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# Symbolic Capital and the Performativity of Authorship: The Construction and Commodification of the Nineteenth-Century Authorial Celebrity

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SYMBOLIC CAPITAL AND THE PERFORMATIVITY OF AUTHORSHIP:  
THE CONSTRUCTION AND COMMODIFICATION OF THE NINETEENTH-  
CENTURY AUTHORIAL CELEBRITY

by

Whitney Helms

A DISSERTATION

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SYMBOLIC CAPITAL AND THE PERFORMATIVITY OF AUTHORSHIP:  
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CENTURY AUTHORIAL CELEBRITY

Whitney Helms, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2013

Adviser: Laura M. White

Victorian and Antebellum writers were the first literary figures to construct and perform their authorship within the sphere of celebrity. Unlike their Romantic predecessors who endured fame as an unexpected consequence of their popularity, the Victorians and their contemporaries understood celebrity as a condition of authorship. This dissertation takes as its subject the origins and development of symbolic power for authors as it was expressed in the trappings of celebrity and mass culture and argues that authorship became no longer strictly a profession of writing, but rather a performative endeavor that could be presented through diverse commercial markets. Investigating the changing conditions of the production and consumption of literature, this study contends that the public enterprises in which authorship was now being performed were not cheap acts of mass entertainment, as many would claim, but were in fact new forms of cultural capital and legitimate literary labor. Focusing on Charles Dickens, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Wilkie Collins, and Oscar Wilde, four of the greatest nineteenth-century authorial celebrities, this work traces the historical growth of celebrity culture within the authorial profession from the inception of the Victorian and Antebellum periods to the *fin de siècle*. In doing so, it seeks to understand how each of these writers effectively reconciled publicity and self-commodification with respectability and authorial legitimacy.

Incorporating cultural studies, new historicism, gender studies, and the discourse of the recently emerging study of celebrity culture, each chapter is a microhistory that focuses on the respective promotional tours of these authors. Because the tours offered Dickens, Stowe, Collins, and Wilde with a new medium in which to perform their authorial role, they illustrate the ways in which notions of authorship and literary labor were being reconceived in popular culture. Specifically, they show how celebrity and visibility played increasingly major roles in the public reception of these writers' work within a mass market. Together, the chapters of this dissertation offer detailed discussions on four canonical writers while also providing an analysis of the larger structural, cultural, and social forces that helped to develop and sustain the nineteenth-century authorial celebrity within the literary realm.

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## INTRODUCTION

“Celebrity is everywhere acknowledged but never understood.” –Fred Inglis<sup>1</sup>

In 1812, following the publication of the first part of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Lord Byron was said to have awoken one morning to find himself a famous man.<sup>2</sup> The poem, a combination of Byron's travels and his infamous personality, was something of a self-portrait, if not an artistic representation by which Byron sought to be known. What followed could only be described as Byromania, a term that Byron's future wife, Annabella Milbanke, coined to describe the “mass hysteria” that ensued around him (McDayter 2). Flooded with fan letters and greeted with the screams and shrieks of enthusiastic admirers, Byron became an object of desire and a subject of intense interest to a public who knew him only through his fictive, semi-biographical poetry.<sup>3</sup> The fame to which he awoke was indeed unparalleled thus far in its scope and nature, particularly for a literary figure. Prior to Byromania, legitimate fame had generally been reserved for those figures of authority whose power derived primarily from politics, religion, royalty, or warfare. While writers had often been granted some form of public recognition, they did not have the clout, connections, or authority to be idolized by the general public. This dynamic considerably changed with the social and political upheavals of the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century with the simultaneous decline of monarchical power and the rise of the middle class. The “waning influence of established civil

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<sup>1</sup> From Inglis' *A Short History of Celebrity* 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* was published between 1812-18.

<sup>3</sup> McDayter explains that “[Byron's] every social activity was recorded and he became the most sought-after guest at the tables of the rich and famous. Women fainted upon meeting him (actually, we know of only one confirmed case, but history has embellished the myth) . . . [and] men envied him” (3).

authorities and a persistence of class struggle led to the rise of a new host of public figures—military men, scientists, authors—who gained fame differently than they might have in the past” (Shires 199). While Byromania was certainly a product of these new conditions, it was also intensified by the poet’s “reluctance to create a recognizable divide between his life in history and his life in art” (McDayter 2). By composing *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and other major works around his authorial persona, Byron unwittingly played a major role in revising the conditions and responsibilities of authorship. The Byromania he inspired became unequivocally tied to the public's increasing desire to scrutinize and consume the author beyond the pages of the text as well as to the new market demands for the commercialized, if not commoditized, author. I open with Byron here specifically because his fame, as it was externalized in the Byromania phenomenon, significantly impacted the trajectory and nature of Victorian and Antebellum authorship by creating new ideological frames through which these writers would operate. By signaling that the profession of literary authorship was now linked to a developing celebrity sphere, Byron’s renown became a new model of popularity and literary fame, and a standard of success that Victorian and Antebellum writers would strive to recreate and achieve in their own literary careers.

My dissertation takes as its subject the writers who directly succeeded Byron and his contemporaries. It is a study of how the nature of the authorial celebrity developed within the Victorian and Antebellum periods, and more specifically, of the structural, cultural, and social forces that helped to develop and sustain celebrity culture within the literary realm at this time. While the modern authorial celebrity may have emerged in the Romantic period with Byron’s staggering fame, the Romantic celebrity is absent from my

analysis precisely because this figure's fame was often an *unexpected* outcome of the tenuous conditions of early nineteenth-century literary production and consumption. I am concerned not with unanticipated fame and its consequences, but with deliberately self-created celebrity, a far more involved and complex form of symbolic power. While Byron was certainly a celebrity, enduring the common trappings and advantages of fame to which celebrities today are still subjected, it was a type of cultural authority that clearly startled him. The Romantics may have endured the ambiguous beginnings of celebrity culture, but the Victorians accepted it as a condition of authorship and aggressively worked to refine and develop this new cultural role that had primarily been a source of bemusement to their predecessors.

Because my project focuses on the origin of the self-conscious constructed authorial celebrity, I must call attention to what I see as a clear distinction between two relatively similar but not interchangeable terms: fame and celebrity. As subjective constructs used to identify a type of cultural authority that is itself both relativistic and mutable, these terms are difficult to define or differentiate between with any real accuracy. The *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that the only recognizable difference between fame and celebrity is that fame, "[t]he condition of being much talked about," signals less prestige or enthusiasm than celebrity, "[t]he condition of being much extolled . . . about." What the *OED* does not make clear is the notion that celebrity is a cultural concept that by nature cannot be encompassed within the traditional definitions of fame. The notion of fame has existed for thousands of years, having appeared under a host of identifiers, including "notable," "lion," and "renown," and has been associated with

figures as ancient as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar.<sup>4</sup> The term celebrity, on the other hand, did not originate until the seventeenth century and even then did not acquire its more modern meaning until the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> My own understanding of these two terms has been informed and shaped by landmark and recent works on celebrity culture such as Leo Braudy's *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame & Its History* (1986); Daniel Boorstin's *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1962); Alexis Easley's *Literary Celebrity, Gender, and Victorian Authorship, 1850-1914* (2011); Brenda R. Weber's *Women and Literary Celebrity in the Nineteenth Century: The Transatlantic Production of Fame and Gender* (2012); Ghislaine McDayter's *Byromania* (2009); and Fred Inglis' *A Short History of Celebrity* (2010), all of which offer varying definitions of fame and celebrity in their approaches to the industries, people, and practices that produce and engage them. In the following chapters, I treat celebrity as a highly commercialized and industrialized version of fame, one that has been consciously cultivated by or derived from the markets and institutions tied to it and/or the people invested in its development. Whereas fame "was once assigned to men of high accomplishment in a handful of prominent and clearly defined roles . . . [and] brought honour to the office not the individual," celebrity can be seen as an exclusive kind of cultural power that both distinguishes and privileges the individual (Inglis 4). Earlier conceptualizations of fame are more concerned with the celebrated individual than they are about the practices and cultural phenomena from which modern celebrity culture

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<sup>4</sup> Leo Braudy's *The Frenzy of Renown* examines fame as it affected major historical figures from Alexander the Great to Marilyn Monroe.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Dames notes that "the word 'celebrity' in its current meaning . . . does not appear until the late 1840s" (27).

emerged. In fact, I assert that fame, as it has conventionally been understood, could not continue under the monumental social and cultural changes that occasioned celebrity culture in the nineteenth century.

The first writers to embrace and exploit collectively the material changes that gave rise to the modern celebrity were the Victorians and their contemporaries. One of their advantages was the opportunity to produce literature in what had become a fully industrialized market amongst astonishing rises in literacy rates and readership. Unlike their predecessors, the Victorians wrote for an audience that was as wide as it was diverse, and they generated much of their literary success by forging with their audience an intimate and personal relationship that cumulatively developed with every literary production.<sup>6</sup> Working within this new cultural framework, the Victorian author transformed him/herself into an altogether new kind of public figure; after all, authorship was proving to be less a profession and more a performance in a diverse and mass market. In other words, authors were becoming valuable commodities in their own right. Emerging in the period dubbed by Coleridge as the “Age of Personality” and governed by new market dynamics that welcomed if not demanded the public figure’s visibility and ubiquitous presence within popular culture, the Victorian writers self-fashioned an authorial persona, a means by which they formed their relationships with readers and their celebrity in general.<sup>7</sup> Because existing conditions now rendered the author almost

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<sup>6</sup> These literary productions often came in the form of serial (often weekly or monthly) installments or as three-decker novels, which were circulated throughout lending libraries.

<sup>7</sup> In *Biographia Literaria*, the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge dubbed the period the “Age of Personality”, writing: “[e]specially in this age of personality, this age of literary and political gossiping, when the meanest insects are worshipped with a sort of Egyptian superstition, if only the brainless head be atoned for by the sting of personal malignity in the tail . . .” (27).

fully responsible for the self-production and self-performance of his or her symbolic capital, I argue that Victorian authors found themselves in a rather delicate position. Specifically, I am concerned with the way in which their emergence in the celebrity sphere coalesced with the popularization of spectacle and performance in mass entertainment and how this dynamic forced those who exploited the consciousness of celebrity to walk a fine line between, on the one hand, legitimizing and increasing their cultural power with the public and, on the other, simply becoming a public spectacle.

Of the sundry Victorian writers who achieved great recognition and celebrity, I focus on Charles Dickens, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Wilkie Collins, and Oscar Wilde, who each constructed lucrative and successful authorial careers through the complex interworking of celebrity culture. I seek to understand how their constant struggle to balance self-aggrandizement, self-commoditization, popularity, and respectability before a public that could number in the hundreds of thousands was effectively performed in a time when the idea of pandering to the masses was culturally suspect. The chronology of these writers' careers allows me to trace the development and historical growth of celebrity culture within the authorial profession from the inception of Victorianism to the *fin de siècle*. More importantly, Dickens, Stowe, Collins, and Wilde each embarked on a transnational tour for the purposes of self-promotion, performance, public reading, and/or lecturing. I direct much of my attention to these tours, because they were the intersection and culmination of the complex institutions, practices, and networks that generated and sustained the celebrity sphere, and they demonstrate the astounding cultural impact of these writers' celebrity on both sides of the Atlantic. These tours are a clear reflection not only of how authorship had become increasingly absorbed into popular amusement by the

nineteenth century, but also of how the public performativity of the authorial role had become a central concern amongst writers at this time. By approaching these tours as extraliterary events that offer valuable insight into the ways Victorian and Antebellum writers handled the controversies that ensued from the growing overlap of mass culture and the literary market (including the excesses of fandom, authorial commodification, and the potential disrepute of the profession), my study shows that the tours were in fact not demonstrative acts of cheap entertainment, but were an extension of legitimate literary labor. The tours allowed Dickens, Stowe, Collins, and Wilde to redefine traditional ideas of authorship and reconceive the means by which the authorial role could be performed.

Because the possibility of offering a comprehensive analysis of the Victorian and Antebellum authorial celebrity is beyond the scope of a dissertation, it was especially important that I focused on writers whose celebrity was recognized in their own time. In other words, it was important that their celebrity impacted the larger cultural and social structures that affected all nineteenth-century readers as well as the nature of the literary market and the authorial role at large. I therefore rely heavily on contemporary newspaper reviews that articulate public and critical sentiment towards the reception of these authors as celebrated figures. Each of the following chapters is about one author; chapters are organized by the chronological timelines of these writers' careers. This arrangement has allowed me to provide a more ordered narrative while lending me the structural means to demonstrate how the literary celebrity adapted to and developed with the changing attitudes and conditions of the time. It further gives me the means to demonstrate the ways in which Dickens, Stowe, Collins, and Wilde each partially

conceived their notions of literary celebrity in the context of each other's careers.

Chapter 1 takes as its subject the construction and rise of Charles Dickens's celebrity amidst the growing overlap of celebrity culture, mass entertainment, and commodity discourse. I begin with the production of Dickens's first novel, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37), a work that provides a record of the formation of the friendly authorial personality by which Dickens would make himself known and through which he would develop with his readers the figurative friendship that would become the basis of his celebrity and public commodification. Examining Dickens's first visit to America in 1842, I show the consequences of this friendship as they were manifested in the public's intense desire to scrutinize and visually consume Dickens as though he were a public exhibition. While Dickens certainly understood that the celebrity figure was something of a public commodity to be consumed by the very groups that validated its existence, he was considerably troubled by what had become extreme and uncontrolled consumption. In response to this concern, Dickens negotiated the dynamics of his celebrity by launching the reading tours, a series of readings of some of his most popular works, which he performed across Great Britain and America. These readings should not be understood as gratuitous, as many of Dickens's contemporaries claimed, but rather as Dickens's strategic way to increase his symbolic capital while limiting unrestrained commodification. Examining personal letters, reviews, and the reading books, I argue that the performances are a reflection of Dickens's successful efforts to redefine the boundaries of legitimate authorship by staging in new ways both his authorial personality and literary successes in a growing new field of entertainment.

The second chapter examines the historical formation and development of the



female celebrity as it was expressed in *Fraser's Magazine* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's literary career following the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Until recently, the female authorial celebrity has been largely overlooked in scholarship, an absence of considerable interest considering the intriguing if not paradoxical role that women writers occupied at this time. Encouraged by gender ideologies to remain private and silent within the public sphere, female writers faced a new kind of cultural anxiety as the authorial role became increasingly dependent on the celebrity realm. In this chapter, I look at common representations of famous women writers as they were presented in popular culture, and I contend that early Romantic female writers' fame was largely understood in domestic and feminine terms, an interpretation that not only helped to justify their participation in the public sphere, but also ensured that their literary careers would not prevail at the expense of their womanhood. Those women who defied prevailing social codes and could not easily be depicted within such confining terms were often condemned if not vilified in print. This opprobrium made it difficult for women to self-cultivate any authentic form of symbolic capital. My chapter demonstrates that this idealized portrayal of female writers was significantly challenged with the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, an extraordinarily successful novel that transformed its authoress into the most famous female writer of her time and generated a cultural phenomenon known as Tom Mania. While *Uncle Tom's Cabin* made Stowe a household name, her celebrity was not simply an effect of the novel's popularity or the ensuing Tom Mania, but was also a product of the self-publicity that she and her husband crafted while on

promotional tours in Great Britain.<sup>8</sup> In treating Stowe's celebrity as a self-formed construction rather than as a symptom of a literary cultural phenomenon, this chapter is concerned with the complications, strategies, and ideologies involved in the development and rise of Stowe's celebrity. I show that Stowe, always conscious of her public image, facilitated the development of her celebrity by constructing and marketing her authorial public persona around the ideals of decorum, propriety, and domesticity. Such an approach considerably lessened the possibility that she would be reduced to the commodification, vulgarity, spectacle, and sensationalism that often threatened the reputations of public figures. Focusing primarily on her first tour to Great Britain and her travelogue, *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands*, I discuss how Stowe actively performed this authorial persona before audiences that sometimes numbered in the thousands, and I demonstrate how these performances allowed her to cultivate her celebrity publically without marring either her womanhood or respectability. In calling attention to the important changes that women like Stowe helped to develop in the authorial careers of women writers, this chapter considers the Woman Question within the framework of the celebrity sphere and establishes the basis from which female authors would begin to achieve greater legitimate authority through a developing celebrity culture.

Chapter 3 turns to Wilkie Collins, one of the greatest celebrities of the Victorian period, whose cultural power has waned substantially since the early twentieth century. Considered the greatest living novelist following Dickens's death in 1870, Collins was one of the most sought after and highest paid writers of his time, making his cultural decline something of a puzzle. This chapter examines the circumstances under which

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<sup>8</sup> Stowe would also travel to continental Europe, but she focused much of her publicity campaign and marketing efforts on her visits to Great Britain, particularly London.

Collins's celebrity was formed in order to understand why his popularity fell only decades after the success of sundry novels and theatrical dramatizations, a cultural mania over *The Woman in White*, and a North American reading tour. Tracing his career from the publication of his first novel in 1850, I argue that Collins generated his celebrity from a cultural crisis over sensation literature that set the critical elite at odds with the mass public. Working under a new model of authorship that treated readerly interests as a chief component to literary success, Collins openly performed his authorial labor in the name of "public approval," a strategy that compromised his reputation amongst critics but transformed him into a legitimate celebrity with the masses. Focusing specifically on *The Woman in White*, I show how Collins exploited the novel's phenomenal success in order to transform sensationalism into a means through which his celebrity was identified and sustained. Despite the criticisms to which his authorship was subjected, Collins's celebrity flourished and even warranted a five-month reading tour across North America in the 1870s. Though the tour was itself not financially rewarding, it was a successful promotional enterprise through which Collins furthered his celebrity and expanded his authorial brand across various markets. Though his authorial celebrity remained powerful throughout his lifetime, I propose that it began to diminish with the declining interest in sensationalism since Collins had ineradicably associated himself with this literary trend in his efforts to establish his fame. In hindsight, this association became the chief way in which Collins's reputation was historicized and recorded in both scholarship and popular culture, which has informed the ways in which current scholarship appreciates and understands both his authorship and the scope of his repertoire.

The fourth chapter turns to the ways in which Oscar Wilde's enduring celebrity

has been historically problematized by the self-commodifying and performative practices from which he constructed his literary persona. I show that the genesis of Wilde's authorial celebrity is rooted in both his efforts to stage himself as a provocative and eccentric aesthete and his willingness to indulge a media that had become aggressively interested in publicizing and satirizing his self-performances. Delighted that the ridicule from which he suffered was also another source of publicity and fame, Wilde permitted the media to turn him into a primary target of the Aesthetic Movement, an allowance that gave them greater authority to control the terms by which he was publically portrayed and known. While I examine the methods by which cultural satirists produced problematic versions of Wilde in the popular media, I am primarily concerned with the way that Wilde used his lecture tour across North America to validate the exaggerated characterizations of him that had been proliferating in the media since the late 1870s. My chapter considers how this public image that Wilde both sanctioned and perpetuated contributed to the levity with which people viewed him even after he became a legitimate playwright, as well as to the volatile state of his cultural and authorial legitimacy. I argue, then, that Wilde thus helped to create posterity's inability to discern any real distinction between his authorial personality as it was expressed in some of his most popular and acclaimed works and the persona by which he had so earnestly defined himself in popular culture.

Although I investigate my topic by focusing on four canonical authors, I aim to provide a cohesive, structured, and thematic work by writing each chapter around three central inquiries: 1) How did nineteenth-century writers construct and maintain themselves as celebrity figures/public selves? 2) How did this new cultural role and its

concomitant commercial success nourish the literary market, help legitimize and empower authorship, contribute to modern understandings of intellectual property rights, and affect the reception of literature with both critics and readers? 3) Can and should we directly link their publicity tours to the lower-class amusements that popularized and sensationalized the human being/“freak” as a performative and commodified entity?<sup>9</sup> These questions, which guided my approach to each chapter, were primarily investigated through and influenced by Pierre Bourdieu’s theories on cultural production, symbolic capital, and the cultural field. Bourdieu’s ideas set up the primary theoretical framework for this project because his idea that “[t]he meaning of a work . . . changes automatically with each change in the field within which it is situated for the spectator or reader,” provides a basis to begin considering how such radical changes (the transformation of a work from the written word to an authorial performance) in the cultural field alter the work’s pecuniary, cultural, social, and/or political value, which in turn expands the field to accommodate legitimately popular and critically esteemed authors (*Field of Cultural Production* 31). In other words, I am less concerned with the conditions under which an author is created and a work is produced and more invested in how an author is *recreated* by the appropriation of symbolic power and how a work is *reproduced* once such structural changes occur in the field. I argue that nineteenth-century authors who were endowed with this self-cultivated symbolic power sustained and continuously renewed their work’s value in the marketplace and in turn reinvented their own cultural and

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<sup>9</sup> Examples of sensationalized, commodified human beings include figures such as Joice Heth, General Tom Thumb, and aborigines from New Zealand.

literary authority.<sup>10</sup> Working within Bourdieu's theoretical model, I show how these writers redefined the terms of authorship and thus created a new cultural field, or a new site, in which to struggle over the definition and the legitimacy of the author.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Bourdieu's claim that a text's meaning and its value are always partially determined by the agents—the writer/reader/audience—involved in its production and reception is especially important in any study on celebrity since the legitimacy of the celebrity requires the sanction of others. I show in each chapter that a point of contention for some literary celebrities was the danger they risked of being viewed as portable displays to be scrutinized and desired by the public. In contrast to the famous writer who simply produces literature, such as Scott or Hawthorne, the literary celebrity risks more, since he or she was a figure who actively engaged in self-display by performing a public role and catering to public demands.

My opening quotation, taken from Inglis' historical work on celebrity, claims that celebrity is never understood. I wrote this project with the expectation that it would make the nineteenth-century celebrity somewhat more "knowable." By providing the Victorian and Antebellum authorial celebrity with both origins and a history, I hope my dissertation contributes to what has become a steadily growing interest in the study of celebrities and celebrity culture within the literary profession. Since its rise in the nineteenth century, the modern celebrity, as both a product and generator of mass culture, has often been misconceived if not misunderstood, and consequently it has been too easily dismissed as an unworthy subject of serious scholarship. This attitude began to change in the mid-

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<sup>10</sup> Here we see the origins of current forms of publicity and the modern literary celebrity.

<sup>11</sup> This is the basis of Bourdieu's theory on the production and purpose of a cultural field.

twentieth century with the publication of Daniel J. Boorstin's *The Image*, the first comprehensive book that explored the history of celebrity culture. Since then, there has been a number of works on literary celebrity culture, including Tom Mole's *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture, 1750-1850* (2009), Eric Eisner's *Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Literary Celebrity* (2009), Nicholas Dames's "Brushes with Fame: Thackeray and the World of Celebrity" (2001), and Heather Marcovitch's chapter "Celebrity, Caricatures and Public Performances in the 1880s" (2010). Even some biographical works, such as Simon Callow's *Charles Dickens and the Great Theatre of the World* (2012), present their subjects through the context of celebrity culture. Scholars have begun to recognize celebrities as public figures whose popularity and authority tell us much about the people and cultures that created, sustained, and worshipped them. Indeed, it is generally understood that the rise of the celebrity sphere gave the masses a figure on whom they could project their hopes and anxieties during a time of staggering social and cultural change. This need seems to have developed steadily over time, for not only has celebrity culture become a ubiquitous phenomenon in our day, but also we remain equally invested in developing, if not constantly inscribing, a renewed kind of value to the celebrities of Dickens, Stowe, Collins, and Wilde.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The celebrity of Dickens, Stowe, Collins, and Wilde is still being cultivated hundreds of years after their respective deaths. For instance, they have been thrust into participating in modern forms of social media that generate celebrity and popularity in the twenty-first century. Fan clubs and/or professional clubs have designed Facebook pages for all four authors, and all but Collins have a Twitter account. That Collins does not yet have a Twitter account suggests that his revival in current scholarship and popular culture is still in development.

## CHAPTER 1

## PERFORMING AUTHORSHIP IN THE CELEBRITY SPHERE:

## DICKENS AND THE READING TOURS

I was thinking the other day that in these days of lecturing and readings, a great deal of money might possibly be made (if it were not *infra dig*) by one's having Readings of one's own books. It would be an *odd* thing. I think it would take immensely. What do you think? (Dickens, *Letters* 4: 631, author's emphasis)

In 1846, Charles Dickens wrote to his close friend and future biographer John Forster, informing him that he was seriously considering the idea of giving paid readings of some of his most popular stories. Dickens's tour manager, George Dolby, recounts that Forster was far less taken with the proposal and ultimately objected on the grounds that Dickens's "desire to increase his property in such a short space of time, and in such a way, was unworthy of him, or, in fact, of any man of genius, as the business of *reading* was a degrading one" (Dolby 137, author's emphasis). This dialogue between Dickens and Forster serves as an important marker of the ongoing debate about nineteenth-century celebrity culture that was divided along two lines. On the one hand, Dickens aims to expand the putative terms of legitimate authorship by following in the footsteps of his contemporaries and configuring for himself a new cultural field in which he can use his celebrity for personal and professional gain. On the other hand, Forster seems unable to look beyond the growing performative and commodifying practices upon which popular amusement was generally constructed and thus condemns what can be interpreted as Dickens's eagerness to stage himself as mass entertainment for the purposes of spectacle



and celebrity. That Dickens and Forster each raise valid points calls attention to the fact that critically-esteemed writers who exploited the consciousness of celebrity during the Victorian period often walked a very fine line between legitimizing and increasing their cultural power with the public and simply becoming a public spectacle. There is no question that this line was sometimes blurry for Dickens, particularly during his first American visit as well as in the late 1850s and 60s, during which he performed over four hundred critically and publically-acclaimed readings across America and Great Britain and earned tens of thousands of pounds and dollars in return.<sup>13</sup>

Nineteenth-century audiences were increasingly greeted by a host of public presentations and lectures led by such culturally recognized figures as William Makepeace Thackeray and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Because Dickens's reading tours were part of this growing business of public performances, they mark a turning point in the definitions of authorship and celebrity for Dickens. The readings considerably increased his visible celebrity, or rather, his exposure in the public sphere, for not only was Dickens now literally before the public, but so were the many images of him that proliferated at this time. This visibility increased Dickens's commoditized value for a public whose intense curiosity in him often led to the visible consumption of his person. In light of these cultural changes, I argue that these readings, or what I call capital ventures, should be understood within the larger context of celebrity culture and commodity discourse since they illustrate how closely the two interrelated at this time.<sup>14</sup> The origins of both

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<sup>13</sup> Of the 472 readings that Dickens gave, Phillip Collins estimates that between 423 to 445 were paid, while the remaining few were given in the name of charity (xxvi).

<sup>14</sup> The term "capital ventures" is an appropriate description of Dickens's tours, because it aptly reflects their pecuniary value for Dickens and allows us to view them as part of his efforts to enhance what

cultural forces can be traced to the same means of production, including an expanding print culture, a growing consumer-based mass market, and the commercialization of public figures. I assert that Dickens not only used the readings to systemize and thus limit unrestrained commodification of his person, but that he also exploited them as a chief enterprise in which to develop his authorial celebrity. The tours, then, serve as valuable markers of the changing dynamics not only of Dickens's cultural capital, but of Victorian authorship and literary celebrity in general.

Dickens is a key figure in any study on celebrity culture, for he was not only one of the first modern celebrities, but he had acquired tremendous cultural power in his day. One marker of this power can be seen in the Dickens Museum in London, the curators of which have made a point to display a number of artifacts from Dickens's reading tours alongside a visual dictionary of *Star Wars: Episode One* and a ticket to the Madonna: Blond Ambition tour "to equate modern product association and levels of celebrity with the type of fame and demand Dickens achieved in his lifetime" ("The Charles Dickens Museum Virtual Tour" n.pag.). The caliber of Dickens's celebrity can be primarily attributed to his ongoing efforts throughout his career to produce and circulate symbolic power on his own behalf.<sup>15</sup> His active involvement in a number of different enterprises, including novel writing, editing, play acting, and touring made him both an ever-present figure in Victorian culture and a marketable brand in the consumer consciousness. His name alone could induce thousands of admirers to withstand several hours in below-

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Bourdieu identifies as symbolic and cultural capital. Capital, in all its forms, occupies an important place in this chapter, precisely because the tours created for Dickens a field in which his symbolic, cultural, and economic capital could be mutually sustained and increased.

<sup>15</sup> "Symbolic power" is Bourdieu's term.

freezing temperatures just so that they could secure a ticket to one of his coveted public readings.<sup>16</sup> He was a subject of equal interest to Queen Victoria and American presidents, as he was to the general public who inundated him with their requests for an autograph, a handshake, or even a few locks of his hair.<sup>17</sup> The public's fervent curiosity in Dickens was so great that it necessitated "a boy to be in constant attendance outside his sitting-room [in New York] to prevent intrusions on his privacy [as well as] . . . the exclusive use of a private stairway, so that he could come and go without being seen by the public" (Fitzsimons 117). Such scrutiny inevitably made him the subject of unfounded gossip and rumors, many of which contributed to the fashioning and dissemination of his public image and in turn rendered his celebrity a kind of public property: "I say all sorts of things that I never said go to all sorts of places that I never saw or heard of, and have done all manner of things (in some pervious state of existence I suppose) that have quite escaped my memory" (qtd in Fitzsimons 136). Even when the media did print factual information about Dickens it was occasionally wrong, much to his chagrin: "Of course I can do nothing but in some shape or other it gets into the newspapers," he complained. "All manner of lies get there, and occasionally a truth so twisted and distorted that it has as much resemblance to the real fact as Quilp's leg to Taglioni's" (Dickens, *Letters* 3: 72). The circumstances of his private affairs also became points of speculation, including his separation from Catherine Dickens and his affair with

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<sup>16</sup> Dolby mentions that in one instance, over 3,000 people lined up for tickets in New York. He notes that the line "was over three-quarters of a mile in length" (187).

<sup>17</sup> Dickens met President John Tyler at the White House during his first visit to America. He would meet privately with President Andrew Jackson while on tour in the late 1860s. Jackson would also attend a reading.

Ellen Ternan, both of which subjected him to personal scandal in the public eye.<sup>18</sup> The kind of treatment that Dickens endured as a celebrity is by no means exclusive to the Victorian period, as the same advantages and problems that he faced in his own time still resonate in the context of celebrity culture today. What is unique and important about his fame is that it marks the beginnings of the modern celebrity culture with which we are now excessively familiar. And because Dickens largely formed his celebrity in accordance with the changing conditions of the literary market, it is possible to trace its origins and development through the sundry records that nineteenth-century print culture left behind.

While Dickens became a beloved author with the publication of his first novel *The Pickwick Papers* in 1836-37, his public identity was not developed solely by virtue of the novel's popularity. In fact, it can be traced directly to the strategic choices that Dickens made in the midst of *Pickwick's* twenty-month serialization. Bradley Deane's account of the literary labor involved in the construction of Dickens's authorship is an excellent starting point for any discussion on the production of Dickens's fame, because the origins of his celebrity were deeply embedded in the identifiable authorial role that Dickens would create through *Pickwick*. In *The Making of the Victorian Novelist*, Deane explains that the author figure of "Dickens would arrive not in a flash of inspiration, but out of a protracted struggle to seize the new opportunities of early Victorian print culture" (28). Initially, *Pickwick* appeared as edited by Boz, Dickens's pseudonym and lifelong

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<sup>18</sup> The affair with Ternan was publically addressed by Catherine Dickens's family, the Hogarths, but then later retracted at the request of Dickens, who threatened to suspend all financial support in his separation with Catherine until an official denial was made. Dickens also offered his own public defense and published it in *Household Words*. Most of the public attention that his affair with Ternan received was speculative.

nickname, but it would eventually be presented as a novel authored by Charles Dickens. Deane attributes this change to a number of factors, including Chapman and Hall's decision to issue *Pickwick* in monthly installments, a form of publishing that presented favorable prospects in a market that could now accommodate mass readership through more affordable literature. Because the novel was issued over the course of several months, a prolonged intimacy formed between Dickens and his readers, thereby giving Dickens the opportunity to present himself as the public's sympathetic friend (Deane 28). Boz the editor could not forge such a friendship in the way that Dickens the personalized author could since "[e]ditorship is a not [a] creative or original" profession, but one that "culls and arranges 'valuable information' . . . that [has] been established by others" (Deane 34). In other words, it was an identifier that was simply too impersonal for the purposes of securing symbolic capital or forging with readers what Tom Mole calls the "hermeneutic of intimacy" (22-23), an important dynamic of cultural power that was beginning to emerge at this time in order to "[ease] the sense of industrial alienation between readers and writers" (22).<sup>19</sup>

While Deane is concerned with how *Pickwick* signals the construction of Dickens's authorship, I am more interested in the way that it represents the production of his celebrity and how it foregrounds the link between celebrity and commodity culture. Undoubtedly, this new model of authorship made possible Dickens's celebrity, for the abandonment of his pseudonym not only allowed him to present himself publically by name, but it gave him the means to associate with that authorial name a distinct

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<sup>19</sup> Mole is referencing this term to describe Lord Byron's celebrity, but it is one that became increasingly relevant to Victorian writers, such as Dickens, who performed their authorship in an ever-growing industrialized, mass culture.

*personality*, one that was created from the very sympathy and intimacy that Deane references. By presenting himself as a friendly personality, Dickens associated his writings with a recognizable and popular construct that not only distinguished his work but also made it competitive in a market already saturated with an abundance of other commodities. And because all of Dickens's major novels appeared in serial form, it became natural that this authorial personality would develop both Dickens's celebrity and his friendship with the public through cumulative and steady effects.<sup>20</sup> While Dickens maintained a sincere affection for his reading public throughout his career, his relationship with them was clearly developed by and strictly associated with the novel as commodity.<sup>21</sup> Deane argues compellingly that the friendship between Dickens and his readers allowed Dickens to call attention to his "concern with intimacy and sympathy," but I contend that it also helped Dickens to promote his work throughout the market and still appeal to the respectability of a profession that looked upon commercialism and mass appeal as culturally suspect (28). As a writer who was always deeply concerned with intellectual ownership and financial success, and as a businessman who was aware of the advantages of mass readership, Dickens recognized the pecuniary and cultural value that a figurative friendship with the public could offer him—both with his novels and in his tours. The friendship thus signals the point in which his authorship became permanently aligned with notions of celebrity and commodity culture. By presenting himself as a familiar personality, Dickens united the novel-commodity with a persona

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<sup>20</sup> Serial publishing also helped limit the possibility that Dickens's cultural significance or even the relationship that he had developed with the public would lapse, be forgotten, or become irrelevant, since his readers were met with "Charles Dickens" on a weekly or monthly basis.

<sup>21</sup> This is made plain by the fact that even as late as 1858, when Dickens would begin his public readings, few could identify him in person.

that could be appealed to in the name of friendship, a relationship that was particularly amenable to an expanding consumer market and which ensured him greater cultural and economic capital with every new reader or “friend.”

Because Dickens’s authorship was composed of so many cultural forces, it complicated for Dickens and his readers the real meaning of their relationship, and it problematized the ways in which it could be appreciated. Though their affiliation was produced and fostered by commodity culture and capitalistic interests, both parties—author and readers—nevertheless adamantly professed that their relationship was first and foremost rooted in “friendship.” For Dickens, it became especially difficult to divorce figurative friendship from profit. In fact, during his first visit to America, he spoke publically on the need for an international copyright law, using language that clearly revealed how uncomfortable it was for him to choose profit over the affection that a broader readership made possible:

Securing for myself from day to day the means of an honourable subsistence, I would rather have the affectionate regard of my fellow men, than I would have heaps and mines of gold. But the two things do not seem to be incompatible . . . . For myself, I would rather that my children coming after me, trudged in the mud, and knew by the general feeling of society that their father was beloved, and had been of some use, than I would have them ride in their carriages, and know by their banker’s books that he was rich. But I do not see, I confess, why one should be obliged to make the choice, or why fame, besides playing that delightful *reveille* for which she is so justly celebrated, should not blow out of her trumpet a few

notes of a different kind from those with which she has hitherto contended herself. (Dickens, *Letters* 3: 60)

Dickens's insistence that fame, friendship, and remuneration were mutually exclusive forces indicates how difficult it was for him to reconcile what Juliet John calls "his humanist and reformist ideals about culture . . . with his acceptance of culture as commerce" and the public as "consumers" (132).<sup>22</sup> In an effort to attenuate the dehumanizing effects of mass modernity, John suggests that Dickens turned to profit and literal numbers as a visible verification that he belonged to a community of friends. Under such circumstances mass friendship could only sustain and validate itself as a productive and profitable *business*, which explains why "Dickens's need to amass people was . . . as important as his impulse to amass money" (John 144). As his most profitable enterprise, then, the reading tours register most strongly the inherent filiation between friendship and profit. What made real friends like Forster cringe was not just that Dickens was substantially profiting from his shows (collectively, his paid readings grossed more than £45,000), but that from the beginning he had made no apparent effort to hide his enthusiasm for the money involved.<sup>23</sup> "All well and prosperous," Dickens remarked of a late performance. "Copperfield and Bob last night with great success. My present *profit* is

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<sup>22</sup> My argument is not to detract from Dickens's work as a social novelist. I acknowledge that this familiar and intimate personality known as "Charles Dickens" was also meant to appeal further to readers' sympathies in order to provoke social change and reform. My chapter seeks to understand this personality, or Dickens's celebrity, primarily in the context of capital culture.

