but realism began developing in the 1860s as an alternative model (*American Drama* 153). It is also important to note that the realist drama described by Ackerman and Richardson is not a distinct genre as is American melodrama. Instead, realism was an artistic theory, and writers such as Howells argued that realism should influence all aspects of theatrical performance: acting, text, and staging. Furthermore, the move away from melodrama, a form that replaced "rationality" with "feeling" or empathy (Grimstead 20), mirrored middle-class society's displacement of emotion's primacy in social interaction.

Louisa May Alcott's *Behind a Mask; or, A Woman's Power* (1866) grapples with these cultural and theatrical transitions, working within emergent theatrical trends while attempting to reconstitute emotion's role in the literature of a culture that, Halttunen argues, privileges form over heartfelt sincerity. Jean Muir, the novella's protagonist, is an actress who utilizes theatrical techniques to entertain, dupe, and seduce varying members of the Coventry family, ultimately succeeding in marrying the elderly Sir John Coventry. Jean's actions "reflect dramaturgical assumptions of her day" (Ackerman 160), not only in her methods *as* an actress, but also in the belief that social interaction is inherently theatrical. So while Jean is seen by some critics to be a dangerous and subversive figure, she also exemplifies the cultural shift toward what Karen Halttunen might call social theatricalism. In fact, the novella portrays the Coventry family as members of an outmoded sentimental culture, perhaps deserving their fate, as they have not embraced

the transition away from sentimentalism. It is their sentimentality, the novella argues, that not only makes them easy marks for Jean's manipulations but also is the cause of their initial state of ennui and inertia. In fact, Jean's theatricalism actually has a positive influence on every member of the Coventry household.

Alcott portrays Jean's acting style as a product of a culture that saw dramatic productions move from an exaggerated style of acting to one of quiet realism; the narrator repeatedly comments on Jean's "natural" acting style. Yet overall, the novella resists the shift to artistic realism even as it promotes the budding trend of social theatricalism. Jean literalizes the vogue of parlor theatricals; she turns the private lives of the Coventrys into a private theater. Unlike *The Blithedale Romance*, which maligned melodrama as insufficient in generating sincere emotion, Alcott's novella privileges the theatrical elements of melodrama as necessary emotional components of social interaction. By defending Jean's more melodramatic aspects, Alcott is also defending her own status as a writer of sensational fiction. Sensational fiction works much the same way as melodrama; by exciting the emotional and physiological passions of her readers, Alcott is claiming that *Behind a Mask's* sensational qualities have beneficial properties akin to Jean's melodramatic abilities. In this way, the "woman's power" of the novella's subtitle resides in not acquiescence to the demands of realism, but in utilizing melodramatic/sensational elements in dangerous, subversive, but ultimately edifying ways.

#### Social Theatricalism: Parlor Theatricals and "Mr. John Smith"

In order to place *Behind a Mask* in its theatrical context, it is prudent to first understand the ways in which theater culture informed and complicated private life in Alcott's America. As Karen Halttunen describes in *Confidence Men and Painted Women*,

sentimental culture began to wane after 1850, replaced by a cultural philosophy that was founded upon the explicit agreement that social interaction was intrinsically theatrical. Outer appearance no longer was generally accepted to be a direct reflection of inner character. Yet, Halttunen stresses, this did not mean that the American middle class saw themselves as liars or insincere. Instead, parlor society became about trust; if everyone knows and acknowledges that the forms of social interactions are ritualized, and if everyone plays by these “rules,” then no one will be “hurt” by these communal deceptions (*Confidence Men* 188). Social conventions were even more highly theatricalized within the home. Parlor society, wherein middle-class Americans entertained one another with formal social gatherings in their parlors, openly acknowledged its theatricality, and used dramatic words like “ceremony” to indicate its self-conscious ritual. Additionally, middle-class Americans began to import theater into their private interactions, using theatrical tropes as the foundation for the interactions in social gatherings. Dramatists were taking note of Americans’ appropriation of theatrical trends, both by performing social roles in the home as well as literally putting on plays in their parlors. Subsequently, dramatists began writing plays that contained plots about the private lives of Americans. The issue of theatrical “privacy” opened the door not only for theater to metaphorically enter the home, but also for dramatists to take private scenes as subject matter. Plays began to be about the private lives of Americans, specifically focused on the ways in which those private lives were overtly theatrical. Consequently, many parlor theatricals became meta-dramas, social entertainment that recognized and satirized the artificiality of social interaction.

Parlor theatricals were a literalization of the widely-accepted metaphor that parlor interactions were inherently ritualized. One theater historian calls parlor theatricals a “literal intrusion of theatricality into middle-class domestic life,” and points out that their fashion initially began as Charades (Buckley 471). In the eighteenth century, genteel Americans engaged in the French game of Charades, which involved not pantomime but highly literate wordplay. This wordplay was eventually expanded to involve scenes of action, and by 1860 the game had metamorphosed into entertainments like farces, tableaux vivants, and one-act skits. In nearly all cases, the emphasis was placed on the continuity between the theatrical and the domestic. For example, William Gill privileges the creativity and ingenuity of the players; in the preface to *Parlor Tableaux and Amateur Theatricals*, he describes how costumes can be made from non-clothing material like sheets or baskets (Gill 11). Annie Frost writes that she had intended to write “dramas that will not draw too heavily upon the ingenuity of the aspirants,” so as to make it as easy as possible for players to design the costume and sets (Frost 3).<sup>71</sup> Both Gill and Frost assume that amateur players will have materials on hand that can easily be transformed into props or costumes. This fluidity of usage, the easy transformation from parlor to stage, underscores the message of many parlor theatricals: by and large, many polite interactions were founded upon social charades.

At first glance, it might seem that amateur performers viewed parlor theatricals as harmless entertainment. For example, William Gill calls such dramas “simple and elegant

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<sup>71</sup> While Frost contends that her plays only provide the skeleton of the drama and that it is up to the performers to flesh out the characters, her stage directions indicate that she assumed a certain level of sophistication and technical proficiency of her readers. For example, she provides details for costumes of characters such as Jane Shore and the Ghost in *Hamlet* that were to be as intricate as anything on stage. This level of detail belies Frost’s claim that this will not stress the creativity of her readers; she is assuming that they can assemble detailed costumes.



amusement,” indicating that, while they do stem from an awareness of theater’s influence on social interaction, the parlor theatricals themselves were nothing more than a fashionable and tasteful way to pass an evening’s time (5). Theater historian Peter Buckley argues that the amateur manuals’ detailed descriptions of dramaturgical and technical methods instead “show a self-conscious attention to the business of acting, in a sense making a parody of theatricality itself” (471).<sup>72</sup> In addition, some of these manuals coached performers in a melodramatic style of acting; one was to place their hand over their heart to signify love, or run one’s fingers through one’s hair to illustrate despair (Halttunen, *Confidence Men* 178-9). The melodramatic style, having mostly become unfashionable on stage with the rise of more nuanced actors such as Edwin Booth, was as a result deployed more as a dramatic caricature rather than a serious performance. Therefore, some theater historians argue that nineteenth-century players conceived of theatricals as a popular and fashionable, but ultimately trifling, amusement.

