

# THEATER FIGURES





---

# THEATER FIGURES



The Production of the  
Nineteenth-Century British Novel



EMILY ALLEN



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
*Columbus*

---

Copyright © 2003 by The Ohio State University.  
All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Allen, Emily

Theater figures : the production of the nineteenth-century British  
novel / Emily Allen.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8142-0931-9 (hardcover : alk. paper) — ISBN 0-8142-5110-2  
(pbk. : alk. paper)

1. English fiction—19th century—History and criticism. 2.  
Performing arts in literature. 3. Theater—Great Britain—History—19th  
century. 4. Theater in literature. 5. Actors in literature. I. Title.

PR868.P44 A78 2003

823'.809357—dc21

2003005558

Text and jacket design by Jennifer Shoffey Forsythe

Type set in Adobe Garamond

Printed by Thomson-Shore, Inc.

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American  
National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Mate-  
rials. ANSI Z39.48-1992.

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Contents



	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
	<i>Introduction: Figuring Theater</i>	I
<b>1</b>	Theatrical Reforms: Stage Fright and the Scene of Reading	29
<b>2</b>	Staging a Comeback: The Remasculinization of the Novel	66
<b>3</b>	Heimlich Maneuvers: Domesticity, Theatricality, and the Abject	99
<b>4</b>	Mesdames Bovary: Performative Reading, Cultural Capital, and High Art	135
<b>5</b>	Performing Distinction: Elevating the Literary Sphere	170
	<i>Conclusion</i>	198
	<i>Notes</i>	203
	<i>Bibliography</i>	230
	<i>Index</i>	244



# Acknowledgments



AS FATE AND PERHAPS my topic would have it, this book was written in many stages and never lacked for a supportive cast of scholarly characters. At UC Santa Barbara, where *Theater Figures* began life as a dissertation called “Stage Fright: British Fiction and the Figuration of Theater,” I had the inestimable good fortune to work with three brilliant and generous people: Julie Carlson, Garrett Stewart, and Everett Zimmerman. They were this book’s first, and they remain its ideal, audience, never to be upstaged in my affections. I also owe a tremendous debt to the faculty, staff, and graduate students of UCSB’s English Department, who gave me my first intellectual home and taught me the joy that could be found there. I am grateful to the UCSB Humanities Center, the Graduate Division, and to the General Affiliates for grants that enabled the writing of the dissertation.

At Dalhousie University, where I continued the project as an Isaac Walton Killam Postdoctoral Fellow, I spent a very happy year among the fine people of the English Department, who welcomed and sustained me. I am deeply indebted to Marjorie Stone and Judith Thompson for their guidance and friendship, and to the Killam Trust for its generous financial support.

At Purdue University, where *Theater Figures* took its current shape with the aid of a Purdue Research Foundation Grant and a much-appreciated research leave, I have been greatly helped by my friends and colleagues in the Department of English, Women’s Studies, and the Program for Theory and Cultural Studies. I owe a special thanks to the following for their editorial acuity, translational savvy, and careful advice: Kristina Bross, Dino Felluga, Shaun Hughes, Arkady Plotnitsky, Aparajita Sagar, Siobhan Somerville, and Marta VanLandingham. I would also like to thank my graduate and undergraduate students—



## Acknowledgments

my most captivating if not quite captive audience—for talking over many of the ideas in this book.

A shorter version of chapter 1 appeared in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 31 (1998): 433–52, and a shorter version of chapter 2 was published in *Studies in Romanticism* 37 (1998): 163–82. I thank those journals and their publishers (Johns Hopkins University Press and the Trustees of Boston University, respectively) for the permission to reprint that material here. The Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University and University Library Special Collections at the University of California, Santa Cruz, have kindly made visual materials available for reproduction, for which I am most grateful. I am also extremely grateful to the people at the Ohio State University Press, especially to my acquisitions editor, Heather Lee Miller; my in-house editor, Karie L. Kirkpatrick; and to my two anonymous readers, the Great Unknowns of this book. I hope someday to return thanks *in propria persona*.

I cannot hope to express what is due to Dino Felluga, who has been this book's most generous reader and, of all its many figures, by far the dearest. This book, and so much more, is dedicated to him.

# Introduction

## Figuring Theater



FIG. 1 "PREFACE" BY ALFRED THOMPSON

Appearing in *The Mask: A Humorous and Fantastic Review of the Month*, edited by Alfred Thompson and Leopold Lewis, vol. 1 (February–December, 1868), p. iii.