<sup>23</sup> Dickens's first reading tour under Arthur Smith generated approximately £12,000, while his second tour, under the management of George Dolby, earned him an estimated £33,000. For more information on exact figures and numbers related to Dickens's tours, see Dolby's *Charles Dickens as I Knew Him*.



over £1,000 per week!” (Dickens, *Letters* 11: 502, author’s emphasis). In another letter he exclaimed, “We have had a tremendous night. The largest house I have ever had since I first began. 2,300 people. Over £200 in money” (Dickens, *Letters* 8: 629). In his analysis of Dickens’s readings, Malcolm Andrews explains that one of the qualities that Dickens greatly admired in his first tour manager, Arthur Smith, was his ability to “[maximize] seating capacity in the various halls”, sometimes doubling the number of seats a venue normally held, which meant an automatic doubling of the profits (147). Dickens’s language alone repeatedly reveals how he viewed the very people that Smith squeezed into the venues not so much as friends, but as living and walking currency: “We arrived [in Belfast] yesterday at two,” he wrote. “The room will not hold more than from eighty to ninety pounds” (Dickens, *Letters* 8: 641). Less than a month later, Dickens again converted his audience into pounds as he “regretted . . . that even Arthur could not squeeze more than £75 into the room” (Dickens, *Letters* 8: 617). Because Dickens’s authorial celebrity derived from his efforts to conflate “friends” and profit, he unsurprisingly endured the consequence of public commodification as it was expressed by a mass public who naturally found it difficult to discriminate between Dickens the friend and Dickens the commodity.

Dickens first experienced the excesses of public commodification during his first visit to America in 1842.<sup>24</sup> By this time he had cultivated a well-developed figurative friendship with the public through the successes of his early novels, and his readers now hoped to take the relationship one step further by seeing him face-to-face. Dickens

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<sup>24</sup> During this visit, Dickens’s stops included New York, Boston, Hartford, Kentucky, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Washington, DC, Richmond, Baltimore, Harrisburg, Pittsburgh, and Canada.

delighted in his American reception, informing Thomas Mitton that “[t]here never was a King or Emperor upon the Earth, so cheered, and followed by crowds, and entertained . . . and waited on by public bodies . . .” (Dickens, *Letters* 3: 43). However, the celebrations and fetes were often undermined by the mobs, reporters, and enthusiastic fans who hounded Dickens wherever he went. Eager to catch a glimpse of the author whose name had, by this time, become a household word, the public often mistook intense familiarity for knowability, forgetting that they maintained a *one-sided* acquaintance with Dickens that could not be reciprocated accordingly:

I can do nothing that I want to do, go nowhere where I want to go, and see nothing that I want to see. If I turn into the street, I am followed by a multitude. If I stay at home, the house becomes, with callers, like a fair. If I visit a public institution, with only one friend, the directors come down incontinently, waylay me in the yard, and address me in a long speech. I go to a party in the evening, and am so inclosed and hemmed about by people, stand where I will, that I am exhausted for want of air. I dine out, and have to talk about everything, to everybody. I go to church for quiet, and there is a violent rush to the neighbourhood of the pew I sit in, and the clergyman preaches *at* me. I take my seat in a railroad car, and the very conductor won't leave me alone. I get out at a station, and can't drink a glass of water, without having a hundred people looking down my throat when I open my mouth to swallow. Conceive what all this is! Then by every post, letters on letters arrive, all about nothing, and all demanding an immediate answer. This man is offended because I won't live in his house;

and that man is thoroughly disgusted because I won't go out more than four times in one evening. I have no rest or peace, and am in a perpetual worry. (Dickens, *Letters* 3: 87, author's emphasis)

The chaos, interest, and collective gaze that Dickens describes in this letter uncannily echo the intense manner in which a P.T. Barnum spectacle was treated by the paying consumer. After all, Barnum generally attracted audiences to his incredible exhibitions through the claim that they “had to see them to believe them,” thus making visibility a dominant component in his commercial successes.<sup>25</sup> The same was true of Dickens's first experiences in America; in fact, on one occasion, a lady said to him: “Mr. Dickens, will you be kind enough to walk entirely round the room, so that we can all have a look at you?” (qtd in Slater, *Dickens on America* 12).<sup>26</sup> By complaining at length of this invasive treatment from which he suffered, Dickens's letter exposes a public grown too presumptuous about their role as voyeur/spectator. The anxiety of being suffocated or unable to breathe due to the extraordinary number of people constantly within his presence is one that is repeated in his letters at this time. And the intense scrutiny to which he was subjected is the very act that quite literally transforms these spaces into the “fairgrounds” of which he writes and Dickens into their main attraction. In examining

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<sup>25</sup> Joice Heth was one of Barnum's most famous live exhibitions. She was a woman who Barnum claimed was the 161-year-old black nursemaid of George Washington. Barnum advertised her as “the Greatest Natural & National Curiosity in the World” and “exhibited [her] in taverns, inns, museums, railway houses, and concert halls in cities and towns across the northeast for seven months, beginning in 1835” (“The Joice Heth Archive” n.pag.). Heth became so famous with spectators that she became, as Bluford Adams puts it, “a cultural phenomenon of national proportions” (2). After Heth's death, it was revealed that Barnum had been lying for the purposes of entertainment and profit, since her autopsy proved that she was no more than eighty years old. For more information on Heth and her relationship with Barnum, see The Joice Heth Archive online, or Adam's *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture*.

<sup>26</sup> While Dickens complained of this public treatment, he pointed out several times in his letters that he found Americans “friendly” and “warm-hearted” (Dickens, *Letters* 3: 134).

Dickens's disillusioned attitude towards America in the wake of his first visit, John proposes that contrary to Dickens's hopeful outlook towards the democratization of reading and the commercialization of the market, the public confrontations to which he was subjected "seemed to bring him face-to-face (often literally) with a *dystopian* vision of mass culture" (76, my emphasis). Certainly, the excessive fandom, as it was expressed in such intrusive terms, contributed to the inconsistent, if not ambiguous attitude that Dickens subsequently held towards the massification of the literary market. Tracing Dickens's relationship with America, John notes that "[c]onfusion and conflict over the possibilities of popular culture were at the heart of Dickens's American experience," and consequently, his relationship with the public was problematized on both a commercial and ideological level (77). I argue that the disillusionment from which he suffered prompted Dickens to manipulate the performance and dissemination of his authorial celebrity in later years with the official launching of his tours, an enterprise through which he could both manage and capitalize on the mass commodification and consumption of his person.

Even before he had secured legitimate celebrity status, Dickens was well aware of the developing excesses of fan culture and the public's growing interest in the social power that produced and sustained celebrities.<sup>27</sup> After all, who can forget Dickens's satiric portrayal of Mrs. Leo Hunter in *The Pickwick Papers* whose sole ambition in life is to hunt down the literary lions of the day and invite them into her Den? As Mr. Leo

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<sup>27</sup> The *Daily Cleveland Herald* noted: "Persons who anticipated making some social capital for themselves by entertaining and lionizing Charles Dickens will not be greatly delighted by this semi-official notification from the Boston *Advertiser*[:] 'It is Mr. Dickens's invariable custom, when giving his readings, to devote himself entirely to it as a business, and to accept no friendly invitations which would tend to take up his time and distract his attention'" ("[Persons who anticipated making some social capital]" n.pag.).

Hunter explains to Pickwick, his wife “is proud to number among her acquaintance, all those who have rendered themselves celebrated by their works and talents”, and she even makes a point of holding a public breakfast for these celebrities during which they are on full display (Dickens 198).<sup>28</sup> While Dickens pokes fun at celebrity culture and Mrs. Leo’s “noble” ambition in his first novel, they pale in comparison to his own experiences as a celebrity (Dickens 198). While he had hoped to increase his audience during his time in America, it was certainly not his intention to be commodified. Aside from his complaints of feeling overwhelmed by crowds and various social gatherings, his letters frequently cite moments that show how this invasive conduct had figuratively divorced him from his human characteristics and turned him into a kind of performative commodity. Treated as a traveling exhibition as he visited one city to the next, Dickens noted that “[w]henver we come to a town station, the crowd surround it, let down all the windows, thrust in their heads, stare at me and compare notes respecting my appearance, with as much coolness as if I were a Marble image” (Dickens, *Letters* 3: 154-55). Once he escaped the peering crowds at the railway station, his typical agenda in America consisted of “[holding] a regular levee or drawing room, where [he shook] hands, on an average with five or six hundred people...” (Dickens, *Letters* 3: 161). In fact, he shook the hands of so many strangers that he feared he had “almost paralyzed [his] right arm...” (Dickens, *Letters* 3: 151). Meckier contends that Dickens shook the hands of so many admirers that he “became a hand-shaking *machine*” (266, my emphasis). Under such “febrile circumstances” as Dickens described them, he even grew apprehensive about cutting his

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<sup>28</sup> Dickens is also satirizing those who believe they are literary lions, as it is clear that many of these “lions” are poseurs.

hair, since barbers who had trimmed it in the past had been bribed for the cut locks (Dickens, *Letters* 3: 87).

In many ways, the commodification and scrutiny that Dickens endured at the hands of Americans during this first visit across the Atlantic was unavoidable for a celebrity as culturally recognizable and beloved as he.<sup>29</sup> As something meant to be circulated and publically consumed through books, gossip, images, and other forms of media, the nineteenth-century celebrity was a complex public commodity in part because it participated in its own production and perpetuation. Dickens could thus negotiate, to some degree, the conditions under which his public identity could be consumed. After all, it was not fandom that Dickens found troubling; it was the unrestrained and excessive consumption often at his expense that offended him. In spite of his anxiety and complaints, Dickens could not ignore the cultural power of his celebrity, or more specifically, its commercial and pecuniary value in a mass market. It was for this reason that he would launch one of the biggest promotional tours of the nineteenth century—the public readings, an enterprise that I contend allowed him simultaneously to bolster his celebrity and limit the degree to which he was commodified. Specifically, the readings helped to systemize not only the means through which Dickens was made visible in the public sphere, but also the way in which audiences could interact with him. By making public appearances at scheduled times, and by asking the public to pay a fee to see him in

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<sup>29</sup> Prior to Dickens's arrival in America for the tour in 1867, the *Daily Cleveland Herald* featured an article that publicized the readings. Seemingly aware of the interplay between celebrity and commodification, the writer warns the American public to refrain from subjecting Dickens to the excesses of either cultural force: "Mr. Dickens is a gentleman who has made authorship a successful profession. Having native genius he has also had the tact to put that genius in good marketable shape, and has in consequence become a literary and commercial success. He should therefore be treated by our citizens as one gentleman treats another who has established a claim to our attention and respect, not as a demigod to be worshipped, or a monster to be stared at" ("Dickens Coming" n.pag.).

the role of the authorial personality by which he had originally presented himself, Dickens identified a way to address the inherent tensions in his relationship with the public and further reconstruct the boundaries by which legitimate authorship could be performed in a new cultural field.<sup>30</sup>

Dickens was first compelled to read for pay after he witnessed the extraordinary success of the public readings he gave in the name of charity. Flooded with endless invitations to read, he would perform these shows for four years to considerable acclaim, but without any significant financial gain for himself. The benefit readings marked an important moment in Dickens's career, because they showed just how strongly Dickens's celebrity resonated with the public. Fitzsimons notes that "[w]hen Dickens appeared on the platform [during his first charitable reading], the audience were not certain what he was going to do. A 'Reading' sounded dull and most of them had braved the weather simply to look at the famous author" (18). Essentially, Dickens had conceived of a new way to convert his literary capital into enormous economic capital: "... [Beale] called to know whether it was possible to arrange anything in the way of Readings for this autumn—say, six months," he wrote to Forster. "Large capital at command. Could produce partners, in such an enterprise, also with large capital. Represented such. Returns would be enormous" (Dickens, *Letters* 8: 535). While it is true that Dickens launched these tours in part out of a desire to escape sundry personal problems, I believe that the entertainment pattern of the day, coupled with Dickens's consciousness of his celebrity power, also invites us to interpret them as Dickens's shrewd way of capitalizing on an ideology of authorship that was growing more reliant on the overlap between celebrity

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<sup>30</sup> By performing scheduled shows, Dickens could dictate when and for how long the public could see him.

and commodity cultures.<sup>31</sup> As a once-aspiring professional actor and an avid fan of both the circus and theater, Dickens was acutely aware of how celebrity, performance, and exhibition could be transformed into mass entertainment and self-promotion, and how rewarding it could often be: “The Reading idea that I had, some time ago, sticks to me,” Dickens wrote to F.M. Evans in early 1858. “Let me read where I will, an effect is produced which seems to belong to nothing else; and the number of people who want to come, cannot by any means be got in” (Dickens, *Letters* 8: 533). After discussing the idea with a number of friends and colleagues and soliciting their opinions on the matter, Dickens officially performed the first paid reading in 1858, an endeavor that by nature explicitly *invited* the public to consume him but in a controlled and restrictive manner. The readings allowed Dickens to expand the boundaries of legitimate authorship, because they presented him with a new celebrity apparatus to stage literally his persona and reunite it with the novel-commodity. The readings would not only significantly increase all forms of capital and develop his figurative friendship with the public in a more intimate way, but they would also resolve the inherent tensions in his relationship with audiences by allowing his public image—rather than his person—to be consumed and displayed. These efforts, though, were complicated by the commercialized culture in which they

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<sup>31</sup> Fitzsimons writes that the Birmingham Readings “came at a time when [Dickens] was seeking distractions of any kind” (21). A number of troubles fell upon Dickens at this time. Not only was he getting older, but he had experienced difficulty in finishing his most recent novel, *Bleak House*, which forced him “to face the thought that what had been his greatest talent might some day fail him” (21). Additionally, his marriage to Catherine was far from blissful, and marital anxieties led to a separation in 1858 under very public and dubious circumstances. Dickens had also begun relations with Ternan, and this scandalous affair partially damaged his reputation at the time.



were produced, for some critics would argue that Dickens was not expanding his authorial role, but degrading it entirely by engaging in self-commodification through the workings of the cultural field of mass entertainment. This disapproval inevitably sparked a cultural debate over the nature of Dickens's readings, a conversation that was significantly rendered more complex by Dickens's incredible success, performative theatrics, and appeals for respectability.

The commercial success that Dickens's readings experienced across Great Britain and America was nothing short of remarkable. Even before it was definitively settled whether he would read in America, Horace Greeley of the *New York Tribune* posited that "The fame as a novelist which Mr. Dickens has already created in America, and which at the *best* has never yielded him anything particularly munificent or substantial, is become his capital stock in the present enterprise" (qtd in Dolby 123, author's emphasis). Greeley's prediction would soon be proven correct, for the effect that Dickens's tours had on America alone was clearly commensurate with his celebrity: the *Philadelphia Press* called it "The Dickens sensation" ("The Philadelphia Press" n.pag.); the *Salt Lake Daily Telegraph* referred to it as "The Dickens Mania" ("The Dickens Mania" n.pag.); the *Lowell Daily Citizen and News* dubbed it "The Dickens fever" ("[The Dickens fever ran high in Brooklyn, N.Y.]" n.pag.), and the *Daily Cleveland Herald* described it as "The Dickens Furore" ("The Dickens Furore in Boston" n.pag.). Indeed, Dickens's tours caused what might be called a cultural frenzy: thousands lined up before the ticket booths with mattresses, pillows, and food in preparation for a long night of waiting to buy a ticket to his shows; the police were called in on more than one occasion to break up riots that were known to occur among those who competed for tickets, and Boston even

nicknamed their town “Boz-town” to show their affection for the famed author. But the tours’ commercial success and their enormous popularity with the public was, for some, a clear sign that artistic decorum no longer prevailed in Dickens’s career. Some critics and friends were distressed by his decision to perform in the field of entertainment and argued that the readings were in bad taste, especially since they were being performed in a time when spectacle for financial gain was ubiquitous. Though Dickens made claims about the respectability of the readings and even argued “that the public exhibition of oneself takes place equally, whosoever may get the money,” he could not rid them of the fear that they would cheapen his status as an author and compromise his reputation indefinitely (Dickens, *Letters* 8: 534).

We can attribute much of this criticism to the growing concerns over the questionable nature of mass entertainment, a complex matrix of industries that had begun to dominate the popular imagination at this time. In *Professional Savages*, Roslyn Poignant offers a fitting cultural context for nineteenth-century amusement when she writes that “Western systems of mass entertainment and education, involving display and performance . . . marked the emergence of the modern world as spectacle, as it was configured in the fairgrounds, circuses, exhibition halls, theatres, and museum spaces” (7). Within this “modern world as spectacle” emerged Barnum, the American showman largely responsible for popularizing the human being as both a performative spectacle and a commodified exhibition.<sup>32</sup> The presentation of peculiar entities became a lucrative form of mass entertainment through Barnum’s enterprises as he displayed them in his

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<sup>32</sup> Barnum also presented in his shows and exhibitions animals and peculiar objects, such as the FeeJee Mermaid.

traveling acts and museums. By mid-century, audiences had long been confronted with countless performances and “freakish” exhibits that demanded their gaze. Consequently, they had become well accustomed to seeing an attraction in its most exploited and spectacular condition—a state of being that necessarily reduced it to a commodified state.<sup>33</sup> Barnum, then, should be credited not only with altering the value and production of popular entertainment, but also with helping to create the public’s expectations of it. In *The Victorian Freak Show*, Lillian Craton argues that in an effort to align his authorship with the changing conditions of popular taste, Dickens constructed his novels much like Barnum performed a show by “[relocating] the fairground tradition of bodily spectacle to the realm of fiction” (47). Focusing on Dickens’s theatrical aesthetics and the physical oddities of his characters such as Quilp, Nell, Little Dorrit, and Jenny Wren, Craton posits that Dickens portrayed his characters’ grotesqueness and littleness in highly visual, spectacular, and sentimental terms in order to perform his social criticism through the visual if not freakish impact of his novels. In other words, Dickens had, in some fashion, always acted as an “authorial showman,” one who saw his characters as performative exhibitions of Victorian visual amusement. (Craton 48). I call attention to Craton’s analysis here because it further shows that the readings were simply a more dramatized and performative act of the very showmanship that Dickens had long been performing in his career through the novel-commodity.

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<sup>33</sup> Barnum’s shows were such lucrative productions across America and England that a number of competing entrepreneurs followed suit by launching their own venues and acts. Even Queen Victoria, during her coronation in 1837, hosted a variety of “menageries, waxworks, marionettes, conjurors, acrobats, jugglers ... [and] peep-shows ...” as well as “a display of giants, dwarfs, the woman with two heads, the living skeletons and the pig-faced lady” all for the public’s amusement (Craton 25, qtd in Michael Diamond, *Victorian Sensation* 9). Fourteen years later, Victoria’s husband, Prince Albert, brilliantly presented England to an estimated six million visitors at The Great Exhibition, the ultimate exhibitionary production.

While I do not mean to suggest that Dickens's readings were tantamount to a Barnum production, or a freak show in general, they were certainly partially constructed and received along similar lines. Barnum therefore deserves more attention here not only because his name appears periodically alongside Dickens's in some of the reviews, opinions, and books that took the reading tours as their subject, but also because we can identify at least two specific instances that link him to Dickens's readings.<sup>34</sup> Much of the commercial success of Dickens's first tours can be attributed to his manager, Arthur Smith, whose talent for increasing Dickens's publicity can be traced directly to Barnum.<sup>35</sup> Smith was the brother of Albert Smith, the infamous writer and Mont Blanc showman who had been made privy to many of Barnum's methods of self-promotion during a visit with him in 1844.<sup>36</sup> Albert found Barnum's publicity strategies so valuable that he employed them for his own purposes with the help of Arthur, who acted as his business manager, and who would later make use of them to promote Dickens's first tour. Almost ten years after the first tour, Dickens's last manager, George Dolby, traveled to America on Dickens's behalf to determine whether the readings' prospective earnings would be favorable enough to warrant an American tour.<sup>37</sup> While Dolby first "[obtained] the

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<sup>34</sup> Just as Dickens's readings would help promote his writings and celebrity, Barnum's own enterprises would be used to publicize his autobiography.

<sup>35</sup> The first tour would begin in 1858; the second tour began in 1867 and included the American readings.

<sup>36</sup> Albert Smith was a friend of Dickens, an association that greatly "pained" Forster because of Smith's line of work (Fitzsimons 32). Fitzsimons credits Smith with being the one "who had started the fashion of writers appearing on the public platform" (31). While Forster tried to dissuade Dickens from embarking on reading tours, Smith enthusiastically encouraged him.

<sup>37</sup> Dolby was officially Dickens's third tour manager. Smith died in 1861 and was replaced by a man named Headland who was unsatisfactory to Dickens. Dolby was hired in 1866.

opinions of the leading literary men ...” (122), such as Horace Greeley, the editor of the *New York Tribune*, he also sought out America’s most popular ““showmen”” (125). Dolby explains that “[f]oremost amongst these was P.T. Barnum, the evergreen showman, whose opinion on all matters connected with public life is priceless” (125). That the opinions of Greeley and Barnum were equally valuable to Dolby highlights the dichotomous nature of Dickens’s enterprise and more generally reveals how closely celebrity, literature, and entertainment were beginning to intersect at this time.

Barnum’s role in helping Dickens to determine whether he should make a “second coming” to America is worth noting because in some ways the successes of Dickens’s capital ventures were dependent on the changing conditions of entertainment so clearly established by Barnum’s ubiquitous shows.<sup>38</sup> This was of particular importance to Dickens whose decision to launch an American tour was based on the potential financial success it held for him: “Have no fear that anything will induce me to make the experiment, if I do not see the most forcible reasons for believing that what I could get by it, added to what I have got, would leave me a sufficient fortune” (qtd in Fitzsimons 103-04). In order to succeed in America, Dickens had to cater somewhat to popular form and public interests, both of which had been influenced in part by Barnum. In other words, although Dickens’s readings were generally characterized by their respectability, restraint, and sympathy, they were nonetheless driven by the same market dynamics and audiences from which Barnum’s amusements gained their success. At times, these commonalities called attention to the impropriety and commodification so clearly associated with the popular amusement against which Dickens’s readings competed. For

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<sup>38</sup> Dickens’s American reading tour was popularly dubbed “the second coming of Dickens.”

instance, the *New York Herald* could not help but view Dickens's shows within the same framework in which other leading figures of Victorian entertainment were conducting their business:

The Readings of the author [Dickens], at St. Martin's Hall, of the "Chimes," the "Cricket on the Hearth," and other Christmas stories, continue as popular as ever, and promise to be as permanent an institution as Albert Smith's Mont Blanc, the American Circus, Christy's Minstrels, or Queen Victoria's annual donation to the British people in the shape of an increase of the population—and taxation.<sup>39</sup> ("The Saxonia and Europa's News" n.pag.)

But this review's implied rebuke of Dickens is mild in comparison to other kinds of criticism that he would receive. Because his shows shared common ground with the entertainment produced by the likes of Barnum, he made himself suspect on more than one occasion.<sup>40</sup> Dolby recounts that an early request to secure the Town Hall in an English town manifested the concerns that Dickens's readings registered for some, since Dolby received a letter that requested him "to supply [the functionary of the Town Hall] with full particulars of the *nature* of Mr. Dickens's *entertainment*" (Dolby 79, author's

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<sup>39</sup> This reference to Queen Victoria is odd but appropriate for a culture invested in commodities and industry. Note that Victoria's *annual* childbearing is alluded to as an "institution," one that operates on a fixed schedule that then leads to a monetary return via taxation. This act renders her, like Dickens, an industrial means of production.

<sup>40</sup> In an advertisement of Dickens's readings, the *Daily Cleveland Herald* remarked: "Charles Dickens is now daily expected in Boston, and in a few weeks will arrive in New York where he doubtless expects to reap a harvest of greenbacks by his entertainments. In a city where every place of amusement has its patrons, from the Italian opera down to the Barnum Gorilla, we may expect to see Charles Dickens draw houses which will astonish his most sanguine friends over the water" ("[Charles Dickens is now daily expected in Boston]" n.pag.).

emphasis). Taken aback, Dolby consulted Dickens who “enjoyed the joke immensely, and greatly relished the idea that the Town Hall might be polluted by the appearance of a fat woman, or a dwarf, or some other monstrosity” (Dolby 80). The functionary’s concerns that Dickens’s shows would be vulgar signals how strongly popular entertainment produced by the likes of Barnum was in the public consciousness at this time. Sensationalized live figures such as Joice Heth and General Tom Thumb were defining the tenor of popular amusement and public expectation, making it plain why Dickens’s readings could be thought of in such dubious terms.<sup>41</sup> To make matters worse, some even contended that the mania caused by Dickens’s readings was turning the public itself into a scandalous Barnum production: “This incident [of waiting in line] at Brooklyn goes to show what a passion we Americans have for lionizing strangers, particularly if they have any claim to eminence in literature or otherwise,” reported the *Lowell Daily Citizen and News*. “That Mr. Dickens should be heard by full houses is all right and proper, but this ado of a hundred people sitting up all night beforehand, really has the look of a sensational affair, in which Barnum may have had a hand” (“[The Dickens fever ran high in Brooklyn, N.Y.]” n.pag.). The dangerous effects that sensational or theatrical entertainment could have on the public were a major cause for the contentious debates that surrounded mass entertainment at this time. That Dickens’s shows were risking the public’s respectability by turning them into a Barnum production

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<sup>41</sup> General Tom Thumb (Charles Sherwood Stratton) was a little person whose unusually small size made him a perfect spectacle for Barnum’s entertainment business. Under Barnum, General Tom Thumb entertained and performed for audiences during his tours across Europe and America in the 1840s. Barnum even transformed Tom Thumb’s wedding to Lavinia Warren into a spectacle, as it was turned into a play and performed by children at various events for fundraising and entertainment purposes.

was a serious moral concern for his critics, especially since his audience primarily consisted of the middle class who were expected to uphold respectable values.

While the town functionary in England simply *imagined* the possibility that Dickens's readings might show some resemblance to a disreputable kind of amusement, there were other critics who discerned a clear likeness. Like Barnum, Dickens toured across Great Britain and America from one city to another, engaging in a considerable amount of self-promotion and exhibition and sometimes making thousands of dollars in one show alone. In response to these similarities, the editors of the *Derby Mercury* offered the most serious condemnation of Dickens's commercial efforts by presenting, in no light terms, how seriously they believed Dickens had betrayed legitimate art and respectability by exhibiting and profiting from his celebrity. In their opinion, what made the tours worse was that they could not even be categorized in the same vein as its commercial rivals since:

In ordinary lectures or readings, the journalist has nothing to do with the personal appearance of the Lecturer or Reader. He criticises his performance, but not himself. In the case of Mr. Dickens, however, it is otherwise. Mr. Dickens comes to show himself, that is what people pay for, and Mr. Dickens, as his own showman, makes every provision that the public may enjoy a good stare at the lion . . . . Mr. Dickens carries with him an artistically arranged apparatus for framing himself . . . . [I]n front of Mr. Dickens are . . . face-lights . . . throwing their light full on the face and person of the reader. For our own part, we confess that as admirers of many of Mr. Dickens' works . . . we regret that their author should have



been induced thus to make merchandise of himself, and to pander to one of the lowest tastes of the time, viz., the hunting after notabilities. We regret it for Mr. Dickens' sake, because we cannot but feel that he will lose influence as a social teacher when he has come down from the *omne ignotum pro magnifico*, and has exhibited himself to the public for so many shillings a head . . . . And we regret Mr. Dickens' exhibition also on this other ground, that he voluntarily takes a lower place in the public of letters than the world was ready to accord to him, when he stoops to court the suffrages of public favour among such rivals as Messrs. T.P. [sic] Barnum, Albert Smith, or the Gordon Cumming . . . . Mr. Dickens has seriously damaged the future of his reputation and influence, and that he has done what in him lay to lower the position of literary men in the social scale. ("Charles Dickens in Derby" 5)

Although this review articulates sentiments not widely shared by the majority of critics and audiences who took an interest in the readings, it echoes the concerns that Forster had presented to Dickens in 1846. More specifically, it confirms how high the personal and artistic stakes were for Dickens to venture into this new cultural field since the readings presented an even greater risk that he would damage, rather than bolster, the cultural influence he had secured as a respected novelist. What made Dickens's readings particularly offensive to these critics was that all was within his control, as he was *deliberately* turning himself into a commodity for purchase. This control is apparent in the publicity that Dickens used to promote his shows since he presented *himself* through the same means of publicity that had, at one time, been employed strictly for the sale of

literal commodities. Dickens's emblematic orange posters that were circulated en masse to promote his tours would have been a familiar sight to the reading public who were often presented with them at the advent of a new novel. In this instance, the terms by which both Dickens and the novel-commodity were presented were almost visibly and rhetorically identical.

As the *Derby Mercury's* review shows, Dickens's readings became enveloped in a small but important cultural debate over the proper role of the writer, thus rendering them a larger extension of the debate first begun in 1846 between Dickens and Forster. In fact, the performance of reading as entertainment seemed to require much cultural justification. Almost ten years later, as though in direct response to the *Derby Mercury*, the *North American and United States Gazette* argued that:

It may be said that this rather degrades art to place a genius like that of Charles Dickens in the position of a literary showman, and Mr. Dickens himself . . . appears to have been apprehensive lest something of this kind should attach to his visit. But in England he has been held to be a great reader, and wherever he might go for that purpose, his readings have always been popular . . . . Wherever he might read in public there would be an uncontrollable rush to see him, because of his antecedents; and of the mixed audiences now thronging his entertainments curiosity may be said to attract quite as many as the fame of his readings. The same may be said of any extraordinary entertainment and therefore this cannot be considered as properly degrading art or literature. ("Dickens in Philadelphia" n.pag.)

Interestingly, while the *Derby Mercury* argued that public curiosity and mass popularity made Dickens's shows a tasteless form of entertainment, this review posits that they are the very elements that uphold Dickens's respectability. Adding to the controversy was the *Philadelphia Press*, which offered more or less a conflation of these two reviews by calling the readings a "genteel exhibition" and explaining that "[Dickens] is not exactly a Christian writer, but then to hear him is not like going to the opera, and it is the fashionable thing besides" ("The Philadelphia Press" n.pag.). That many people had trouble defining the nature of Dickens's tours and determining exactly how they affected his reputation as an author suggest that Dickens had partially succeeded in manipulating the ostensibly clear boundary that divided the authorial celebrity and its corollary of authorial commodification. Furthermore, it reveals how extensively the cultural fields of mass entertainment, celebrity, and legitimate authorship were beginning to coalesce in the public sphere. This change is alluded to in the review by the *North American and United States Gazette*, for it proffers that Dickens's readings consisted "of . . . mixed audiences," and that the popularity of his shows was what made them a venture above degradation ("Dickens in Philadelphia" n.pag.). Though the middle class formed the majority of Dickens's audience, his readings were also known to attract luminaries such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Mark Twain. Dolby also writes that at the first reading in Washington, DC, those present included "the English ambassador . . . [and] all the ambassadors representing other countries, and a large proportion of Congressmen, and those connected with the Legislative Assembly" (232). That such notable figures frequently came to see Dickens on the stage is a marker of the

prestige and cultural power that he held in a public sphere that now generously accommodated celebrity culture and social capital.

In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Pierre Bourdieu calls attention to the tension between restricted production (high art) and large-scale production (popular art) and argues that mass success often precludes the appropriation of symbolic power.<sup>42</sup> Though Dickens's novels were not defined as high art, novel writing by the mid-nineteenth century was generally considered a respectable profession, especially in comparison to popular amusement. Despite the criticism that Dickens faced, I argue that he successfully attenuated if not resolved this tension by increasing and expanding his symbolic power in spite of the constraints of the field.<sup>43</sup> Because Dickens was assuming and performing his characters on stage, he found a way for audiences to consume not the real man himself, but the personality that he had marketed since the latter days of *Pickwick*.<sup>44</sup> That this was an enterprise designed to showcase more of Dickens's authorial personality—not Charles Dickens proper—is evidenced by the modesty he demonstrated as he took the stage: “[The Americans] are all so accustomed to do public things with a flourish of trumpets, that the notion of my coming in to read without somebody first flying up and delivering an ‘Oration’ about me, and flying down again and leading me in, is so very unaccountable to them, that sometimes they have no idea until I open my lips that it can

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<sup>42</sup> The term “high art” is perhaps a misnomer for Dickens's novels. While the novel had certainly gained more respectability in the nineteenth century, it was still a form of entertainment.

<sup>43</sup> I assert that this resolution was possible due to the fact that commodity culture and performativity were now so closely tied to celebrity status and literary success, which weakened the tension between high and mass art.

<sup>44</sup> Because Dickens's celebrity was formed through a personality that was marketed through the novel-commodity, the public found it difficult or even unnecessary to divorce Dickens from the characters he had created.

possibly be Charles Dickens” (Dickens, *Letters* 12: 13). And even the *American and Gazette* remarked in its review: “There is so little attempt at display, but such a vivid portraying of his characters, and such a quiet unobtrusiveness of himself, that we almost forget the great Charles Dickens whom we stood up from daylight to get a ticket to see, and are wholly absorbed in the changing experiences of old Scrooge” (“Mr. Dickens Last Night” n.pag.). The readings thus afforded audiences the opportunity to increase both their physical proximity to and level of engagement with the characters that Dickens histrionically revived, particularly since Dickens requested that they participate in the performances by vocally expressing their emotions to the readings as they wished. This kind of interaction between the author and his public exemplifies Michael Slater’s argument that Dickens’ readings were not cheap theatrics but “[performances that] allowed him literally to ‘write a book in company’ in a more literal and even more exhilarating way” (*Charles Dickens* 467). Slater interprets the readings as a more collaborative and immediate form of writing that allowed Dickens to temper his works in accordance with his audience’s sensibilities. Known to scrutinize his audiences’ reactions to his performances (much like he evaluated their responses to the published installments of his novels), Dickens would at times “[improvise] new text as he was actually reading,” a performative device that not only gave audiences “the thrilling feeling of hearing a book being written for them there and then,” but also provided Dickens with the immediate satisfaction of hearing and seeing them delight in his performance (Slater, *Charles Dickens* 467). Because the readings were constructed by mechanisms and strategies that were similar, if not more intense, to those upon which Dickens relied in his literary career, they strengthened the “hermeneutic of intimacy” between Dickens and the

public, but did so in a manner that did not infringe on his privacy. Thus, by turning to mass entertainment to stage this personality for a fee, Dickens was engaging in no more self-commodification than he had as a writer who had marketed a personality to sell a novel. If anything, Dickens had tapped into a new field to re-engage and thus redefine the very terms that had conditioned the making of his authorial labor.

Although Dickens adapted his readings somewhat to the conditions by which mass entertainment generally succeeded, he ultimately hoped his readings would be remembered for their artistic value. This desire is most clearly apparent in Dickens's decision to perform "Sikes and Nancy," a reading that was rather uncharacteristic of his usual program in that it depicted the violent murder of Nancy from *Oliver Twist* and thus created the effects of visible sensation that a Barnum show was almost always guaranteed to produce. Dickens seriously began to consider performing the "Sikes and Nancy" reading in 1868, believing that it would sustain the public's interest in his last shows, the Farewell Readings. But the performance was so horrifying that Dickens thought hard about his decision to read it publically. Unsure "whether the Art of the thing ["Sikes and Nancy"] should exalt the horror, or deepen it," Dickens offered a trial reading to a select group of people (Dickens, *Letters* 12: 218).<sup>45</sup> Dolby noted that the audience was "awe-stricken" by it, and that "[o]ne visitor, a celebrated critic, expressed an opinion as to the danger of giving the Reading before a mixed audience, *as he had an irresistible desire to scream*" (351, author's emphasis). But it was the actress Mrs. Keely who summed up the general consensus when she told Dickens that: "the public have been wanting a sensation for a few years—and now they've got it!" (Dickens, *Letters* 12: 224). Once

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<sup>45</sup> Dickens's uncertainty here registers just how fine and flexible the lines between cheap public amusement and artistic entertainment were at this time.

“Sikes and Nancy” was added to Dickens’s repertoire, it became a phenomenal success with audiences. As Dickens’s most “awful” reading, it reveals how earnestly Dickens sought to sustain public interest in his enterprise by appealing to their enthusiasm for sensation as long as it could be conducted through legitimately artistic means (Dickens, *Letters* 12: 248). “[I]t was quite understood,” Dickens explained to Forster, “that I wanted to leave behind me the recollection of something very passionate and dramatic, done with simple means, *if the art would justify the theme*” (Dickens, *Letters* 12: 220, my emphasis).