Yet an examination of nineteenth-century materials about parlor theatrical yields a different picture; the playwrights and amateur directors took these pageants seriously. For example, William Gill harps on the need for “taste” in putting together a proper tableau or theatrical performance (Gill 6). After all, he surmises, only the most genteel citizens can properly engage in this activity. He concludes his preface with an admission that while his manual ostensibly makes theatricals available to any audience, he emphasizes, “to *originate* and *produce* fine tableaux undoubtedly requires considerable taste, and some knowledge of art” (Gill 16, original emphasis). Furthermore, he stresses that

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<sup>72</sup> Guidebooks to parlor theatricals often included in-depth instructions on constructing a stage, the proper building and use of lighting, and examples of impromptu costumes. For example, William Gill instructs players to build an 8’ by 12’ stage, with advice on how to make it portable (i.e. built to be easily assembled and disassembled for easy movement and storage). Gill also suggests that the stage rotate as on a turntable, to create a theater-in-the-round space in which audiences can see all angles of the tableau.

performers should have “two or three rehearsals” for “perfect performance” (Gill 14). In this way Gill is emphasizing the importance of producing the most distinct effect possible, highlighting the focus on social ritual and ceremony. Similarly, Annie Frost believes that parlor theatricals should be used for the social education of children. It would not be “fair to exclude the little folks” from participating in parlor theatricals, she argues in the preface to *Amateur Theatricals and Fairy-Tale Dramas*, because those plays “open for them a field for acquiring ease and grace of manner” (Frost 4).<sup>73</sup> Theatricals, Frost implies, teach young men and women the methods of social interaction. For both Frost and Gill, theatricals serve as models and as rehearsals of actual societal communication and therefore serve a valuable cultural function.

The parlor stage, as Gill describes it, highlights the importance of middle class Americans’ understanding of social theatricalism at work. For example, the stage itself should be designed in pieces, making it easy to assemble and disassemble at a moment’s notice. It also means that the stage can be moved without much difficulty. He even suggests the stage (at least for tableaux) be built on a turntable, in which case the audience can actually surround the entire platform. The stage becomes the centerpiece of the parlor. But this does not mean that the stage is indistinguishable from the rest of the room. As Halttunen points out, nineteenth-century amateurs understood the strict delineation of “front space” and “back space” (*Confidence Men* 182). The “front space” was the stage itself, and that was devoted completely to theatrical effect. The front space epitomized the burgeoning idea that outer appearances could potentially belie inner character; on stage, only the surface appearance or effect was examined. The “back

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<sup>73</sup> I am reminded of the March sisters’ theatricals in *Little Women*. In that novel, Alcott makes it clear that the girls’ theatrics within the home were formative elements in their development as little women.

space,” or behind the curtain, was how appearance or effect was generated. Audiences understood that the *hows* of effect were supposed to be veiled. Only the final appearance was important, not the procedure for the construction of that appearance. For this reason, Gill underscores the importance of a well-defined curtain, one that separates preparation (back space) from effect (the stage) (Gill 10).

For this reason, actual social interaction is unlike theatricals; in public, there is a blurring between the metaphorical front and back spaces. During any theatrical performance, the audience understands that the players on the stage are embodying, to some degree, a character different from themselves. A parlor theatrical, by extension, contains the subtext, sometimes not all that subtextual, that parlor etiquette requires performance analogous to that seen on stage. But the curtain still exists in a parlor theatrical; the audience knows, from location and context, when the player is performing. Without the clearly-defined curtain, social performance becomes indistinguishable from theatrical character. Misunderstandings arise when people are not following the same social “script” or do not recognize that they have moved beyond the metaphorical stage curtain into social ceremony. The necessity of a clear delineation between the two in a world of social theatricalism is the theme of Sarah Annie Frost’s play, “Mr. John Smith” (1868).

“Mr. John Smith” is a two-act comedy designed to be, as Frost says in her introduction, a full evening’s entertainment. The play begins with the titular character arriving, from New York City, at the country house of Harry Morris after a long and disorienting trip through a blizzard. Smith thinks he has arrived at the home of his friend Dr. Harris, but instead has blundered into a house filled with amateur players preparing to

put on a midnight performance. The players have been eagerly awaiting the arrival of a professional actor, *also* named “John Smith of New York,” and the play’s comedy derives from this basic situation of mistaken identity. The intended performance is a pastiche of great Shakespearian and neo-Elizabethan scenes, so that Macbeth can be seen mingling with Rolla (from *Pizarro*), Jane (from *Jane Shore*), and the Ghost from *Hamlet*. The players are all in costume, and some do not break character as they interact with Smith—some even address each other by their characters’ names—and Smith becomes more flustered and frightened as the play proceeds. Prior to his trip, his friend Harris coyly admitted to being engaged in a new hobby, and Smith assumes, based on the other characters’ actions, that Harris’s new hobby is the rehabilitation of the clinically insane. By the end of the play, thinking that the inmates have overtaken the asylum, he nearly collapses from fear, believing that he is about to be murdered in some bizarre ritual. All is sorted out after the appearance of Mr. Morris, who, upon learning that Smith has never once attended the theater, believes that it is Smith who is clearly the more insane fellow there.

The play fully buys into the contracts of social theatricalism, acknowledging the intrinsic theatricality of social discourse. The play, both in content and in form (i.e., stage directions and notes), emphasizes and privileges “natural” acting, as opposed to Smith’s more melodramatic (and therefore comically unrealistic) reactions. When acting becomes completely “natural,” it becomes most difficult to distinguish between what is real and what is performance. The comic misunderstandings in the play arise from the central conceit that when one is in unfamiliar company, one is unsure when others are performing roles and when they are “being themselves.” Thus the play stresses the

importance of understanding spatial delineations—recognizing front and back spaces, for example—and the importance of recognizing and responding appropriately to theatrical social conventions. If you do not understand the intrinsic theatricality of social forms, the play argues, you will either think you are going insane or you will be perceived as such.

The play begins with the “implication that the private sphere is irremediably theatricalized” (Ackerman 161). When Smith first enters Morris’s home, he is flabbergasted that there is no one to greet him or announce his presence. “When a gentleman walks without ceremony into a stranger’s house,” Smith muses to himself, “it is well to prevent unpleasant suspicious with regard to spoons or watches” (Frost 9). He is attempting to make himself as innocent as possible, avoiding the appearance of being nosy or larcenous. Yet it is important that he uses the phrase “without ceremony,” the implication being that he is aware, at least on some level, of the ritualized observances of polite society. The “ceremony” serves the function of announcing his presence, but if it were truly his good friend’s home, then the ritual is an empty one; Dr. Harris would assume that Smith, being a friend, would not use his time unobserved to steal silver or jewelry. A few seconds later, Ellen (dressed as Jane Shore) enters the room and tells Smith “not [to] stand upon ceremony” (Frost 10). Thus the play immediately implies, via both Smith and Ellen, that social “ceremony” exists only to serve a particular function and can be easily eliminated if the “rules” of that interaction (in this case, the introduction of a stranger to a new community) do not apply. The problem, Frost is arguing, is that these allegedly meaningless theatricalized moments are ignored at one’s peril.

The play further admits that certain types of social behavior are inherently theatrical and therefore insincere. As Smith and Ellen initially talk, Mr. Johnson (dressed

as Jane Shore's husband), enters the foyer. Staying in character, Johnson accuses "Jane" of infidelity and she reacts (in character) by fainting. When Smith does not catch her, Ellen quips, "If there is *nobody* to support my fainting form, I suppose I might as well revive" (Frost 11). The swoon itself was bogus, and Ellen acknowledges that, as a social form, the swoon is highly theatrical and therefore insincere. Smith, on the other hand, does not even seem to recognize this fact. He accepts her swoon as real, but is too astonished and afraid of Johnson's accusation that he does not catch her. Smith does not fulfill his end of the social contract; he does not "play the role" of adulterer to Ellen's Jane. This in turn forces her to admit that both the accusation and the subsequent fainting spell were both theatricalized social forms.