WHEN IN 1868 Leopold Lewis and Alfred Thompson published the first number of *The Mask*, a satirical review of literary, artistic, and dramatic culture devoted to the idea that British life was inherently, spectacularly, theatrical, they struck upon an idea whose time had come—and struck out, failing within a year's time. While mid-Victorian England may indeed have been extravagantly theatrical, it apparently did not pay to advertise that fact too prominently, and Lewis and Thompson did little else. They turned their theatricalizing gaze on the main institutions of Victorian life, finding in them the culture of burlesque that they termed "the vice of the period." "The spirit of the age," they write, "seems to be moved to an exorbitant exaggeration of every sentiment and every motive; and ridicule can only too easily be evolved from the subjects most interesting to men and women in the second half of the nineteenth century" (122). Religion, politics, social life, and the arts, fall under the

## Introduction

category of “burlesque,” which for Lewis and Thompson is both the cause of their satire and their chosen satirical mode. While the journal maintains, for the most part, a jolly tone, its carnivalizing treatment of London life and arts betrays a discomfort with the pandemic theatricality that it characterizes both as harmless play and, more darkly, as a matter of flamboyance and inauthenticity, of self-consciousness and show. For Lewis and Thompson, all of Britain is engaged in the business of show, and they are far too good-natured (or cynical) to exclude themselves: the illustration that fronts the first volume of *The Mask* shows the two journalists framed by a theatrical curtain, their mighty pens crossed above with a bravura flourish, holding between them the black mask of the *bal masqué* that serves as their main metaphor for the journal, for London life in general, and for authorial production (see figure 1). What is interesting here is the way that Lewis and Thompson figure themselves as writers and showmen, as exaggerated figures within a larger world of rampant theatricality. As they disclose their journalistic “features,” they are completely aware that audience response is everything, and that the joke may very well be on them: “Laugh with us, dear Readers, if you can. Laugh at us if you like. Only laugh” (iv).

Lewis and Thompson’s ill-fated experiment introduces two of this book’s main concerns: the problems of authorship in a market-driven economy and the (anti)theatricality of British culture and character. While the two editors portray themselves as thoroughly theatrical figures and claim that they conceived of the idea for the journal while attending a ball at the Grand Opera, they are also quite anxious that their readers recognize them as *literary* men. The preface highlights their total control over the contents of the journal: “Every article in the present Volume has been written by one or the other of the two editors. Every illustration has been drawn by one of them (Mr. Alfred Thompson)” (iii). The magazine, in other words, is a two-man show, relying even for its letterpress on its editors. This focus on originality, craftsmanship, and authenticity seems to be the editor’s response to the anonymous world of mass culture that the two set out to critique, which is why they “unmask” on *The Mask’s* very first page. At a time when British culture was concerned with the proliferation of a mass readership—termed the “Unknown Public” in a famous series of articles—Lewis and Thompson prefer to be *known*, to maintain the prestige of authorship. At the same time, however, they prefer to be *read*, and so they address themselves to “the Intelligent Public,” which turns out to be anyone willing to pay: “You, Sir or Madam, have paid your sixpence to look behind the mask, or a friend of yours has considered your sympathy worth the expense of that large sum, and therefore you belong to the Intelligent Public” (1). Caught between competing desires for authorial distinction

## Introduction

and mass-market appeal, the editors of *The Mask* turn the contradiction into gentle self-parody, poking fun at their own and their reader's cultural aspirations.<sup>1</sup>

The example of *The Mask's* attempt to extract literary prestige from theatrical buffoonery, and to resuscitate literary (or at least authorial) character from theatrical figure, speaks to the main project of this book, which is to demonstrate how theater and theatricality worked to produce categories of *literary* distinction.<sup>2</sup> I am interested not only in how literature distinguishes itself from theater, but also in how theater and theatricality become a means for nineteenth-century literature's most visible forms to make distinctions among themselves, to make claims for and about literary value. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who explores the ways in which the literary avant-garde established distinction over and against the bourgeois mass market, I will illustrate the ways that such an avant-garde maneuver in fact borrows a pervasive strategy from both the bourgeoisie and the bourgeois novel: the positing of distinction from within the very heart of the market itself.<sup>3</sup> Both the novel and its bourgeois readership posit cultural capital and literary value over and against abjected competitors for the very market from which the novel must, at the same time, distinguish itself. This book will attempt to untangle the complex maneuvers undertaken by the mass-market form of the nineteenth-century novel and the massive majority of novel readers to claim distinction for themselves.

In the pages that follow, I focus specifically on the relationship between theater and the novel, and I explore the crucial role played by popular theater in the formation and reformation of the novelistic field over the course of the British nineteenth century. I argue that theater and theatricality not only enabled that field's continual process of self-definition, but they also gave novelists and critics a set of tropes through which to understand and regulate the nineteenth century's rapidly changing literary market. Realist novels were both the market's most brilliant success story and its most vexed cultural products, offering as they did an apparent *retreat* from market forces in their construction of private, emotional space and privatized family values. Theater, on the other hand, appeared to embody market forces at their most raw, offering the public spectacle of undisguised and unregulated consumption. Although this imagined opposition between "novel" and "theater" never held, novelistic and critical versions of it reappear throughout the century as the point around which the novel's cultural position and cultural work are renegotiated. At stake in these negotiations are what twentieth-century critics have come to see as the realist novel's most important—and contested—political projects: the construction of middle-class identity, the naturalization of female subjectivity, and

## Introduction

the maintenance of the domestic sphere. These “private” projects all turned, however paradoxically, on the creation of a reading public, and it is this public—supposedly made up of well-regulated individual readers, readers who might without satire consider themselves members of “the Intelligent Public”—that the figure of theater both imperils and secures. As *Theater Figures* shows, the history of novels and their readers, while uneven and episodic, was written against the popular and very public form of theater. Far from excluding theater, the literary and critical tradition surrounding nineteenth-century novels depends upon it.