The “Sikes and Nancy” reading is one instance where we can locate a major division between Dickens’s and Barnum’s enterprises: Barnum’s appeal to sensationalism was often performed through unscrupulous methods to attract his audience, while Dickens attempted to uphold some form of artistic decorum through his refusal to perform sensation gratuitously. He argued that the passionate and carefully rehearsed performance of the brutal murder would articulate even more forcefully the moral that he had so clearly embedded in the narrative of *Oliver Twist*. Thus, while Dickens appealed to sensational effect in this reading, it operated primarily as an entertaining device with which to present the harrowing social and moral injustice of Nancy’s murder. As one reviewer attested from the *North American and United States Gazette*, “[the readings] are familiar—sometimes homely, sometimes repulsive. But they are human, and their humanity raises them from the ordinary level of fiction, and gives them to move among us as realities, little if at all removed from our own experiences”

(“[Mr. Dickens read from *Nicholas Nickleby*]” n.pag.).<sup>46</sup> A dramatic reading of the murder thus changed the conditions by which the story’s moral could be presented and by which readers could sympathize with Nancy. In other words, it allowed Dickens to expand his authorial role as a social novelist by using the public stage to “rewrite” old works. The performance of “Sikes and Nancy” lent to *Oliver Twist* a new kind of meaning, one that not only gave relevancy to a social concern first presented in the novel over thirty years prior, but one that made the novel’s moral more suitable for audiences whose tastes and interests had considerably changed since the late 1830s when *Oliver Twist* originally appeared. Specifically, it made the public literal witnesses to Nancy’s murder, thereby significantly increasing their participatory role in it and intensifying their sense of moral indignation and social responsibility on her behalf. While the novel itself is replete with theatrical and pathetic moments, Dickens’s performance, that he “got up with great pains and elaboration” (Dickens, *Letters* 12: 224) and “[polished] . . . minutely” (Dickens, *Letters* 12: 259), added considerably to these dynamics. In fact, the performance was so intensely dramatic that Dickens admitted that it “horrified myself” (Dickens, *Letters* 12: 224), and even remarked to W.P. Frith that “[the performance] “is horribly like, I am afraid! I have a vague sense of being ‘wanted,’ as I walk about the streets” (Dickens, *Letters* 12: 221). The timbre of Dickens’s voice, coupled with his wild gesticulations, character mimicry, dramatic flair, voice inflections, and facial gestures completely captivated the public, members of whom were often found holding their breath out of the sheer horror that the scene induced. Some even said that before them on the stage was not in fact Dickens, but a monstrous Fagin and an even more malevolent

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<sup>46</sup> While the reviewer was not specifically referring to “Sikes and Nancy,” his words are relevant to it.



Sikes. The *Belfast News-Letter* in particular expressed just how powerful Dickens's physical gestures could be when it observed: "In [Dickens's] ever-active hand an unlimited power of illustration resides. Frequently a mere motion of the hand shed a hitherto un-dreamt-of meaning upon a whole passage, giving you the idea that this member is to Dickens what the wand is to the familiar fairy" ("Mr. Charles Dickens in Belfast" n.pag.). The performance of "Sikes and Nancy" is one instance, then, of the workings of Bourdieu's claim that "[t]he meaning of a work . . . changes automatically with each change in the field within which it is situated for the spectator or reader" (*Field of Cultural Production* 31). And Dickens's argument that art should ultimately prevail over sensation helps to illustrate how the transformation of a novel from print to authorial performance could further expand the field of entertainment to accommodate critically-esteemed authors.

Dickens maximized the visibility of his authorial brand not only by transforming his novels into public performances, but also by turning these performances into saleable books. At the beginning of his tour, audiences were quite unsure what a reading by Charles Dickens would entail, and they often brought their own copies of the novels whose titles appeared on the program so that they could follow along. It became quickly apparent, though, that Dickens had prepared particular versions of these novels which were more adaptable to a dramatic and short performance.<sup>47</sup> Ironically, these special editions originated from his efforts to retaliate against pirates who sought to commodify the readings for their own profit. Planning on transcribing and selling the readings to a public gone wild with Dickens mania, these men's efforts to appropriate and disseminate

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<sup>47</sup> A performance would often last two hours, though more than one story would be performed.

the capital that Dickens had gained through his tours reveal just how culturally vulnerable celebrities like Dickens could be. His celebrity was so successfully fashioned and sustained that it is easy to see how his development from writer to personality to commodity to brand turned him into a lucrative industry from which others could substantially profit.<sup>48</sup> Within this new cultural field of performative reading, Dickens aggressively sought to impede any form of piracy, issuing the printed readings with his publishers, Ticknor & Fields, and selling them at a significantly cheaper cost at the performances and in bookstores alike:

. . . [E]very bookseller's window was stacked up with copies of Ticknor & Fields' new edition of Dickens, to the temporary displacement of Longfellow's 'Dante' and Dr. Holmes' 'Guardian Angel; the cigar shops came out as one man with their brands all now christened, and nothing is smoked, chewed or taken in scuff to-day but 'Little Nell Cigars,' Mr. Squeer's Fine Cut, the Mantilini Plug, and the Genuine Pickwick Snuff; while at every turn, in the illustrated papers, in the hotel office, and in all the shop windows, the new portrait of Mr. Dickens is to be seen . . .  
 ("Charles Dickens. His First Readings in America" n.pag.)<sup>49</sup>

The sale of these editions offered Dickens a real means to modify the value of the literary text and reconfigure the terms by which the reading of his novels could be

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<sup>48</sup> Dolby mentions that one "enterprising individual made a point of staying in the same hotel with ourselves, so as to be able to move as we moved" (191).

<sup>49</sup> Speculators and "pirates" took advantage of Dickens's readings by reselling tickets at higher prices, copying and selling his reading excerpts, adapting his work to plays, and promoting his novels in bookstores for profit.

appreciated. Taking into account Mole's assertion that "[t]he visual and verbal texts that constructed the branded identity were bolstered by the celebrity's social appearances," I argue that Dickens, as the creator and performer of these editions, exerted considerable authority over the *meaning* of them (18). While reading publically may have been nothing new, an author publically reading his own work certainly was, and his presence and performance inevitably affected the meaning that this work produced. Fully conscious of the public's insatiable appetite for spectacle, Dickens knew that while his name could attract crowds, an exciting show would undoubtedly draw in more. To the audiences' delight, Dickens took his novels already influenced by melodrama and theatrics and turned them into what Andrews calls "quasi-theatrical binges" (40). His attempt to cater to the public's interests in this way was a phenomenal success, and he took great pleasure in watching their reaction:

We have done exceedingly well since we have been out—with this remarkable (and pleasant) incident; that wherever I read twice, the turn-away is invariably on the second occasion. [The audience does not] quite understand beforehand what [the reading] is, I think, and expect a man to be sitting down in some corner, droning away like a mild bagpipe. In that large room at Clifton, for instance, the people were perfectly taken off their legs by the Chimes—started—looked at each other—started again—looked at me—and then burst into a storm of applause. (Dickens, *Letters* 8: 623)

The *North American and United States Gazette's* review of the readings echo Dickens's own observations, writing:

[W]e apprehend . . . that the readings of the author have given a subtler significance, a finer intelligence, more body and more point to many things that were swallowed up in the current of the story as a story, when read in our parlors and libraries. [Dickens] succeeds in conveying delicate discriminations of character or temper, by a look, by a tone, by a wave of the hand or bend of the body, that no type could convey. Last evening, Squeers grew into a viler and more nefarious being, we have no doubt, than he ever appeared to the mere readers. Smike's dread and suffering, and Mrs. Squeers' brutality were brought to a fuller light; the courage of Nicholas had a more pronounced expression, and John Booby was rendered more nobly aggressive than could have been the case previously. For then [*sic*], those who were present had not only the simulacrum, but the real thing. ("[Mr. Dickens read from Nicholas Nickleby]" n.pag.)

Characterized as "the real thing," the performances clearly allowed Dickens to maintain even more creative and literal ownership over his work and the characters with which the public were so familiar. By performing the texts as the authorial personality, Dickens altered the nature of the public's interpretations of these special editions, especially if their first reading of them took place during Dickens's own recital. By following the reading with the written text, audiences suspended their imaginative interpretations in favor of the meaning produced by Dickens's histrionic performance. Arguably, seeing "the real thing" made it more difficult for the public to resist or ignore these meanings in subsequent readings of the special editions or even in the original novels from which the performances were extracted.

The sale of these special editions raises questions about the value or the function of this literature and Dickens's authorship in general. For instance, could these dramatic adaptations be read as novels were read, or were they meaningless or less meaningful without Dickens's performance alongside them? An advertisement for these books more or less suggests the latter. After providing a brief summary of the readings that Dickens performed, the announcement explained:

The first of these [books that we have mentioned] is now too late for use here, save as a curiosity and suggestor of the full story. The others will be very convenient for those who attend the residue of the readings. Their enjoyment will be heightened if they peruse the work beforehand, so as to know what Mr. Dickens reads, and the enjoyment of others will not be marred if they fail to rustle the leaves during the reading. ("Mr. Dickens' Readings" n.pag.)

That the first book was considered "now too late for use" since it was no longer being performed in Dickens's shows indicates that the books were primarily meant to prepare the public for the readings, if not offer them a means to participate in them. Operating as a "suggestor" of the respective original texts from which they derived, it seems that the real value of the editions was their ability to allow Dickens to expand his authorial boundaries. As someone who had worried about his literary powers waning after the completion of *Bleak House* in 1853, Dickens mitigated this anxiety by revitalizing the market value of his past literary labor, a strategy that ultimately renewed and increased his cultural and economic capital on the market. Of course, the sale of these dramatic adaptations was also Dickens's own way of adding to the larger cultural dissemination of

his work in a newer form, as the editions joined a host of other adaptations and variations of his repertoire that appeared primarily in the form of plays, *opera bouffes*, and various commodities, all of which exposed the degree to which commerce was being pulled toward both celebrity and commodification.<sup>50</sup>

A year after he began to consider reading for pay, Dickens proudly spoke of his success relative to *Pickwick* and its serial form: “My friends told me it was a low, cheap form of publication, by which I should ruin all my rising hopes; and how right my friends turned out to be, everybody now knows” (qtd in Deane 54). In what would seem to be an uncanny repetition of experience, the reading tours would also be fraught with claims of disrepute but would, in the end, serve to justify further Dickens’s legitimacy as a celebrated and respected author. But the similarities that *Pickwick* and the tours share are not uncanny at all, especially when we consider that both endeavors were constructed by the same discourse of celebrity and performed under the same terms and conditions, and that they both gave Dickens the means to redefine the limits and opportunities for esteemed authors at this time. Dickens found himself in such a cultural debate on more than one occasion precisely because he was working in and enthusiastically adapting to a time that endured major changes in the way that print culture, commodities, and audiences were produced and viewed in an expanding mass market. But more importantly, Dickens was triumphant in these battles because he recognized and worked with the way that these changes were increasingly drawing the commodity and celebrity

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<sup>50</sup> In a letter to Wilkie Collins, Dickens explained: “Wherever I go, they play my books, with my name in big letters. *Oliver Twist* was at Baltimore when I left it last Wednesday. *Pickwick* is here, and *Bob and the Carrier* are here. *Pickwick* was at New York too, when I last passed that way; so was *Our Mutual Friend*; so was *No Thoroughfare*” (Dickens, *Letters* 12: 31). Versions of Dickens’s and Collins’s play *No Thoroughfare* were also being performed illegally in America at this time.

closer together, a cultural overlap that helped form a new cultural field in which Dickens could fashion himself as one of the greatest modern celebrities the world had ever seen.

## CHAPTER 2

## THE (AUTHORIAL CELEBRITY) WOMAN QUESTION:

## HARRIET BEECHER STOWE'S (DOMESTIC, FEMININE) CELEBRITY

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Woman Question was an ongoing social debate that dominated the cultural consciousness in America and England. Derived from an ideology that emphasized a growing gender division and separate spheres, the debate was often settled by the enforcement of social codes that mandated women to perform domestic duties and demonstrate silence within the public realm.<sup>51</sup> Of course, such codes were only prescriptive, and while many women upheld them, the female authorial celebrity, by nature of her profession, could not. Occupying a delicate and contradictory position, the nineteenth-century female authoress confronted a cultural and social paradox that was generated by the concurrent development of gender ideology and celebrity culture. Specifically, while Victorian and Antebellum society demanded that women be both invisible and private, it simultaneously welcomed new technological advances in the literary industry, an increase in mass readership, and the effects of “Byromania,” all of which made authorship a much more publicized profession. These changes marked a turning point in authorship and its concomitant anxieties, especially for female writers, because they produced the writer as celebrity, a cultural role that was inherently at odds with the Victorian-American concept of a woman’s place. Not only did authoresses have to face the complications that arose from their heightened visibility in the public sphere, but celebrity culture increasingly necessitated that they *self-create* and

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<sup>51</sup> For a more detailed discussion on gender ideologies in nineteenth-century American culture, consult Barbara Welter’s essay “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860.”



market this exposure, too. By virtue of gender, women writers risked serious social stigmas if they generated too much publicity or the wrong kind of exposure, but in a market saturated with an abundance of commodities and dominated by male writers, they risked marginalization, if not obscurity, with too little promotion. As the responsibility to perform symbolic power now rested primarily with the writer, the ability to balance the dynamics of one's celebrity became increasingly crucial since "[a] successful career . . . [in the literary market] depended on being seen . . ." and known (Shires 199).

In *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter explains that to many Victorians, "it seemed that the nineteenth century was the Age of the Female Novelist," and indeed, literary history proves that many nineteenth-century women were celebrities in their own right (3). But how these women produced their celebrity during the early part of the century was often ignored, criticized, domesticated, or marginalized by contemporary public records. Within celebrity culture, women were often characterized as celebrity seekers, if not unruly fans since their propensity for hysteria made them particularly susceptible to uncontrollable enthusiasm.<sup>52</sup> Although women were traditionally identified as both the makers of male celebrities and the celebrity seekers, sexual and gender politics made it difficult for society to imagine them establishing and sustaining their own celebrity. When a woman's celebrity was acknowledged, it was often publicized in domestic and feminine terms, a strategy that "resolved" any possible controversy by placing the female writer back into her socially constructed role. The

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<sup>52</sup> Mrs. Leo Hunter in *The Pickwick Papers* is perhaps the most famous fictive example of a lionizer (see Chapter 1 for a more detailed discussion). Thackeray also depicts this gender stereotype in "The Lion Huntress of Belgravia" (1850), a story in which a female hostess declares: "They call me the Lion Huntress. I own that I love the society of the distinguished and the great . . . [i]ndeed what is there in life worth living for but the enjoyment of the society of men of talent and celebrity?" (324-325).

anxiety that celebrity came at the expense of true womanhood was expressed in popular literary magazines like *Fraser's*, a considerable problem since *Fraser's* was a “. . . journal [that] had much to do with the formation of celebrity discourse” in the early part of the century (Dames 29). By subordinating a woman’s literary merit to her domestic duties, magazines like *Fraser's* offered an incomplete narrative of women’s literary history, and provided no real information on the development and preservation of their fame. In light of these historical inaccuracies, this chapter takes as its study what I call the Authorial Celebrity Woman Question, or the Woman Question within the context of public authorship and the celebrity sphere. In order to trace the historical formation of the female celebrity, I first discuss the traditional rhetorical and social constructions of women writers by examining *Fraser's* “Gallery of Illustrious Literary Characters” (1830-38), a set of highly publicized literary portraits that featured some of Britain’s most famed writers, journalists, and critics.<sup>53</sup> While the “Gallery” featured only a handful of women, it nevertheless encouraged the stereotype that female authorial celebrity was merely a public display of a woman’s domestic labor and feminine sensibilities.<sup>54</sup> Written by William Maginn and illustrated by Daniel Maclise, the portraits, as David Higgins explains, “took a different approach to authorship: [in that they were] gossipy, iconoclastic, and more concerned with social appearance than artistic essence” (par. 1). In short, Maginn and Maclise ensured that their “subjects . . . were interesting as much for

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<sup>53</sup> Notable male authorial celebrities featured in the “Gallery” were William Wordsworth, Benjamin D’Israeli, Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Sir Walter Scott, and William Makepeace Thackeray.

<sup>54</sup> Higgins notes that “*Fraser's* was the best and most vibrant literary magazine of the 1830s, with similar sales to the two most powerful Reviews, the *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly*” (par. 2). The magazine ran from 1830-82.

what they *were* as for what they *wrote*” (Higgins par. 4, author’s emphasis). By emphasizing personae over artistry, the portraits not only illustrated a number of emerging concerns that confronted nineteenth-century female writers, but they also helped to set a dismissive attitude towards their authorship. In its attempt to present a more socially acceptable narrative of the nature of women’s fame, *Fraser’s* “Gallery” raises a number of issues with which this chapter is concerned. For instance, how did the nineteenth-century female writer construct authorship knowing that celebrity was often a product or a condition of the profession? Was it possible to be both a successful, famous author and a private, domestic woman at the same time? How did one legitimately generate enough publicity to sustain a literary career but still not violate the delicacy of middle-class decorum? Investigating these questions will not only help to elucidate what magazines like *Fraser’s* did not, but will also contribute to the growing scholarly interest in the ways in which celebrity culture informed notions of gender and identity.

Due to sundry social pressures and challenges that women authors faced at this time, the strategies that they employed to develop their celebrity are too varied to offer a general overview of this issue. I have thus chosen to focus much of my analysis on Harriet Beecher Stowe, a woman whose international celebrity can be attributed to her ability to configure for herself a space within the public sphere by manipulating established gender roles and allowing her husband to manage much of her public image during the initial stages of the development of her celebrity.<sup>55</sup> In 1852, Stowe rose to

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<sup>55</sup> In 1872, several years after Stowe had established her celebrity, she embarked on public readings throughout New England without the help of Calvin Stowe or her brother. Facing poor financial circumstances, Stowe agreed to read publically and face audiences, but admitted: “I am appalled by finding myself booked to read . . . I shrink from Tremont Temple [in Boston]” (qtd in Trautmann 280).

fame with the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a didactic novel that used the conventions of domestic and sentimental fiction to advocate for the abolition of slavery. By using her novel to articulate the ways in which slavery compromised the private sphere, Stowe domesticated politics and politicized feminine discourse, a narrative strategy that culturally authorized her to operate as a political mouthpiece for the anti-slavery movement.<sup>56</sup> Capitalizing on the novel's extraordinary popularity and notoriety on both sides of the Atlantic, Stowe transformed her authorial career into an anti-slavery cause, hoping "to keep the slavery agitation alive..." in America (Klingberg 547) and "[to revive] the . . . cause in Britain" (Hawley 236).<sup>57</sup> Her devotion to the abolitionist movement grew into a highly publicized political crusade, resulting in three publicity tours of Great Britain, during which she attended events held in her honor, socialized with the British aristocracy and celebrities, and "publically raised compensation for the royalties *Uncle Tom* lost in the absence of an international copyright law" (Meer 165).<sup>58</sup> Of similar caliber as the tours and public presentations given by the period's most acclaimed male writers, such as Dickens and Thackeray, these tours lent Stowe a

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The public readings signal Stowe's full participation in celebrity culture and her adjustment to new authorial roles as they were developed and refined at this time.

<sup>56</sup> A popular Uncle Tom legend tells of a meeting between Abraham Lincoln and Stowe in 1862, during which Lincoln supposedly declared to the authoress: "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war!" (qtd in Hedrick Hedrick vii). Whether these words were spoken or not, it is a story that is still retold to signal the larger cultural and political phenomenon that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has had since its publication.

<sup>57</sup> Although the slave trade was abolished in the British Empire as early as 1807, slavery was not illegalized until 1833 with the passing of the Slavery Abolition Act.

<sup>58</sup> Stowe visited Great Britain in 1853, 1856, and 1859. This chapter focuses much of its attention on Stowe's first tour since it directly followed the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and occurred during the height of Tom mania. More importantly, this tour marked the time in Stowe's career when she actively worked to channel her fame into celebrity.

significant opportunity to increase her celebrity by performing the tenets of true womanhood within the public realm. Often accompanied by her husband and brother, Stowe made a point to be seen standing silently behind her husband who more directly handled her public affairs, and to participate personally only in socially respectable events. Although these tours, along with a two-volume travelogue, helped Stowe transform herself into one of the most illustrious female celebrities of her time, the self-promotional efforts that both she and her husband Calvin made are often overlooked, including a publicity ploy that announced that Stowe had secretly met Queen Victoria during Stowe's second trip abroad. Because the story detailing the meeting between the two women is described in rather dubious terms, and because there is no real evidence to support its veracity, current resources suggest that the story was simply a marketing device intended to increase Stowe's transatlantic celebrity. Such publicity deserves to be studied outside of the heated slave debate and the Tom mania that have not only somewhat eclipsed the efforts that Stowe made towards establishing her celebrity, but are often credited for creating it. By basing her public persona on her womanly attributes, Stowe made herself one of the most powerful forces within celebrity culture, a dynamic that helped to expand the boundaries that had limited the opportunities of female authorship and negotiate the terms by which women could establish legitimate fame.

Though early nineteenth-century female writers' literary talent often commanded acclaim, popularity, and a wide readership, female authorship was nevertheless a subject of contention in a time governed by gender constraints. In this "Age of the Personality", as the nineteenth century was sometimes called, it became a common rhetorical device among male editors, writers, and critics to reconcile the female authorial celebrity with

gender norms by grounding a woman's celebrity within the cult of domesticity.<sup>59</sup> The concept that her fame was bound up in the performances of true womanhood was expressed in *Fraser's Magazine*, one of the premier journals that presented public figures as compelling personalities. In its "Gallery of Illustrious Literary Characters," *Fraser's* featured a total of eighty-one celebrity profiles, eight of which were women writers.<sup>60</sup> The considerable inequity between male and female profiles initially suggests that the literary market was simply monopolized by male writers, a truth to some degree considering the ease with which men at this time could occupy public professions. But a closer examination of the textual and visual representations of the eight women signal that the paucity of female portraits is a reflection of Maginn and Maclise's belief that females were less fit to be authors, much less celebrated personalities.

The first female portrait, appearing in March 1831, was of Caroline Norton, a poetess whose fame derived from works such as *The Sorrows of Rosalie* (1829) and *The Undying One* (1830). Though Norton was a well-established and esteemed poet, Maginn immediately downplays her authorial talent in favor of her feminine delicacies and domestic work.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> In "Novels of the Season. Batch the Second," Maginn offers a review of some of the most popular and esteemed female writers of the time, but the praise he extends is primarily based on their compliance not to "wander into . . . unfeminine paths" (qtd in Fisher 119). In his review, Maginn declares: "[t]he most considerable and current writers of the day are females. There is Mrs. Norton, the sprightly, beautiful, and poetical—L.E.L., the enthusiastical, Sapphoish, and sentimental—Mary Mitford, the Teniers of fair-fingered scribblers—Mrs. Hemans, the graceful, harmonious, and touching—Miss M.A. Browne, who uses her verses as little girls in pinafores use their skipping-ropes—Mrs. E.L. Bulwer, who wrote the greater portion of a novel which was mothered on Miss Spence of the "Bagman" celebrity . . . and, though last not least, Mrs. Charles Gore, author of *The Manners of the Day*, *Mothers and Daughters*, and *Pin-money*" (11).

<sup>60</sup> The eight female writers featured in *Fraser's* "Gallery" were Caroline Norton, Mary Russell Mitford, Countess of Blessington, Miss Landon, Harriet Martineau, Jane Porter, Lady Morgan, and Mrs. S.C. Hall.

<sup>61</sup> Norton's appearance in *Fraser's* preceded her divorce from George Norton in 1836.

Fair MRS. NORTON! Beautiful Bhouddist, as Balaam Bulwer baptizes you, whom can we better choose for a beginning of our illustrious literary portraits, when diverging from the inferior sex, our pencil dares to portray the angels of the craft? . . . . We display her as the modest matron making tea in the morning for the comfort and convenience of her husband . . . .

Authoresses are liable to many rubs. Mrs. Norton, it would appear by her picture, at breakfast, has escaped some. Happy in all the appliances of wealth and fame, there is nothing to alter the beauties of that symmetrical form. And her look, as depicted in the sketch before us, is enough to shew that she has not passed the night in any sublunary matters; but in the contemplation of that divine philosophy and sublime poetry which is best indulged in without intrusion. The consequences are upon her countenance. "Sweet are the sorrows of Rosalie." She is evidently composing a poem which no doubt will be as fluent, as clear, as lucid, and as warm as the liquid distilling from the urn. (Maginn, "Gallery of Illustrious Literary Characters. No. X. Caroline Norton" 222)

Both Maginn's description and Maclise's illustration of Norton make plain that although she is included in this series of literary figures for her writing, it is still an act that by virtue of her gender is subordinated to the feminine attributes that she physically displays (Figure 1). Indeed, Maginn is anything but discreet about his reasons for selecting her as the first female literary figure to promote; after all, she is a "Beautiful Bhouddist" who privileges her husband's needs over all else. The attention directed at her beauty is particularly noteworthy since, as Higgins notes, Maginn often "conflates references to



Figure 1. "Caroline Norton," *Fraser's Magazine* 3 (March 1831).



[these women's] *works* with descriptions of their *looks*, thereby ensuring that their public lives as writers cannot be separated from the inspection of their bodies by a masculine observer" (par. 13, author's emphasis).<sup>62</sup> Maginn uses Norton's authorial celebrity to display her sexuality for his male readers, a form of publicity that trivializes her intellect and questions her literary talent. More importantly, Norton's elegance, femininity, and beauty allow Maginn to market female authorship as a profession that is literally performed through her domestic responsibilities, a representation that makes her writing career a more fitting endeavor. It is noteworthy that her domestic role, as well as her subordination to male authority, is clearly put on public display, as she is seen pouring tea for her husband and sitting directly beneath a portrait of her grandfather whose captivating look stands in stark contrast to her feminine downward gaze.<sup>63</sup> Faced with the paradox of how to celebrate Norton without marring her respectability or compromising her femininity, Maginn and Maclise use both her fame and popularity to their advantage by *publically* resituating her authorship within the confines of prescriptive gender ideologies in order to show her more conventionally working at her craft.

Norton's profile gives a small indication of the way in which the "Gallery" exploits the dynamics of authorial fame in order to restrict the boundaries of legitimate female authorship and to encourage the marginal status of women writers within a

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<sup>62</sup> In this quote, Higgins is specifically referencing Maginn's "Regina's Maids of Honour," an essay appearing in *Fraser's "Gallery"* in 1836 which collectively discussed the eight women whose literary portraits had appeared in the "Gallery," along with Mrs. S.C. Hall, whose portrait was forthcoming. As Higgins explains, Maginn and Maclise employ the same rhetorical and artistic devices in "Regina's Maids of Honour" in order to keep these women writers in more domesticated, feminine spaces.

<sup>63</sup> Norton's grandfather was writer Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816).

growing literary profession. Maginn and Maclise express a widespread concern that stemmed from the fact that “[a] woman who wrote for publication threatened to collapse the ideal from which her authority was derived and to which her fidelity was necessary for so many other social institutions to work” (Poovey 125). By repeatedly trivializing women writers in popular print media, Maginn and Maclise worked to link these authoresses to an idealized version of the profession. Indeed, the language and rhetoric used to inscribe Norton within the private sphere are ubiquitous within six of the remaining seven female portraits. For instance, while Norton is busy pouring tea, Mary Russell Mitford’s authorial work is metaphorized as a domestic production of picking flowers and hopping to market, two acts that makes her authorship especially appealing to Maginn, who writes:

There are . . . very few girls in our village, or twenty villages beyond it, that can dress up so pretty a basket of good-looking and sweet-smelling natural flowers, all of the true English soil, not foreign and flaunting like the flaring dahlias that one class of bouquet-gatherers thrust under our noses with so much pretence, nor smelling of turf and whiskey like the strong-scented bog-lilies which are offered to us by the basket-women of the provinces; nor yet at all resembling the faded imitation roses picked up in second-hand saloons, and vended as genuine posies by draggletail damsels, who endeavour to pass themselves off as ladies’ maids, generally without character. And Mary's basket is arranged in so neat, so nice, so trim, so comely, or, to say all in one word, so very English a manner, that

it is a perfect pleasure to see her hopping with it to market.<sup>64</sup> (Maginn, “Gallery of Illustrious Literary Characters. No. XII Mary Russell Mitford” 410)

Although Linda H. Peterson is correct in pointing out that “. . . *Fraser’s* makes [women’s] participation in the literary field of the 1830s visible to its readership,” it is of the most problematic kind of visibility (20). If celebrity is “the condition of being . . . extolled or talked about . . .” it is significant that not only do Maclise and Maginn exploit these authoresses by using their fame to domesticate and publically disguise their talent, but they control the nature and scope of their celebrity by extolling and talking about them in erroneous and unfavorable terms (Marshall 5). Mitford, in fact, did not write because she had the luxuries of leisure and hobby, as Maginn would have the public believe, but because she faced pressing financial needs. Such an anxiety could not be advertised in a magazine that sought to mitigate the problem of celebrating a writer who could never fit the masculine model of authorship.

Whereas many of the “Gallery’s” male literary figures appear at their writing desks surrounded by books, candles, papers, and pens, the women all appear in private, domestic quarters in which the accoutrements of writing are minimized or entirely absent. Lady Morgan appears in full dress as she adjusts her bonnet in front of a mirror; the Countess of Blessington, whose intellect and beauty are compared to that of a cake, stands behind a chair looking down, as though on display; Jane Porter sits in a veil and full dress, stirring a cup of tea, and Mrs. S.C. Hall sits playing the piano, as a dog lounges by her feet. Though Maginn and Maclise do at times acknowledge the talent that these

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<sup>64</sup> The village reference is an allusion to Mitford’s *Our Village*, a five-volume work written between 1824-32.

female writers possess, they remain firm in their belief that the real appeal of a woman writer is her willingness to contribute to the notion that female authorship is a domesticated profession. By writing about subjects that neither violated proper social spheres nor transgressed their occupation as “angels of the craft,” these authors could be celebrated in print since they posed little to no threat to womanhood or to the other sex. (Maginn, “Gallery of Illustrious Literary Characters. No. X. Caroline Norton” 222)

Those who refused to perpetuate this myth by publically taking issue with more masculine-oriented concerns were ridiculed and “defeminized,” as illustrated in Maginn’s scathing portrait of Harriet Martineau. By publishing *Illustrations of Political Economy* in 1832, Martineau established herself as a social writer, or as a woman who challenged Maginn’s attempts to publically “[emphasise] the limitations of female genius” (Higgins par. 9). Offended by her intervention in public concerns, Maginn and Maclise publicized Martineau as an unattractive and unsexed spinster whose work threatened the very social framework they sought to uphold. In keeping with the other seven portraits, Martineau is shown in the private realm, but unlike her female counterparts, it is clear that she occupies a more masculine and austere space that stands in direct contrast to the elegant settings featured in the other female portraits. Though she sits by a fire tending to a cooking pot, Martineau is depicted less as a domestic woman and more as a monstrous witch stirring a concoction in a cauldron as a cat sleeps atop her shoulder. The trope of witchcraft is reinforced by her rather unwomanly, haggard, and unflattering appearance which is used to criticize visually her “endorsement of population control . . . by hinting at traditional beliefs that witches had the capability, and often the malice, to prevent conception” (Ernstrom 280; qtd in Higgins par. 11). The vitriolic treatment to which

Martineau is subjected in *Fraser's* is a product of the larger tensions that confronted the professionalization and the celebrity of female authors at this time. Indeed, as one who established her fame by calling attention to public matters such as overpopulation and labor strikes, Martineau's celebrity was particularly vexing to those who evaluated women's writings primarily by domestic and sexual aesthetics. Resenting her willingness to overstep her womanly boundaries, Maginn and Maclise use her fame to associate her publically with a perverse form of femininity, a marketing ploy that altered the dynamics of the rise of her celebrity by transforming her from a celebrated authoress to a less respectable (and less legitimate) notorious public figure (Figure 2).

*Fraser's* "Gallery" is an important starting point for any discussion on female authorial celebrities, for not only was it a highly successful series, but it was mimicked by a number of competing periodicals in years following.<sup>65</sup> The "Gallery" helped to establish the conditions under which female celebrity should thrive, and it reinforced the gender stereotypes that dictated the ways in which women *and* authoresses should behave. The generic, feminine image of the authorial celebrity that *Fraser's* promoted was particularly important since, as Judith Fisher explains, "[the magazine] understood clearly that an essential ingredient of celebritydom is the power to make fans want to imitate the celebrity" (110). The portraits, then, became a means for Maginn and Maclise to impose the ideology of domesticity not only on the women they publicized, but on their female readership, as well. By publically defining their authorship by gender

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<sup>65</sup> *New Monthly Magazine* featured "an imitation set of literary portraits in January of 1831, running until November of 1832" (Fisher 108). Similar celebrity profiles ran in various magazines throughout the century, including *Weekly Gallery of Celebrities*, *Celebrities of the Day*, and "Celebrities at Home."



Figure 2. "Harriet Martineau," *Fraser's Magazine* 8 (November 1833).

constraints, Maginn and Maclise not only denied these women any real measure of distinction, but also complicated the terms by which they could market their public personas and authorial brands (Fisher 121). Because “[t]he . . . authorial celebrity [was a figure] that emerged within [a] broader cultural field of the publicized personality,” *Fraser’s* “Gallery” raises the question of how female authoresses in the nineteenth century could legitimately assume celebrity status without being reduced to a generic true woman or compromising their respectability (Newbury 160).

This Fraserian idealization of women writers was significantly challenged by Harriet Beecher Stowe, a writer who manipulated the gender ideologies that Maginn and Maclise advocated in order to display the ways that celebrity could successfully intermingle with domestic and feminine interests. Having begun her professional writing career in 1833, Stowe’s repertoire primarily consisted of religious tracts, short stories, and essays with which the larger reading public was unfamiliar. As a relatively unknown writer whose values centered on her deeply religious upbringing and strong commitment to the ideals of domesticity, Stowe was one of the most unlikely figures to endure fame, much less assume the role as the most renowned female authorial celebrity of the nineteenth century.<sup>66</sup> But having come from “a family of social crusaders,” Stowe had inherited a mind for reform, as well as a deep respect for her social role as a woman, which were two sensibilities that were considerably intensified with the passing of the

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<sup>66</sup> Though Stowe’s professional writing career had begun as early as 1833, she was a relatively unknown author at the time that she began writing the anti-slavery novel. Her repertoire consisted of religious tracts, short stories, and essays, including *Primary Geography for Children* (1833); *New England Sketches* (1835); and “The Coral Ring” (1843).

Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 (Reynolds 6).<sup>67</sup> Outraged by the ways that slavery compromised the values of the home and family, and distressed over the fact that she was now legally bound to enforce its practices, Stowe felt compelled to partake in the most controversial socio-political issue of the time, justifying her involvement strictly on the basis of her moral authority: “I feel now that the time is come when *even a woman* ... who can speak a word for freedom and humanity is bound to speak ... I hope every woman who can write will not be silent” (qtd in Hedrick 208, my emphasis). Risking the domestic ideal by exposing herself within the public sphere, the middle-class wife and mother called attention to herself by writing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, an anti-slavery novel that she hoped would challenge pro-slavery sentiment by “[awakening] sympathy and feeling for the African race” (Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* 36). It is here, then, that we can identify the genesis of and the reasons for Stowe’s fame. If cultural sympathy was to be the novel’s paradigm, it was crucial that Stowe neither suppressed nor minimized her identity as a woman and mother. After all, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s* success was partially contingent on Stowe’s ability to develop a sense of familiarity and intimacy with her readers, as well as her willingness to perform some sort of maternal commiseration and indignation alongside them. Such a task not only made it impossible for her to hide behind anonymity or pseudonymity, as many of her female contemporaries had done and would do, but rather forced her to make herself publically known.<sup>68</sup> If Stowe intended to

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<sup>67</sup> Passed on September 18, 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act stated that all fugitive slaves were to be legally returned to their rightful owner. This law particularly outraged many Northerners because it made them unwilling participants in the institution of slavery.

<sup>68</sup> There were many reasons why women wrote anonymously or under pen names in the nineteenth century. *Fraser’s* “Gallery” expressed the predominant attitude held towards female writers at this time, making it difficult for women to be taken seriously if they chose to “wander from unfeminine paths” under



invoke, on a mass scale, the moral superiority associated with women, she had to reconcile rather than divide the culturally opposing public and private ideologies that confronted her as a professional writer.

Authoring a highly charged political novel under her own name and disseminating it to thousands of Americans who were already caught up in a heated slave debate had the potential to jeopardize if not permanently damage Stowe's reputation as a respectable middle-class woman. Certainly, any woman who publically questioned slavery in Antebellum America was bound to attract fame and notoriety as a radical, which was a considerable problem for someone like Stowe who was cautious about her reputation. After all, Stowe was a middle-class woman and mother who belonged to "a very important family of writers and speakers in nineteenth-century America" (Belasco Smith 77). In light of such circumstances, Stowe made a concerted effort to construct an authorial persona around the politics of gender, relying on maternal affection and notions of femininity as a means to promote and protect both her novel and her fame. For instance, on more than one occasion, Stowe posited that her motivation to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was driven not by commerce, but purely by divine inspiration and maternal-feminine instincts: "I wrote what I did because as a woman, as a mother, I was oppressed and broken-hearted with the sorrows and injustice I saw..." she explained ("The Publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" n.pag.).<sup>69</sup> And as novels were increasingly being read and desired as reflections of an author's persona, it was equally important that *Uncle*

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their own names (qtd in Fisher 119). Anonymity and pseudonymity also ensured a woman's privacy, keeping her from the exposure that could potentially damage her reputation.

<sup>69</sup> At the writing of the novel, Stowe had six children. She would have seven in her lifetime.