The play distinguishes "natural" behavior as a mode of acting from the overly melodramatic manners of Smith. For Frost, "natural" connotes both a realistic acting style as well as an unselfconscious (or non-theatrical) type of behavior. For example, the stage directions indicate "speaking naturally" when the characters are speaking as themselves and not in their Shakespearian roles (Frost 13). In this sense, "natural" means that the characters are not attending to the performance of social roles. The play also uses the word to signify a realistic mode of acting. After Smith stumbles upon the stage, he hears the female players practicing their screaming. Smith even hears Cora complain that Ellen pinches her in order to elicit a realistic shriek. Later on, Susy complains to Smith that a fellow performer is an unnatural or bad actor. In addition to complaining of Will's "horrid" face, which Susy does not deem at all realistic, she grumbles, "if he can't give a good, vigorous death-blow, he spoils the whole effect" of Gloucester's violence in *Henry VI, Part 3* (Frost 20, 19). Susy is preoccupied with having as realistic an effect as

possible, in acting and in set dressing. Playing the part of Ophelia, Susy muses, “I wonder now if anybody will discover that all my flowers are *real* . . . I’ve half a mind to upset the basket amongst the people as I go out” (Frost 19). For her, the fact that they are using real flowers in the scene is just as important as making Ophelia’s suicide as realistic as possible. For the players, mimetic representation is paramount, in both theatrical acting and in social intercourse.

John Smith is offered in counterpoint to the theatrical realism of the other characters’ acting. Contrary to their slavishness to “natural” behavior, two of Smith’s first words in the play are “Nature! Humbug!” (Frost 8). From the very beginning, then, Smith is the exemplar of all *unnatural* social behavior. In the play’s theatrical context, the unnatural is equated with the melodramatic. Smith’s overly melodramatic responses to the appearance of the Ghost seem more at home in an 18<sup>th</sup>-century gothic novel than a 19<sup>th</sup>-century parlor.<sup>74</sup> When Smith enters the stage and discovers the bloody axe, the skull, and the coffin, he moans “I never heard of such horrors . . . what kind of place have I got into, where empty coffins lie round promiscuously! Oh, how the chills creep over me!” (Frost 17). Smith’s fear seems comical not only because the audience understands Smith’s misapprehension of the situation, but also by the basic fact that his reaction is so stylized or exaggerated.<sup>75</sup> Smith further exemplifies the melodramatic audience when Mr. Jones sings a song from the frontier melodrama *Ingomar the Barbarian*. Smith is so moved by the unabashed patriotism that he sings along with the chorus: “three cheers for

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<sup>74</sup> I admit to using the colloquial version of “melodrama” here, rather than the historically specific term from previous chapters. Here, I am using “melodramatic” as a generalized anti-realistic term, for Smith’s melodramatic behavior does have more in common with the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century gothic plays than even the mid-century melodramas like Aiken’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

<sup>75</sup> Not until the end of the play does Frost make it explicit that Smith has stumbled across a parlor theatrical. Instead, she assumes that the use of context clues like the stage props or the characters’ use of actual Shakespearian dialogue would be enough for a theatrically literate audience.

the red, white, and blue!” before asking himself “what am I doing?” (Frost 21). Smith seems to have a temporary monopathic response to the song; he is moved emotionally to sing along. In fact, nearly every reaction Smith has is rooted in his (illogical) fear, making him melodramatic in spirit.

For all its comedy, the play also hints at very real dangers. Smith’s physical life is not in peril, but his social life is. The problem for Smith, the play indicates, is that his theatrical innocence causes him to completely misread his situation. With interpersonal relations being so highly theatrical, the social rituals themselves become so “natural” that they can become indistinguishable from “natural” behavior. In other words, without recognizing the cultural markers indicating social ceremony, one can never be truly sure where the self (“true person”) ended and the character of social performance began. This is demonstrated by the casual way characters like Ellen and Susy integrate their own words with lines from their respective plays. Furthermore, Johnson calls for his partner both by Ellen and her character’s name, Jane. This “Ellen! Jane!” juxtaposition effectively blurs the line between self and character (Frost 11). Jones admits as much to Smith: “Of course, the whole house is upside down, so you must excuse any want of ceremony” (Frost 29). All social niceties have been suspended because the household is putting on the performance, Jones admits, but the subtext here is that by being “upside down,” all the social rules have been deferred.

Mr. John Smith, melodramatic as he is, does not recognize the highly theatrical nature of the house, which ultimately dooms him to becoming the butt of every joke. For an audience schooled in dramaturgical techniques, Smith’s behavior is absurd: he believes the Ghost is real, not recognizing the famous Shakespearian lines the Ghost



intones; when Kate rehearses her lines from *Rienzi*, Smith does not seem to understand her words, much less realize that she is reading lines even after she admonishes him for interrupting her soliloquy;<sup>76</sup> he does not recognize the props as such, not realizing the daggers are collapsible and mistaking a violin's shriek for that of a cat. All in all, his near idiotic reactions to what is, to the audience, characters rehearsing a play, cause Mary to say in exasperation, "You never saw such a guy as John has made of himself! He looks perfectly *insane*" (Frost 30). Smith clearly seems like the crazy one, and when he admits, "I was never in a theatre, sir, in my life, and know nothing about it!" Mr. Morris replies, "That's odd—now-a-days" (Frost 37). By not recognizing the theatrical nature of the community, Smith is opening himself up to scorn, mockery and pity. Smith's life, of course, is never in actual danger. But the play implies that one's social reputation can certainly be injured through similar misapprehensions.

#### Jean Muir the Actress: *Behind a Mask's* Anti-Sentimental Stance

In *Behind a Mask*, Louisa May Alcott inverts the central premise of "Mr. John Smith" in order to illustrate the dangers a household faces when it does not change with the increasingly self-consciously theatrical times. In the play, the clueless Smith blunders into a highly theatrical domestic community, and as a result becomes comically discombobulated. In Alcott's novella, the protagonist, the highly theatrical Jean Muir, enters, and consequently disrupts, the decidedly untheatrical home of the Coventry family. *Behind a Mask*, like most of Alcott's thrillers, was published pseudonymously. In this case, Alcott used the name A. M. Barnard. Alcott criticizes Louise Rostenberg and

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<sup>76</sup> Mary Russell Mitford wrote *Rienzi: A Tragedy* in 1828. While Frost does identify Kate's role as "Claudia in *Rienzi*" in the *dramatis personae*, it is only through Kate's rehearsal is Mitford's version of *Rienzi* is identified (rather than, for example, Wagner's opera of the same name). Presumably Frost's audiences would have been familiar enough with Mitford's drama that they would have recognized Kate's portrayal of Claudia.

Madeleine Stern uncovered and identified these periodical thrillers, reprinted in 1975. Scholarly criticism of *Behind a Mask* marks it as a generic counterpoint to *Little Women* (1868) and underscores the novella's critique of the theatrical nature of women's roles, particularly those of sentimental culture. Judith Fetterley, for example, focuses on the sensation stories as Alcott's answer to her family's financial problems, and links Jean Muir's theatricality with Alcott's own penchant for drama. Teresa Goddu expands on Fetterley's critical model, arguing that Alcott veiled her sensation or gothic fiction in the guise of domestic or sentimental drama in order to more easily navigate the literary marketplace. Other critics home in on the novella's themes of theatricality, making arguments that Jean Muir as a character and Alcott as a writer undermine the "sentimental notions of feminine authenticity" (Schewe 578).<sup>77</sup> While influential in their arguments about performativity's crucial purpose in the gothic tales and *Little Women*, as well as in Alcott's conception of her own role in the literary marketplace, generally these critics do not address the historical context of the 1860s as it corresponds to theatrical trends. It may be constructive to place *Behind a Mask* as a literary indicator of the shift towards a historical moment that privileged theatricality in social interaction. To this end, I read Jean neither as a gothic villain, though she is certainly dangerous and disruptive, nor, as Charles Strickland asserts, as a sentimental victim (24), but rather as prototype for a culture that was becoming increasingly attentive to the theatrical elements of social discourse.

*Behind a Mask; or, A Woman's Power* tells the story of how 30-year-old former actress Jean Muir uses theatrical techniques to charm and seduce the members of the Coventry household. Playing the role of a much younger governess, Jean infiltrates the

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<sup>77</sup> See Mary Elliot, "Outperforming Femininity" and Melanie Dawson, "A Woman's Power."

Coventrys by partially fabricating a back-story involving their friends, the Sydneys. When she is not teaching the Coventry daughter, Bella, Jean bewitches younger son Edward, thaws the cynicism and seduces eldest son Gerald (in the process thwarting the plans of Gerald's fiancé, Lucia), and eventually wins the heart of and marries Sir John, Coventry patriarch and Gerald and Edward's uncle. In the process, she reveals her skills at acting, languages, music, forgery, and nursing—all skills she squarely puts to use for seduction in one form or another. Despite their seeming deceptiveness, Jean's actions have positive consequences for the family members: Gerald is moved to secure Edward a commission, Edward emotionally matures to the point where he can see through Jean's manipulations, Gerald and Lucia shake off their ennui in rediscovering passion. Edward eventually discovers Jean's purpose; he learns the truth about Jean's previous attempt at marrying family friend Sydney and the fallout of that attempt. Yet Jean is ultimately successful, marrying Sir John and, therefore, into a title.

While it may be easy to pigeonhole Jean as some sort of devilish villainess—she is often called a “Scotch witch” by the Coventry boys—I think that the novella's stance is more problematic than that.<sup>78</sup> It is important to remember that Alcott is writing during a period when sentimental culture is giving way to a culture that embraces the understanding that sentimental culture itself is highly ritualistic.<sup>79</sup> The Coventry family

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<sup>78</sup> Alcott, Louisa May. *Behind a Mask; or, a Woman's Power. Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott*. Ed. Madeleine Stern. New York: Morrow and Co, 1975. 3-104. Pg. 28. Subsequent citations are parenthetical.

<sup>79</sup> This transition from “sentimental culture” to one of “social theatricalism” is the focus of Halttunen's study. She argues that Americans began to recognize that their cult of sentimentality was performative—one could perform sentimentality—and therefore the emphasis was placed on *seeming* sincere. This is not to say that she argues there was a sharp delineation between the two philosophies, though my reduction of her terms makes it seem that is the case. I am less concerned with Halttunen's arguments concerning sincerity vs. “seeming sincere” than I am with her arguments concerning the theatrical. Therefore I am using Halttunen's terms to construct a dialectic that she herself does not, a dialectic that places Jean as part

represents an outmoded and naïve sentimental culture. Therefore, Jean's actions fit within a larger framework of theatricality in social situations, public and private. In fact, as Frost's "Mr. John Smith" illustrates, the domestic space has become hopelessly theatricalized. In *Behind a Mask*, Jean brings that theater into the private space; "the family shrine becomes the private stage," contends Elizabeth Keyser, and the Coventrys unwittingly become her "supporting cast" (51). The move away from sentimental culture begins with Jean's arrival, whether the Coventrys realize it or not.

The novella opens with a moment that Alcott frames as socially theatrical: a servant's announcement of Jean's arrival at the Coventry house. The "introduction of a stranger to the home," argues Elizabeth Schewe, "is made up of common theatrical elements, such as the announcement of the name and the bow" (582). Jean further milks the theatricality of the moment, pausing in the doorway in order to make the introductory scene more like a tableau vivant. The narrator describes the scene: "[A] little black-robed figure stood in the doorway. For an instant no one stirred, and the governess had time to see and be seen before a word was uttered" (5). The novella's final tableau mirrors Jean's introduction: "Pausing an instant on the threshold before she vanished from their sight, she looked backward" (104). Jean's dramatic exit as Lady Coventry at the end of the novella is, thus, eerily reminiscent of her arrival. In fact, both scenes highlight the two-way street of social intercourse. What the Coventrys do not realize is that Jean is always looking back at them; she pauses during her arrival "to see" and her final penetrating gaze is thrown over her shoulder. While she draws their gazes with her performance, she

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of a generation that understands theater's role in social intercourse and the Coventrys as naïve to theater's social influence.

is simultaneously observing them. That observation allows her to fluidly and effectively adapt her performance.

As Annie Frost demonstrates in “Mr. John Smith,” a person’s character in a culture of social theatricalism is fluid. Alcott herself recognizes this, and throughout *Behind a Mask* it becomes difficult to ascertain Jean’s true self (Fite 173). Certainly it initially seems as if Jean abides by the separation of front space and back space. For example, upon settling into her private room at the end of the novella’s first chapter, Jean takes off the “costume” of the governess and “her mobile features settled into their natural expression, weary, hard, bitter” (12). Mary Elliot takes this as proof that Alcott clearly separates Jean’s character from her role:

Neither Alcott nor Muir confuses nor [*sic*] conflates performance with the authentic . . . first, she removes the mask only when she is safe and alone—that is, when she is most herself; second, she recognizes the demarcation between her own identity and that which the ‘mask’ confers; third, she demonstrates her own ‘authentic’ subjectivity by choosing to remove the mask whenever possible. (301)

Elliot points to the “unmasking” scene at the end of Chapter 1, in which Jean’s true identity is revealed to the reader. The “hard, bitter” woman appears to be her “true self,” and Elliot takes this as a clear delineation between “Jean the actress/seducer” and Jean’s role as governess.

Yet at the moment of her unmasking, Jean soliloquizes, “I may be myself for a few hours, if actresses ever are themselves” (11). That final caveat—“if actresses ever are themselves”—points to the fluidity of Jean’s identity. Like the players in “Mr. John

Smith” who move smoothly between themselves and their Shakespearian counterparts, Jean’s role of seducer and governess becomes so blurred that it becomes impossible judge the extent of her sincerity. Jean admits to herself that even she does not know when she can “be herself.” Indeed, it seems that she is *always* in character. Both Gerald and Sir John eavesdrop on Jean multiple times—when she is with Bella and when she is alone—and in every case they overhear what she wants them to hear. Bella even admits to hearing Jean crying in her room at night. Are we to believe, as Elliot does, that Jean removes her mask “whenever possible,” and only replaces it when she knows someone is spying? I believe it is more likely that Jean attempts to embody the role of governess. She never breaks character, maintaining the illusion in case the moment arises when someone does eavesdrop. This is certainly a testament to Jean’s mercenary tenacity, but it also speaks to the emergent theatrical culture of the period. Jean’s constant performance is paradigmatic of the larger philosophy that, even in the most private of spaces, social interaction is always performative.

The Coventry family falls victim to Jean’s theatricality because they are representative of an outdated sentimental culture. Typical of that culture, pity becomes the predominant emotion the Coventrys exhibit in response to Jean’s manipulations. When Jean first appears, “everyone looked at her . . . and all felt a touch of pity at the sight of the pale-faced girl in her plain black clothes” (5). Here, Jean mirrors pity-inducing sentimental heroines like *The Wide Wide World’s* (1850) Ellen Montgomery and *The Lamplighter’s* (1854) Gertrude Flint. Jean evokes as much pity as possible in the initial introduction; her mournful piano melody and her plaintive voice bring tears to Mrs. Coventry’s eyes and touches the hearts of those present (7). Similarly, Jean’s attempts at

winning Gerald's heart hinge on her "tragical expression" which "haunt[s]" him for days (29). Pity, in fact, becomes the hallmark emotion for her initial interactions with all her victims.