*Tom's Cabin* could also be defended and measured by these same feminine principles.

The novel is itself a highly feminine text, one that filters the slave debate directly through the family and home and reflects in its narrative the sentimental force of a woman.

Conversational in style, the narrator employs melodrama and pathos to ensure that readers react to the slave debate first with sentiment and Christian feeling. By devoting one of the novel's two main plots to Eliza's predicament as a mother, Stowe makes slavery a female concern by directing her readers' attention to the ways that slavery trivializes motherhood, a woman's most sacred role. Stowe makes emotion and sentiment the primary driving forces of the novel, and she expects her readers to be guided by the characters who express sentiments of sympathy above all else.<sup>70</sup> For instance, Miss Ophelia, a puritanically austere woman who initially admits: "I've always had a prejudice against negroes," reconsiders her attitude after Topsy and Eva teach her the value of compassion (Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* 302). And Senator Bird demonstrates his humanity when he allows his feelings to prevail over the law by helping Eliza escape, a decision that earns his wife's praise: "Your heart is better than your head, in this case, John . . ." she tells him (Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* 121). But the most compassionate and kindhearted character in the novel is Eva, an idealized child whose presence both awakens and validates human feelings in the novel, and whose death deeply affected many of the novel's readers. By taking a political concern and transforming it into a moral issue, and by feminizing the politics of slavery in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe

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<sup>70</sup> Stowe's argument that slavery was also a domestic concern was particularly important since, as Stephen Railton explains, "...it is safe to say that at least nineteen out of every twenty Americans who bought and read fiction were women" (15).

justified her presence in the public sphere.<sup>71</sup> But more importantly, she had located a way not only to promote women's moral and sympathetic disposition through mass media, but also to construct her persona around notions of this disposition. By reconciling celebrity culture and the cult of domesticity, then, Stowe validated her presence in the sphere of *celebrity*.

Easing such ideological friction by her authorship was a task that was fostered by the initial form of literary production by which Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Having received a small sum from the editor of the abolitionist newspaper, the *National Era*, Stowe agreed to produce a story that could be serialized “‘through three or four numbers’” (qtd in Hedrick 208).<sup>72</sup> Though she informed the editor that the story would “‘be a much longer one than any I have ever written . . .’” she grossly underestimated the scope of the project, as it was ultimately serialized in forty-one weekly installments over the course of ten months (qtd in Hedrick 208). Such a time frame naturally led to the making of Stowe's authorial celebrity, but more importantly, it gave her the luxury of more thoroughly developing her public image in accordance with the tenets of true

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<sup>71</sup> Not everyone approved of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or Stowe's intervention in the politics of slavery, but those who primarily took issue with Stowe were American Southerners whose criticism against her stemmed from what they saw as her breach of womanhood. For instance, in an unsigned review, John R. Thompson of *The Southern Literary Messenger* wrote: “‘We know that among other novel doctrines in vogue in the land of Mrs. Stowe's nativity—the pleasant land of New England—which we are old-fashioned enough to condemn, is one which would place woman on a footing of political equality with man, and causing her to look beyond the office for which she was created—the high and holy office of maternity—would engage her in the administration of public affairs; thus handing over the State to the perilous protection of diaper diplomatists and wet-nurse politicians. Mrs. Stowe, we believe, belongs to this school of Women's Rights, and on this ground she may assert her prerogative to teach us how wicked are we ourselves and the Constitution under which we live. But such a claim is in direct conflict with the letter of scripture, as we find it recorded in the second chapter of the First Epistle to Timothy—‘Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection’” (“Notices of New Works” 632). Criticisms, however, reached beyond the novel. Stowe and her female allies (primarily her British companions) were often attacked for being “‘unwomanly” for involving themselves in the slavery question through petitions, discussions, and social events.

<sup>72</sup> The novel ran in weekly installments from June 1851-April 1852.

womanhood. With every new or developing plotline involving maternal anxiety, fractured families, and religious insincerity, Stowe reinforced her own domestic and feminine inclinations. The nature of serialization meant that not only was “literature [becoming] a part of the day-to-day lives of readers,” but so were authors like Stowe (Belasco Smith 71). By gradually creating a sense of extended contact and communication, serialization helped to establish both a sense of familiarity and a personal connection between the reader and author. Stowe capitalized on this more intimate relationship by occasionally interrupting the narrative of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in order to speak directly to her readers. This aesthetic choice not only called attention to her presence, but also engaged readers in a conversation with her:

If it were your Harry, mother, or your Willie, that were going to be torn from you by a brutal trader, to-morrow morning,—if you had seen the man, and heard that the papers were signed and delivered, and you had only from twelve o’clock till morning to make good your escape,— how fast could *you* walk? How many miles could you make in those few brief hours, with the darling at your bosom,—the little sleepy head on your shoulder,—the small, soft arms trustingly holding on to your neck?

(Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* 87, author’s emphasis)

The appeals Stowe made to readers certainly did not go unnoticed. Both Stowe and the newspaper’s editor were flooded with enthusiastic letters from readers, and the *Era* experienced a sharp increase in weekly subscriptions once the work appeared in its

pages.<sup>73</sup> Suddenly, this sentimental novel and its equally domestic authoress were being welcomed weekly into the parlors of tens of thousands of readers, many of whom were women. The common sympathy between the authoress and her female readers united them in a recognition of the moral duties that they were called upon to enforce, a dynamic that grew stronger with every passing week. But, with the publication of the last installment, the source of the connection came to an end, and Stowe bid farewell to a public that had become her friends: “‘The ‘Author of Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ must now take leave of a wide circle of friends, whose faces she has never seen, but whose sympathies, coming to her from afar, have stimulated and cheered her work,’” she wrote. “‘The thought of the pleasant family circles that she has been meeting in spirit weekly has been a constant refreshment to her, and she cannot leave them without a farewell’” (qtd in Belasco Smith 70). That Stowe considered this friendship significant enough to acknowledge in the epilogue signals that her fame was not simply an unexpected outcome that arose from the novel’s extraordinary popularity, but was rather something that originated from a carefully cultivated relationship that had developed piecemeal and had been forged in the name of reform and sympathy.

Though Stowe was conscious that she could garner publicity by writing an anti-slavery novel and personally appealing to her readers, she—or anyone, for that matter—could not have anticipated the unprecedented success, popularity, and fame that both she and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* would encounter once the novel was published in book form.

Presented in full by Jewett & Co. in 1852, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* quickly became the best-

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<sup>73</sup> Those who subscribed to the *National Era* and read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* often wrote to Stowe and to Gamaliel Bailey, the *Era’s* editor, to express their opinion of the novel. That readers could influence the direction of future installments signals their growing participatory role in the production of literature.

selling novel of its time and was hailed as “the most popular book of the century” (qtd in Meer 199).<sup>74</sup> While tens of thousands of subscribers read the serialized version of the novel in the *Era*, its commercial success as a book was unparalleled, selling 5,000 copies in its first week and sixty times that number in its first year alone. The abolitionist journal, the *Liberator*, delighted in the impact that Stowe’s novel continued to have on the reading public, writing:

John P. Jewett & Co., the publishers, inform the editors of The Traveller that the demand for “Uncle Tom's Cabin” is so great, that notwithstanding that three paper mills are constantly employed in making the paper, and three of Adams's power presses are kept running 24 hours per day, (Sundays only excepted,) and 100 booksellers are unceasingly plying their art, the publishers are still some thousands of copies behind their orders. *Fifteen thousand* have already been printed, and *five thousand* more will be printed this week—making 20,000 copies or 40,000 volumes, in three weeks. It is a powerful and intensely interesting work, and deserves the extensive circulation it is receiving.<sup>75</sup> (“Extraordinary Demand for ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’” 59, author’s emphasis)

The novel’s popularity with abolitionists and its notoriety amongst pro-slave Southerners led to what the London-based newspaper, the *Spectator*, dubbed as “Tom Mania.”

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<sup>74</sup> Some of the novel’s most famous readers were Charles Dickens, Charles Kingsley, Thomas Macaulay, Lord Carlisle, and Prince Albert and Queen Victoria, all of whom received a personal copy from Stowe.

<sup>75</sup> The sales of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were extraordinary: “The first edition of 5,000 copies sold out within a week[;] . . . 50,000 copies within eight weeks, 200,000 by January 1853, 300,000 after the first year” (Meer 4).

Following the novel's wildly successful publication, the public was exposed to a number of Uncle Tom reproductions, rewritings, and adaptations, all of which were produced by those who hoped either to exploit the novel's success or tailor it to fit their own socio-political agenda.<sup>76</sup> Market and shop owners capitalized on the novel's ubiquity by creating and selling in mass quantities what became known as "Tomitudes," or Tom commodities that were produced in every imaginable form, including toys, games, fine china, and coffee.<sup>77</sup> Those who could not access Stowe's novel, or who wanted to encounter a live interpretation of it, had the option to see a theatrical, melodramatic, comedic, or minstrel version of it every night of the week in major cities such as New York, Baltimore, Chicago, Cincinnati, New Orleans, Salt Lake City, Philadelphia, and San Francisco.<sup>78</sup> And although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* dealt specifically with American politics, the mania spread internationally, as "adaptations of Mrs. Stowe's famous narrative were mounted in major capitals throughout the world," including Paris, Berlin, and London (Frick, "Uncle Tom's Cabin on the Antebellum Stage" n.pag.). Ironically,

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<sup>76</sup> Though *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was unpopular in the American South, it still had a great cultural impact on Southerners. David Reynolds writes that "[a]t least twenty-nine anti-Tom novels were published before the Civil War," including *Life at the South; or, "Uncle Tom's Cabin" As It Is*, *Aunt Phillis's Cabin: or, Southern Life As It Is*, *Uncle Robin, in His Cabin in Virginia*, and *Tom Without One in Boston*, and *The Cabin and Parlor; or, Slaves and Masters* (153). In these pro-slavery novels, writers attempted to correct what they saw as Stowe's misguided and erroneous portrayal of slavery.

<sup>77</sup> Tomitudes came in practically every imaginable form, including Tom panoramas, games, jigsaw puzzles, paper cut-outs, figurines, children's books, glassware, ashtrays, ornaments, and even wallpaper.

<sup>78</sup> Theater considerably helped boost both the novel's and Stowe's fame. Showmen and entertainers, such as P.T. Barnum, staged Uncle Tom theatrical adaptations at their local venues, while hundreds of theater companies traveled from city to city and staged their own productions, thus helping to spread Tom Mania across the country. There were also a number of productions staged in the South prior to the Civil War, most of which took a pro-slavery stance. John Frick explains that "While Mrs. Stowe's novel reached roughly 300,000 readers in the year following its publication, theatre historians estimate that more than twice that number were exposed to one or more of the stage adaptations; and that arguably the stage version may have made more of an impact due to its mode of presentation: as a moral reform melodrama" ("Uncle Tom's Cabin on the Antebellum Stage" n.pag.).

the mania was particularly prevalent in London in spite of the fact that England had illegalized slavery almost twenty years prior to the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Audrey Fisch notes that the novel sold “a million and a half” copies “by the end of the first year of publication,” making it an even greater commercial success in England than in America (96).<sup>79</sup> Read by the poorest working-class citizens as well as members of the British aristocracy, the novel's popularity in England can be primarily attributed to its appeal across class lines. The affection that the British expressed towards *Uncle Tom's Cabin* should be partially understood as an effort to “[rework] and [delink] the negative associations between England and slavery, and the unprecedented popularity of the novel is certainly part of the larger anti-slave movement that was “becoming central to British national identity” (Fisch 97).

The British not only sought to disassociate themselves from slavery, but they began to express anti-slavery sentiment as “a testament of British national superiority” (Fisch 105). *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became a popular and commercialized commodity through which readers could publically demonstrate their abolitionist beliefs. Like American readers, the British channeled their intense emotional response to the novel into a collective consumption of Tomitudes and Stowe-related commodities. Having been published in both the wake of a sharp rise in mass production and the consumption of commodity culture, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* signaled just how rapidly the conditions of production and distribution could align writers with celebrity culture. *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* described the rapidity with which Stowe's fame emerged, writing, “Mrs.

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<sup>79</sup> Although the novel “was a best seller in . . . Europe and Asia, and was translated into over 60 languages,” this chapter focuses its attention on *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* impact exclusively on England and America (“The Publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*” n.pag.).



Stowe, who was before unknown, is as familiar a name in all parts of the civilized world as that of Homer or Shakspeare” (“Uncle Tomitudes” 99). Stowe’s image was quickly absorbed into the popular imagination, appearing on a number of Uncle Tom advertisements as well as sundry Tom commodities that were circulated throughout the market, turning her into something of a Tomitude to be collected. Moreover, in later publications of the novel, Stowe’s image was literally bound to the novel in order to entice potential consumers: “Handsome Present. –Now ready, a splendid PORTRAIT of Mrs. HARRIET BEECHER STOWE . . . will be PRESENTED GRATIS to every purchaser of the PEOPLE’S COMPLETE ILLUSTRATED EDITION of UNCLE TOM’S CABIN, price only 7d,” the *Daily News* advertised (“Handsome Present” 8). By using Stowe’s image as an advertisement and directly attaching it to her literary labor, publishers and marketers signaled the rising visibility that even women writers in the mid-nineteenth century could now have. Furthermore, their efforts illustrated the developing notion that “literary authority was [now] constructed interactively . . . among authors and audiences as part of a larger cultural paradigm centering on commodities” (Shires 200). Within this mania, Stowe’s authorial celebrity was quickly turned into a very valuable and highly sought after brand. The Tom phenomenon thus challenged gendered expectations of legitimate authorship by proving that female authorship and its concomitant celebrity could be commercialized, fashionable, and extraordinarily profitable on a mass scale, and that women could be celebrated rather than condemned for their intervention in public discourse.

As a female celebrity whose entrance into the public sphere was framed within Tom mania, Stowe found it crucial to manage her public image. After all, the

overwhelming mass production and consumption of Uncle Tom products were sometimes vulgar, if not spectacular, and so Stowe's authorial legitimacy was open to attack since it was linked to the sensational ethos of nineteenth-century mass entertainment. In an effort to counter this potential danger, Stowe used the public's intense curiosity to know illustrious figures as an opportunity to manipulate the new celebrity media and to "cultivate an outward posture of true womanhood" (Hedrick 239). In one of her first self-promotional efforts, Stowe publically constructed herself as a woman whose literary career was governed by domestic and familial duties, a representation that distinguished her from the crudity of popular culture and the disrepute of mass entertainment: "So you want to know something about what sort of a woman I am," she wrote.

. . . I am a little bit of a woman . . . about as thin & dry as a pinch of snuff never very much to look at in my best days--& looking like a used-up article now. I was married when I was 25 years old . . .

Some of my friends pitying my toils, copied & sent some of my little sketches to certain liberally paying annuals, with my name. With the first money I earned in this way, I bought a *feather-bed!* . . . After this, I thought I had discovered the philosopher's stone, & when a new carpet, or a mattress was going to be needed, or when at the close of the year, it began to be evident that my accounts . . . wouldn't add up, then I used to say to my faithful friend . . . Anna . . . 'Now, if you'll keep the babies, & attend to all the things in the house for one day, I'll write a piece & then we shall be out of the scrape, and so I became an authoress. Very modest,

at first I do assure you, & remonstrating very seriously with the friends who had thought it best to put my name to the pieces, by way of getting up a reputation, & if you ever get to see a wood cut of me . . . on the cover of all the Anti Slavery almanacs, I wish you to take notice that I have been forced into it, contrary to my natural modesty by the imperative solicitations of my dear 5000 friends & the public generally. (qtd in Hedrick 239-40, author's emphasis)

Self-consciously crafting a private and domestic persona by which she hoped she would be remembered within the public sphere, Stowe could not “acknowledge the determination with which she had arranged her household . . . so that she would regularly have three hours a day to write,” or admit to her long-standing conviction that “if she chose to be a ‘literary woman’ she had a good chance to succeed” (Hedrick 240). The modesty and humility with which Stowe publically portrayed herself demonstrated a valuation of womanhood over promotion and diverted attention away from her efforts to transform herself into a celebrated literary woman. In consequence, the reading public viewed Stowe as a modest figure. When portraits of Stowe began to appear on the market, the *Liverpool Mercury* noted that “her countenance wears a soft and gentle expression, quite in accordance with her affable and pleasing manners . . . . No amount of unexpected fame will lead such a woman to look with a less pure and single eye to the righteous object of her labours” (“Harriet Beecher Stowe” 294). While Stowe’s self-proclaimed image of true womanhood was certainly not a façade, it was a form of deliberate posturing that allowed her to align notions of celebrity with domestic

propriety, an association through which she could develop legitimate authorial celebrity with few negative social consequences.

Because Stowe treated her celebrity as a side-effect of her domestic propriety, and because it emerged through the whirlwind of Tom mania, few scholars have closely examined the making of her celebrity. For instance, Meer writes that “[the] text self-[fueled an] explosion of publicity and international celebrity,” thereby suggesting that the cultural and socio-political circumstances of the novel’s production and consumption were primarily responsible for Stowe’s celebrity (4). I argue, however, that the novel and the subsequent mania are primarily responsible only for thrusting Stowe into celebrity culture, but not for cultivating her celebrity. As much as the Tom mania drew attention to Stowe as the creator of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, it did just as much to eclipse her. Though Stowe was feted upon her arrival in England in 1853 and known throughout America following the novel’s publication, the Tom mania signals that the mass hysteria and the mob adoration (two phenomena specific to celebrity culture) were incited primarily by the novel, rather than its authoress. However, despite *Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s* remarkable and chaotic popularity, it is possible to distinguish Stowe’s unexpected fame—the state of being known as the authoress of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—from her cultivated celebrity—a more developed form of fame that signals a degree of earned or designed prestige and renown.

Since authorial celebrity had become a new medium by which writers could register their literary and social authority with a public that now numbered in the hundreds of thousands, Stowe was highly invested in developing widespread recognition in order to perpetuate *Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s* cultural appeal and political agenda. But as a

woman who had defined her ethos on the authority of domesticity, Stowe found the prospect of making herself the subject of public discourse through promotional tours, lectures, and public meetings considerably troubling. It is these circumstances and vexed dynamics that make Stowe's celebrity a particularly compelling study. Faced with such obstacles, Stowe negotiated the conditions of her public relations by accepting invitations to promote her celebrity, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and her agenda, but only if her husband could assume the more visible and public role in her stead. Calvin Stowe, a theologian and professor, who had failed to achieve literary prominence, gladly accepted this responsibility, spending much of the 1850s projecting his own literary ambitions onto his wife and enjoying the fame and public distinction that he earned as Stowe's public speaker.<sup>80</sup>

The first opportunity for international publicity came in 1853 when the Glasgow Ladies' New Anti-Slavery Society invited Stowe to the British Isles to promote the anti-slavery cause. Though Stowe told Charles Sumner that she would 'decidedly reject empty parade and useless flattery' on this European trip, it nevertheless was a self-publicity tour, one that accommodated the Stowes' interest in nurturing her celebrity (qtd in Reynolds 131). After all, the tour was not only scheduled on the heels of *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* extraordinary reception in Great Britain, but it also coincided with the Tom mania that had engrossed the British nation. The invitation alone suggested that Stowe was already in the same company as entertainers like Tom Thumb and Jenny Lind, both of whom were part of a cult of celebrities whose mere presence could draw in crowds by

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<sup>80</sup> Calvin would eventually achieve literary success with his 1867 book, *Origin and History of the Books of the Bible, both Canonical and Apocryphal*, but it would never match the caliber of Stowe's literary success and fame.

the thousands. Though Stowe declared “I have a purpose there [Britain],” and claimed that she had no time for public blandishments, both she and Calvin were highly aware that circumstances rendered it impossible to divorce her cause from her fame. To promote the abolitionist cause in the midst of Tom mania on an international tour was to promote herself. Having been “highly sensitive to her public image” following *Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s* publication, Stowe did much to perform conventional codes of conduct while abroad, often standing silently beside her husband or brother who accompanied her on her tours (Hedrick 239). Maintaining middle-class decorum not only meant controlling the conditions under which her celebrity was publically presented, but also the means by which it was consumed by a public who could easily devolve into a voyeuristic and indecorous mob. Upon her arrival in Liverpool, and throughout her tour in general, Stowe was greeted with a collective frenzy to which she responded with stoic grace. Such conduct helped to establish her public image as a proper woman and wife, rather than as a self-commodifying public figure:

. . . [M]any persons proceeded to the landing stage [of the *Canada*], in the hope of greeting Mrs. Stowe on her arrival in the mother country . . . . A rush was . . . made to the place of landing, and the greatest anxiety was evinced by the dense crowd to catch a glimpse of the popular writer . . . . Mrs. Stowe then, closely veiled, walked ashore, leaning on the arm of her husband. The crowd followed them to one of . . . [the] cars, in which Mr. and Mrs. Stowe immediately took their seats. The people up to this time managed to suppress their enthusiasm, but when a large portmanteau with the letters “H.B.S.” was lifted on the top of the car, all doubts as to the

identity of the lady were dispelled, and a loud cheer given. During the few moments intervening before the car drove off, those on the quay thronged round, and gave expression to their feelings in various ways. Dr. Stowe appeared to be much pleased with the reception given to them, and his wife bowed her acknowledgements at the windows of the car. (“Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe in Liverpool” 6)

Stepping off of the ship, Stowe appeared unrecognizable to the crowds of over seven hundred people who had anxiously awaited her arrival.<sup>81</sup> Both her veil and husband shrouded her person, thus preventing the crowds from performing the intense scrutiny and visual consumption that so easily turned celebrities into public spectacles. By refusing to indulge or fully acknowledge the fandom confronting her, Stowe demonstrated the degree to which she understood the concomitant risks of courting too much visible fame in the public sphere. Rather than offering locks of hair, handshakes, or autographs upon her arrival, she used the occasion to give a public performance of domesticity, sensibility, and privacy, qualities that would continue to define her persona throughout the tours.

The party’s arrival in Liverpool was the first of many instances in which Stowe conceded to patriarchal conventions and allowed Calvin to face the crowds while she quietly stood beside him. In contrast to Dickens, who grumbled repeatedly of the suffocation, commoditization, and scrutiny to which the public often subjected him, and unlike Wilde who reveled in the fact that he was “torn in bits by Society,” Stowe’s letters are generally absent of such complaints since Calvin controlled most of her public

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<sup>81</sup> On this first tour, Stowe arrived with Calvin, her brother Charles Beecher, her sister-in-law Sarah Buckingham Beecher, Sarah’s brother William Buckingham, and her eleven-year-old son George.

relations (*Letters* 86-7). In many ways, the tours reflect the strategic ways in which the Stowes promoted Harriet's celebrity while minimizing the commodification and consumption of it. While Dickens self-performed readings and Wilde gave lectures, Stowe followed gender roles that restricted women from publically speaking. In fact, during one of the first events that Stowe attended, the Reverend Dr. Wardlaw gave her a glowing introduction, declaring: "I have the happiness of introducing to a Glasgow audience a lady from the transatlantic continent, the extraordinary production of whose pen, referred to in the resolution, had made her name familiar in our country and through Europe, ere she appeared in person among us" (Stowe, *Sunny Memories* 1: xxii). Immediately following Wardlaw's speech, Calvin, not Harriet, stood to reply, explaining that he "appeared in the name of Mrs. Stowe," an arrangement that was maintained no matter the number of people in attendance or the prestige of the event (Stowe, *Sunny Memories* 1: xxiv).<sup>82</sup> But Stowe not only refused to speak publically while on these tours, she refused to be on display either on stage or in the audience. At a meeting in Liverpool, for instance, Stowe's son recounts that she was greeted by two thousand people who "first clapped and stomped, then shouted, then waved their hands and handkerchiefs, then stood up . . ." (qtd in Hedrick 238). But rather than indulging the raucous crowd or her popularity, Stowe quietly walked to the side gallery, a space reserved for women where she could "see and not be seen" (qtd in Hedrick 238). By occupying the side gallery during public events, Stowe publically reinforced gender expectations and deflected the audience's attention away from her, a strategy that allowed her to be in attendance while keeping visual consumption/commodification to a minimum. And

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<sup>82</sup> When speaking on her behalf, Calvin often read speeches that Stowe had written.



because Calvin articulated her political concerns in every speech and lecture that he gave, Stowe lessened the possibility of being forgotten or obscured. In fact, her modesty and efforts to minimize her visibility in public was often commended. In a public meeting in Liverpool, the chairman made a point during his speech to call attention to Stowe's prudent ways, declaring:

The modesty of our English ladies . . . like your own, shrinks instinctively from unnecessary publicity . . . . We had hoped almost to the last moment that Mrs. Cropper would have represented, on this day, the ladies . . . among whom she has taken a distinguished lead in the great work which you had the honor and the happiness to originate. But she has felt with you that the path most grateful and most congenial to female exertion, even in its widest and most elevated range, is still a retired and a shady path; and you have taught us that the voice which most effectually kindles enthusiasm in millions is the still small voice which comes forth from the sanctuary of a woman's breast, and from the retirement of a woman's closet . . . (Stowe, *Sunny Memories* 1: xvi)

The chairman's praises reveal how successfully Stowe had negotiated the paradoxical set of cultural conventions that demanded that she be visible but invisible, marketable but private.

Though quiet and willing to concede to her husband in the lecture halls and within mixed company, Stowe was more personally active in private dinners and ladies' charities since participation in such reform work posed little threat to her

reputation.<sup>83</sup> While raising awareness for the abolitionist cause, Stowe continued to increase her symbolic capital by publically associating with a number of important members of the aristocracy and British celebrities, including Dickens, whom she met “in the Mansion House at a lavish public banquet given . . . by the Lord Mayor of London” (Stone 198).<sup>84</sup> It was soon reported in the British and American papers that Stowe had been seated across from Dickens at the dinner table, and that a toast was given in their honor for “[employing] fiction as a means of awakening the attention of the respective countries to the condition of the oppressed and suffering classes” (qtd in Stone 198). Publically associating with and being compared to Britain’s most famous social writer further legitimized Stowe’s authority as a social writer herself, and it called attention to her literary clout and growing celebrity. In fact, her celebrity had become so great that Dickens himself began to display some measure of annoyance towards the universal excitement that surrounded Stowe and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Stowe seemed conscious of Dickens’s antipathy, observing that he showed “a graceful and playful strain” when his literary successes were publically compared to the achievements of a novice authoress whose sudden fame and success seemed to be eclipsing his own (*Sunny Memories* 1: 264).

Even Dickens’s wife, Catherine, had been impressed by the authoress, having signed “An Affectionate and Christian Address of Many Thousands of Women of Great

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<sup>83</sup> Reform work was a gendered task primarily associated with women in the nineteenth century.

<sup>84</sup> Dickens had just begun publishing the first few installments of *Bleak House*, a social novel to which *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was often compared. Even Dickens, in a letter to Mrs. Gaskell, commented on what he saw as his own influence on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*: “I seem to see a writer with whom I am very intimate (and whom nobody can possibly admire more than myself) peeping through the thinness of the paper” (qtd in Meer 203).

Britain and Ireland to Their Sisters, the Women of the United States of America,” an anti-slavery petition drawn up by British women who sympathized with Stowe’s cause.<sup>85</sup> Just as they had been compelled by the sentimentality and domesticity of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, women were equally drawn to Stowe for her insistence on privileging womanly behavior over fame and self-importance. Along with the petition, British women and their respective charities lavished Stowe with gifts and contributions, donating tens of thousands of pounds to her crusade and giving her hundreds to keep for herself.<sup>86</sup> Though women at this time held no voting rights or legal political power in the public sphere, they were following in Stowe’s footsteps by staunchly claiming that their moral authority justified their presence in this very public issue. The support Stowe received from women in Britain proved that she had not only helped to expand the boundaries of female authorship in order to accommodate writers who had for too long been expected to remain silent or anonymous, but that she had also played a major role in making the public sphere more accessible to hundreds of thousands of women.

The soirees, teas, dinners, charities, and lectures that Stowe attended were recorded in her travelogue *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands*, a two-volume work that was also featured in excerpts in a handful of American newspapers following her return to the United States.<sup>87</sup> Presented as both a narrative and a collection of personal letters,

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<sup>85</sup> The petition displayed over 550,000 signatures.

<sup>86</sup> Hedrick explains that “the ‘Penny Offering’ . . . was taken up all over the British Isles . . . [originating] out of the idea that because Stowe reaped no English royalties from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, each reader should contribute one penny to the author” (240). Hedrick estimates that Stowe took \$20,000 back with her to America.

<sup>87</sup> Excerpts were published in newspapers such as the *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*.

*Sunny Memories* is part of the travel accounts that flooded the literary market in the mid-nineteenth century, and it was written “to give to those who are true-hearted and honest the same agreeable picture of life and manners which met the writer’s own eyes” (Stowe, *Sunny Memories* 1: iv). Despite this assertion, *Sunny Memories* is little more than a self-promotion of Stowe’s authorial success as well as a detailed account of her celebrity formation. Written in the third person, Stowe attempts to construct an unassuming tone throughout the narrative and present the book as little more than a detailed description of her itinerary. However, the account that she provides is “a gushing record,” one that is peppered with famous names and replete with the praises that had been extended both to her and to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Meer 165). Prominently advertised throughout the book are the relationships she forged with some of Britain’s most prominent aristocrats, including the Duchess of Sutherland, Lady Mary Labouchere, the Earl of Shaftesbury, and Prime Minister Viscount Palmerston. Cultivating social relations with the aristocracy and calling attention to it in print further increased her celebrity by signaling the kind of clout and significance that her name now carried. Furthermore, by publishing *Sunny Memories* and catering it to a public hungry for celebrity, Stowe sought to produce symbolic capital by what Bourdieu calls *degree specific consecration*, or “the degree of recognition accorded by those who recognize no other criterion of legitimacy than recognition by those whom they recognize” (*Field of Cultural Production* 38). And if Stowe’s gender made “literary legitimacy” an even greater struggle, she attempted to reconcile the matter by name dropping in excess, recounting the evenings she spent with some of Britain’s most esteemed and popular male writers, like Dickens, and dedicating pages to her visits to the homes of the literary giants, Scott and Shakespeare. Writing of

herself within such company was a strategy that not only lent her some additional form of literary prestige, but further established her cultural significance to an American audience who still closely followed Britain's literary culture.<sup>88</sup>

If such company did not grant Stowe more authority as an authorial celebrity, surely the many commendations, which were lavished upon her and reprinted, did. Even though many of the talks made in Stowe's honor were published in the papers, Stowe selected certain speeches, given in her honor, to appear in *Sunny Memories*. This tactic allowed her to revisit the highlights of her tour on her own terms and to promote herself without appearing self-serving or distasteful. The travelogue is filled with Stowe's contemporaries discussing the "high literary fame" that she had achieved; the crowds of people who fawned over her while on tour; the gifts and money with which she was presented; the inordinate number of invitations sent to her; the respect and appreciation shown towards her; the parties she attended; the support that the British extended towards her cause, and the novel's success in general. Throughout all of the acclaim, Stowe retains her unassuming persona as the mere narrator of these reprinted selections that praised and promoted her. Her modesty and reserve always appear in stark contrast to those doing the praising, such as Mr. Gilfillan, a man who spoke on behalf of the Committee of the Ladies' Antislavery Association at a public meeting in Dundee and whose obsequious speech appears verbatim in the early pages of *Sunny Memories*.

. . . [Stowe] would find her name known and revered in every hamlet,

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<sup>88</sup> At this time, American writers were struggling to establish their own national literature outside of British influence. Meer explains that "the majority of books Americans read were British, and British periodicals were widely followed in the United States. By comparison, only a small number of American writers were reviewed and even fewer published in Britain . . ." (3). The immense popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in England, then, was a major triumph for an American author, particularly a woman, because for the first time, an American novel had fully captivated millions of British readers.

and see copies of Uncle Tom's Cabin in the shepherd's shieling, beside Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, the Life of Sir William Wallace, Rob Roy, and the Gaelic Bible. I saw copies of it carried by travellers . . . and, as Coleridge once said when he saw Thomson's Seasons . . . 'That is true fame,' I thought this was fame truer still. [Applause.] It is too late in the day to criticize Uncle Tom's Cabin, or to speculate on its unprecedented history--a history which seems absolutely magical. Why, you are reminded of Aladdin's lamp, and of the palace that was reared by genii in one night. Mrs. Stowe's genius has done a greater wonder than this--it has reared in a marvellously short time a structure which, unlike that Arabian fabric, is a reality, and shall last forever. [Applause.] . . .

. . . [T]he most popular book of the century has appeared on the west side of the Atlantic . . . It is the work of a woman, too! None but a woman could have written it. There are in the human mind springs at once delicate and deep, which only the female genius can understand, or the female finger touch. (Stowe, *Sunny Memories* 1: xxxvii-xxxviii).

With its inflated rhetoric and excessive praise, Gilfillan's speech is particularly well-suited for the purposes of increasing Stowe's cultural legitimacy and market demand within the public sphere. By aligning *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with works that were then considered canonical, this speech is both a form of flattery and an advertisement for the quality and long-standing reputation of the novel. Much unlike the literary profiles of female writers that were featured in *Fraser's*, Gilfillan's words prove that Stowe's femininity is valued rather than trivialized, and that her decision to participate fully in the

professional literary world is appreciated far more than not. Using print media to call attention to the cultural impact that she had had on the British Empire, Stowe shrewdly contributed to the development of her celebrity and proved the “established definition of the writer”—particularly the female writer—was undergoing a major transformation (Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production* 42).

Though the pages of *Sunny Memories* demonstrate that Stowe had attained a caliber of celebrity unmatched by any female writer of the nineteenth century, Calvin continued to promote her, partly at least out of his own self-interest. It is well-known among Stowe scholars that while Calvin was Harriet’s greatest supporter, he often expressed frustrations that his literary ambitions would never match her success: “You must take into consideration your celebrity and my obscurity, & the fact that I have ambition as well as other people,” he told Harriet. “That is the plague of my life, to work so hard & suffer so much, and have only a horrible little mean scrawl to show for it when I have done . . . If I could only do what you have done, I should be glad enough to suffer all that you have suffered or are likely to suffer . . . I suffer & have nothing. Your birth pangs bring living, immortal children, Uncle Tom & Dred—mine, long continued, agonizing, never ceasing, all end in abortions” (qtd in Hedrick 273). Unable to be a celebrated writer like Stowe, Calvin took it upon himself to live vicariously through her, making a name for himself by giving lectures and speeches during her tour and enjoying the publicity and events that were held in his wife’s honor. He certainly enjoyed *Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s* triumph, prefacing many of his lectures with praise and advertisement for the novel and associating himself with its great commercial success. Calvin, though, would always be in Stowe’s shadow, often being introduced at public events as “a

classical scholar, a man of general literature, and a theologian . . . who, on the subject of slavery, holds the same principles and breathes the same spirit of freedom with his accomplished partner; and, along with them too, another member of the same singularly talented family with herself” (Stowe, *Sunny Memories* 1: xxii). The fame that Calvin cultivated for himself while basking in the Tom mania was sometimes more notorious than promising. Because he actively assumed Stowe’s more public duties, and because slavery and abolitionism were highly controversial and sensitive subjects at this time, Calvin often suffered the general criticism from which all public figures are subjected to at one time or another. Hedrick even goes so far to write that “[t]hroughout [Stowe’s] tour poor Calvin Stowe acted as a lightning rod for negative reactions while Harriet escaped not only unscathed, but with her reputation enhanced by her modesty and good sense” (242). While Hedrick explains, “the anticlerical animus aroused by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* landed squarely on [Stowe’s] ministerial husband,” I suggest that Calvin’s unpopularity with the public was also a reaction to the overzealous ways in which he worked to further Stowe’s celebrity. In fact, Calvin’s efforts to control Stowe’s public relations were at times considered to be immodest, if not extreme in nature.