The pity Jean evokes is effective in moving the Coventrys precisely because, while the pity they feel is genuine, her methods to elicit that pity are not. Sentimental culture, like nineteenth-century melodrama, depends upon sincerity of emotion to move and motivate audiences. Yet Alcott is writing at a moment when middle-class Americans understood that such displays were not necessarily motivated by genuine feeling. Jean relies on "extreme emotive and physical displays," not because she is inherently a bad actress, but because the Coventrys are so bad at "reading" theatrical cues that they, like Mr. John Smith, miss the subtleties of social theatricalism (Dawson 22). She therefore must emotionally overact, or oversell her emotional state, in order to seduce the young men. This results in an exaggerated or stylized, rather than realistic, acting style. Unfortunately, a lifetime of sentimentality has not prepared Gerald for such emotional output. For example, when Gerald intrudes on Jean's crying jag the night of the tableaux vivant (she has previously insinuated that she is an aristocrat's daughter who has fallen on hard times, a stereotypically sentimental plot), he does not know how to comfort her. Her tears stymie him; "[h]e had no experience in such scenes and knew not how to play his part" (58). Whenever he is faced with overwhelming emotion, be it sadness or lust, Gerald seems frozen. Jean's emotions seem sincere to him, and since sentimental culture does not afford any defense against such emotional manipulation, he becomes vulnerable to his own passions. Even the narrator's theatrical terms—Gerald does not know how to

“play the part” in Jean’s “scenes”—underscore the fact that Gerald is out of his element theatrically and emotionally.

Not only are the Coventrys emotionally unprepared for Jean’s manipulations, they also seem emotionally distressed themselves. A pall of spiritual illness hangs over the whole family. Bella and Gerald are bored; he suffers from an emotional malaise that leaves him restless, and Bella complains that life is “so dull” (4). We also realize that “[p]oor, peevish Mrs. Coventry” is also discontented as she settles “into an easy chair with a nervous sigh and the air of a martyr” (3). Lucia seems stuck in an emotional stasis, waiting for Gerald to consummate their engagement but unwilling to display the passion that might catalyze that consummation. The entire household seems perched on the verge of some major change, a change that Jean ultimately brings about through her theatricality and passion. “Because their wealth gives them no purpose,” argues Christine Butterworth-McDermott, “the Coventry men seem to hunger for something outside themselves” (36). In other words, the very passions that Gerald (and, to a lesser extent, Edward) have been repressing are what cause the pall of discontent. If it is true that Alcott is writing for an audience who believes that “heart-to-heart intimacy . . . [has] no place in a courtesy code signed for smooth social intercourse” (Halttunen, *Confidence* 167), then Jean must find a way, through theater, to forge that intimacy. True, this intimacy is, on one hand, insincere. After all, she is manufacturing situations to evoke passion in Gerald. On the other hand, the *effect* is real, and in a theatrical culture the effect is paramount. Therefore, Jean’s insincere or faked emotion has very real (and positive) consequences.



Jean's influence on the family is undeniable. The narrator remarks, "The arrival of Miss Muir seemed to produce a change in everyone," and then expands on how Jean systematically makes their lives better even as she schemes to marry into that family (25). She serves as Mrs. Coventry's nurse, acts as confidante and tutor to Bella, spurs Gerald to get Edward a commission, and uncovers Gerald and Lucia's passion. Even Lucia admits, "We are all changed, and this girl has done it" (87). Despite this, some critics see Jean as wholly mercenary. Karen Halttunen, for example, denies Jean any positive motivations. While Halttunen admits that some good does come out of Jean's theater, she argues that everything Jean does is "to serve her own calculated self-interest" and calls her a "monstrous perversion" of the sentimental woman ("Drama" 241). However, I side with Judith Fetterley, who maintains that Jean is not so vile, and states, "[T]hough *she* may be an imposter, her services are genuine" ("Impersonating" 12). For when Lucia says that Jean has brought "sorrow and dissension into this hitherto happy family," she forgets that no one seemed happy before Jean's arrival (87).

#### Sensationalism, Eroticism, Melodrama

While the changes that Jean effects seem intangible, especially Gerald's newfound passion, the narrator describes the catalyzing of those effects in explicitly physical terms. In other words, Alcott's sensation fiction is occupied with the effects of sensation itself. Furthermore, *Behind a Mask* engages the contemporary discussion around acting trends by allowing Jean to exhibit the "natural" style of acting that was becoming more fashionable at the time. The emerging realistic style of acting dovetailed with the move to more "readerly" and intimate theatrical performance, yet Jean eschews that style in favor of a theatricalism that highlights the power of her body. "In general,

theorists of dramatic realism discuss the body remarkably little,” argues Alan Ackerman, “a significant departure from the previous generation” (24). Alcott emphasizes Jean’s body in order to highlight the sensations, both physical and emotional, that she elicits in the Coventrys. Those sensations in turn inform emotion, the critical component of melodrama. The new culture, becoming increasingly preoccupied with the ritualism of social norms, subordinated emotion to stylized ritual. Ultimately, then, by providing a defense of sensationalism via Jean’s theatricality, Alcott is able to demonstrate melodrama’s, and emotion’s, potential roles in the “social theatrical” model.

Initially, the physiological effects that Jean’s actions elicit are akin to a diffuse, emotional pleasure, as in when she flatters Sir John during their first meeting. Jean plays coy with her remarks and the narrator admits, “Sir John was not a vain man, but he found it pleasant to hear himself commended by this unknown girl” (14). Jean is able to provide this low-grade, generalized “pleasure” to most of the Coventrys, especially through humor and flattery. Her body, too, can enchant without being explicitly erotic or sexualized.<sup>80</sup> One such occasion occurs when Jean is able to calm Edward’s wild horse. Edward focuses on Jean’s physical presence: her “idle” singing, the “high-spirited horse” lowering its head to the “slender figure in the grass” (15-6). And while Edward is certainly filled with “admiration,” he is also physically moved; he hurdles the wall and joined her in “wonder” (16). The “pleasure” and “wonder” Jean instills is a kind of low-grade *thauma* in the same vein of Ahab’s charisma. Jean’s use of this power is the first step in the seduction process, and Alcott makes it clear that these preliminaries are

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<sup>80</sup> This is not to say that Jean does not use her body in an erotic manner. As I will argue below, her keen awareness of the sensual nature of theater allows her to provoke strong physical sensations in Gerald. My point here is that she also uses her body in a non-erotic way that still allows for a certain level of bewitchery.

sensational rather than logical. Jean is not trying to win over the family through rational or psychological arguments concerning her value or trustworthiness. Instead, the seduction is most pointedly rooted in sensation.

While Jean's voice has a special power to persuade and enchant, she effectively uses her body for the more pointed physical responses. The sensations that Jean conjures directly counter Gerald's lethargy and directly promote the constructive changes in the character of the Coventrys. For example, just before the brothers' fight, Jean chastises Gerald. She responds to Gerald's complaints that his younger brother's lack of purpose has led him to fall madly in love with her:

A momentary glisten shone in Jean Muir's steel-blue eyes . . . her voice was full of reproach, as she said, steadily, impulsively, "If the 'romantic boy' had been allowed to lead the life of a man, as he longed to do, he would have had no time to lose his heart to the first sorrowful girl whom he pitied. Mr. Coventry, the fault is yours." (30-1)

Jean uses all her dramatic faculties as she reprimands Gerald; her eyes flash, her voice is strong, and her words are pointed. Gerald bears the full brunt of this rhetorical assault, but instead of reacting to it rationally or emotionally, he reacts *physically*. The narrator claims, "[S]eldom in his life had he been blamed. It was a new *experience*, and the very novelty added to the *effect*" (31, emphasis mine). Alcott focuses on the physiological consequences of bodily sensations. Here, Jean's voice and body, perhaps more than her argument, induce shame and titillation in Gerald. These two emotions directly motivate him to secure Edward's commission. In this way, Alcott is demonstrating the positive power of physical sensation. Essentially, Alcott is defending sensationalism in a culture

that was moving away from the physical and emotional focus of melodrama and sensationalism towards a more psychologically-based private theater.

The clearest example of Alcott's defense of sensationalism appears in Jean's erotic seduction of Gerald. After Edward leaves the house, Jean more fully utilizes her body's erotic power to stoke Gerald's physical passion. But the results are not wholly sexual; the erotic sensations create emotions in Gerald, effectively changing his character. Two scenes in particular, Jean's nursing of Gerald after the fight with Edward and Gerald's participation in the tableaux vivant, illustrate the transformative power of Jean's eroticism. In the fight scene, Edward stabs his brother in a fit of passion. In the immediate aftermath, Jean staunches the blood and installs a life-saving tourniquet. Jean then sings to him, massages his head and arms, and attempts to soothe him. She takes his hand and "soon a subtle warmth seemed to steal from the soft palms that enclosed his own, his heart beat quicker, his breath grew unequal, and a thousand fancies danced through his brain . . . [and he] seemed to sink into a soft cloud which encompassed him about with an atmosphere of perfect repose" (40). The proximity of Jean's body to his excites Gerald, his rapid heartbeat and ragged breath indicative of sexual arousal. In some ways this is a reversal of the sentimental model, since it is "a passive male complying with the physical gestures of an active, dominating female" (Gaul 842). Yet Gerald's ultimate reaction is not stimulation but relaxation; as Jean massages his hand, Gerald falls asleep. This seems antithetical to the sexual arousal she appears to elicit, but it reinforces Alcott's argument that actions regulate character rather than, as the sentimental model would have it, the other way around. The sensations evoked by Jean's playing the part of nursemaid (and Gerald playing the part of convalescent) shape inner character. Gerald

eventually plays the role of the suitor, for example, because of the emotions Jean's body elicits in him.

This inversion of the sentimental model is even clearer when the family engages in an evening of tableaux vivant. In one tableau, Gerald and Jean represent "two lovers, the young cavalier kneeling, with his arm around the waist of the girl, who tries to hide him with her little mantle," and his head resting on her bosom (52). The scene is sexually charged, and once again the proximity of her body arouses him. Yet Gerald thinks there is something different about Jean:

Coventry experienced another new sensation. Many women had smiled on him, but he had remained heart-whole, cool, and careless, quite unconscious of the power which a woman possesses and knows how to use, for the weal or woe of man. Now, as he knelt there with a soft arm about him, a slender waist yielding to his touch, and a maiden heart throbbing against his cheek, for the first time in his life he felt the indescribable spell of womanhood, and looked the ardent lover to perfection. (53)

Lucia, for example, does not incite this kind of passion in him, but Lucia lacks Jean's theatrical ability. The narrator again underscores the "sensation" that Gerald experiences, one that he thinks of as a "spell." But for the audience witnessing the tableau, he "looked the ardent lover" because he has been transformed by the sensation into the lover. The tableau is so well-received that the audience demands a sequel—Jean dying in Gerald's arms, surrounded by Puritan guards—that further instantiates "strange delight" in him (53). By this time it is obvious (to the reader and to Lucia) that Gerald has fallen in love

with Jean, but Alcott's point is that those feelings only exist because she has forced him to enact the role of doomed lover. It is external behavior, Alcott implies, that drives emotion and character.<sup>81</sup> This idea allows Alcott to reprioritize sincere emotion within social theatricalism's framework, a paradigm that typically renders such emotion subordinate to ritual. Emotional sincerity *can* be known in this new culture, Alcott argues. It comes from the roles one plays.

*Behind a Mask*, then, participates in the mid-century transition to a middle class culture founded on self-conscious theatricality. By demonstrating that Jean's theatrical nature engenders positive changes in the Coventry family, Alcott's novella is emblematic of a culture that has begun to value an understanding of society as inherently theatrical. While this culture openly admits the danger of believing emotional displays are always inherently sincere, to the extent that polite form becomes more important than actual politeness in social situations, *Behind a Mask* attempts to recoup the sincerity of emotion and the potential benefits of melodrama. Melodrama, then novella contends, becomes the vehicle for genuine emotion. Gerald unwittingly recognizes that almost immediately. Jean's arch look, the "gesture like [famous nineteenth-century French actress] Rachel," brings an uncharacteristic "look of interest [to] his usually dreamy eyes" and causes him to exclaim, "What a melodramatic young lady!" (7-8). That initial meeting serves to prefigure the novella's trajectory: using melodrama, Jean is able to effect an emotional change in Gerald, which in turn informs his behavior.

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<sup>81</sup> Both Karen Halttunen and Elizabeth Schewe discuss the ways in which *Behind a Mask* is influenced by the beliefs of Alcott's father, Bronson. Halttunen, for example, argues that the sensationalism in *Behind a Mask* is Louisa's response to Bronson's pedagogy that a child's learning physical self-restraint will result a similar self-restraint of character. See "Alcott's Domestic Drama," pg 237.

The sensations that Jean evokes, like the eroticism of the Cavalier tableau, result in changes to Gerald's very identity. Because of those experiences, he admits he is a changed man. Influence was the most common term, according to Halttunen, used to describe the impact one person has on another's character. Influence was often described using terms such as "electricity" or "sensation" (*Confidence* 4), and it seems that Alcott is using similar connotations to describe the effect's of Jean's acting. For example, when Jean acts "angry, hurt, and haughty" towards Gerald, "the change only made her more attractive, for not a trace of her former meek self remained. [He] was electrified" (45). Her acting "electrifies" him, one of many such moments that "influence" his emotional state. Yet for nineteenth-century audiences, terms like electricity and sensation, when used in conjunction with "influence," seem to work just as empathy works in melodrama. For example, nineteenth-century advice writer David Magie defines "influence" in terms of melodramatic empathy: "The link is mysterious which binds human beings together, so that the heart of one answers to the heart of another" (qtd. in Halttunen, *Confidence* 4). Thus sensation and melodrama are linked, and Alcott exploits this connection in order to demonstrate how emotional sincerity can flourish in a culture wherein proscribed social forms dominate. In *Behind a Mask*, sensationalism and melodrama become "legitimate outlet[s] for passionate self-expression" in the emergent culture of social theatricalism (Halttunen "Drama" 238).

#### Jean Muir as Storyteller: Alcott's Defense of Sensational Fiction

In defending melodrama as a vital part of this new theatrical culture, Alcott is also simultaneously defending the genre of sensational fiction. After all, the new culture denigrated sensational fiction along with sentimental culture for its vulgar emphasis on

sensation and reliance on emotional titillation.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, Jean's theatricality relies almost as much on her storytelling ability as it does her body and acting ability. In a way, her body becomes "a kind of metafictional allegory" in which her "masked" nature anticipates the "sensational fictions that were infiltrating, disturbing, and titillating households of all stripes in 1860s America" (Hackerberg 437). The theatrical manner in which Jean entertains and manipulates the Coventrys has an electrical and titillating effect similar to that experienced by Alcott's readers. Indeed, the novella's narrator uses many of the same narrative techniques as Jean does when she is seducing or winning over the Coventrys, most often delays or gaps in the narrative designed to heighten suspense and desire for more. In this way, *Behind a Mask* is constructed in such a way as to allow readers to experience sensations similar to the characters in the novella.

Jean's status as representative sensational fiction wrier is evident in the plots of the elaborate back-stories she crafts. Whenever she deigns to reveal information concerning her past, the story of that memory is often culled from sentimental types, a genre that the Coventrys would find familiar and to which they would therefore respond with the requisite pity. One such back-story is the partially fabricated story of Lady Grace Howard. Jean does reveal, in a letter to her friend Hortense, that Lady Howard was her father's second wife. To the Coventrys, however, Jean implies that Lady Howard is her mother. Dropping tidbits of the story to Sir John, she frames the story in sentimental terms, which John repeats to Gerald later: "Her mother was Lady Grace Howard, who ran away with a poor Scotch minister twenty years ago. The family cast her off, and she lived and died so obscurely" (47). Jean has seeded the biography of Lady Howard with

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<sup>82</sup> Sara Hackerberg describes sensational fiction as a "fictional mode largely seen as working-class and predominantly disparaged by critics of the time" (438).



sentimental elements, which efficiently evoke pity in both men. She takes a similar tack when she talks to Gerald about her history with Sydney. Again, she takes the already melodramatic truth—Sydney learns of her true identity and purpose and refuses to marry her, so she stabs herself in a fit of anger in order to shame the family into silence—and adds the final emotional touches. She rewrites the story so that Sydney is the villain, and tells Gerald, “[H]e threatened to rob me of my only treasure, my good name, and . . . in desperation, I tried to kill myself” (58). In both cases, Jean casts herself as a victim, though a specifically melodramatic one. The Coventrys, so immersed in sentimental culture, are familiar with the generic conventions of the orphan girl, forcibly separated from her titled heritage, and threatened by ne’er-do-wells who eye her chastity.