One such instance occurred in 1856, during which Calvin sought to enhance Stowe’s reputation through a publicity scheme that directly associated her with the monarch of Great Britain and Ireland. Three years prior, newspapers had publicized that Queen Victoria had refused “to admit the authoress of ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’” (“Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe in Paris” n.pag.). Perhaps in response to this snub, Calvin prepared a letter to a personal friend, Professor Park, in which he discussed the details of an informal and “accidental” meeting at a train station between the Stowes and Queen



Victoria and Prince Albert during their second tour of England. “Yesterday . . . we had just the very pleasantest little interview with the Queen that ever was,” Calvin wrote. “None of the formal, drawing-room, breathless receptions, but just an accidental, done-on-purpose meeting at a railway station, while on our way to Scotland” (qtd in Wilson 420). Calvin then offered various details of the meeting, including the favorable reception bestowed upon them by the Queen:

The Queen seemed really delighted to see my wife, and remarkably glad to see me for her sake. She pointed us out to Prince Albert, who made two most gracious bows to my wife and two to me, while the four royal children stared their big blue eyes almost out of looking at the little authoress of ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin.’ Colonel Grey handed the Queen, with my wife’s compliments, a copy of the new book (“Dred”). She took one volume herself and handed the other to Prince Albert, and they were soon both very busy reading. She is a real nice little body, with exceedingly pleasant manners. (qtd in Wilson 422)

This meeting that Calvin described has received very little attention in Stowe scholarship. At the writing of this chapter, Forrest Wilson’s 1941 biography *Crusader in Crinoline: The Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe* is perhaps the only substantial work on Stowe that discusses the meeting at length.<sup>89</sup> Investigating this episode is a delicate and difficult

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<sup>89</sup> Researching the meeting between Victoria and Stowe is especially difficult since most Stowe scholars, when discussing it, almost always reference Wilson’s biography as their primary source. Additionally, it is noteworthy that the Stowe Center carries no sources that can verify the meeting, and its web site only makes mention of the incident during which Victoria’s carriage passed Stowe: “Queen Victoria was eager to meet the famous author, but was urged by advisors not to receive such a controversial figure. Instead, as Stowe’s sister Mary related in a letter, the Queen arranged to pass Stowe’s carriage on the road, so the two women could silently nod to each other” (“The Influence and Popularity of Harriet Beecher Stowe and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” n.p.).

matter, particularly because there is no mention of it in any of Stowe's letters. The absence is particularly odd for a woman such as Stowe, who delighted in "starstruck name dropping" throughout the pages of *Sunny Memories* (Meer 166). What does appear in Stowe's letters, however, are the many instances during which Stowe came close to Victoria. Stowe made much of the fact that the Duchess of Sutherland and Lady Mary Labouchere, both of whom were close to the Queen, mediated the few conversational exchanges that occurred between her and Victoria. Expressing her curiosity at such an uncommon relationship, Stowe wrote to Calvin: "I have been very *near* the Queen, and formed acquaintance with divers of her lords and ladies . . ." (Fields 222, author's emphasis). Near the Queen, though, meant seeing her from afar, not meeting her. During a drive through England, Stowe's coachman brought it to her attention that the Queen was passing, an incident that Stowe later recorded in a letter: "We stood still and the royal cortege passed. I only saw the Queen, who bowed graciously" (Fields 226). Even when the Queen was interested in discussing Stowe's novels, she did not invite the authoress to partake in the conversations. In a letter to Lady Byron, Stowe explained:

[T]he Queen had sent over from Windsor for Lady Mary and her husband to dine with her that evening, and such invitations are understood as commands. So, although they themselves had invited four or five people to dinner, they had to go and leave us to entertain ourselves . . . . The next day Lady Mary told me that the Queen had talked to her all about 'Dred,'<sup>90</sup> and how she preferred it to 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' how interested

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<sup>90</sup> *Dred* is a novel written by Stowe in 1856, which also takes as its subject the problems of slavery.

she was in Nina, how provoked when she died, and how she was angry

that something dreadful did not happen to Tom Gordon. (Fields 225-26)

Certainly, the Queen's behavior was a point of confusion for Stowe; after all, she had already been socializing with some of her closest confidants. It seems, however, that Victoria felt some apprehension over acquainting herself with a woman who had generated her celebrity from the politics of abolitionism. Specifically, Victoria's politics suggest that it was prudent to keep her distance from the authoress since any public association with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* could easily be interpreted as a political statement, or more specifically, a gesture of Northern support.<sup>91</sup>

Meeting the Queen and acquiring her support was Stowe's aim as early as 1852, when she sent a copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to her on the basis that "beneath the royal insignia of England throbs that woman's & mother's heart . . . a heart ever ready to feel

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<sup>91</sup> On May 13, 1861, Queen Victoria issued, on behalf of England, a Proclamation of Neutrality, which officially kept England out of the American Civil War and recognized the Confederacy as having belligerent status. The problem was that while Stowe "saw the war as a holy crusade to emancipate the slaves," the British perceived it as an invasion of the South by an overly aggressive North, who had turned the war into a political struggle over power (Hamand 6). In fact, according to Donald Bellows, the British had good reason to view the war in this way, since for a good part of the first two years of the war, Lincoln and the North actively "[denied] any intention to abolish slavery," which made the North untrustworthy, and gave Britons a justifiable right to declare neutrality in an event that had nothing to do with their own causes or interests (513). Furthermore, the British viewed Southern secession as an ideal solution to the problems that had plagued the country for the last decade. As Bellows puts it "in one stroke the North would be rid of slavery and the . . . problems it posed," and the South could maintain autonomy without any Northern interference (512). Not only did the British believe secession was a resolution, but they viewed it as a "constitutional right" one that should be exercised peacefully (Bellows 516). Thus, in spite of the popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in England, the North's reputation was questionable and therefore difficult to defend. In fact, the North earned such a poor reputation in England that many Britons who had advocated for the abolition of slavery actually sympathized with the South. And if they did not sympathize with them, they tended to claim that slavery, as evil as it was, was not a justifiable reason for the North to invade their southern counterpart. Additionally, the declaration of neutrality was the best way not to upset British domestic concerns. For instance, both Victoria and Lord Palmerston had to consider how intervening in the war would affect England's "white slaves", or white laborers whose deplorable working conditions were considered by many to be comparable to the conditions under which American slaves suffered. This argument was one that Stowe dismissed a number of times in *Sunny Memories* primarily on the grounds that it was not a valid comparison: "One cannot read the history of the working classes in England . . . without feeling sensibly the difference between oppressions under a free government and slavery" (Stowe, *Sunny Memories* 1: 68).

for the suffering[,] the oppressed[,] and the lowly” (Stowe, “Harriet Beecher Stowe to Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha” n.pag.). It seems odd, then, that for a woman who had a history of publishing the details of her relationships with celebrities and titled aristocrats, and who had already written about the many incidents during which she had had some sort of mediated contact with the Queen, Stowe never makes mention of any personal meeting in either her correspondences or published works. The incident of which Calvin speaks is also absent from Victoria’s letters or biographies, thus leaving at our disposal Calvin’s story as the only available evidence. The problem, however, is that Calvin equivocated on the details regarding the meeting. In his letter to Professor Park, he clearly asserts that the meeting was deliberately arranged, but his story later changed since, as Wilson points out, a conversation about the incident began to appear in the press. The *Edinburgh Witness* first published a note that not only called attention to the meeting, but also claimed that Stowe had capitalized on the Queen’s presence at the terminus to present her with a copy of her latest abolitionist novel, *Dred*, vis-à-vis their mutual friend Colonel Grey (Wilson 421). Following this piece, Wilson explains that the *New York Independent* presented the story in its pages, claiming that it was not Stowe’s idea to present *Dred* to the Queen, but that it had been Colonel Grey’s intention all along, and that after receiving the novel, “[t]he Queen came to the side of the carriage and bowed” (qtd in Wilson 421). To complicate the matter further, Wilson notes that “Calvin was not satisfied with the way the *Independent* handled the denial,” and he wrote to the editor to set the record straight (422).

Dear Sir:—There is still a mistake. Col. Grey did nothing but present  
“Dred” to the Queen and informed her of the presence of the author. All the

rest was done by another gentleman official, whose name was not mentioned. No communication whatever passed between Col. Grey and Mr. or Mrs. Stowe. The whole matter of the presentation took us entirely by surprise. When we saw the book in the hand of the officer, we remonstrated, but to no purpose; and it all terminated very well, just as you say it did. (qtd in Wilson 422)

It is possible that Calvin's private and public account of the incident varied simply because a deliberately arranged meeting would have been an incident that Victoria would have, for political reasons, preferred to keep discreet. But there is also the stronger possibility that the incident did not occur at all; that it was a fictive story circulated within the papers simply to increase the public's preoccupation with Stowe. Certainly, Calvin knew that any mention of their association with Victoria would pique the public's attention and generate speculation that Stowe had fostered some sort of political alignment between England and the American North. Calvin's publicity stunt is an example of Cheryl Wanko's assertion that celebrity had become "a new market- and media-driven form of attention that [differed] greatly from a traditional, neoclassical ideal of fame" (5). Certainly, the publication detailing the meeting drew more attention to Stowe, but what is most significant of the marketing ploy, if it was one, is the way in which it reveals the extent to which Stowe and Calvin actively participated in the commercialization of her name, the cultivation of her celebrity, and the publicity of her works. In other words, despite the limitations of her gender and the insistence on following proper social codes, Harriet Beecher Stowe was a savvy self-promoter, one

who worked alongside her husband to present herself as a fascinating figure through her novels, tours, travelogues, and the company she kept.

Too often early and mid-nineteenth-century authoresses were obscured, trivialized, or marginalized in discussions of celebrity culture and those who garnered fame often did so reluctantly or under their own self-imposed obscurity. Working within a male-dominated field, Stowe actively produced her own legitimate celebrity by forging a connection between her feminine disposition and her career as a writer, a feat that undermined the sharp division between the private and the public realms that had threatened to ruin the respectability of those women who sought a public literary career. Stowe's self-cultivated success and her efforts to establish herself within the celebrity sphere prove that her cultural significance should not be exclusively attributed to writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The cultural authority that she generated within the celebrity sphere helped to redefine the boundaries that had for so long limited female authorship and its concomitant social expectations. The tours, travelogues, novels, and promotional work that followed *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are all cultural indices that prove just how instrumental Stowe's authorial career and her celebrity were to a long history that, in the nineteenth century, documented a sharp rise in legitimate and respected female authorial celebrities.

## CHAPTER 3

## WRITING IN THE NAME OF 'KING PUBLIC':

## THE RISE AND FALL OF WILKIE COLLINS'S SENSATIONAL CELEBRITY

Following the publication of *The Woman in White* in 1859-60, Wilkie Collins enjoyed a literary celebrity that could be rivaled only by his mentor, collaborator, and friend, Charles Dickens. His immense popularity with the reading public led to numerous portrait sittings, interviews, autograph signings, advertisements, honorary parties, and appearances in the various celebrity profiles that proliferated during the second half of the century. At the height of his career, Collins commanded as much as £5,000 for the exclusive publishing rights to his novel *Armadale* (1864-66), and publically earned the reputation among some of his contemporaries as a “celebrated author” (“The Dead Secret” 30); “one of the most popular novelists of his generation” (“[William Wilkie Collins]” 727); “a favourite with the English public” (“Mr. Wilkie Collins At Home” 831); “the recognized greatest writer of fiction of the century” (“Wilkie Collins” 4), and the “chief of the British school of novelists” (“Facts and Faces” 98). Collins himself had much to do with the making of his celebrity, reproducing and adapting his work to different forms of media and earnestly working to establish a name that, on its own, could operate as his best marketable asset. The culminating moment of Collins’s celebrity power was his five-month reading tour across the United States and Canada in 1873-74, an event that exhibited his cultural appeal with the public and put him in the company of some of the world’s most renowned literary personalities.<sup>92</sup> Collins’s celebrity remained

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<sup>92</sup> Arriving in September 1873 and departing in March 1874, Collins’s tour spanned 154 days in North America, or a little over five months. His itinerary included New York, Albany, Syracuse, Philadelphia,

in power with audiences throughout his forty-five-year career.<sup>93</sup> In fact, in the late 1880s, the *Pall Mall Gazette* “published a competition for the most popular living author,” in which Collins “distanced all competitors” (qtd in Ashley, Jr. 266). In the year that marked his death, *Young Folks Paper* admitted that “A generation has passed since the first publication of ‘The Woman in White,’ and though Mr. Wilkie Collins may not now have so immense and eager a following as he could depend on during the three decades comprised between 1855 and 1885, the number of his readers is yet legion” (“Mr. Wilkie Collins: Novelist” 142). Dying in 1889, Collins’s headstone was engraved with the epitaph, “Author of ‘The Woman in White’ and other Works of Fiction,” a remembrance that commemorated him for the novel from which his celebrity specifically derived, and one that suggested his cultural significance would survive his death.<sup>94</sup> But in the years following, Collins’s symbolic power and glowing popularity dissipated, rendering his celebrity a neglected part of his history. Collins’s North American tour, in particular, has been generally minimized, if not absent, in current discussions on him. In fact, Susan R. Hanes’s book, *Wilkie Collins’s American Tour, 1873-4*, published as late as 2008, is the first—and to my knowledge—the only major work on Collins’s reading tour. Her book appears sixty-seven years after the publication of Clyde K. Hyder’s

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Boston, Baltimore, Washington, Providence, Montreal, Toronto, Niagra, Buffalo, Cleveland, Toledo, Detroit, Chicago, and Worcester.

<sup>93</sup> While it is true that Collins did not sustain at the end of his career the caliber of success he had earned with *The Woman in White*, his works continued to be generally well received and popular with the reading public, and the press continued to feature him in celebrity profiles and other notable news. Scholars, however, have generally argued that following Dickens’s death in 1870, the quality of Collins’s work considerably declined and his popularity dimmed to the point of obscurity. In particular, Lonoff argues that Collins lost “a firm, authoritative guide . . . and a trustworthy editor” with Dickens’s passing, and his subsequent work suffered accordingly (52-3). Other reasons for his alleged decline are attributed to Collins’s growing ill health and a long-standing opium addiction.

<sup>94</sup> Collins was buried in London at the Kensal Green Cemetery.



cursory eight-page article, “Wilkie Collins in America,” which, according to Hanes, “contains the most comprehensive research on the topic” (1). That the first real scholarly attention paid to Collins’s tour did not materialize until sixty-six years after it occurred, and that it was followed up by only one major work decades later is a matter that this chapter intends to address. While Hanes attributes this absence primarily to the fact that Collins did not have a manager on tour to document his day-to-day activity, I contend that it has much to do with the complicated if not problematic origins of Collins’s celebrity. His fame arose from and became reliant on the Sensation Mania, a cultural phenomenon that Collins was often credited for inventing and for which he became a popular and infamous advertorial.<sup>95</sup>

This is a study of Collins’s celebrity and the cultural ideologies, publishing practices, and reading trends that both facilitated and ultimately undid it. I trace Collins’s career from his anonymous “apprenticeship” at *Household Words* to the height of his celebrity, a time in his career that is characterized by his enormous popularity with the public and increasing notoriety with critics. Although his celebrity materialized approximately ten years into his career, I show that Collins had always understood the value of commercialism, publicity, and mass marketing and that he had negotiated his authorship accordingly. Much of his early career is marked by his efforts to distinguish himself from Dickens, publicize his name, and most importantly, write for the pleasures of the masses, or “King Public,” as he had deferentially dubbed them (Collins, *Collected Letters* 1: 77). Collins’s celebrity is of particular interest because while it was constructed along the same lines and by many of the same terms that conditioned the celebrity of

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<sup>95</sup> Collins’s god-son, Frank Ward, acted as Collins’s unofficial part-time assistant, but his work was relatively minimal and he left no known records of the tour.

figures such as Dickens, Thackeray, and, Carlyle—all of whom have maintained their extra-literary and historical significance well into the twenty-first century—it has not endured or retained its cultural currency in either popular culture or scholarship.<sup>96</sup> To understand this issue, I contextualize Collins’s celebrity in the Sensation Mania that helped shape contemporary Victorian reading trends and notions of popularity within the literary market. Unlike his contemporaries who presented their authorial labor in terms of friendship, Collins openly wrote in the name of public approval, a strategy that generated and sustained his celebrity amongst the masses even while it stained his reputation with critics. Emerging with the extraordinary success of *The Woman in White*, Collins’s celebrity was invented and secured by a literary trend that was often likened to cheap trash and critically condemned for its transgressions against middle-class propriety. I argue, then, that his authorial celebrity became a ubiquitous and defining cultural marker of sensation literature’s overwhelming success and ephemerality. Consequently, it became increasingly understood less as a form of symbolic capital and more as a debased construction as sensationalism declined in popularity. It was within this context that Dickens’s historians and biographers, in their efforts to preserve and honor Dickens’s celebrity, further exacerbated the state of Collins’s reputation by marginalizing him in their historical remembrances as a second-rate sensationalist author and a troubling influence on Dickens’s writing. Collins’s celebrated reputation thus became indelibly

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<sup>96</sup> Even as late as 2009, the fourth edition of *The Longman Anthology of British Literature* does not include Collins in its list of canonical or revived authors. Only within the last few decades has scholarship begun to take notice of Collins. The Wilkie Collins Society was formed in 1980; the publication of Collins’s letters, to which this chapter is heavily indebted, were recently published in 2005; Peter Ackroyd’s biography of Collins, *Wilkie Collins*, appeared in 2012; and in *Unequal Partners*, Lillian Nayder discusses the relationship between Collins and Dickens, but rather than rehashing the common notion that Collins was more or less a second-rate author whose literary endeavors were heavily indebted to Dickens, Nayder offers a compelling case suggesting that Collins equally influenced Dickens’s authorship, and that he earned a sense of autonomy by “[resisting] Dickens’s authority (3).

linked to a kind of cultural threat, if not a popular fad that ultimately eclipsed his standing as a social novelist and the serious efforts he put towards the artistry, business, and construction of his writings, all of which had a tremendous effect on his standing as a legitimate author and as one of the most celebrated Victorian writers of all time.

As early as 1851, literary critics and reviewers were already putting Wilkie Collins in the company of Shakespeare, “Lockhart, Croly, Bulwer and Ward” (*The Athenaeum*, qtd in Page 40). His first published novel, the historical romance, *Antonina*, won him collective praise from critics who saw “abundant promise of future excellence” for the rising author (*Dublin University Magazine*, qtd in Page 50).<sup>97</sup> The *Spectator* called attention to Collins’s “eloquence . . . and clever ‘treatment’ and invention in . . . incidents” (qtd in Page 40), while *Gentleman’s Magazine* recognized Collins as “a new aspirant after fame in this class of literature,” whose first novel was “sufficient in itself to entitle [him] to a place in the foremost rank” (qtd in Page 43). Collins’s fame, however, did not rise as quickly as reviewers predicted, for while he was critically hailed at the beginning of his career, he was generally less popular with the reading public who treated his work with a fair but lukewarm reception or did not read it at all.<sup>98</sup> In fact, his work would not reach a wider audience until it began to appear in Dickens’s *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, two of the most popular weekly periodicals of the mid-nineteenth century. Writing of Collins’s time at *Household Words*, Anne Lohrli credits

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<sup>97</sup> Although *Antonina* was the first novel by which Collins became known, *Iolani*, written in 1844, was the first novel he wrote. It remained unpublished during his lifetime.

<sup>98</sup> In 1850, the year in which *Antonina* was published, Collins’s repertoire also consisted of some shorter works, *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., R.A.*, a biography of his late father, William Collins, and a travel book called *Rambles Beyond Railways*.

the journal for acquainting the public with the rising author, stating that “Collins’s fame . . . resulted in part from his *Household Words* contributions” (163). While there is no question that his fame has ties to the middle-class periodical, it is important to point out that it was initially troubled if not stifled by Dickens’s own celebrity, a status that was continually fostered by the weekly success of *Household Words* and the editorial rule that all contributors’ work would appear anonymously in his self-promotional magazine. In truth, Collins was far more responsible for the construction of his fame than Lohrli claims, because it developed less from his work appearing in the popular periodical than it did from a conscious and strategic five-year struggle to abandon the subordinate role that he had assumed in his professional relationship with Dickens since their first meeting.

Collins and Dickens met in 1851 when the two writers performed in a theatrical production of Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s play *Not So Bad As We Seem* to help benefit the Guild of Literature and Art.<sup>99</sup> Cast as Dickens’s faithful valet, Collins was required to “[perform] a host of menial tasks for his ‘master,’” a subservient and marginalized part that would ironically characterize the early stages of his professional relationship with Dickens and plague his literary reputation for much of the twentieth century (Nayder, *Unequal Partners* 25).<sup>100</sup> Collins, who was “anxious to succeed as a professional writer

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<sup>99</sup> Dickens and Collins shared a love of theater and acting. They not only performed together, but they also co-wrote the play *No Thoroughfare* in 1867. And although Collins’s play *The Frozen Deep* (1856) was written by Collins, it had been so heavily revised by Dickens that it was presented as a play by Wilkie Collins “Under the Management of Charles Dickens.”

<sup>100</sup> In his defense of Collins’s reputation and cultural significance, Robert P. Ashley, Jr. remarks that “earlier studies of Collins were, without exception, brief and were usually conducted by scholars and writers who had stumbled on Collins in the course of investigating someone else, usually Dickens” (“Wilkie Collins Reconsidered” 265).

[and] impressed by Dickens's genius and fame" (Nayder, *Unequal Partners* 8), went to great lengths to show his deference for the celebrated author, often signing his personal letters to Dickens with the valediction: "as usual and always my excellent manager's attached and obedient servant, W Wilkie Collins," and readily acquiescing to the professional demands that Dickens imposed on his contributions to *Household Words* (Collins, *Collected Letters* 1: 50). Specifically, under Dickens's editorial rules, Collins was restricted to producing essays and shorter works—two genres that hindered his greatest talent for writing intricate plots and suspenseful mysteries—and was required to waive the right to attach his name to his published work. This latter condition particularly impeded the potential formation of Collins's fame because it restricted him from benefitting from the developing ideology of authorship that made personas, publicity, and the "personal" relationship between authors and readers increasingly important to the value of the literary text and the success of one's authorship. Moreover, Collins's work was subjected to Dickens's rather specific if not excessive editing, an editing that aimed to ensure that all contributions were presented in the style of Dickens's own friendly authorial persona that audiences had come to know since *Pickwick*. While Dickens used *Household Words* as a weekly self-advertisement that worked to facilitate the celebrity of both his name and authorial personality, Collins was reduced to writing behind the scenes, a form of labor that rendered him indistinguishable from the thousands of other anonymous producers who had suddenly emerged within the rising print culture. Working under an old model of labor that saw writers as impersonal manufacturers of commodities, Collins's name—in relation to the work he produced for *Household Words*—was rendered valueless in a literary market that was growing increasingly

author-centered. Moreover, his literary labor was subsumed under, obscured by, and confused with Dickens's name, the only authorial moniker to appear prominently on the masthead and in the journal at all.<sup>101</sup> Collins's anonymous labor, then, worked simultaneously to suppress his own fame and to promote both the sales of *Household Words* and Dickens's celebrity, if not Dickens's growing "brand" more generally.

This enforced anonymity and its consequences were serious concerns for a writer like Collins who spent most of his career negotiating terms and conditions that would most favorably facilitate the publicity of and remuneration for his labor.<sup>102</sup> Many of his personal and professional letters, composed in response to his concerns about the lack of an International Copyright Law, illustrate his strong advocacy for writers' commercial, property, and financial rights, and prove that he tried to conduct his literary endeavors along these lines.<sup>103</sup> Having earned a reputation for conducting his literary career with business acumen and an acute consciousness for profit margins, marketing, and publicity, it is surprising if not highly uncharacteristic that Collins ever agreed to working under

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<sup>101</sup> The masthead of *Household Words* announces that it is "conducted by Charles Dickens." Nayder explains that "at times [Dickens] . . . received credit for authoring [his contributors' works] because they were published anonymously" (*Unequal Partners* 19).

<sup>102</sup> As early as January 1854, Collins discussed the potential publication of his *Letters about Italy* with George Bentley, Richard Bentley's son. I quote a considerable portion of the proposal because it demonstrates how conscious Collins was not only of the value of his intellectual property, but also how specific he often could be in terms of the publication details, layout, and presentation of his work: "I should want a place in six numbers, of the Magazine, occupying in each an average space of a sheet – sometimes a little less, sometimes a little more. You will see what the plan is of the Letters I propose writing, from the first of the series. As this plan is, so far as I know, quite a new one, I should wish to reserve the copyright of the Letters, as my own property—giving you of course the refusal of any republication of them which it might seem desirable to me to make, in case of their success; and engaging also at the outset, not to republish, under any circumstances, without your consent until after the expiration of a certain time, dating from the publication of the First Letter" (Collins, *Collected Letters* I: 95).

<sup>103</sup> The lack of a copyright law plagued Collins who, as I show, fought fervently to protect his work and earn his rightful profits. In support of protecting intellectual rights abroad, Collins would publish "Considerations on the Copyright Question Addressed to an American Friend" in 1880.

such unfavorable conditions at *Household Words*. In fact, even while he was working as a subordinate and anonymous laborer for the periodical, he was busy stipulating the terms and conditions of the copyright, publication, and dissemination of his advertised repertoire, including his second and third published novels, *Basil* (1852) and *Hide and Seek* (1854). Both novels, published in full by Richard Bentley, appeared under Collins's name and helped to associate it with a growing commercial value across the public sphere. Observing that “[*Basil*] has gone off pretty well hitherto—our first edition being nearly exhausted” (Collins, *Collected Letters* 1: 83), and that “[*Hide and Seek*] met with greater success . . . than anything I had previously written,” Collins admitted a keen awareness over his growing market demand, a change in circumstance that made him less willing to perform his authorial work outside the boundaries of celebrity culture (Collins, *Collected Letters* 1: 136). Disgruntled over his lack of publicity and property rights at *Household Words*, Collins rejected an offer for steady employment and a raise of “[f]ive Guineas a week” when he declined to join the staff in 1856. (Dickens, *Letters* 8: 188). Ironically, Dickens had extended the offer primarily to dispel Collins's long-standing grievances, hoping that the position would compensate him accordingly: “I observe that to a man in his position who is fighting to get on, the getting his name before the public is important,” Dickens remarked to his sub-editor, H.W. Wills. “Some little compensation for its not being constantly announced is needed, and that I fancy might be afforded by *a certain engagement*” (Dickens, *Letters* 8: 188, author's emphasis). Dickens concluded by remarking that he believed this offer “would do [Collins], in the long run, a world of good” (Dickens, *Letters* 8: 188). As an authorial celebrity who understood the great value of self-promotion and advertisement, Dickens seems highly aware of but surprisingly

unsympathetic to Collins's displeasure with the limitations that had been imposed on him while writing for *Household Words*. Presented with an offer that was clearly unworthy of his growing market value, Collins rejected the proposal on the grounds that the anonymity under which he was forced to write was interfering not only with his individual authorial identity, but also with his sense of intellectual property, and that a raise in income of five guineas could not possibly equal the potential publicity, celebrity, and cultural capital of his published name in *Household Words*. Faced with Collins's resolute stipulations, Dickens eventually conceded to his demands and modified the conditions of his proposal, to which, only then, Collins accepted: "I think [Collins] wrong in his objection, and have not the slightest doubt that such a confusion of authorship (which I don't believe to obtain in half a dozen minds out of half a dozen hundred) would be a far greater service than dis-service to him. This I clearly see," Dickens remarked. "But, as far as a long story is concerned, I see not the least objection to our advertising, at once, before it begins, that it is by him. I *do* see an objection to departing from our custom of not putting names to the papers in H.W. itself; but to our advertising the authorship of a long story, as a Rider to all our advertisements, I see none whatever"<sup>104</sup> (Dickens, *Letters* 8: 189, author's emphasis). Following the stipulation that his contributions to *Household Words* be appropriately publicized, Collins's reputation and

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<sup>104</sup> Dickens's assertion that the "confusion of authorship" was to Collins's advantage makes plain why Collins strenuously objected to the original terms of the offer. What Dickens failed to understand—or perhaps understood too well—is that the confusion actually enhanced Dickens's authorial reputation by increasing his market value and celebrity. Unbeknownst to Dickens, Collins was not seeking the personal satisfaction that may have come with the knowledge that readers occasionally attributed his work to that of an esteemed and established artist like Dickens, but was rather seeking the public ownership of his labor and the cumulative symbolic capital that could be derived from it.



fame grew considerably.<sup>105</sup> He was featured in Edmund Yates' celebrity series "Men of Mark," as well as John Cordy Jeaffreson's *Novels and Novelists*, in which it was predicted that he would "occupy a principal place in the republic of letters" (345). By 1857, his novel, *The Dead Secret*, was widely advertised in *Household Words* under his name, and "The Wreck of the Golden Mary" and "The Perils of Certain English Prisoners," works on which he publically collaborated with Dickens, proved to be commercially popular in their own right. In light of this success, biographers have generally marked "[Collins's] employment as a staff member at *Household Words*" as the defining moment in which he "joined 'the Gentleman's Club' of literary professionals," but I contend that it is also the point in his career that his authorship became aligned with notions of celebrity, an ideological change manifested by the efforts that Collins made from this point on to tailor his authorship to a burgeoning mass and industrialized market (Nayder, *Unequal Partners* 33). By signaling the beginning of what would become his lifelong effort to "reach the widest audience and reap the greatest rewards" from self-promotion and self-commodification, Collins's victory over enforced anonymity also marked the moment in which the state of his reputation was transformed into a reflection of the increasing conflicts that arose between the mass public and the critical elite in the mid nineteenth century (Law and Maunder 45).

Since the early twentieth century, posterity has seen Collins as a second-rate hack writer of cheap novels or simply as "the Dickensian Ampersand," an identity that trivializes his authorial labor and entirely disassociates him from his literary successes

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<sup>105</sup> In 1870, Collins would receive, in writing from Dickens, the copyright to the work that he had published in both *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*.

(Allingham, “Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens” n. pag.).<sup>106</sup> The complicated nature of Collins’s popular but forgotten symbolic power can be largely attributed to the circumstances under which it was formed. The great irony—and the problem—of his celebrity has always been that his subsequent obscurity developed from the very practices, conditions, and ideologies that made him so famous. Tracing the development of his public identity, I assert that the materialization of Collins’s name in 1856 equipped him with the very marketing tool he needed to begin performing his authorial labor in its most industrialized, commodified, and consumerist terms. His efforts to reconceive his authorship along these lines, however, were problematized by a contentious rift that had developed between those who Collins dubbed “Readers in general” (the masses and popular entertainment) and “Readers in particular” (the critical establishment and legitimate culture) (Collins, *Armadale* xxxix). In other words, because Collins developed his public identity in accordance with the growing force of mass culture at the very time in which it was held in cultural contempt, his reputation paradoxically rose and fell in concurrence, and his authorial celebrity became the touchstone for cultural concerns about mass culture. Collins himself was aware of these circumstances under which he sought to make himself more publically known, even examining them in his article, “The Unknown Public” (1858). In this article, Collins explores the changing conceptions of literary value as they evolved with the appearance of “the Unknown Public,” a mass readership that was quickly outnumbering the critical elite, or more generally, “the

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<sup>106</sup> Although the growing revival of Collins in scholarship has begun to distance him from this nickname, the association still exists. In fact, the 2013 Dickens Universe conference, which often only discusses Dickens’s work, is taking as its main feature both Dickens’s *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and Collins’s *The Moonstone*.

customers at the eminent publishing-houses, the members of book-clubs and circulating libraries, and the purchasers and borrowers of newspapers and reviews” (217). As a byproduct of the industrialization of literacy and the development of mass culture, the critical establishment viewed the Unknown Public as a dangerous and an omnipresent force, if not simply as a literary mob that harbored indiscriminating tastes for cheap, immoral stories. While the elite charged them with posing a serious threat to “high art,” Collins embraced this “monster audience” (221) recognizing that any force numbering at “three millions” was a cultural authority in its own right, particularly when literary value was increasingly being expressed through the avid consumption of cheap (literally and figuratively) literature within the mainstream market (218).<sup>107</sup>

Developing his authorship in a market that had already begun to reconfigure itself in the wake of massification, Collins recognized that existing power relations between the author, his critics, and his public were dramatically changing in favor of the public who had become a legitimate force in the production of literary success. “. . . [T]he readers who rank by millions, will be the readers who give the widest reputations, who return the richest rewards, and who will, therefore, command the service of the best writers of their time,” Collins declared. “A great, an unparalleled prospect awaits, perhaps, the coming generation of English novelists. To the penny journals of the present time belongs the credit of having discovered a new public. When that public shall discover its need of a

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<sup>107</sup> Collins himself characterizes the millions primarily by their ignorance and prosaicness, if not simply by their extra-literary idiosyncrasies and lowbrow interests. To him, they are “[a] reader of a penny-novel-journal who wants a receipt for gingerbread. A reader who complains of fulness in his throat. Several readers who want cures for grey hair, for warts, for sores on the head, for nervousness, and for worms. Two readers who have trifled with *Woman’s Affections*, and who want to know if *Woman* can sue them for breach of promise of marriage” (220). Despite their philistine tastes, Collins expected that they would “obey the universal law of progress,” which he believed would transform them into a more cultured and educated group of readers (222).

great writer, the great writer will have such an audience as has never yet been known” (222). Much to critics’ disdain, that writer would prove to be Collins, a once promising author who now sought to fulfill his “ambition . . . to be a popular novelist” by adapting his artistic choices and larger projects to the changing tastes of popular sentiment as it was expressed by a low-brow audience (Lonoff 1).<sup>108</sup> What exasperated critics most was the rather explicit and vocal manner in which Collins not only appealed to this “public of the penny-novel Journals” (Collins, “Unknown Public” 218), but how he categorically privileged their readerly tastes over critical elitism. “[*Basil*] has been vehemently objected to as immoral (!) by some of those virtuously inflammable ladies and gentlemen of Modern Times who are gifted with particularly sharp noses for smelling out suppositious [*sic*] filth in particularly unlikely places,” Collins observed. “As I have never written for these people and never will, then their condemnation is infinitely more acceptable than their approval” (Collins, *Collected Letters* 1: 83). And when their condemnation proved to be less “acceptable,” Collins opted simply to ignore it: “Whatever the critics may say, readers are certainly grateful for a story that interests them. So don’t mind what the Quarterly Review, or any Review says. Or, rather, do as I do—don’t waste your time in reading them,” he advised his mother (qtd in Lonoff 56). His efforts to ignore critics and answer the demand for tales of a shocking and

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<sup>108</sup> Collins was notorious for using his prefaces as public forums to challenge and respond to critical reviews of his work. In his preface to *Armada*, the novel which followed *The Woman in White*, he responded to the bifurcation of readership that his sensation novel had occasioned: “Readers in general — on whose friendly reception experience has given me some reason to rely—will, I venture to hope, appreciate whatever merit there may be in this story without any prefatory pleading for it on my part . . . . Readers in particular, will, I have some reason to suppose, be here and there disturbed, perhaps even offended, by finding that ‘Armada’ oversteps, in more than one direction, the narrow limits within which they are disposed to restrict the development of modern fiction — if they can” (xxxix).

spectacular nature proved to be a commercially successful tactic, as it culminated in the publication of his most famous and successful sensation novel, *The Woman in White*, the very work that simultaneously transformed Collins's fame into legitimate authorial celebrity and intensified the critical condemnations against his authorship.

Published serially in Dickens's newest literary magazine, *All the Year Round* and in the American periodical, *Harper's Weekly*, *The Woman in White* made its debut in late November 1859.<sup>109</sup> Although Collins had been incorporating elements of sensationalism in his writings since *Basil*, it was *The Woman in White* that "helped to establish [his] reputation as 'the ablest representative' of 'the sensation school' of fiction" (Nayder, *Wilkie Collins* 74). In fact, the novel's sensational effects were so overwhelming that they somewhat obfuscated Collins's attempts to construct his commercial endeavors on moral grounds, for while he calls attention to social problems such as domestic exploitation and problematic marital laws in the novel, he does so in the most sensational terms.<sup>110</sup> Writing to Wills during the initial stages of the novel's production, Collins explained: "I *must* stagger the public into attention, if possible, at the outset. They shan't drop a number when I begin, if I can help it" (Collins, *Collected Letters* 1: 180, author's emphasis). Here, Collins calls attention to the source of his public success and the origins of his celebrity. Writing a serialized novel that bound female insanity, bigamy, and

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<sup>109</sup> Contentious matters between Dickens and his publishers Bradbury & Evans led to Dickens dissolving *Household Words* in 1859 and launching *All the Year Round* in its stead.

<sup>110</sup> In 1889, twenty-nine years after the publication of *The Woman in White*, the *Daily Inter Ocean* declared that it was the lack of moral purpose or social agenda in Collins's novels that was responsible for his alleged decline in popularity: "In later years Mr. Collins has not been a vogue. His two or three last stories attracted comparatively little attention, not for the reason there was any falling off in power, but because of a change in popular tastes and the strain of dialecticism that has entered into books and conversation. Just now . . . we ask for novels with a purpose, an aim" ("Wilkie Collins and His Stories" 4).

criminal activity into an elaborate mystery, he deliberately aimed to capitalize on the mass public's appetite for deviance, secrecy, and scandal, and incorporate it into a suspenseful plot that would sustain their interest week by week.

The state of the public's interest in *The Woman in White* proved to be a crucial concern for Collins well beyond the writing of the first installment. Throughout the novel's production, he showed a willingness to construct the novel in accordance with his readers' opinions and suggestions as he saw fit, which helped generate further his celebrity by establishing a familiarity and intimacy between himself and the masses. Doing away with the rhetorical posturing of the authorial-reader friendship that so many authors, like Dickens, had employed at this time in order to maintain respectability and attenuate the constraints of a profession that looked upon mass appeal and commercial marketing as culturally suspect, Collins openly defended the value of public opinion, and worked to appeal to their readerly desires in the most basic and explicit terms:

[Readers] represent all nations and all ranks. Whether they praise or whether they blame, their opinions are equally worth having. They not only understand us, they help us. Many a good work of fiction has profited by their letters when they write to the author. Over and over again he has been indebted to their stores of knowledge, and to their quick sympathies, for information of serious importance to his work which he could not otherwise have obtained . . . . Their influence has raised fiction to the great place that it occupies in the front of Literature. (qtd in Lonoff 66)

Collins's personal correspondence testifies to this authorial credo, illustrating not only the deference and esteem with which he held "King Public," but just how seriously he

appreciated their input. He not only took the time to reassure them (“I beg to assure Miss Chambers, solemnly, that nobody about whom she is interested and over whom the undersigned can exercise benevolent control, shall come to any harm [in *The Woman in White*]) (Collins, *Collected Letters* 1: 196), but he delighted in their approval (“I should be insensible indeed, if I did not feel gratified and encouraged by such a recognition as you send to me of the appeal which I am now trying to make to the sympathy and interest of readers in your country and in mine—and I am especially pleased to find that the part of [*The Woman in White*] which was perhaps the most difficult to write, is exactly the part which you think the most successfully written”) (Collins, *Collected Letters* 1: 199). Even in his 1861 preface to *The Woman in White*, Collins admits to having “endeavoured, by careful correction and revision, to make my story [*The Woman in White*] as worthy as I could of a continuance of the public approval” (3). Known for measuring his artistic success by sales figures and degree of popularity, Collins never abandoned his faith in the power of the public and their influence to command market dynamics and commercial successes.<sup>111</sup> While Collins was often accused of cheapening the authorial profession and its aims for respectability by pandering to the masses, I argue that he was consciously developing his authorship in accordance with the growing democratization of reading and the industrialization of the authorial role. Such conditions of a mass market had not only transformed collective consumption and notions of popularity into the dominant means

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<sup>111</sup> When faced with a less than promising reception to his 1868 novel, *The Moonstone*, Collins placed his hopes entirely in the public, arguing that it was their collective approval or disapproval that would ultimately determine the success of his novel: “. . . we have only to wait a few weeks—until the book has had time to get talked about. I don’t attach much importance to the Reviews—except as advertisements which are inserted for nothing. But the impression I produce on the general public of readers is the lever that will move anything—provided the impression be favourable. If this book does what my other books have done, in the way of *stimulating the first circle of readers among whom it falls*—that circle will widen to a certainty. It all depends on this” (qtd in Lonoff 37, author’s emphasis).

by which literary success was understood, but they had made celebrity a new, if not essential, ideological basis of authorship at this time. In light of these circumstances, Collins's "pandering" should be understood more as an artistic strategy that demonstrated his awareness of the way in which his authorship--through celebrity and popularity--could only be *interactively* created and sustained between the performer *and* his audience.

Collins's efforts to appeal to public opinion proved to be enormously rewarding, as *The Woman in White* was not simply a commercial success, it was a sensation in its own right. *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier* called it "the most deeply interesting and thrilling novel of the day" ("New Publications" n.pag.), and Collins himself triumphantly remarked that "[t]he story has proved to be by far the greatest success I have made yet, both here [England] and in America" (Collins, *Collected Letters* 1: 197). Outperforming its predecessor, *A Tale of Two Cities*, in both sales and popularity, *The Woman in White* considerably increased the circulation of *All the Year Round* and drew Collins out of Dickens's shadow by linking his name and his likeness to a genre being read by everyone from the Prince Consort to the lower classes.<sup>112</sup> Working in a time when the publicity of the author was vital to the popularity of his or her work, Collins shrewdly promoted himself alongside his novel when he arranged for his photograph to appear in the first published book of *The Woman in White*. The novel's sales were so extraordinary that Collins was forced to sit for numerous portraits since "[a]ll the 'negatives' of the photographic portraits in *The Woman in White* are exhausted by the large sale" (qtd in

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<sup>112</sup> The first installment of *The Woman in White* appeared in the same issue as the concluding installment of Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*.



“Wilkie and Photographs” n.pag.). As one who had always fought fervently for intellectual property rights and due recognition, these self-portraits gave Collins maximum exposure and ensured that his most successful and widespread novel would be visibly and definitively tied to him. Highly aware that his authorship was becoming an increasingly valuable commodity and an object of mass consumption, Collins carefully managed the production and dissemination of his photograph, treating it as a business venture in which his image now stood as the face of his growing brand.<sup>113</sup> Writing in response to photographer Herbert Watkins’s request to take a full-length portrait of him in 1861, Collins gladly accepted the offer for the promotional opportunity, but only on the condition that it would not inhibit the sales and profits of his novel, which currently advertised a mid-length portrait of him: “I have seen my publishers to-day, and have put the question about my portrait to them,” Collins wrote. “They are decidedly of the opinion that the sale, at present, of any photographic likeness of me will interfere with the effect which they hope to produce by publishing my portrait in the forthcoming edition of ‘The Woman in White’ . . . . Under these circumstances . . . I have no alternative but to ask you, not to abandon your idea of publishing my portrait, but only to defer it for a short time” (Collins, *Collected Letters* 1: 224). Collins kept his promise and sat for Watkins in the spring 1861.

As the reproduction of his image proliferated both within and outside *The Woman in White*, and as his novel generated a continued success, Collins grew highly aware of how crucial his legal, commercial, and personal ties to the novel had become to his

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<sup>113</sup> The visible advertisement was so successful that it became a common promotional device in his later works. In fact, in his novel, *The Dead Secret*, issued by T.B. Peterson & Brothers, Philadelphia in 1873, Collins’s portrait appeared on the cover.

authorial celebrity and its concomitant success. Upon being offered £500 by George Smith of Smith Elder & Co. for the copyright of *The Woman in White*, Collins firmly declined, explaining “I cannot avail myself of [the offer], because it requires me to part with the copyright . . .” or, as he saw it, the only legal means from which continued capital could be earned (Collins, *Letters* 1: 181). With the popularity of the novel, and the successful advertisement of his authorship, Collins held a new commercial value in both the public and celebrity spheres, one that could be measured by literal cultural and financial capital. Short biographical accounts of Collins were now being published in celebrity profiles; fans wrote to him with the request for his autograph; he found himself the honored guest at prestigious social events on more than one occasion, and he calculated that by September 1860, he had earned “[o]ne thousand four hundred pounds” from *The Woman in White*. Moreover, not only was the novel already going through various editions, but so were his earlier works, which had appropriated new value in the wake of his success (Collins, *Letters* 1: 188). In 1860, Collins wrote to Charles Ward explaining that “Low proposes republishing *The Dead Secret*, and Ward and Lock . . . are republishing *Antonina* . . . . The public seems in a fair way to have rather more than enough of me, in course of time” (Collins, *Collected Letters* 1: 212). It seemed, however, that the public could not get enough of Collins or *The Woman in White*. Advertisers in both England and America, hoping to capitalize on its worldwide popularity, began to incorporate it in their own promotional schemes: “The ‘Woman in White,’ of Wilkie Collins, or ‘any other woman’ or man, will find an unusually large and select assortment of dry goods, dress goods, etc. at the store of McLeran & Stafford,” the *Daily Arkansas Gazette* advertised “([The ‘Woman in White’ of Wilkie Collins] n.pag.).” And Collins,

who was inundated with letters from “[p]eople [writing] to [him] from the four quarters of the earth” (Collins, *Letters* 1: 203), watched the novel’s popularity manifest itself into a market for “‘Woman in White’ cloaks and bonnets, ‘Woman in White’ perfumes and all manner of toilet requisites, [and] ‘Woman in White Waltzes and Quadrilles’” (qtd in Gasson 158).

*The Woman in White* assumed an even greater and perhaps more alarming popularity when it appeared on the stage as a sensation drama. The novel had proved to be a lucrative industry for those hoping to profit from its success, and with no copyright legally in place, various dramatic adaptations began to appear in popular entertainment, much to Collins’s chagrin: “They are going to dramatize the story at The Surrey Theatre—and I am asked to go to law about that. I will certainly go and hiss—unless the manager makes a ‘previous arrangement’ with me” (Collins, *Letters* 1: 191). Collins’s complaint makes visible the contentious nature of modern celebrity in a mass consumer market, namely that his celebrity, as a culturally powerful and popular construct, had become a valuable commodity in its own right. Pirated dramatic versions of *The Woman in White*, as they appeared under the authorship of others, diminished his ownership and control over the text and associated his image with unauthorized interpretations that could potentially compromise his reputation. And while his celebrity was, by nature of association, promoted by any production of *The Woman in White*, he was nevertheless robbed of the due credit and financial gain that he rightfully stood to earn, a point of serious vexation for him: “What I dare not do with my own work, another man (unknown in Literature) is perfectly free to do, against my will, and . . . to the prejudice of my novel

and my reputation,” he fumed (Collins, *Letters 2*: 362-63).<sup>114</sup> Collins would eventually re-assert his property and financial rights over the theatrical version of *The Woman in White* and regain control over his celebrity when he produced an official dramatization of the novel in London eleven years following its original publication.<sup>115</sup> By adapting it to a new market, Collins broadened consumer demand for the novel and maximized his own cultural visibility (Figure 3). Indeed, his decision to wait eleven years was both prudent and strategic, because it allowed him to revive interest in both his authorship and *The Woman in White* through a medium that could enhance the novel’s sensational effect, the very aesthetic that had once made it so commercially appealing. The success of *The Woman in White*, then, as it successfully appeared in various countries and across multiple markets, provides a more specific context in which to understand the problem of Collin’s celebrity.

Collins had not simply constructed his celebrity from *The Woman in White*, the novel that the *Glasgow Herald* judged as having “probably been the most widely read of all the sensation novels,” but he deliberately developed this symbolic power through efforts that naturally sustained and expanded the Sensation Mania (“The Perils of Sensation” 3). As the culminating phenomenon of the ongoing cultural crisis between Readers in general and Readers in particular, sensation literature was vigorously decried on moral and aesthetic grounds by the critical elite who construed it as a “vile”

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<sup>114</sup> Collins is specifically referring to his novel, *Poor Miss Finch*, which was appearing on the stage in an unauthorized theatrical version despite his insistence that it was “unfit for stage performances” (Collins, *Letters 2*: 362).

<sup>115</sup> Collins’s drama ran successfully at the Olympic Theatre in London between October 1871-February 1872.



Figure 3. This caricature of Collins appeared in ‘Caricature Portraits of Eminent Public Men’ in James Rice’s February 1872 edition of *Once A Week* during the time in which Collins’s dramatic version of *The Woman in White* was being performed in London at the Olympic theatre. Pasting an advertisement of the play that is as large as his person, the cartoon satirizes Collins’s self-promotional efforts--particularly since his pocket is full of more *Woman in White* posters. Alongside the caricature appeared a short sketch of him, which both celebrated and questioned his authorship: “THE subject of our cartoon, Mr. Wilkie Collins, is one of the most successful novel writers of the day. His English is not drawn from the purest fount, nor is his literary style to be compared with that of several living writers. He is a manufacturer of interesting works of fiction, pure and simple. He has made it his business in life. And, under the circumstances, it is perhaps a little provoking that he should so often ring the changes on such phrases as ‘my art,’ ‘my purpose in writing the book,’ ‘the object I had in view,’ &c., &c., &c., as each of his later novels has probably brought him £4,000 . . . We should place ‘Man and Wife’ among his best productions; but in literature he will be remembered as the author of ‘The Woman in White.’ That wonderful story made him famous.”

subliterary genre, and the chief anxiety of a diseased culture (“‘Sensation’ Literature” 14). Routinely leveled against Collins and his contemporaries was the attack that they were violating literary propriety and cheapening authorial practices all in the name of public interest:

We are threatened with a new variety of the sensation novel, a host of cleverly complicated stories, the whole interest of which consists in the gradual unraveling of some carefully prepared enigma. Mr. Wilkie Collins set the fashion, and now every novel writer who can construct a plot, thinks . . . he . . . may obtain a success rivaling that of the *Woman in White*. (*Spectator*, qtd in Page 109)

More than anything else, the real threat that sensation novels posed was their employment of thrilling and alarming plots that spectacularized the most basic elements of lowbrow literature (crime, violence, scheming) and placed them at the center of middle-class life. In other words, it was widely held that sensation novels degraded nineteenth-century values of virtuosity and propriety by linking the middle class to a culture that had been commonly associated only with the lower classes. The matter was exacerbated by the alarming popularity of sensation novels and the eagerness with which readers consumed them. The public’s “morbid appetite . . . [for] garbage” increased the elite’s charge that sensation novels were nothing but an infectious cultural disease that had to be eradicated from the market (“‘Sensation’ Literature” 14). In light of these cultural attitudes towards sensation literature, it should come as no surprise that the extraordinary success of *The Woman in White* rendered Collins’s reputation a cultural paradox. His willingness to exploit King Public’s readerly interests, adapt the novel to other existing forms of media,

and permanently associate his image (and thus himself) to the most famous sensation novel of the time allowed Collins to turn sensationalism into a profitable brand that became indelibly linked to his celebrity. And if that was not bad enough, it became increasingly apparent that his celebrity had become the means by which the popularity of the genre was manifested. By developing his public identity within the Sensation Mania, Collins accommodated the developing growth of mass culture and increased the public's preoccupation with the literary trend in general, and with every reproduction, adaptation, and commoditization of *The Woman in White*, his cultural capital intensified accordingly. In fact, Collins had so fervently marketed himself through the production and success of this novel that he was often cited by name in reviews that criticized or discussed sensation literature on a general level, and he became erroneously credited for creating the genre by more than one source.<sup>116</sup> Featuring Collins in its "Men of the Day" series, *Vanity Fair* observed:

Every romance that is written makes the next more difficult to write . . . .  
[e]specially difficult must it have seemed to secure the attention of jaded readers for any attempt to puzzle or to horrify them. They had been puzzled and horrified by millions of volumes, and knew every trick and

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<sup>116</sup> Collins is often held responsible for inventing the sensation novel. It is more appropriate, however, to credit him with popularizing it, since sensation literature derives from older forms of fiction, including Gothic, Newgate, and melodramatic literature. Even Trollope, in his biography, pointed to Collins as the representative of sensation fiction when he observed the growing categorization of English writers: "Among English novels of the present day, and among English novelists, a great division is made. There are sensational novels and anti-sensational, sensational novelists and anti-sensational, sensational readers and anti-sensational. The novelists who are considered to be anti-sensational are generally called realistic. I am realistic. My friend Wilkie Collins is generally supposed to be sensational" (226-27). Henry James would also famously credit Collins for inventing the sensation genre, writing in the *Nation*, "To Mr Collins belongs the credit of having introduced into fiction those mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors. This innovation gave a new impetus to the literature of horrors" (qtd in Page 122).

every spring so well that it appeared to have become impossible to raise any other feeling but mirth with any puppets acting in any conceivable way. Mr. Wilkie Collins, however, recognised the rudeness of the contrivances hitherto in vogue, and by a far more artistic and conscientious treatment than had yet been attempted, he essayed to revive once more the interest in horrors. He is entitled to be called the novelist who invented Sensation. (qtd in Lewis, "The Vanity Fair Portrait" n.pag.).

Certainly, the success of *The Woman in White* and the celebrity that Collins garnered from it contributed to this misconception and to the low esteem with which critics held him. As the novel was transformed into perfumes, clothes, and waltzes, it commercialized the Sensation Mania on a mass scale and sensationalized the extra-literary activities and ordinary commodities of the middle class, thereby propagating it into other markets and "degrading" far more than just the public's literary sensibilities. Collins's celebrity was thus a point of bemusement and vexation for critics who publically condemned sensationalism as a vulgar and cheap form of entertainment but watched Collins generate legitimate cultural capital from its popularity: "'The Woman in White' is [Collins's] most popular novel," *Yenowine's News* wrote, "and, as usual in such cases, quite an army of critics have scored the public for its taste, but the author himself and Charles Dickens thought the public perfectly right" ("The Man of Deep Plots" 6).

In spite of the criticisms leveled at Collins, *The Woman in White* definitively proved that he was a legitimate and an independent author who now commanded a cultural power on par with that of the most prominent and popular British writers. Collins's letters are a clear indicator of the change in circumstance that his celebrity had



occasioned. Writing to George Smith in 1872, Collins expressed his displeasure with Smith's proposal to lower the price of his novel, *Man and Wife*, in order to boost its sales. Collins refused to comply, recognizing that his authorial celebrity was too powerful to justify the means by which Smith sought to promote the novel: "I . . . consider myself to be a rather better novelist, with a rather wider reputation than Mrs Henry Wood," Collins observed. "I happen to know that she averages a thousand a year profit to herself by the sale of her novels . . . . I mention this, in support of my notion that it is undesirable to lower my price . . ." (Collins, *Letters* 2: 359). Cultural capital was now legitimately tied to financial capital, and Collins's name now commanded an extraordinary price. In fact, publishers Smith & Elder valued Collins's symbolic and commercial capital at £5,000, an enormous sum with which they presented him for the rights to publish *The Woman in White's* successor, *Armadale*. As one who had spent much of his early career fighting for rightful advertising and due credit, this offer was a testament to Collins's long-standing efforts to achieve authorial success by way of public sentiment and strategic self promotion: "Five Thousand Pounds!!!!!" he exclaimed to his mother. "Ha! ha! ha! Five thousand pounds, for nine months or at most a year's work—nobody but Dickens has made as much" (Collins, *Letters* 1: 197). To Collins, whose admiration of Dickens had once been along the lines of hero worship, there was no better way to gauge his success than to measure it against the very author he venerated and to whom he had once been subordinate. Having spent his earlier career negotiating terms for the acceptance and publication of his work, Collins now delighted in watching publishers outbid each other for it. Discussing his 1862 novel, *No Name*, Collins exclaimed: "Low has outbidden everyone—and has offered the most liberal price that has ever been given for the

reprinting of a work already published periodically—no less than Three Thousand Pounds!! Add to this, the receipts from “All the Year Round” and from America, and the amount reaches Four thousand, six hundred. Not so bad, for storytelling! (Collins, *Letters* 1: 210). Collins, of course, facetiously underestimates the nature of his labor, minimizing this internationally successful authorial brand to mere “storytelling.”<sup>117</sup> Indeed, *The Woman in White*'s success proved that the popular estimation of Collins's authorial value was deeply rooted in public opinion not only within the literary market but in mass culture at large, which gave him both the circumstance and cultural capital to perform his authorship in the five-month long reading tour across North America in 1873-74.

While the idea of public reading was certainly motivated by Collins's celebrity power, it was also influenced by Dickens's own reading tours, which were performed in 1858 and again in 1867-68. These tours, as we have seen, not only made Dickens more culturally beloved, but also richer by more than £45,000.<sup>118</sup> As both a colleague and valued friend of Dickens's, Collins was part of an inner circle with whom Dickens discussed the idea of touring. One of his closest confidants, Collins was personally asked for his opinion in relation to the logistics and performances of Dickens's readings, and he was the recipient of various letters in which Dickens delighted over the enormous audiences and even better profits that he had commanded while on tour. Having enjoyed,

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<sup>117</sup> Collins often negotiated the publication of his works in various languages, a marketing device that the *Galveston Daily News* observed in relation to his success: “Mr. Collins' principal works have passed through several editions both in this country and the United States, and have been translated into French, Italian, German, Dutch, Danish and Russian” (“Wilkie Collins Dead” 2).

<sup>118</sup> For a detailed analysis of Dickens's Reading Tours, see Chapter 1, “Performing Authorship in the Public Sphere: Dickens and the Reading Tours.”

since the 1860s, a celebrity that could rival Dickens's own symbolic capital in popularity and cultural power, and having inherited the role as the most popular living novelist of the time following Dickens's death in 1870, the idea of public readings seemed especially suitable and profitable for Collins. Specifically, it seemed that touring—whether reading, entertaining, or lecturing—had become a common endeavor among celebrated figures, if not simply *the* marker of legitimate celebrity power. Swarms of public figures from astronomers to politicians embarked on their own self-promotional tours during the latter half of the century (Figure 4). Commenting on this growing cultural trend, the *Toronto Daily Globe* observed that there was an unusually high demand for the display and performance of public figures in America: “Since Mr. Dickens found his Golconda in America, there has been an increasing tendency to bring every English celebrity, or even mere notorieties, across the Atlantic . . . . Therefore, any Englishman who thinks he has the power to interest an audience . . . may very fairly take an opportunity of seeing the United States, and making money at the same time” (qtd in Hanes 7). Under these conditions, Collins's popular celebrity justified a reading tour. His output had been prolific in both theatrical and literary endeavors since the establishment of his celebrity in 1860 (*No Name*, *Armadale*, *No Thoroughfare*, *The Moonstone*, *Black and White*, and *Poor Miss Finch*, among others), and during the year that he sailed for America, Collins had not only produced a serial story, but had written and overseen the dramatizations of *The New Magdalen* and *Man and Wife*. Indeed, Collins was a major force in popular culture, indicated by the fact that it was reported that “[his] agents had received over 1,500 applications for his appearances” in America (Hanes 12). A tour



THE LYCEUM COMMITTEEMAN'S DREAM—SOME POPULAR LECTURERS IN CHARACTER.

Figure 4. In 1873, *Harper's Weekly* published the caricatures of some of the most famed nineteenth-century public lecturers and readers in this image entitled "The Lyceum Committeeman's Dream." Collins is prominently featured reading from his novel.

would not simply satisfy public demand for Collins, but it would prove to be a prudent course of business and an extraordinary means of publicity for his authorial celebrity. It was an enterprise that would allow Collins to perform simultaneously the promotional efforts in which he had long been engaged and still protect, expand, and profit from his growing commercial brand.

Of all the business, publicity, and literary/theatrical endeavors in which Collins performed throughout his career, the tour is perhaps the greatest marker of Collins's celebrity.<sup>119</sup> The public's enthusiasm over his visit, coupled with their willingness to attend his readings in spite of poor reviews and an even poorer economy, confirmed his reputation as a world-renowned author. Collins could happily declare: "No matter where I go, my reception in America is always the same. The prominent people in each place visit me, drive me out, dine me, and do all that they can to make me feel myself among friends. The enthusiasm and the kindness are really and truly beyond description" (Collins, *Collected Letters* 3: 3). However, this admiration for Collins was at times expressed by rather invasive and intrusive means. The public's enthusiasm was so overwhelming that it forced him to change hotels three times in Boston "to escape the relentless pursuit of autograph hunters" (Hanes 77). The public's intense consumption of his celebrity was certainly fueled by a press that "'pursued [him] everywhere . . .'" and made a lucrative business out of reporting news of Collins that extended far beyond his literary endeavors (qtd in Hanes 22). As one who had always tried to manage his public

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<sup>119</sup> As Dickens had, Collins first performed public readings for charity prior to his American tour. He explained that "[these readings] are but rehearsals by which I as an untried public reader, am endeavoring to train myself for my appearance elsewhere. I owe much to my American friends, and wish to do my very best to please them" (qtd in "Wilkie Collins As A Reader [An event in literature]"). His "rehearsals" were generally considered a success.

image, Collins was certainly uneasy over the way in which his daily life had been transformed into the fodder for both gossip and news. Hanes calls attention to this matter, writing that “[h]ardly a day went by that the newspapers failed to report [Collins’s] whereabouts or relay some pun or witticism about [him]” (92). Reports of him ranged from the kind of food he kept in his room, to his opinion on American hotels, his choice in books, the developing state of his gout, and “the bagginess of the knees of his trousers” (“[Wilkie Collins, the novelist]” n. pag.). As Collins had worked to create his authorial celebrity as a lucrative brand, selling his novels, plays, name, and image, it is only expected that the idiosyncratic details of his habits, as well as his autograph, clothes, and appearance would be transformed into valuable commodities, and that they would acquire even greater value as he both performed and promoted himself across North America.

Perhaps what most called attention to Collins’s reputation was the esteem with which his colleagues publically held for him. Their admiration for him was so intense that Collins later admitted, “I find myself living here in a species of social whirlwind” (Collins, *Collected Letters 2*: 419). In fact, Collins made his American debut by associating with and being feted by “prominent representatives of literature, art, and the drama” at the Lotos Club in New York (“Wilkie Collins. [His First Greeting in America]” n.pag.). The reception was so brilliant and his celebrity so great that the evening’s events were published in newspapers across the country. And on February 16, a formal banquet was held in his name during which Collins was celebrated by “Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Samuel Langhorne Clemens . . . as well as Josiah Quincy (one-time mayor of Boston) . . . and the Vice-President of the United States, Henry Wilson” (Hanes 80). In this dinner of eminent

figures, Collins was commemorated for his ability to engross his readers through methods of mystery and suspense, the same literary practices for which critics had condemned him. He was further honored by Oliver Wendell Holmes who recited his poem, "A Toast to Wilkie Collins," and "[a]t the close of the evening, each guest was presented with a bon-bon box, in the shape and size of the Cabinet edition of Collins's works, covered in Turkish leather, and containing his photograph, his autograph and 'the number of his important works exactly corresponding with the number present at the reception'" (qtd in Hanes 82). Certainly, the extraordinary reception accorded to Collins in America challenged the many reviewers who questioned his literary legitimacy and cast him off as a writer of cheap, perfunctory trash. That famous literary men such as Holmes, Clemens, and Longfellow each received Wilkie Collins souvenirs, along with commemorative memorabilia of his celebrity, demonstrates that in a time when popularity was a measure of one's success, Collins was not only immensely popular with King Public, he was also a celebrity amongst celebrities.

Ironically, while Collins launched his readings in order to enhance his celebrity, it seemed that his celebrity power was the very thing that fueled the success of his readings. The program of Collins's readings primarily featured *The Dream Woman*, a sensational story involving apparitions, attempted murder, and foreboding dreams.<sup>120</sup> As usual, the press continued to criticize Collins who had, once again, turned to sensationalism for the purposes of entertainment and self-promotion: "[i]t was not pleasant to hear a famous Englishman describing, before several hundred pure girls, how one wretched, fallen woman, after mysteriously killing her man, had captivated two more, and stabbed another

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<sup>120</sup> *The Dream Woman* was adapted from Collins's work, "The Ostler," which originally appeared in *Household Words* in 1855.

to death in a drunken frenzy,” the *Philadelphia Press* declared (qtd in Hyder 516).

Ironically, despite their melodramatic content, it seems that Collins’s performances were not sensational enough. Reviewers widely characterized them as dull and unexciting, and claimed that the profession of acting was simply “beyond [Collins’s] reach” (“Wilkie Collins as a Reader” n.pag.). Collins himself admitted to the anti-sensational effect that his performances produced, writing, “my way of reading surprises [audiences] . . . because I don’t flourish a paper knife and stamp about the platform, and thump the reading desk” (Collins, *Collected Letters* 3: 3). But despite the criticism leveled at the dullness of his performances, Collins insisted that his readings were a triumph with the public, and indeed reviewers tended to agree, claiming on more than one occasion that the public watched Collins intently. Several critics, however, attributed the success strictly to the great appeal of his great celebrity: “Doubtless half the members of his audience . . . attended the reading mainly for the purpose of seeing one of their favorite authors in *propria persona* . . . Had the *Dream Woman* been written and read by an unknown author, it would have excited but little interest,” the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser* quipped (qtd in Hanes 69). The *Chicago Evening Journal* expressed this sentiment in much more candid terms, writing: “But notwithstanding the reader’s monotonous cockney accent and jerky elocution and inability to change from his own tone to the imaginary ones of his characters, the reading was worth all it cost to anybody simply because it was done by one of the great masters of English fiction” (qtd in Hanes 73). His celebrity power was indeed his greatest capital, proving to be, in most cases, greater than the rather poor quality of his performances and the economic crisis that had



struck America in the same month in which he arrived.<sup>121</sup> In spite of general financial difficulties among the American public, Collins admitted that “[t]he hard times have been against me of course – but while others have suffered badly, I have always drawn audiences” (Collins, *Collected Letters* 3: 3). Those who have studied Collins’s readings are always quick to note that Collins’s assessments of his readings are generally at odds with respective critical reviews, a contradiction that Hanes says makes it impossible to affirm whether Collins’s tours were a success (91). While his readings earned tens of thousands of pounds fewer than Dickens’s tours, and his performances were not particularly well-received by critics, I suggest that profits and criticisms are not the only way by which we should measure Collins’s success.<sup>122</sup> Despite poor management, an even poorer economy, and the disadvantage of being constantly compared to Dickens’s unprecedented success in America, Collins’s readings were highly anticipated and often sold out, and the reception accorded to him throughout his tour remained nothing less than splendid.<sup>123</sup> Thus, the publicity and attention he commanded from both the public

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<sup>121</sup> While Collins was en route to America on the *Algeria*, the United States suffered a financial crisis when “the Philadelphia banking firm of Jay Cooke--the banker who during the Civil War had made vast sums, in commissions alone, for selling government bonds--declared bankruptcy.” The incident led to “[f]ive thousand businesses [closing] and left "millions penniless" (Hanes 16). Under these circumstances, few could indulge in the luxury of entertainment. Any assessment of Collins’s success or failure in America should be made within the context of the state of the American economy in 1873-74.

<sup>122</sup> Collins was estimated to have earned £2,500 for his readings. The relatively low number was certainly influenced by economic problems and the American Literary Bureau’s inability to manage Collins’s tour professionally. The Bureau was notorious for scheduling readings too closely together, not informing Collins well in advance of scheduled readings, and selling tickets at unaffordable prices. Hanes notes that the latter was a point of disgruntlement to a country under financial straits, and it accordingly led to poor publicity and low attendance rates (53). Collins would eventually replace James Redpath of the Boston Lyceum Bureau as his manager and agent.

<sup>123</sup> Upon arrival in America, Collins stayed in the very hotel room that Dickens had occupied during his own reading tours. In assessing Collins’s readings, a Philadelphia paper remarked: “Mr. Collins . . . reminds one very much of Dickens. He employs many of the same tones, the same gestures, and some of the peculiar tricks of the voice which distinguished the great novelist. This may be insensible or intentional

and the press signals a definitive kind of cultural success that should not be dismissed easily. In fact, we should not assess the tour's success strictly by the readings, but by the various self-publicizing enterprises in which Collins was engaged while in America.

The North American tour was not simply a reading tour; it was a promotional tour of Collins's expanding authorial labor. While Collins had come to North America primarily to read, he had also made efforts to adapt his authorship to a wide range of markets in order to appeal further to an extended, international audience. Prior to arriving in America, Collins had adapted his novel *The New Magdalen* (1873) to the stage as a means both to protect the financial and intellectual rights of his work and to maximize his publicity. Equally concerned about piracy of his work in North America, Collins arranged for *The New Magdalen*, along with the theatrical adaptation of *The Woman in White*, to appear in America during the time in which he conducted his readings. As part of his long-standing efforts towards thwarting piracy and regaining control and ownership over his work, Collins enticed the public with advertisements that proclaimed he had deviated from the novel's plot in his official dramatization for the purposes of originality: "Thanks to these precautions," he wrote to one of the play's actresses, "the thieves who may plunder me successfully at the beginning of the story will be quite unable to snatch the latter half of it" (Collins, *Collected Letters* 2: 393). Collins proved to be an even shrewder businessman when he strategically arranged for the play to appear at the

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imitation. It is quite possible that Mr. Collins has chosen Mr. Dickens as his model as a public reader and he could not have done a wiser thing. But his imitation is, of course, far from possessing the merit of the original and it has a much smaller influence upon an audience, for that which gave a charm to the elocution of Mr. Dickens cannot be copied. It is an inborn quality; the personal magnetism of the consummate, sympathetic actor, which the most dexterous art may strive in vain to acquire" ("Wilkie Collins' 'Dickensesque'" n.pag.).

Broadway Theatre in New York the day before his reading debut at the Association Hall in the same city. Touted as Collins's dramatization of his own sensational story in order to distinguish it from unauthorized versions and to publicize Collins's visit to America, the play was widely advertised under his name and became further linked to him as it became known that he oversaw the casting, production, and rehearsals and that would attend its New York premiere. While *The New Magdalen* on the stage occasioned more criticism against Collins for his sensationalism, the play proved to be a commercial and personal success for Collins who, on the night of the debut, was persuaded by a "torrent of cries" (qtd in Ashley, "Wilkie Collins and the American Theatre" 249) to leave his box and appear before the crowd for an obligatory bow. This appearance signaled even more forcefully his authorial ownership over his work, and as the *New York Daily Graphic* observed it "was probably worth as much to the audience as the play, [since] everyone likes to see the stuff that authors are made of" (qtd in Hanes 44).<sup>124</sup> *The New Magdalen*'s successful run on the stage was followed by the American debut of Collins's version of *The Woman in White*. As with *The New Magdalen*, Collins presented an altered version of the famed novel to prevent piracy, and he oversaw its debut in mid December. But in spite of the novel's enormous popularity in America, and the play's success in London years prior, the drama was less successful in America,

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<sup>124</sup> Collins's version of *The New Magdalen* successfully premiered at the Globe Theatre in Boston in May 1873, only months prior to his arrival in America. The play would be staged in America once again during Collins's lifetime in 1878.

perhaps because, as Hanes suggests, it “had to compete with a number of inferior plagiarized productions that had preceded it” (56).<sup>125</sup>

Not only was Collins enhancing his reputation by reading and staging dramatizations of his novels, but he was also engaged in writing a sensational story set in America called *The Dead Alive*.<sup>126</sup> Based on the 1819 murder trials of American brothers Jesse and Stephen Boorne, the story was yet another thrilling and suspenseful tale that Collins could add to his repertoire of sensation literature. Most importantly, as Collins’s first novel set in America, *The Dead Alive* was a smart attempt to appeal to a public that he was currently courting, a promotional gesture that did not escape critics. “Collins has complimented the country which he is now visiting by writing an American novel,” the *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* noted in its review of the novel (“An American Novel by Mr. Wilkie Collins” 3). First published serially in the New York *Fireside Companion*, the novel was yet another attempt on Collins’s part to achieve a simultaneous success, as its serial publication appeared in America alongside his American readings and in Canada directly following his Canadian performances.

Collins was not simply publishing new works during his visit. He was also working with his American publishers, Harpers & Brothers, on the publication of a seventeen-volume Illustrated Library Edition of his novels, a project that not only advertised his older repertoire, but also publicized and commemorated his tour. Collins had much to do with the production, discussing the stories that should appear in it and

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<sup>125</sup> While *Man and Wife* debuted in America in September 1870, it was restaged during Collins’s tour in January 1874. I am, however, unable to find definitive evidence on whether or not this restaging was intended to be part of Collins’s tour.

<sup>126</sup> This is the American title. In Great Britain it appeared as *John Jago’s Ghost*.

acknowledging the American public by inscribing in the edition a dedication to them:

“I gratefully dedicate this collected edition of my works, to The American People,” he wrote in the first volume. A massive publication, the edition served as long-term publicity for Collins since Harpers published only one volume monthly. Responding to the edition, the *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* wrote, “[i]t was very naturally expected that the presence of Mr. Wilkie Collins in this country would give a new impetus to the sale of his works . . .” (“An American Novel by Mr. Wilkie Collins” 3), and indeed, as Collins himself noted, “[t]he sale of the old editions has been immense here. Go where I may, I find that my books have made friends for me among all classes of the population” (Collins, *Collected Letters* 3: 6).

His promotional tour, as it appeared in readings, theatrical productions, novels, and his authorial commodification, necessitated widespread publicity. Having relied on his image as an important marketing device of both his authorship and his novels since the publication of *The Woman in White*, Collins arranged for his photograph to be taken in America for the purposes of self-promotion. He first sat for photographer George Kendall Warren, and as many theatrical and literary celebrities had done before him, he later posed for famed celebrity photographer, Napoleon Sarony, an artist who sought to present his subjects in a manner and likeness that expressed the persona and/or the work for which they were publically celebrated: “To seize the opportunity when the unconscious subject is at his best—there’s the test of the expert,” Sarony explained. “When Wilkie Collins came to me, I discerned a peculiarity of facial expression when he talked about his own books, which was most interesting; so, while he kindly answered a question or two for me about his “Woman in White,” I made a quick exposure, feeling

that I had taken the great novelist at his best. And so it proved” (qtd in Willets 190).

Capturing Collins at random as he spoke of his most famous novel, Sarony turned the link between Collins and *The Woman in White* into an artistic form that revived the association between the author and his novel, and served as a unique promotional commodity for his readings (Figures 5 & 6). In figure 5, Collins appears in a lavish coat against an equally ornate background, signaling that unlike other photos of him that featured a standard profile photograph or a mid-length presentation of him sitting, this photograph was intended to be a work of legitimate art. And while it was common for Collins to be professionally photographed with a book in hand, Sarony actually captured him pleasantly engaged in a novel, a pose that reflected both Collins’s labor and the nature of his North American performances. Collins himself favored these photographs over any other portraits for which he sat, as he sent them to publishers and friends and called them “true works of Art, sold at most moderate prices” (qtd in “Wilkie and Photographs” n.pag.).