Therefore, Jean exploits those conventions, which compel the men to unconsciously play the part of the melodramatic hero in order to “rescue” her. And, as the tableaux scene demonstrated, the act of playing that role generates the emotion, even if the role itself is fabricated. Insincerity—Jean’s fictional back-story—propagates very sincere emotions.

The stories themselves become even more effective when coupled with Jean’s theatrical ability to tell them effectively. Her “skills at weaving plots, creating suspense, and telling tales” work to transform her into a representative writer of sensational fiction (Hackenberg 440). There is a special emphasis on the telling of the tale, which combines her skills as a sensational writer with her dramaturgical proficiency. For example, early in the novella Gerald is curious about the laughter from the other room. He enters, only to see Jean abruptly leave. Lucia and Edward said Jean was telling “the wittiest stories,” and when he asks them to repeat them, Edward refuses: “That is impossible; her accent and manner are half the charm,” said Ned. “I wish you had kept away ten minutes longer, for

your appearance spoilt the best story of all” (19). Edward underscores the manner in which she tells them, indicating the fusion of literary and theatrical elements. His final comment, too, is telling; the fact that the ending to the story is delayed makes Edward want to hear it that much more.

Gerald similarly experiences the sensation of enchantment and suspense brought about by Jean’s storytelling. Won over by her seductions and his belief that she is an equal, he begins to ask for accounts of her life. The narrator describes the scene:

[B]efore he knew how it came to pass, the young man was listening to the story of his companion’s life. A sad tale, told with wonderful skill, for soon he was absorbed in it . . . he listened eagerly as the girl’s low voice recounted all the hardships, loneliness, and grief of her short life. In the midst of a touching episode she started, stopped, and looked straight. (72)

This passage illustrates two things. First, it demonstrates Gerald’s “absorption” into Jean’s tale. Like Everell listening to Magawisca’s recitation of the Mystic Massacre, Gerald is entranced not just with the contents of Jean’s tale, but with how she tells it: with “skill” and in a “low voice.” The performance is as much a part of the scene as the text of the story. Yet the most important thing, at least as it involves stoking Gerald’s desire to hear it, is its abrupt cessation. Just as she refuses to finish “the best story” to Lucia and Edward, she creates another cliffhanger here. This delay results in narrative suspense but acts as a very real element in the seduction process.

Jean consistently uses narrative delay as she seduces and manipulates the Coventry family. Gail Smith contends that nineteenth-century images of the confidence woman, including Jean Muir, conflated the paradigms of sorceress (Circe) and

storytellers (Scheherazade) (48). The latter is especially apt, for like the character from *One Thousand and One Nights*, Jean is able to effectively enchant others by denying them the satisfaction of narrative closure. In Chapter 2, “A Good Beginning,” she supplies the “beginning” of stories and flirtations without completing them. We see this work with John, Edward, and Lucia, one after another, and in each case the delay acts to start to win the characters over. With Sir John, the mutual flirtations stop once she admits to being “only Miss Coventry’s governess,” but she abruptly leaves before he can assimilate that knowledge with their prior flirtations (15). Next, she charms Edward’s horse, but when Edward shows his admiration, she “paused, as if remember that she had no right to question” his identity (16). The pause causes Edward to finish her thought for her, and serves to tease his interest. Finally, she praises the beauty of Lucia’s mother, as seen in the portrait, but halts that praise before Lucia recognizes it as transparently empty flattery. This diffuses Lucia’s skepticism and leads her to believe that Jean is acting in accordance with her supposed station. These are just three cases where Jean acts as narrative tease, delaying the gratification of narrative closure and forcing her listener to fill in the blanks. This effectively brings them into her story, causing them to adopt the roles she wishes them to play.

And, as Gerald learns during his tableau stint as a Cavalier lover, stepping into the role will often involve strong sensation and emotion. Similarly, Alcott’s narrative seeks to have the same sensational effect on its readers. Like Jean, the narrative often relies on suspense, which in itself is no surprise. After all, readers of sensational fiction are fully aware of the thrills and chills that await them. This is most clearly experienced in Chapter 8, appropriately titled “Suspense.” The chapter employs many of Jean’s narrative

techniques, including veiled references to her stab wound, the fate of Edward and Sir John (either or both could have been killed in a train accident), and the revelation of the forged letters. A series of cliffhangers and revelations do much to elicit excitement, as does the novella as a whole. Originally published serially (in four parts), Alcott's novella effectively creates the kind of suspense necessary to sustain excitement over one hundred pages.

Like Jean, Alcott infuses this narrative suspense with theatricality, to the point where some of the narrative is imbued with an element of performance. In some cases, the narrator seems to be purposefully muddying the waters, causing the reader to doubt Jean's *insincerity*. For example, by the time the tableaux vivant are performed, readers are aware that Jean is a divorced actress with plans to marry up. The fabrication of her lineage has also been revealed. Yet when Gerald finds her crying, still dressed as Queen Bess, the narrator interjects, "One would know she was wellborn to see her now. Poor girl, what a burden a life of dependence must be to a spirit like hers!" (55). The free indirect style makes the reader question if this assertion that Jean truly is "wellborn" is in Gerald's voice or the narrator's. If it is the latter, does that mean that Jean's story about Lady Howard is true? In a similar performance, when Jean tells her story, "she quietly asserted her supremacy in a way which astonished [Lucia], *who knew nothing of her secret birth*" (71, emphasis mine). Here, Lucia has knowledge of Jean's supposed lineage as Lady Howard's daughter, yet the narration hints that the "secret birth" is true. To be sure, Jean's theatrical ability allows her to play the part of the wellborn daughter, which in turn conveys to Lucia a sense of social supremacy. The narration works in a similar fashion, the performance seducing the reader into "sympathizing with [Jean] in spite of

the strong pull of generic convention” (Schewe 587). Despite readers’ knowledge that Jean is acting, and despite the genre’s tradition that such an imposter will eventually be unmasked as a villain, the narrator’s performance instills enough doubt in these moments, eliciting pity along with excitement. Readers begin to side with Jean.

Ultimately, the narrative’s emotional component—what puts the sensation in sensational—is what Alcott is depending on to defend the genre itself. The sensational and melodramatic conventions, which as a child she “seized upon” as “a source of emotional excitement and catharsis,” become, for Alcott, a laudable or positive element in the fiction (Halttunen, “Drama” 233). In the novella, melodrama introduces emotional sincerity into a culture that resigned itself to the extreme difficulty in evaluating such sincerity. Alcott implies that sensational fiction can do the same. “The sensation story seemed especially dangerous,” argues Sara Hackenberg, “precisely *because* of its ability to provoke altered states, both physical and emotional” (442). And it is this transformative power, so crucial to the redemption of the Coventrys, that Alcott wishes to maintain within her fiction as well.

“Novels!” Sir John scoffs, as he eavesdrops on Jean reading to Bella (24). Considering that Jean’s enchanting voice “made every fact interesting, every sketch of character memorable” as she read, John is flabbergasted to learn that she is reading history instead of sensational fiction (24). Yet that is Jean’s power; combining theatrical and sensational elements, Jean is capable of influencing and transforming those around her with her performance. That is why she is so in her element during the tableaux vivants. Even her choice of characters in the tableaux—the apocryphal Judith and the female cavalier—represents the power contained within the traditionally illegitimate or illicit.