By the time Collins left America in March 1874, he admitted to “[leaving] America with feelings of sincere gratitude and sincere regret” (Collins, *Collected Letters* 3: 22). His regret had little to do with the relatively small sum of £2500 that he had pocketed from the tour and far more to do with the friends and people he had to leave. Collins’s tour, as it stood, was a great success, one that had made him a greater celebrity and a more beloved author with King Public. Although he did not follow up his North American tour with readings across Great Britain as he had initially planned, he continued to publish novels, produce plays, and command incredible popularity with



Figures 5 and 6. Two photos/carte-de-visites of Collins created by Napoleon Sarony in March 1874.

the masses. In fact, less than a month after leaving North America, Collins was already negotiating the publication of his readings, *The Frozen Deep, and Other Stories (Readings and Writings in America)*. The popular notion that his reputation declined in the later years of his life are challenged by the great success of his last novel *Blind Love* (1889), steady sales of his work, and his continuing appearances in celebrity profiles such as Hughes & Edmonds's *English Celebrities of the Nineteenth Century* in 1876 and Edmund Hodgson Yates's *Celebrities At Home* in 1879. Commemorating his long-standing reputation, the *Daily Inter Ocean* declared that "[a]mong modern English novelists none, unless it was Dickens, enjoyed a wider popularity with readers who care for romance uncumbered by philosophic purpose. [Collins] wrote, not ostensibly to demonstrate a theory or promote a reform, but as a simple, straight-forward narrator of fiction, bent on entertainment and himself entertained by the work engaging his fancies" ("Wilkie Collins and His Stories" 4). In truth, Collins's popularity only diminished as the hunger for sensationalism began to wane in the late nineteenth century. The massification of the literary marketplace meant that [v]alue was defined as being of the moment rather than for all time" (Easley 138). In other words, the Sensation Mania was a cultural product of a mass market that was capable of accommodating rapid changes in literary tastes, and accordingly, sensationalism fell out of favor with the public almost as quickly as it had risen in their esteem. Collins's authorship was particularly vulnerable to the ephemerality of this trend because he had deliberately constructed and marketed his celebrity from it, and in the midst of doing so he had failed to construct a legitimate divide between himself and his sensational repertoire. But perhaps even more damning to his reputation was that his commercial success had always derived from demand, public



sentiment, and mass culture at large. Having earned his symbolic power by overtly appealing to popular taste, his celebrity was viewed primarily as an ephemeral creation entirely dependent on consumer demand, which was already rapidly shifting at the turn of the century. While his cultural value diminished in the late nineteenth century, his cultural marginalization can be attributed primarily to the sundry memoirs and books in which Collins's authorship was belittled by the friends and scholars of Dickens who wrote them and who admittedly envied Collins, if not disdained him for his efforts to turn sensational effect into an artistic form. As Dickens's celebrity flourished long after his death, Collins's celebrity accordingly declined since, as Ashley notes, "books about Dickens by his admirers constituted for years the chief source of information on Collins" ("Wilkie Collins Reconsidered" 265).<sup>127</sup>

Because scholars have largely contributed to Collins's obscurity within cultural studies, his celebrity raises questions about the methods by which we evaluate and value literary figures. As we continue to reassess Collins's work, we need not only study his authorship in a more objective light, but we should seek to understand him both within *and* outside the boundaries of sensationalism, for his repertoire spans far beyond this literary trend, and so too should his reputation. By expanding our understanding of the nature of Collins's celebrity in his time, I hope to have contributed to a wider appreciation for Collins by demonstrating the ways in which his authorial celebrity was a thriving

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<sup>127</sup> John Forster, a friend of both Dickens and Collins was envious of the affection for which Dickens had always shown Collins. It is generally accepted that Forster manifested this jealousy in his biography of Dickens, in which he marginalized Collins's literary significance. It should also be remembered that Forster was a chief figure in Dickens's circle who adamantly objected to Dickens's readings on the grounds that they were improper. In light of Forster's attitude, it is unsurprising that he treated Collins's authorship rather lightly. Forster's attitude towards Collins was continued by twentieth-century Dickensians such as J.W.T. Ley who lamented: "I trace the Wilkie Collins influence, which, from an artistic point of view, has always seemed to me the most unfortunate happening in Dickens's life" (qtd in Nayder, *Unequal Partners* 4).

business, one that was conducted with strategy and deep consideration on Collins's part. His celebrity deserves more scholarly attention, because it demonstrates that Collins was not simply a popular novelist, but that he was also a chief figure in the fight for authors' intellectual property and financial rights, a writer whose work and cultural power rivaled Dickens's, and a major figure in the cultural expansion of the authorial role.

CHAPTER 4<sup>128</sup>OSCAR WILDE'S VEXED CELEBRITY:  
PERFORMING, COMMODIFYING, AND REINVENTING THE SELF IN POPULAR  
CULTURE

“. . . anything is better than virtuous obscurity . . .”—Oscar Wilde<sup>129</sup>

In the 1870s, an Oxford student by the name of Oscar Wilde was asked what he aimed to do in life. “God knows!” he replied. “I won’t be a dried up Oxford don, anyhow. I’ll be a poet, a writer, a dramatist. Somehow or other, I’ll be famous, and if not famous, I’ll be notorious” (qtd in O’Brien 27). That Wilde immediately links the act of writing with celebrity indicates how important fame had become in conceptualizing authorship in the *fin de siècle*, a striking change from the anonymity that writers such as Scott and Austen had hidden behind at the beginning of the century. Nothing in Wilde’s cavalier response suggests that he desired to pursue writing for the purposes of earning a respectable living, nor is there any indication that he subscribed to Wordsworth’s sentiment that the author/poet is a man “endued with more lively sensibility . . . [and] who has a greater knowledge of human nature” (360).<sup>130</sup> Instead, Wilde’s remark is

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<sup>128</sup> This chapter relies heavily on images of Wilde because they were a major contributing factor in the construction of his fame. Attentive to every detail, Wilde carefully exhibited himself in specific poses, expressions, and costumes that would often subsequently be visually ridiculed by cartoonists and illustrators in the media. E.H. Mikhail sums up the importance of Wilde’s appearance when he writes that “[c]uriosity as to [Wilde’s] personal appearance has been by no means abated by the many descriptions published, for readers at once recognize the fact that in some cases the most vivid language is useless to convey a correct impression, and Oscar Wilde has been considered a sufficiently unique personage to be one of those cases” (81).

<sup>129</sup> From *Letters* 117. Wilde’s words would haunt him at the end of his life, after he had been released from prison. During this time, Wilde would live under the pseudonym Sebastian Melmoth on the continent.

<sup>130</sup> From the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, published at the beginning of the nineteenth century in 1802. Wordsworth is specifically speaking of the Poet.

symptomatic of the ways in which late nineteenth-century authorship was becoming increasingly absorbed into the apparatus of celebrity culture, suggesting that authorship was no longer a private form of artistry, but a dazzling, public, and performative enterprise that could make one famous.

What is most significant about Oscar Wilde's authorial celebrity is that its origins and rise had very little to do with any literary endeavor. Although Wilde had made a concerted effort to establish himself as an author following his days at Oxford, he could only boast of an unperformed play (*Vera*) and a book of poorly received poems (*Poems*) by the time he was in his late twenties. Faced with such bleak prospects, Wilde sought his authorial celebrity *outside* of the literary market and accepted an invitation to give a series of lectures on aestheticism across North America in 1882. Though he attempted to publicize his writings while on tour, they were ultimately eclipsed by Wilde himself, who attracted attention to his person by giving live performances of the exaggerated versions of the satirized aesthete and of the Oscar Wilde caricatures that had appeared in the magazines and newspapers since his days as an undergraduate. The turbulent yet profitable interplay between Wilde and an aggressive press, coupled with his penchant for performativity and self-commodification, turned him into one of the most famous and provocative personalities that the public had ever seen. In this chapter, I investigate the ways in which Wilde used the lecture tour as an opportunity to experiment, refine, and market the public persona that I argue would not only come to define Wilde and his most sophisticated works, but would eventually eclipse the author himself. Because Wilde established his literary persona well in advance of producing any major works, I investigate how the chronology of his rise to fame problematized the ways in which his

work and his authorial legitimacy could and still can be interpreted. Because Wilde first gained notoriety and fame as a performer, and because he went to such excessive lengths to display and perform *himself* as a dandified and languorous aesthete who mused over trivialities, he became, to many, little more than a caricature not to be taken too seriously, despite his efforts years later to transform himself into a serious artist. It is for this reason that his later claims of legitimate artistry would often be undermined, if not superseded, by the dandy-in-knee-breeches image of him that had been indelibly branded in the cultural consciousness since his North American tour in the early 1880s. On a more serious note, I further argue that since Wilde's celebrity was established through the practices of self-commodification and self-performance, he unwittingly transformed his most private and intimate self into public property, thereby making the politics of his personal life a dominant lens through which to understand his professional work. The consequence of this dynamic would come to a head when Wilde's biography was used against him in the 1895 trial by prosecutors who argued that his only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* seemed to echo only too strongly the deviant lifestyle of its author. Wilde would eventually be convicted for gross indecency in part because the courts could not divorce Wilde's textual persona from the provocative personality from which he had generated his celebrity and from which he could never break free. This inability to separate the author from the celebrity persona, or Wilde's personal life from his texts, is at issue even in current scholarship, as we are still incapable of discussing Wilde's work without calling attention to his homoerotic escapades, his conviction and imprisonment, and his tireless efforts to "purposely [go] to the wildest extremes in dress and expressions" (qtd in Hofer and Schornhorst 19). Our remembrances of Wilde are a

product of the circumstances under which his celebrity and authorship were constructed, but even more significantly, they point to the vexed nature of the overly-commodified celebrity that has fallen into the hands of a public only too eager to re-envision and reinvent him.

At the age of sixteen, Wilde was one of only three students attending Portora Royal School to earn a scholarship to attend Trinity College, Dublin. In recognition of this honor, his name was etched in gold on Portora's public notice board. Twenty-five years later, the name, which had originally held such prestige, was blacked out by officials following the 1895 trial in which Wilde was publically disgraced for indecency. But even this stance was short-lived, as his name would ultimately be restored and proudly displayed by the same institution that had once tried to banish it. Portora's rather dramatic relationship with Wilde illustrates, albeit on a small scale, the volatility with which we have both valued and de-valued him in culture and scholarship. I include Wilde in this study of celebrity not simply because he is a celebrated author, but also because his history unmistakably manifests the disorder and cultural instability that all celebrities, in one way or another, endure at the hands of a fickle and changing public. Wilde's reputation, though, seems to have always been especially vulnerable in the public sphere, for his history as a celebrity is a chaotic display of prestige, respect, mockery, dishonor, commemoration, and celebration. Often treated as a figure of ridicule in the late 1870s and early 1880s, Wilde would soon earn the public's interest as a lecturer and their esteem as a brilliant playwright in the early 1890s. In the same year that the public bestowed on Wilde their most ardent acclaim for the production of his new play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, they turned on him in the wake of the 1895 trial that

definitively revealed Wilde to be a homosexual. Ostracized by a society threatened by his deviant sexuality, Wilde would live alone on the Continent for three years, abandoned even by his wife and children.<sup>131</sup> As his name was erased from the programs and advertisements of his plays, and as his writings were removed from bookshop shelves, Oscar Wilde swiftly descended into obscurity. His name would be recuperated in the 1920s and 30s, but serious interest in him would not occur until approximately seventy years after his death in 1900, when scholars working in queer studies would help recover and canonize his writings. Since then, Wilde has become a dominant figure in cultural and literary studies. New editions of his work appear annually, and his plays are regularly performed on stage and adapted for film all over the world. Once stripped of any cultural authority, Wilde, it seems, may now be granted too much. Validated and restored by the changing politics of culture and society, Wilde's cultural significance has not simply been recovered and restored—it has been reinvented. In “Performance Theory and Performativity,” Francesca Coppa calls attention to this issue when she writes that

. . . Wilde has variously been given credit for inventing postmodernity, celebrity culture (including, of course, the celebrity scandal and subsequent trial), queer theory, fashion journalism, and camp . . . . Tom Stoppard recently implied that Wilde invented Love, and in the 18 May 1998 issue of *The New Yorker*, Adam Gopnik claimed that Wilde “invented the talk show guest before there was a talk show to welcome him.” (72)

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<sup>131</sup> An obituary of Wilde, printed in the *Manchester Times*, stated: “The circumstances of the scandal, which consigned [Wilde] to gaol and to oblivion, are too recent and too horrible to need recapitulation” (“Death of Oscar Wilde” 6).

Along with these responsibilities, Wilde is also now widely upheld as a major representative of and martyr for gay and lesbian culture, and the scholarship that focuses almost exclusively on the homoerotic and queer readings of his work continues to be at the center of discussion in Wildean studies. In fact, the name that was once too awful to utter is now associated with one of the most celebrated authors of all time.

Characterizations of Wilde and his work continue to abound in popular culture, statues in London and Dublin have been erected in his honor, and his name occupies a prestigious place in the Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey in London next to Chaucer's.<sup>132</sup> Wilde's history is an interesting narrative of the way in which the celebrity who possesses "the power . . . to impose [his] own self-image as the objective and collective image of [his] body and being. . ." can too easily relinquish it (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 208). There has been a struggle for control over Wilde's public image since its inception in the 1880s, evidenced by the endless cycle of manipulation and reinvention to which it has been (and still is being) subjected. Ironically, at the root of this problem is Wilde himself, who not only cultivated it through his own ploys of self-advertisement, but also allowed himself to become entrapped in it for the sake of celebrity.

Oscar Wilde's first performance was of himself. As early as the age of two, the young Wilde demonstrated an appreciation for the value of self-promotion and self-performance during a show where he "entertained guests by reciting his name—Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde over and over" (Belford 3). The performance is

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<sup>132</sup> An episode of *The Venture Bros* (2008) calls attention to the cultural significance that Wilde now wields, as he is included in an elite group of notable men who are intended to save the world. Despite the prominent and powerful position that he occupies in the cartoon, it is worth mentioning that he is still fashioned as a dandified aesthete, dressed in costume and speaking with a lisp, markers which are used to help modern audiences recognize him.



particularly significant, because it foreshadows Wilde's many efforts towards achieving "fame or even notoriety," his self-declared aim in life, and it anticipates the career he would establish primarily through the excesses of self-performance and self-commodification (qtd in Holland 45). His friend and colleague Francis Gribble would later attest that Wilde "understood . . . the great art of posing—the art of challenging attention, not for what he had done but for *what he was*" (qtd in Mikhail 24, author's emphasis). A subscriber to the teachings of Ruskin and Pater, Wilde was, above all else, a performer whose desire for visibility and fame found expression in exaggerated displays of the aesthetes' creed. Opting to promote his eccentricities over his erudition while at Oxford, Wilde earned a reputation for his ostentation, walking a leashed lobster on campus, displaying himself in a coat shaped as a cello, and sporting boldly colorful neckties, knee-breeches, and checkered suits, among other flamboyant garments (Figure 7).<sup>133</sup> His witticisms were equally memorable, often causing such a stir that they began to appear in the pages of *Punch*, the editors of which repeatedly had great fun at Wilde's

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<sup>133</sup> Despite the flippant epigrams and public antics for which Wilde became publically known, he was a brilliant though sometimes lazy student. Wilde would attend Trinity College, Dublin, from 1871-74 on a full scholarship to study Classics. In 1874 he matriculated at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he earned a double first in his final exams, an uncommon achievement. At Oxford, Wilde met, among other influential figures, Walter Pater and John Ruskin, two individuals who would have a lasting impression on his theories on performativity, art, and beauty. Wilde's later ideas on literary style, the role of the critic, and the subjectivity of the self would also develop at Oxford from his exposure to the writings of Spencer, Plato, Kant, Hegel, Locke, Mill, Keats, Dante, and Baudelaire. Influenced by these writers, Wilde would begin seriously to write reviews and poetry during this time, and even win the Newdigate Prize for his poem, *Ravenna*. Although he achieved numerous academic successes, the reputation that he would earn for himself at Oxford was one that hinged almost entirely on the lampooned public persona. This would significantly affect his reception in many circles, and it somewhat undermined the more philosophical and artistic side by which he would later attempt to define himself in the 1890s.

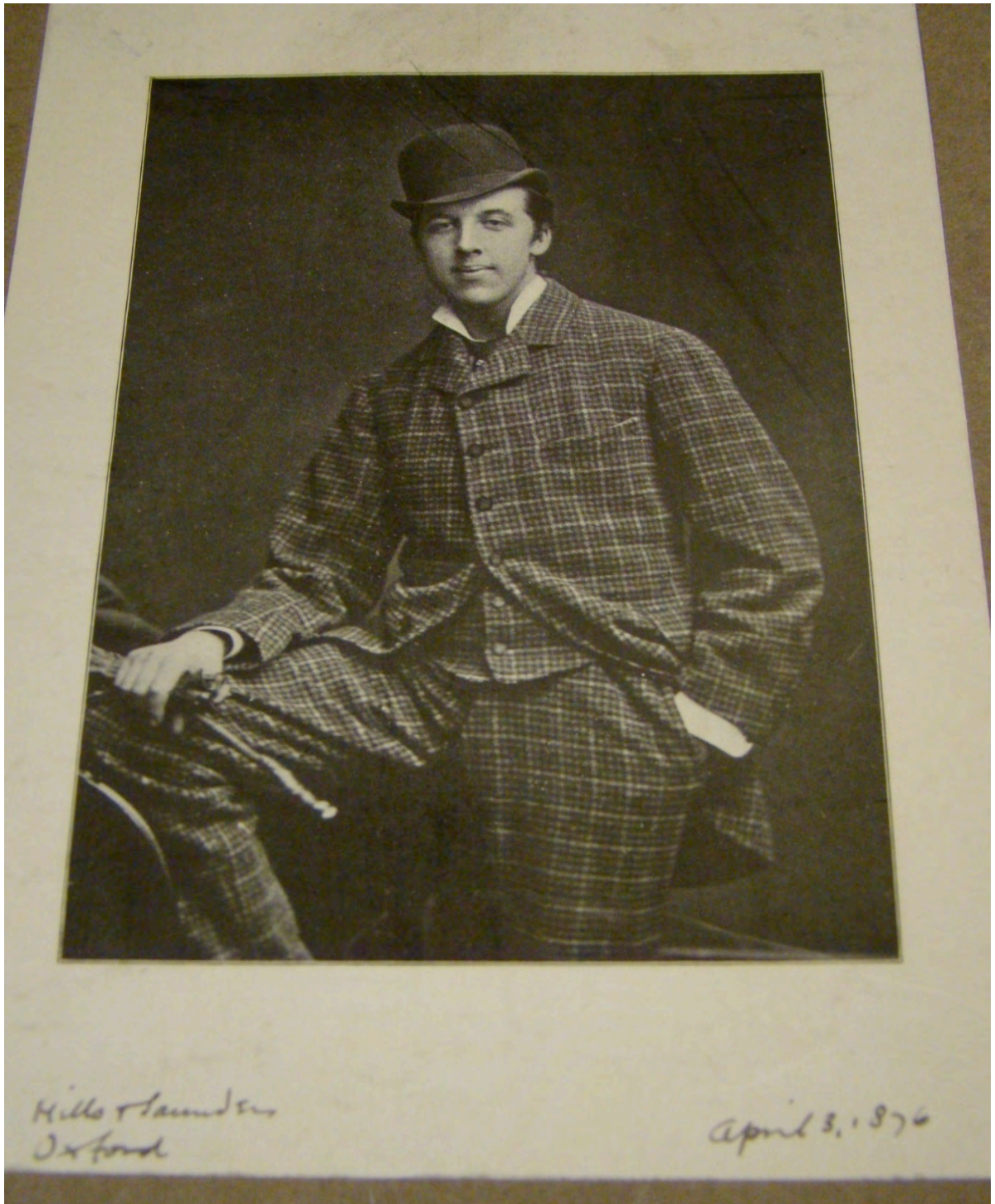


Figure 7. Wilde at Oxford. (April 1876). Courtesy of the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, Los Angeles, California.

expense.<sup>134</sup> Though Wilde was often ridiculed by his contemporaries for depicting himself as little more than a flamboyant and boldly-dressed aesthete who sighed over blue china and lilies, few understood that he was carefully constructing the genesis of his celebrity.<sup>135</sup> Indeed, it was at Oxford that Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde *invented* and staged the public persona that would eventually be known simply as Oscar Wilde, since, as he observed, "A name which is destined to be in everybody's mouth must not be too long; besides it becomes so expensive in the advertisement"<sup>136</sup> (qtd in Belford 3). By inscribing to his physical person provocative gestures, poses, and costumes that would be only too curious not to attract audiences and compel them to interpret such a spectacle, Wilde transformed himself into a bodily text from which meaning could and *should* be derived.<sup>136</sup> By the time he left Oxford in 1878, he was a local celebrity and his name a familiar sight in the various papers and journals that called attention to his persona by

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<sup>134</sup> Wilde gained widespread attention after he was heard telling a group of undergraduates: "I find it harder and harder to live up to my blue china." Wilde is referencing the blue china vases that he used to display the lilies with which he decorated his room at Oxford. The levity of the remark was publically denounced in a sermon by Dean Burgon, a priest in St Mary's, Oxford, who asserted that "'[w]hen a young man says not in polished banter, but in sober earnestness, that he finds it difficult to live up to the level of his blue china, there has crept into these cloistered shades a form of heathenism which it is our bounden duty to fight against and to crush out, if possible'" (qtd in Ellmann 45). Few treated Wilde's quote with the severity that Dean Burgon called for; in fact, the remark was duly satirized in the *Oxford and Cambridge Undergraduate's Journal* as well as in *Punch*, and Pater even included it in his book, *Gaston de Latour*. Much to the Dean Burgon's chagrin, the quote garnered so much publicity for Wilde that it became a popular marker of the flamboyance for which he stood. Even today, it is still a quote that appears frequently in contemporary Wildean scholarship.

<sup>135</sup> Aesthetes argued that art had no practical use, and that it existed as a thing of beauty for its own sake. The lily, a beautiful but useless object, became a cultural symbol of this idea. It predominately became associated with Wilde, especially in the media's satirical characterizations of him.

<sup>136</sup> In *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), Lord Illingworth tells Gerald: "Well, what you have to do at present is simply to fit yourself for the best society. A man who can dominate a London dinner-table can dominate the world. The future belongs to the dandy. It is the exquisites who are going to rule . . . . To get into the best society, nowadays, one has either to feed people, amuse people, or shock people – that is all" (132). Undoubtedly, Wilde, a successful and well-respected playwright by 1893, was referencing the history of his own success in this line.

poking fun at it. It is here, though, that we locate one of the paradoxes of Wilde's celebrity: by inventing and consciously performing this persona, Wilde turned *himself* into his most valuable and appealing commodity from which his celebrity could be developed. And since the market from which Wilde's celebrity sprung was controlled by a public that was "fascinated, suspicious, and fetishizing" of the visible and exposed figure, Wilde's success depended largely on excessive notoriety and visible consumption (Schulz 40). But by presenting himself as a bodily text that deliberately invoked public interpretation through such acts of notoriety, Wilde's image, or his persona, became a public commodity that was parodied, manipulated, and reinvented by the very media that would help make his celebrity possible.

The aesthetes' profession that art existed for art's sake, and that beauty and sensuality should prevail over all else made those associated with the movement an easy and common target to ridicule in the press, and "of all the ridiculous dandies connected with the Movement in the public mind, Wilde was the most notorious" (O'Brien 25). The satirical depictions of Wilde that emerged at this time were essential to the formation of his celebrity, as they not only introduced him to a wider audience, but they also more or less determined the conditions by which the public would come to know him. Merlin Holland notes that Wilde's image and name appeared no less than fifty times in *Punch* between 1881-2, a recognition that demonstrates just how reliant his initial cultural appeal was on the excesses of visibility (117). But to be exact, those who subscribed to *Punch* were not introduced to Oscar Wilde, the persona that Wilde had invented; rather, they met Oscuro Wildgoose, The Prince of Doodads, Ossian Wilderness, His Royal Impudence, Drawit Mildeall, Jellaby Postlethwaite, Maudle the painter and Prigsby the

art critic, all of whom were satirical and exaggerated fictive representations of Wilde's persona created by *Punch's* illustrators, Linley Sambourne and George Du Maurier. Wilde was certainly the ideal figure around which these artists could construct their humor and satire, but more significantly, his displays of ostentation, which deliberately left him open to public interpretation, made him particularly susceptible to their artistic manipulations.

Because Sambourne and Du Maurier were illustrators of a magazine that specialized in humor and satire, it served their purposes well to construe Wilde's everyday performances as extreme. Their efforts to present him in unflattering and frivolous ways had particular consequences for Wilde's public image since many of Sambourne and Du Maurier's contemporaries would subsequently model their own Wildean satire on *Punch's* cartoons. In "O.W.," published in June 1881, Sambourne ridicules and trivializes Wilde's aesthetic aims by anthropomorphizing him as a sunflower, a cultural emblem of the Aesthetic Movement, but also one that plainly effeminizes him and calls attention to his uselessness (Figure 8).<sup>137</sup> The long, flowing hair, limp eyelids, and drooping posture flaunts the very traits that rendered Wilde both a threat to social norms and a figure of amusement to mainstream culture. Specifically, the cartoon exaggerates Wilde's propensity to downplay his more traditionally masculine traits in favor of more delicate ones by depicting him adroitly leaning, a more feminine

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<sup>137</sup> "O.W." is the first characterization to associate Wilde with a sunflower. From this point on, the sunflower became the emblem with which Wilde was most associated in popular culture.

## PUNCH'S FANCY PORTRAITS.—No. 37.



"O. W."

"O, I eel just as happy as a bright Sunflower  
*Lays of Christy Minstrelsy*

Æsthete of Æsthetes!  
What's in a name?  
The poet is WILDE,  
But his poetry's tame.

Figure 8. "O.W." Linley Sambourne's characterization of Oscar Wilde that appeared in *Punch* in June 1881. As one of the first Wildean satirical creations, it became the prototype from which subsequent caricatures would be modeled.

pose that Wilde often adopted in both his performances and photos. His feminized posture is complemented with nothing more than a thin stem for a body that is blooming from and being sheltered by a beautiful but useless vase, a likely cultural reference to Wilde's famous remark about being unable to live up to his china, and a clear jab at both his lack of masculinity and his aesthetic aims for beauty.<sup>138</sup> The aesthete, then, as Sambourne's illustration suggests, is no more than a passive thing of beauty, an object too delicate to be anything but gazed upon, which not only trivializes Wilde's place in society, but also his artistry as a poet. In the same year that Sambourne's cartoon appeared, Wilde had published, at his own expense, a collection of poems, which were less than commercially and critically successful. Although Wilde is composing an ode in the cartoon, Sambourne reminds readers that Wilde's greatest appeal and most compelling commodity is not his poetry, but himself: "Aesthete of Aesthetes! / What's in a name? / The poet's name is WILDE, / but his poetry's tame."<sup>139</sup> The pun redirects our attention back to Wilde's affected mannerisms for which he had earned his fame, but it is important to note that we are confronted with *Sambourne's* exaggerated version of Wilde's persona. By repeatedly presenting to the public overly-inflated and satirical versions of the persona that Wilde himself was marketing, Sambourne and his contemporaries played a considerable role in the reconceptualization of Wilde's image as little more than a sight to be seen, if not a mere amusement. Despite the cultural authority that these cartoonists exerted over Wilde's public image, Wilde welcomed the publicity

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<sup>138</sup> Although Wilde was a rather corpulent man, the delicacy and effeminacy popularly linked to the dandy-aesthete led many to assume that he was both slender and small. Those who saw him for the first time were often surprised at his thick figure and his height which measured at 6'3.

<sup>139</sup> Ellmann explains that *Poems* was criticized both for insincerity and unoriginality. By calling Wilde's poetry "tame," Sambourne mocks the poem's subtle indecency (144).

and even went so far as to admit being pleased by it all: “I have never felt pained at all by [Du Maurier’s] caricatures or those of anyone else, and I think I have enjoyed them fully as much as anyone” he told the press (qtd in Powell 15). Despite his professions, Wilde certainly could not have *enjoyed* being the principal target of satire in *Punch*—his attempt to prevent the paper from being read at Oxford certainly belies the sentiment. What Wilde did enjoy was the concomitant advertisement that these caricatures produced for him. As a journalist at the *Boston Globe* reported during Wilde’s visit to America, Wilde once complained that “[t]he American papers are often a screed of falsehoods,” but he elicited little sympathy from the reporter on account that

through all this harangue a mysterious winkle in the great aesthete’s orbs seemed to intimate that he very well understood the advantage of free advertising, and didn’t so much care whether he was represented or misrepresented, as long as he was as far from a failure as at present. As a matter of fact, had the American papers ignored him as the English have done, his venture in this country would possible have fallen short of its present measure of success. (qtd in Hofer and Scharnhorst 48-9)

The journalist’s assessment puts into perspective Wilde’s reaction to *Punch*. Wilde seems to have recognized that despite their ridiculing and sometimes derisive nature, these characterizations were still operating as a form of publicity that helped to establish and maintain his name within popular culture. It was Wilde, after all, who argued in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that “. . .there is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about” (6). Though these artists’ satirical creations certainly turned Wilde into a figure to be talked about, it is important to point



out that Sambourne and his contemporaries were really popularizing and making famous *their versions* of Oscar Wilde, thereby defining Wilde's public self as they imagined and desired him to be.

A popular amusement with audiences, the Oscar Wilde caricatures quickly emerged as a mass-market commodity, appearing in sundry cartoons and comic strips, songs, poems, and dances. I include an image of the cover of M.H. Rosenfeld's comic song, "Oscar Dear!" to illustrate the impact that earlier comical depictions of Wilde, such as "O.W.", had in shaping his public image (Figure 9). "Oscar Dear" belongs to a proliferation of Wildean caricatures that flooded the market in the late 1870s and early 1880s, and like most Wildean humor at the time, it is simply another variation of its kind. For instance, the illustration linked to Rosenfeld's song depicts Wilde arching his back and leaning against his right hand, as his left knee is slightly bent to help accentuate the pose. Though Wilde is not leaning over as he is in Sambourne's cartoon, it is clear that the two poses are simply different versions of the same effeminate disposition for which Wilde was famous. And though he is depicted in his human form in Rosenfeld's cover, his delicacy is still equally ridiculed. His body, dressed in noticeably tight breeches and a velveteen coat, is just as comically elongated and thin as the anthropomorphized Wilde in Sambourne's illustration. The sunflower is also prominently featured and linked specifically to Wilde, even framing his head in such a way that it appears as though it is attached to his body, as it is in "O.W.". Perhaps most notably, though, Rosenfeld's lyrics, "Oscar, dear; Oscar, dear! / I think you are awfully wild!" is a clear repetition of Sambourne's caption, "The poet's name is WILDE." This aesthete poseur depicted in



Figure 9. The cover of Rosenfeld's "Oscar Dear!" (1882). Courtesy of the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, Los Angeles, California.

Sambourne's cartoon and imitated in Rosenfeld's musical cover would continue to appear in strikingly similar terms within popular culture. Adopted, reproduced, and disseminated into mass culture by a multitude of sources, this frivolous caricature would not only become a purchasable commodity under the media's ownership, but it would also become Wilde's most defining and enduring public image.

With the frequent appearances of these Wildean caricatures, Wilde's fame spread well beyond Oxford and London, especially after the staging of *Patience*, a new comic opera by Gilbert and Sullivan, which took as its subject the love triangles of two dandified aesthete-poets, Reginald Bunthorne, the Fleshy Poet, and Archibald Grosvenor, the Spiritual Poet.<sup>140</sup> When *Patience* premiered at the Opera Comique in London in April 1881, the public mistakenly took Bunthorne and Grosvenor as parodies of Wilde, despite the fact that Gilbert had really modeled them after Wilde's contemporaries, Whistler, Rossetti, and Swinburne. Although these men were associated with the same aesthetic circles, their personalities were no match for Wilde's, whose celebrity eclipsed them all, especially in this context. Furthermore, like most of the aesthete caricatures that appeared at this time, Bunthorne and Grosvenor are fictive creations inspired by the satirical characterizations that had begun in *Punch's* cartoons and were now almost exclusively linked to Wilde by virtue of his notoriety. Indeed, the two protagonists embody all of the exaggerated and absurd qualities to which Wilde owed his fame, and the original cover of the program for *Patience* even features an aesthete whose dress shares an especial

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<sup>140</sup> In response to Wilde's fame, Polish actress Helen Modjeska asked: "What has he done, this young man, that one meets him everywhere? Oh yes, he talks well, but what has he *done*? He has written nothing, he does not sing or paint or act – he does nothing but talk. I do not understand" (qtd in Merlin 60, author's emphasis). In some ways, Wilde's early fame anticipates the twenty-first century celebrity, a public figure whose fame often derives from nothing more than overexposure and an outlandish personality.

likeness to the Wildean caricatures to which the public had been frequently exposed.

That the public immediately recognized Wilde in the opera's protagonists demonstrates just how reliant his fame was on the media's satirical creations, and how lucrative of a commodity his image was becoming within the field of popular amusement. While historians and scholars often credit *Patience* as the event that transformed Wilde into an international celebrity, I argue that its real significance is the role it played in permanently linking this satirical characterization to Wilde's public image.

*Patience* experienced so much success in London that Gilbert and Sullivan planned to debut it in America in September 1881. However, while London audiences were familiar with the excesses of the Aesthetic Movement and thus thought Gilbert and Sullivan's satire amusing, it was questionable whether Americans would fully appreciate the humor. To mitigate this concern, Richard D'Oyly Carte, the producer of the American production, arranged for Wilde to give a series of lectures on Aestheticism that would coincide with the production of *Patience*, hoping that Wilde's affected mannerisms, lavish costumes, and droll conversation would serve as live publicity for the satirical opera.<sup>141</sup> Extended during a period when Wilde's career was in a rather dismal state, D'Oyly's offer came at the ideal time. Aside from "talking himself into London society," Wilde had done little more than author a play and a collection of poems since graduating from Oxford (Holland 57). His play, *Vera, or The Nihilists*, a work that centered on the Nihilist movement and the assassination of the Russian Czar, remained unperformed since its political message was considered too risky to stage at a time when Russia was

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<sup>141</sup> Wilde was initially asked to give fifty lectures over the span of four months, but his popularity allowed the tour to surpass its intended timeframe, and he stayed in North America for a total of ten months, arriving in January and departing in November 1882.

then facing troubling political conditions.<sup>142</sup> And *Poems*, as his poetry collection was entitled, was a commercial and critical failure upon publication despite Wilde's efforts to promote it by sending copies to major literary figures such as Algernon Charles Swinburne, Robert Browning, and Matthew Arnold, and even "[asking] a friend for a laudatory review" (Belford 85).<sup>143</sup> Noted for its aesthetic sentiment, unoriginality, and "tame" indecency, *Poems* was not provocative or interesting enough to capture the public's attention. Hoping that his work would find a better reception in America and reveling in the kind of publicity that such a tour would surely generate, Wilde readily accepted D'Oyly's request one day after it was extended.

By accepting D'Oyly's offer, Wilde was presented with a very real opportunity to reclaim the agency over his public image that he had relinquished to the media; indeed, it was the ideal occasion to revise if not undo the lampooned public image that the press had linked to him. Though D'Oyly's scheme was ultimately for Wilde to promote *Patience* by publically presenting himself in the style of Bunthorne and Grosvenor, the actual lectures gave Wilde a legitimate opportunity to reinvent himself. Not only did they expose him to a considerably larger audience than he had ever been accustomed, but they also presented him with a controlled environment in which he could show himself in a more serious fashion. Wilde could quite easily correct the public's overblown impressions of aestheticism—and his public self—by discussing the real ideas and philosophy behind the movement. But perhaps in light of his literary failures and his

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<sup>142</sup> Most likely out of embarrassment, Wilde would try to claim that *Vera* was not produced because he could not find the right actors.

<sup>143</sup> Belford notes that it was not uncommon at this time to request positive reviews of one's work.

fervent desire for fame, Wilde could not resist the inevitable publicity and success that would develop from a performance of himself within the context of *Patience*. Throughout his tour that spanned thirty-two states, two visits to Canada, and approximately 140 lectures, Wilde went to great lengths not to undo the media's satirical depictions of him, but rather to treat them as the source of his celebrity. In other words, Wilde constructed his public image from them by presenting himself in the form of Reginald Bunthorne—an irony in and of itself since Bunthorne was a fictive creation of the likes of Wilde. Wilde would become so absorbed and embedded in his satirical counterparts during this tour that he would eventually transform himself into a bodily text from which Gilbert and Sullivan's script could only be discerned. Validating the media's many satirical creations of him and even encouraging a greater production of them, Wilde permitted his public image to be conditioned by the demands of popular culture, all for the sake of his celebrity.