The same can be said for the near-illicit nature of *Behind a Mask*. Like Jean, sensational fiction is considered a danger to “the established order” due to its electrifying and titillating nature (Hackerberg 448). The novella privileges in Jean the emerging theatrical culture, one that favors the performances of social interactions rather than relying on transparent or “sincere” character. Yet it also resists the call for a more realistic theater, relying on melodrama’s ability to convey heartfelt emotion. In fiction itself, Alcott demonstrates that what makes the narrative sensational is also what provides it with the sincere emotion and the ability to transform. Readers of *Behind a Mask*, potentially ensnared by Jean’s narrative teasing as much as Gerald and Edward, may be transformed by sensations that teasing elicits. Edward, so immature throughout most of the novella, eventually emerges as a voice of “authority,” and Gerald listens to him (97). Similarly, readers encounter Alcott’s “insincere” narrative performance—a sensational tale with melodramatic and sentimental trimmings—but might realize that the novel has been attempting to influence them with the transformative power of sincere emotion.

#### Coda: Once More, With Feeling

In the decades following the publication of *Behind a Mask*, other writers would build on Alcott’s technique, investigating theater in ways similar to Sedgwick, Melville, and Hawthorne. Again, some of this seems natural. By the 1870s, theater was so clearly part of middle-class life that it is not surprising that writers like William Dean Howells attempted to incorporate theories of theater into their writing, which in turn opened up new ways of thinking about issues of dramatic and narrative genres. One such writer is Henry James, who attempted to reconcile his disparate and conflicting ideas about theater in his fiction and subsequently gained an understanding about his own writing,

particularly in regards to form. In an 1875 review of a Tennyson play, James defines the importance of form in drama:

The fine thing in a drama, generally speaking is that, more than any other work of literary art, it needs a masterly structure. It needs to be shaped and fashioned and laid together, and this process makes a demand upon an artist's rarest gifts . . . [.] In a play, certainly, the subject is of more importance than in any other work of art. Infelicity, vagueness of subject, may be outweighed in a poem, a novel, or a picture, by charm of manner, by ingenuity of execution; but in a drama the subject is of the essence of the work—it *is* the work. (398)

In this review, James describes drama as having the structure of a box, into which the “precious objects” of the plot and characters are placed (398). In this way, James seems to be advocating a return to “neoclassical” dramatic conventions (Ackerman 183), which privilege the traditions of unity of time and unity of space.<sup>83</sup> In this review, at least, James seems to be endorsing a rigid theatrical form.

By the end of the nineteenth-century, theater critics such as James focused much of their theories on the association between the inflexible structure of drama (the box) and the play's content (the “precious objects,” such as theme or character). Critics also detailed the rigid narrative structure as either constricting or liberating. According to Joseph Roach, theories of acting were often centered upon the “organical” vs. “mechanical modes” debate (*Player's* 182). Similarly, writers like Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg rebelled against the formulaic nature of neoclassical drama by offering

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<sup>83</sup> The Aristotelian dramatic traditions of unity of time and space in classical drama dictate that the action of the play takes place between sunup and sundown, and in within a single location.

plots that grew organically out of the characters' situations. This cultural conversation concerning form and content, so much on James's mind in his review of Tennyson's *Queen Mary*, informs his own writing. For example, Ackerman claims, "*The Bostonians* represents the frustrations of freedom and the rigidity of form"; Ackerman sees James stifling the novel's protagonist within a "melodramatic plot" (190). I would also point to a later story by James, "Nona Vincent" (1892), as being preoccupied with contemporary discussions of form and content as well as being a meditation on the space occupied by the audience.

In "Nona Vincent," the protagonist, Allan Wayworth, is a playwright whose plays adhere to the rigid neoclassical formula. He believes that the structure of the play should be "mathematical and architectural" and compares himself to a "goldsmith" (5). For Wayworth, the performance of the play is subordinate to the play's narrative structure and, surprisingly, he believes the play exists as a work of art without even being staged. Wayworth thinks actors are unnecessary as long as play-text exists. But when he is convinced to actually produce the play, the actress Violet Grey rebels against the play's rigid structure, embodying the contemporary discussions of the actor's freedom on stage. Eventually, Violet alters her performance, using the charming Mrs. Alsager, Wayworth's patroness, as inspiration. Violet's realistic performance convinces Wayworth that content supersedes form. Unlike his review more than fifteen years prior, James in "Nona Vincent" seems to see form as determined by character, and not as a static outline. Furthermore, Wayworth's epiphany and the story's turning point—or, in dramatic parlance, peripeteia—occurs in private, in the presence of Violet the actress. If the story is, to some extent, an allegory on James's own meditations on dramatic form, then he is



also positing a collapse of performer and spectator. The stage no longer exists as a gulf between actors and audience; the audience and actors are, in some way, on stage together. This could be seen as prefiguring Antonin Artaud's twentieth-century theories concerning the Theater of Cruelty, where audiences are thrust into the midst of the play's action and the boundaries of performance are non-existent. Essentially, we might see James's story participating in late-nineteenth-century conversations about literary form and audience.

James is only one example of a late-19<sup>th</sup>-century writer who uses theater to examine and comment on his own writing, and therein lies the potential significance of my project. Scholars of American literature do not talk much about nineteenth-century American drama—much less about 19<sup>th</sup>-century American melodrama. Perhaps they should, because clearly nineteenth-century novelists were writing about it—in private letters, articles about the theater, and within the pages of their own novels. By contextualizing nineteenth-century literature within the framework of theater, specifically melodrama, we might be able to discern how these writers use theater as a vehicle to grapple with form, genre, and approach to audience.

And that, I feel, is the significance of this project. Melodrama is an inescapable presence in nineteenth-century American literature. Writers throughout the century wrote, watched, commented upon, and even performed melodrama. Theater's omnipresence made it a cultural force, but its unique relationship to the audience, and its effect on spectators, made it an invaluable symbol and tool for writers to examine their own fiction. From Sedgwick to James, nineteenth-century American novelists incorporated theater, including melodrama, into their narratives in order to examine, explain, and promote their own writing. Melodrama provided a powerful model because it focuses so

pointedly on the effects of emotion. For that reason, melodrama has tools integrated into its very structure that allow dramatists to manage audience experience. American writers found their own ways to appropriate that aspect of melodrama, or modify the *thaumatic* experience so crucial to dramatic performance, in order to control or regulate what their readers think and feel. Like Ahab convincing his crew to undertake what will undoubtedly be a suicidal endeavor, writers using theater's monopathic power can attempt to convince readers to take any imaginative journey with them.

But American novelists of the nineteenth century did more than simply use theater to manage readers' experiences or massage audiences' emotions. These writers also temper theater's power with the narratives themselves. While Sedgwick and Melville see the advantages to harnessing the energy of *thauma*, they also bear witness to its reductive and overbearing elements. There is strength in theater, they argue, but ultimately the effect is reduced to nothing more than shadows on the cave wall. Therefore, American writers were able to utilize melodrama's strengths while simultaneously building a case for fiction's primacy. Specifically, these writers were able to use theater as a vehicle for justifying their genres with which they were working. Catherine Sedgwick, writing at a time when anxieties about a national literature were high, was able to demonstrate that the historical romance was a more effective means in describing American history than historical narratives themselves. Similarly, Nathaniel Hawthorne was able to make an argument for his understanding of the Romance, which he claimed could offer a brand of sympathy, more pure than that of the melodramas that laid claim to that emotion. Even Louisa May Alcott used melodrama to defend her pseudonymous sensational stories. Thus, by recontextualizing nineteenth-century theater, specifically melodrama, within the

boundaries of fiction of the time, we might be able to reconceive how these novels made arguments for their own existence. Writers used all the flash and spectacle of melodrama, coupled with dramaturgical techniques designed to manage audience experience, to their own advantage: to delight audiences and to educate readers, all the while illustrating how fiction does it better.

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