American audiences had been acquainted with *Patience* for three months by the time Wilde arrived in America in January 1882. The excitement that surrounded his visit can largely be attributed to the publicity that D'Oyly had generated for Wilde, as well as to the commercial success that the opera had already experienced in America. Familiar with the affected style and mannerisms of Bunthorne and Grosvenor, American reporters demonstrated their reputed acquaintance with Wilde before he had even arrived. One reporter from the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* offered up his satirical expectations of Wilde in a piece that imagined him as a wistful and dainty aesthete trying desperately to survive the Atlantic:

The cooks on the ocean steamers . . . can make lovely flowers out of vegetables, and, knowing that lilies are the poet's bread and butter . . . [they] will carve a bunch of snow-white lilies out of a big Irish potato, and the starving muse can be nourished by inhaling the familiar odor, and the drooping wings be fed by sight of the adorable daintiness. ("Aestheticism Soon to be Blessed by the Advent of Oscar Wilde" 9)

Although the reporter paints Wilde as a figure of ridicule, it is important to note that his expectations are based primarily on the media's comical characterizations of Wilde, made obvious by his remark that Wilde, known for his unusually thick figure, is a "starving muse," a characteristic that is in keeping with the conventional appearance of the dandy-aesthete who is often portrayed as excessively lank and thin. But the idea that Wilde was this aesthete poseur was the attribute that made him so appealing to the Americans, and so the joke had to be maintained. Crowds swarmed his boat, hoping to get a glimpse of the man they expected to be Bunthorne's authentic counterpart. The public was curious to know if Wilde would play—or be—the part that had been publically self-invented, manipulated, and reinvented, all for the purposes of notoriety and amusement. To their delight, it seemed that he would. Although Wilde did not have a single word of his lecture written by the time he arrived in America, he had spent a good deal of time taking elocution lessons and having his wardrobe designed for the tour. Stepping out of his cabin on the boat, Wilde, costumed in a long green coat, yellow kid gloves, and a seal-skin cap, "leaned against the railing of the companionway in a lounging attitude. . ." listening to

the public recite lines from *Patience* (“An Apostle of Estheticism” 2).<sup>144</sup> And when customs asked him what he had to declare, Wilde made a sensation by flippantly announcing: “I have nothing to declare except my genius” (qtd in Ellmann 160). The entire spectacle caused such a scene that it was reported at length by journalists across the nation who diligently quoted him and recorded every detail of his appearance and mannerisms with the intent that they could capture for the reading public what this curiosity and real-life model of Bunthorne was truly like. For instance, the *New York World* reported:

Mr. Wilde is fully six feet three inches in height, straight as an arrow, and with broad shoulders and long arms, indicating considerable strength. His outer garment was a long ulster trimmed with two kinds of fur, which reached almost to his feet. He wore patent-leather shoes, a smoking-cap or turban, and his shirt might be termed ultra-Byronic, or perhaps—décolleté. A sky-blue cravat of the sailor style hung well down upon the chest. His hair flowed over his shoulders in dark-brown waves, curling slightly upwards at the ends. His eyes were of a deep blue, but without that faraway expression that is popularly attributed to poets. In fact they seemed rather everyday and commonplace eyes. His teeth were large and regular, disproving a pleasing story which has gone the rounds of the English press that he has three tusks or protuberants far from agreeable to look at. He is beardless, and his complexion is almost colorless. In manner, Mr. Wilde was easy and unconstrained, and his attitude as he

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<sup>144</sup> Wilde had this green coat made for his tour.



conversed with the reporters and others was very graceful. A peculiarity of Mr. Wilde's face is the exaggerated oval of the Italian face carried into the English type of countenance and tipped with a long sharp chin. It does not, however, impress one as being a strong face. His manner of talking is somewhat affected—judging from an American standpoint—his great peculiarity being a rhythmic chant in which every fourth syllable is accentuated. Thus, when asked what his mission in America, he replied in a singsong tone: “I come from *Eng-land* because I *thought* America was the best *place* to see.” (qtd in Hofer and Scharnhorst 13-14, author's emphasis.)

Wilde was delighted by his reception upon his arrival in America. In a letter to Norman Forbes-Robertson, he outlined his success, remarking that there was “nothing like it since Dickens . . . I am torn in bits by Society. Immense receptions, wonderful dinners, crowds wait for my carriage” (Wilde, *Letters* 86-7). He was proud that the stature of his celebrity necessitated a black servant and “two secretaries, one to write [his] autograph and answer the hundreds of letters that come begging for it . . . [and the other], whose hair is brown, to send locks of his own hair to the young ladies who write asking for [his]” (Wilde, *Letters* 87). Of course, what Wilde neglects to mention in these letters is that the sensation he caused in America was quite unlike the nature of Dickens's triumph. Dickens was a well-established and beloved author by the time he commenced his reading tours in America, while Wilde's great appeal was predicated almost entirely on the joke that he had become through his efforts to display himself as an aesthetic spectacle: “People go to Mr. Wilde's performances, not to hear what he has to say, but to

see how he wears his hair and his knee-breeches,” the *Daily Inter Ocean* remarked.

“We have not the slightest objection to this, provided the show is a good one . . . .

Dickens could read in this country, not once, but many times, for the people were not satisfied when they had merely seen the great novelist. . . . but on the lecture platform Mr. Wilde is the first man who has made a success by exciting ridicule, and who depends not upon the truths he utters, but upon the ‘utter’ way he has of uttering them for whatever of attention he may receive” (“Oscar Wilde and Sullivan” 12). Though Wilde was not always treated in such a mocking fashion, the reporter certainly captures the general reception of him in America by articulating the degree to which Wilde’s success and fame were highly dependent on his efforts to continue to emphasize the likeness between himself and his satirical counterparts. And to the public’s great pleasure, Wilde willingly acquiesced.<sup>145</sup> The resemblance was no more apparent than when Wilde appeared in a front box at a production of the opera in New York, having come to perform his fictive counterpart visibly from his box, and to watch Bunthorne (ironically dressed as Wilde) perform on the stage.

Wilde would indelibly link himself to Bunthorne’s character when he arranged to have his photo taken by the famous celebrity photographer Napoleon Sarony in the same month that he arrived in America.<sup>146</sup> Totaling at twenty-seven in number, Sarony’s photos of Wilde are a dramatic presentation of the aesthete shown in lavish and

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<sup>145</sup> “His individuality is . . . continually asserting itself,” the *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* wrote in January 1882. “He evidently continues his eccentric actions merely for his own pecuniary benefit, as he will probably become the best-advertised curiosity in the world” (“Interview with Oscar Wilde, the English Exponent of Aestheticism” 4).

<sup>146</sup> Sarony would photograph notable celebrities such as Samuel Clemens, Sarah Bernhardt, and William T. Sherman.

extravagant costumes against equally exquisite backdrops. It is important to point out that Sarony presents Wilde in the very costumes that Wilde had requested from his tailor in preparation for the tour and in which he presented his public lectures. Cloaked in heavy furs, silk knee breeches, stockings, velvet jackets, broad-brimmed hats, a cape, and shoes adorned with bows, Wilde seems to have visibly adopted in these photos the very traits for which the media ridiculed him. Indeed, in each of the photos, he unmistakably looks the part of Bunthorne (See Figures 10, 11, and 12).<sup>147</sup> Sarony's photographs show what appears to be more or less a coded performance on Wilde's part; the famous gaze is often depicted as Wilde wistfully stares at something far off in the distance or looks directly into the viewer's eyes. Much like the satirical productions put forth by the media, Wilde is often portrayed in his infamous feminine pose, whether he is sitting or standing. In many of the photographs, his leg is delicately put forward with a slightly bent knee as he stands, or his head rests on his hand as he reclines on a sedan to give him the appearance of leaning.<sup>148</sup>

The image of Wilde as the dandified aesthete had always been in the public imagination, but I argue that the release and circulation of Sarony's photographs, clearly endorsed by Wilde, confirmed it and permanently linked it to his name.<sup>149</sup> Sarony's photographs, depicting Wilde in the fashion of his satirical foils, are the product

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<sup>147</sup> The costumes in which Wilde appeared while he posed for Sarony also constituted as his lecturing attire.

<sup>148</sup> Though Sarony was notoriously known for controlling the poses of his celebrity clients, it is enough that Wilde agreed to perform them.

<sup>149</sup> Sarony's photographs are still widely in use today, as many serve as the pictorial covers of books that take Wilde and his work as their subjects.



Figure 10. Photograph by Napoleon Sarony (1882). Courtesy of the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, Los Angeles, California.



Figure 11. A collectible carte-de-visite of Oscar Wilde issued by Sarony (1882). Courtesy of the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, Los Angeles, California.



Figure 12. Photograph by Napoleon Sarony (1882). Courtesy of the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, Los Angeles, California.

of Wilde's efforts to stage and commodify visually the persona by which he wanted to be publically known and represented. The images, which flooded the market after Sarony printed them on cards in large quantities to be sold as collectibles, were often the American public's first encounter with Oscar Wilde's person.<sup>150</sup> And even if audiences somehow remained unexposed to the photographs, they were likely familiar with James Edward Kelly's sketches of Wilde that were virtual duplicates of Sarony's images since they were drawn at the same time that he was photographed (Figure 13). Kelly was requested to sketch Wilde as he appeared in Sarony's studio since the photographs would not be printed in time for Wilde's first lecture and some sort of major promotion was needed. The sketches were featured in newspapers to help advertise Wilde's lectures, and they became even more ubiquitous after Wilde sold them to various advertisers who used them to promote products such as ice cream and cigars. The transformation of these photographs into saleable images and advertisements became the basis of Wilde's relationship with a public who, having only recently been introduced to him, knew him largely as an outlandish self-appointed dandy and apostle of aestheticism. It is no surprise, then, that Wilde would begin to be obscured by the fictitious representatives that he had authenticated as himself. The image of Wilde as the comical dandy-aesthete proliferated only too rapidly under such a well-managed publicity campaign, and by performing the role in Sarony's photographs and Kelly's sketches, Wilde permanently captured and literalized what was once only an ephemeral and satirical imagined representation.

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<sup>150</sup> Carte-de-visites, especially those of celebrities, were popular collectibles during the Victorian period. Their popularity signals both the nineteenth-century celebrity's cultural power and the ease with which they were commodified and consumed by the public.

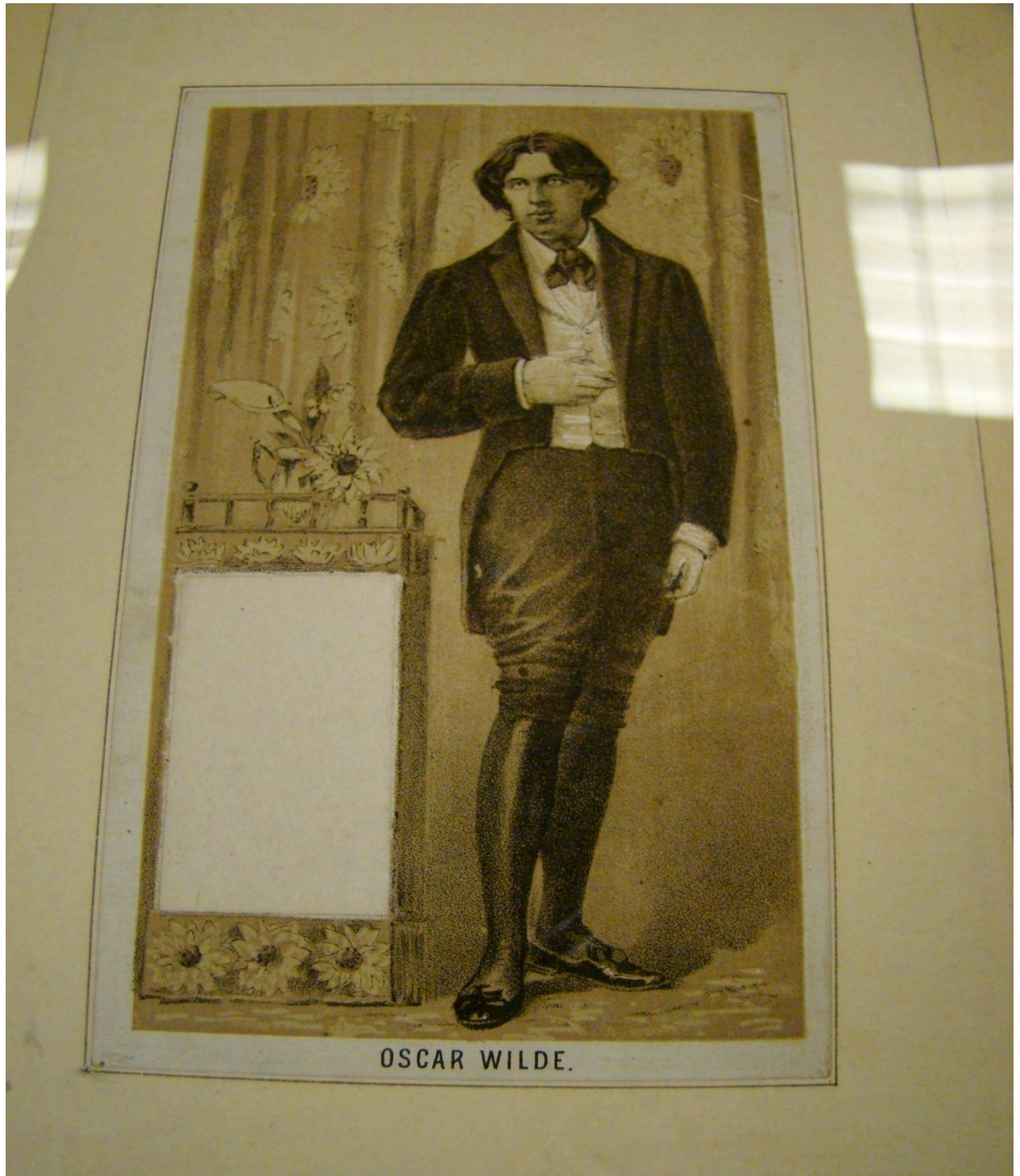


Figure 13. A sketch of one of Sarony's photographs by James Edward Kelly (1882). In this sketch Kelly has taken the liberty to pose Wilde against sunflowers and next to a lecturing podium. Once Wilde sold this sketch to businessmen, the blank spot appearing on the front of the podium was used to advertise various products. Courtesy of the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, Los Angeles, California.



This image of Wilde rapidly proliferated in the public sphere, and the American public responded in kind, extending the derision and mockery far beyond illustrations and songs. By having sanctioned the media's satirical treatment of his public persona, Wilde made himself equally open to the public's ridicule. His lecture in Boston caused a scene when sixty Harvard students, having come to mock Wilde's aesthetic affectations, languorously walked into the venue holding sunflowers and lilies and donning "hats like Bunthorne's," atop Wilde's signature knee-breeches and stockings (Ellmann 182). In good humor, Wilde treated the parody as nothing more than an expression of admiration, and called the students his disciples. A similar scene was repeated days later at the University of Rochester in New York, where Wilde was met with collective jeers and a black man who wore a white kid glove and danced throughout the aisle waving a handful of flowers. Even writer Eugene Field poked fun at Wilde, parading himself in an open carriage dressed as the aesthete. As he often treated the attention he attracted, Wilde seemed amused by Field's performance, calling it "'a splendid advertisement for my lecture'" (Ellmann 191). But it was this kind of publicity that Wilde both created and encouraged that did not just interfere with his other purposes for coming to North America, but altogether precluded them. Though he hoped his tour would help increase his fame, Wilde was also quite serious about promoting *Poems* and staging his play *Vera* and the newest item in his repertoire, *The Duchess of Padua*. He expressed his desire to produce *Vera* in America and explained that his ability to find a stage for it would depend on finding suitable actresses to cast. He considered several women, but it was turned down both by the actresses he pursued and D'Oyly, who Wilde had hoped would manage the production. Though it would finally be shown in New York

after great effort on Wilde's part, critics generally panned it for its nihilism and for Wilde's amateur writing, and it would close only a week after it premiered (Figures 14 & 15). *Poems* would be equally unsuccessful, conveying the same aesthetic sentiments that Wilde displayed and for which he was teased. Ellmann explains that those who reviewed *Poems* "accused Wilde of all the available vices, from plagiarism to insincerity to indecency" (144). Unsurprisingly, serious literary critics who saw Wilde exhibit himself as little more than a satirical amusement viewed his poetry in the same manner. Warning Americans of Wilde's poems, Edmund Gosse described the book as "'a curious toadstool, a malodorous parasitic growth'" (qtd in Ellmann 161). Like the British, few Americans displayed any real interest in his writings. The *Rocky Mountain News* argued that as poets were quite common in America, it was far more likely that Wilde would earn his celebrity through the excesses of performed affectations rather than any literary endeavor:

[Wilde's] poetry would not of itself insure crowded houses in this free land where poets bloom and die much like ordinary mortals, but the fact that he is a sweet scion of nobility, reinforced by the further fact that he is popularly supposed to be a social crank and a great curiosity will make a lion of him and people will flock in thousands to hear him. ("[Oscar Wilde the apostle of estheticism]" 4)

But aside from Wilde's exhibitions of dandyism, which proved him as a celebrity not to be taken seriously, Wilde had not yet fully developed his style and ideas as a writer. Neither *Vera* nor *Poems* expressed the command over dialogue that he would later demonstrate with brilliance in his novel and later essays and dramas, and most



Figure 14. From *The Judge*. The illustration on the left depicts Wilde the Aesthete, surrounded by traditional emblems of aestheticism and posturing atop a heap of gold coins. The image on the right depicts Wilde the Playwright, who appears to be in a much more haggard and dull state, as he makes his return to England following the critical and commercial failure of his play *Vera* in America. Printed in September 1883, this caricature points to the real source of Wilde's fame and success at the time, and even ridicules him for his attempts at authorship. Courtesy of the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, Los Angeles, California.

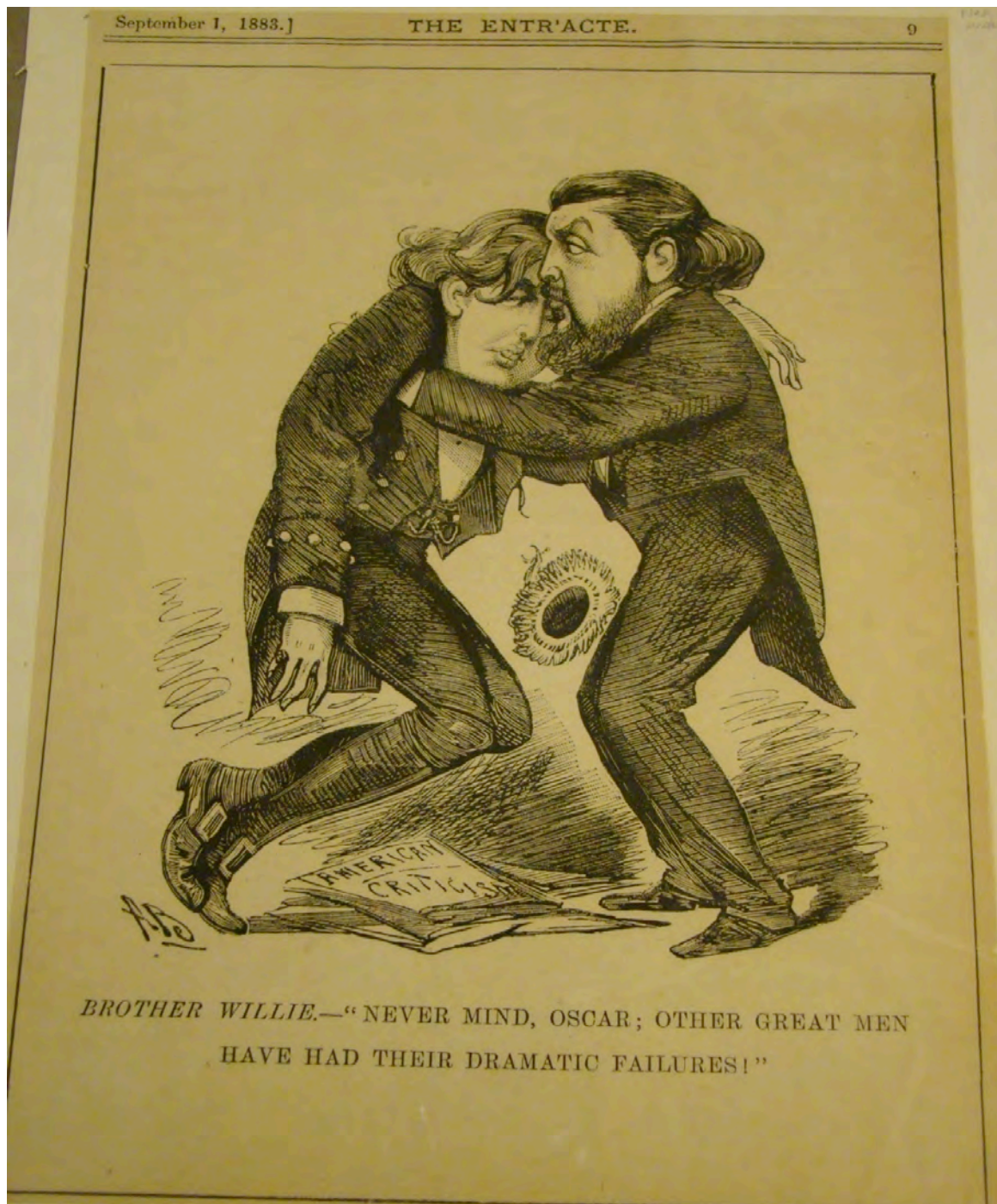


Figure 15. September 1883. From *The Entree'acte*. This illustration appeared in the same month as *The Judge's* satirical portrayal of Wilde's failure as a playwright, and it shows Wilde falling over (a posture that is the inverse of his pose as an aesthete, which often featured him leaning back) into his brother William Wilde's arms after having read the poor reviews that American critics wrote of *Vera*. Courtesy of the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, Los Angeles, California.

importantly, both works lacked the exhibitionist and exciting appeal that made their author so popular in America.

Although Wilde's literary career showed little promise in North America, he still sought to educate his American and Canadian audiences by seriously discussing in his lectures the philosophy and ideas behind the Aesthetic Movement. Wilde's first lecture deserves considerable attention, because it marks a paradoxical moment in his career that would continue to be a dominating threat to his reputation and authorial legitimacy in years to come.<sup>151</sup> Debuting at Chickering Hall in New York on 9 January 1882, he made a scene as he appeared in some of the same extravagant attire that he had worn during his photo shoot with Saronby. His audience of more than 1,200 both marveled and laughed at the sight of him.<sup>152</sup> To their surprise, however, Wilde opened his lecture with an appeal to dismiss *Patience* as a realistic representation of the philosophy of aestheticism:

I am asking, as you have listened for 300 nights to my friend, Mr. Arthur Sullivan's charming opera, "Patience" [laughter], that you will listen to me for one night [renewed laughter]; and as you have had satire, you may make the satire a little more piquant by knowing a little more of the truth, and that, in any case, you will not take the very brilliant lines of Mr. Gilbert any more as a revelation of the movement than you would judge of the splendor of the sea, or the majesty of the sea, by the dust that dances in

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<sup>151</sup> Wilde's North American tour on aestheticism eventually included four lectures: "The House Beautiful," "The English Renaissance," "The Decorative Arts," and "The Irish Poets and Poetry of the Nineteenth Century."

<sup>152</sup> Wilde's first lecture was sold out. It was said that "Pecuniarily the first night of *Patience* could not have surpassed, if indeed it equaled, last night's entertainment" ("Oscar Wilde's Gospel" 7).

the beam or the bubble that breaks on the wave. (qtd in “Oscar Wilde’s Gospel” 7)

It seemed imprudent for Wilde, who was parading “a large diamond in his bosom” and had adorned himself in lace, satin, silk, ribbons, and black knee-breeches that revealed his legs, to ask his audience to divorce him momentarily from the very satire that he had been indulging and profiting from since his arrival in America (“An Eloquent Lecture on Aestheticism by Its Chief Apostle, Oscar Wilde” 6). Moreover, if his costume did not undermine his request, the advertisements for *Patience* that were handed out at the end of the lecture surely did. This was one of many times throughout Wilde’s career that he would expect the public to take him seriously under circumstances that made it impossible for such a request to be honored. His first audience who had come to *see* Wilde and stare at him in wonder, unsurprisingly giggled upon the request being made.<sup>153</sup> After all, not only was this not part of the act that Wilde and D’Oyly had been vigorously publicizing, but it also undermined the very trait that had made Wilde so appealing to the public. Despite the fame he had cultivated for himself by willfully playing the live version of Bunthorne, Wilde seemed unable to realize that he had trapped himself in a role that he would not always wish to perform. When he did discard his affectations, it was duly noted by the press who complained that “[Wilde had] been greatly misrepresented, his individualities caricatured, his tastes exaggerated, his appearance

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<sup>153</sup> Wilde was widely criticized for being a poor orator: The *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* wrote that he “has a poor delivery, as he stutters and splutters when he speaks, and consequently his enunciation is very poor” (“Interview with Oscar Wilde, the English Exponent of Aestheticism” 4); *The Congregationalist* remarked that: “The lecture was little more than an inarticulate strain of dreamy, poetic, but for the most part meaningless language” (“Oscar Wilde in Boston” n.pag.), and the *Daily Inter Ocean* argued that “Mr. Wilde’s greatest need is to be taught how to talk” (“They Will Show Him” 2). Wilde was also heavily criticized for delivering his speeches in a monotonous tone. Despite his notoriety for poor elocution, Wilde’s lectures were still popular with audiences, signaling the intrigue of his personality.

burlesqued . . . . he is not great enough to merit so much attention, and he is not necessarily an object of ridicule” (qtd in Hofer and Scharnhorst 51). Another journalist registered even greater disappointment when he arrived to interview Wilde and found him to be quite average: “Whatever may be said of Mr. Wilde’s costume and manner in society, in the privacy of his own apartments he was *distressingly like any other gentleman*” (qtd in Hofer and Scharnhorst 3, my emphasis).

Wilde did not take these disappointments lightly. After an appearance in Ohio during which the public complained about his subdued evening dress, he wrote to D’Oyly Carte’s American business manager, Colonel W.F. Morse, and requested that Morse supply him with a costume that more readily suited the persona that he was expected to evoke:

Dear Colonel Morse, Will you kindly go to a good costumier (theatrical) for me and get them to make (you will not mention my name) two coats, to wear at matinees and perhaps in evening. They should be beautiful; tight velvet doublet, with large flowered sleeves and little ruffs of cambric coming up from under collar. I send you design and measurements . . . .

Any good costumier would know what I want—sort of Francis I dress: only knee-breeches instead of long hose. Also get me two pair of grey silk stockings to suit grey mouse-colored velvet. The sleeves are to be flowered—if not velvet then plush—stamped with large pattern. They will excite a great *sensation*. I leave the matter to you. They were dreadfully

disappointed at Cincinnati at my not wearing knee-breaches.<sup>154</sup>

(Wilde, *Letters* 97, my emphasis)

This letter demonstrates the ways in which Wilde continued to restrict himself to Gilbert and Sullivan's script. Throughout his time in North America, Wilde would never curtail his readiness to define himself by these satirical depictions. Having developed his fame and popularity through performances of notoriety and affectation, he could only sustain it by conceding to the public's demands. The real value of Wilde's tour, then—at least in this context—is the detailed record it leaves in showing how Oscar Wilde became eclipsed and defined by the public persona that he had been instrumental in both creating and sanctioning.

Wilde would end his tour as a great success, leaving North America far more famous and financially stable than he had been when he arrived.<sup>155</sup> In the years following his tour, his fame would somewhat dissipate in the wake of his efforts to eschew the persona that had turned him into a celebrated figure of derision. In the years following his tour, Wilde attempted to reinvent himself once again, but this time as a more serious man. He became less conspicuous, cutting his long hair, abandoning his aesthetic wardrobe for a more reserved line of clothing, and writing hundreds of anonymous reviews and articles as a journalist. *Punch* took notice of the dramatic change, and used it as one last chance to ridicule Wilde within the context of aestheticism: "To be sold the whole of the stock in trade, Appliances and Inventions of a Successful Aesthete who is retiring from business.

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<sup>154</sup> In this letter, Wilde includes a small drawing of the flowered sleeves that he describes.

<sup>155</sup> Hofer and Scharnhorst estimate that Wilde earned from the tour approximately "\$5600, or a third of the total box-office receipts less expenses" (3).



This will include a large Stock of faded Lilies, dilapidated sunflowers and shabby Peacock's Feathers, several long haired wigs, a collection of incomprehensible poems and a number of impossible pictures . . . . No reasonable offer refused" (qtd in Nunokawa and Sickels 35). Having left his aesthetic lifestyle behind, Wilde worked as the editor of *The Woman's World* and continued to promote his second play, *The Duchess of Padua*, which he was unable to sell until 1891. His novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, was published in *Lippincotts* in 1890, but it was generally met with criticism for its presumed hedonism and immorality.<sup>156</sup> His real authorial success would come in the early 1890s when George Alexander, the new owner of the St. James's Theater, commissioned him to write a modern comedy. In 1892, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, opened to great acclaim and marked the first of four successful Social Comedies that would not only establish Wilde's reputation as perhaps one of the greatest dramatists of the century writing in English, but would also revitalize the public persona that he had subdued since his return from America. Providing Wilde with a more controlled and confined context in which to re-stage the satire, wit, dandyism, and eccentricities that had characterized him since his days at Oxford, the Social Comedies achieved success because they interrogated serious philosophical and social concerns while being self-parodying and self-aggrandizing at the same time. Lord Illingworth in *A Woman of No Importance*, Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband*, and Algernon Moncrieff and John Worthing in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, among others, perform versions of Wilde's personality. Representing the apex of Wilde's career and fame, it is most notable that these Social Comedies reinforced his reputation and image as the conspicuous and eccentric dandy. Indeed, contemporary

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<sup>156</sup> A revised and expanded edition would appear in 1891 with a preface that would serve as the novel's defense. *Dorian Gray* was generally well-received in America but heavily criticized in England.

reviewers could not help but call attention to the way in which Wilde had revived *Patience* and *Bunthorne*: Hamilton Fyfe of the *New York Times* called *The Importance of Being Earnest* “a pure farce of Gilbertian parentage . . . loaded with drolleries, epigrams, impertinences, and bubbling comicalities. . .” (qtd in *The Importance of Being Earnest* 99); Bernard Shaw claimed the play was “in the literary style of Mr. Gilbert” (qtd in *The Importance of Being Earnest* 99); and H.G. Wells observed that the play was “. . . all very funny, and Mr. Oscar Wilde has decorated a humour that is Gilbertian with innumerable spangles of that wit that is all his own” (qtd in *The Importance of Being Earnest* 101). By composing his plays with the same epigrams and brilliant wit that had made him an international celebrity, Wilde had located a way to write himself into his texts and construct legitimate authorship from the same popular antics that had once been the source of both his fame and public ridicule. The greatest irony of Wilde’s career stems from his authorial presence that overwhelms his later oeuvre, for though it initially brought him his greatest commercial success, it would also give the public license to use the presumed homosexual and immoral content of his writings as evidence against his character.

Though Wilde was no longer self-performing in the public sphere, he had made little effort to hide his private affairs, a mistake that would ultimately ruin the authorial success he had achieved late in life. On 28 February 1895, only fourteen days after *The Importance of Being Earnest* opened to great acclaim, John Sholto Douglas, the Marquess of Queensberry and the father of Wilde’s lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, visited the Albemarle Club, where he left for Wilde a card that read: “To Oscar Wilde, *posing* sodomite” [sic] (qtd in Schulz 39, my emphasis). It was no definitive charge; in fact,

the accusation was based exclusively on Wilde's public posturing, thus signaling just how deeply implicative Wilde's performativity and posing within the public sphere could be. Queensberry, simply hoping to keep Wilde away from his son, explained: "I am not going to try to analyze this intimacy and I make no charge; but to my mind to pose as a thing is as bad as to be it" (qtd in Nunokawa and Sickels 84). At Alfred's urging, Wilde, confident that his wit and celebrity would obscure any forthcoming accusations by the Marquess, responded to Queensberry's card by suing him for libel. Though Wilde dropped the libel suit in three days, it gave Queensberry the platform and motivation that he needed to have Wilde officially charged with what he had only accused him of earlier. Supplying the courts with sufficient evidence that Wilde was in fact a sodomite, the Marquess ensured that Wilde would be arrested and tried for "indecently performed with other male persons and with conspiring with each other to commit indecent acts, implicitly sodomy" (Schulz 39).

Wilde's celebrity would have an impact on the nature of the trial, a trial which was treated as a theatrical spectacle both by the press and Wilde himself. The prosecution ruthlessly interrogated Wilde's person as a bodily text—investigating his ambiguous posing and dandified behavior—and the literal texts in which he had restaged his personality. The counsel for Queensberry, Edward Carson, turned specifically to Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which he believed showed "a sodomitical tendency" (qtd in Powell 149).<sup>157</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray* played a major role in the trials against Wilde because it was a novel governed by an authorial personality that originated

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<sup>157</sup> Carson also interrogated several of Wilde's letters and the *The Chameleon*, an Oxfordian undergraduate journal that celebrated homosexuality, and to which Wilde contributed "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young."

from the persona by which Wilde had defined himself in the public sphere. Dorian's self-adoration, inscrutable character, and self-indulgent life of aestheticism, Basil's devotion to the beauty of art, and Lord Henry's proclivity for expressing his cynicism and immoral values through witticisms and epigrams made them each conspicuous authorial surrogates.<sup>158</sup> In fact, Dorian, Basil, and Lord Henry were considered so deeply reflective of Wilde's personality that prosecutors would try Wilde in part for the alleged crimes committed by these fictive characters. Because his authorial personality was not established through a text, but rather through self-performance, it was more easily subjected to judgments far beyond the confines of the novel, and thus became a point of serious contention in the trials. "You left it open to be inferred, I take it, that the sins of Dorian Gray, some of them, may have been sodomy?" Carson asked Wilde. When Wilde evaded the question, it was posed again, this time in the context of readerly interpretation: "I take it that some people upon reading the book, at all events might think that it did deal with sodomy?" Wilde, sitting before Carson, one of those people who *did* think the novel dealt with sodomy, replied in the affirmative: "Some people might think so," he replied (qtd in Powell 149). Throughout Carson's "exhaustive [analysis]" of the novel, he spent much of his time discussing the nature of the relationship between Basil and Dorian, hoping to show that it was a textual expression of Wilde's feelings for Alfred (Schulz 40). Sections of the novel were examined and read by Carson at length, including the scene where Basil confesses to Dorian his affection for him:

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<sup>158</sup> A year prior to the trials, Wilde had written to Ralph Payne, "I am so glad you like that strange coloured book of mine: it contains much of me in it. Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages perhaps" (Wilde, *Letters* 352).

Dorian, from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I was dominated, soul, brain, and power, by you. You became to me the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream. I worshipped you. I grew jealous of every one to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you . . . . Weeks and weeks went on, and I grew more and more absorbed in you. Then came a new development. I had drawn you as Paris in dainty armour, and as Adonis with huntsman's cloak and polished boar-spear. Crowned with heavy lotus-blossoms you had sat on the prow of Adrian's barge, gazing across the green turbid Nile. You had leaned over the still pool of some Greek woodland and seen in the water's silent silver the marvel of your own face. And it had all been what art should be -- unconscious, ideal, and remote. (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 100)

Though Basil expresses his adoration for Dorian in the context of the artist's relationship to his art, Carson chose to interpret it as a passage that conveyed the homoerotic feelings for which he sought to convict Wilde:

CARSON: Do you mean to say that that passage describes the natural feeling of one man towards another?

WILDE: It would be the influence produced by a beautiful personality.

CARSON: A beautiful person?

WILDE: I said, "a beautiful personality." You can describe it as you like. Dorian Gray's was a remarkable personality.

CARSON: May I take it that you, as an artist, have never known the feeling described here?

WILDE: I have never allowed any personality to dominate my art.

CARSON: Then you have never known the feeling you described?

WILDE: No. It is a work of fiction.

CARSON: So far as you are concerned, you have no experience as to its being a natural feeling?

WILDE: I think it is perfectly natural for any artist to admire intensely and love a young man. It is an incident in the life of almost any artist.

CARSON: But let us go over it phrase by phrase [. . .] “I quite admit that I adored you madly.” What do you say to that? Have you ever adored a young man madly?

WILDE: No, not madly. [. . .] I prefer love—that is, a higher form . . .

CARSON: Never mind about that [. . .] Let us keep down to the level we are at now.

WILDE: I have never given adoration to anybody except myself. (qtd in Schulz 42)

Wilde’s claim that the novel was an aesthetic work that displayed the idolatry that an artist feels towards his artistic inspiration was obscured both by the novel’s homosexual undertones and Wilde’s conspicuously suggestive persona that resonated throughout it. The court transcripts depicting Wilde’s defense suggest that Wilde believed that staging his persona in the commodity-text would make him less accountable for the novel’s alleged homosexual content on the grounds that it was simply part of a fictitious narrative. After all, though Wilde, as author, was the creative presence behind the text, it was an ambiguous form of self-expression that was conceived through the forces of literary production, not self-performance. But Wilde could not hide behind an authorial

personality that seemed so like his public persona that it betrayed the novel as another instance of self-promotion. Unable—if not unwilling—to divorce Wilde’s authorial personality from the public persona that had been exhaustively self-commodified and displayed in the public sphere, and having real evidence of Wilde’s deviant behavior, the courts found Wilde guilty of homosexual offenses and sentenced him to two years of hard labor, a sentence that would immediately destroy the prestige and brilliance associated with his celebrity.

In *De Profundis*, the work that Wilde would compose while in prison, Wilde articulated the social and cultural impact that he had had on his time: “I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me: I summed up all systems in a phrase, and all existence in an epigram” (105). One of the most paradoxical and contradictory men of his time, it seems that Wilde can only be constructed as a myth. His cultural significance seems unsettled, even today, as we continue to re-mythologize and modify it in an attempt to align it with modern concerns that seem most compatible with the politics of his life and ours. Like his contemporaries who were unable to look past Wilde’s biography in their attempt to uncover his past, our understanding of Wilde and his work has been deeply informed by the origins and formation of his celebrity. Though our interests are far less malicious than those who prosecuted Wilde in 1895, we are still guilty of seeking the presumed homosexual undertones in his writings, privileging the Social Comedies and his novel over his journalism and poetry, and endowing him with an excess of cultural authority that he does not always deserve. But as one who constructed his celebrity by marketing himself as his own most valuable commodity, and as one who eventually allowed himself to be eclipsed by his fame, it

seems only natural that Wilde and the politics of his celebrity remain our first and greatest interest.



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