To recognize a kinship between nineteenth-century theater and the novel is not exactly revelatory; it is hardly on par with the climactic recognition scenes that fueled the melodramatic fictions and theatricals of the period. Lewis and Thompson certainly knew this, as did other Victorians. They understood and acknowledged that there were certain elemental connections between these two forms of popular culture, which is why they tolerated—even expected—the rampant borrowings that took place between page and stage. Indeed, the Victorian world banked upon the family resemblance between the novel and the theater.<sup>4</sup> Not only did the two forms share the same lucrative territory of plot and character, but they also shared the same patrons. When a novel hit big, for example, stage versions of it were often rushed into production before the novel had even finished its initial serial run, and popular stage productions often found their way to print, in novel form. If the novel and the theater tried to cash in on each other’s successes, it is merely because they were each drawing on the same account.

What this historical account does not explain, however, is why it is that we, as twenty-first-century scholars of the nineteenth century, so frequently tell ourselves that the novel was at mutually exclusive odds with the theater during the nineteenth century. We go even further to say that there was no contest at all. We say that the nineteenth century was the “Age of the Novel,” and we repeat the old canard about dour Victorian antitheatricalism: “Queen Victoria was not amused.” We (mostly) banish nineteenth-century theater from our minds and from our anthologies, leaving a gaping hole between Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Oscar Wilde that can only be filled by something the size of, say, *Middlemarch*.<sup>5</sup> We do this, moreover, despite the fact that we clearly know better. Generations of scholars have demonstrated to us that nineteenth-century Britons, and even Victoria herself, were highly, extravagantly, amused.<sup>6</sup>

## Introduction

They loved theater in all forms: Shakespeare, melodrama, pantomime, music hall, freak show, dancing dogs, and pyro-drama. This is not to say the British valued all of these forms equally, but they did have a rapacious hunger for theatrical entertainment that was only matched by their insatiable desire for novels. We know this, but we tend to forget it, if only so that we can rediscover it periodically, with all of the force of a melodramatic recognition scene: the nineteenth century loved public spectacle! The Queen *was* amused!

The pleasure of rediscovery aside, why do we persist in telling ourselves something we know, or should know, to be false? Certainly the antitheatrical argument has something to do with the repressive hypothesis, as this “rediscovery” narrative suggests: the unamused Victorians are here available for their release at our capable and enlightened hands.<sup>7</sup> And certainly the argument is not entirely without its basis in fact. For all of its beloved theatricality, the nineteenth century was not free of antitheatrical rhetoric; much was aimed at the impropriety of the actress (which I will discuss later) and much was distributed by no more innocent a source than the novel.<sup>8</sup> But our investment in the antitheatrical argument has even more to do with our overinvestment in notions of the novel’s complete and monolithic dominance of the period. As critics of the novel, we have invested very heavily in a critical master-narrative about the bourgeois private sphere and the novel’s role in constructing (or thwarting) it. As this argument goes—and it is a compelling argument that I am in no way dismissing, only complicating—the novel became the dominant generic form in the Victorian period because it both reflected and produced the private, domestic space of the middle-class home (or nation, or reader), a space that in providing an apparent haven from market forces actually allowed those public forces to penetrate and underwrite the private.<sup>9</sup> This argument has been made about the novel for many years now, in many different ways, and it has produced two main habits of critical thought: 1) a tendency to treat the novel as though it really were the sanctified, private domain that it sometimes claimed to be; and 2) a determination to worry the boundaries of the novel’s supposed privacy. While the former strategy tends to lead inward, the latter leads out, to such public discourses as advertising and to such public forms as popular theater. In fact, theater has received a fair bit of attention in recent years, since its unavoidably public nature makes it the most obvious generic counterfoil to the novel’s apparently privatizing ways.

What I am suggesting here is a critical paradox of sorts: our discipline’s continued—if wavering—commitment to the idea of nineteenth-century (and particularly Victorian) antitheatricalism comes from much the same place as the recent flurry of studies on theater and the novel. Both critical positions are driven by the novel’s own claims to primacy and to privacy, and both recog-

## Introduction

nize that there is much riding (ideologically, institutionally, and disciplinarily) on the idea of the novel as private space. In the last ten years, theatrically inclined critics of the novel have questioned both the privacy and the generic dominance of the novel in a number of ways.<sup>10</sup> The best of these critics have shown how the novel actually requires theater for the creation of what we might call not only its “reality effects,” but also its “privacy effects.” The novel uses theater as a negative example by which to tout its own interior processes (a line of thinking that reads the novel’s own apparent antitheatricalism against itself) and/or the novel works by theatrical means to stage its own domestic effects (a line of thinking that allows for the preexistence of the public and the theatrical within the private house of fiction). These are intelligent and important arguments, but they each perform, in their own ways, one of the nineteenth-century novel’s own signature moves: they treat “the” novel as a singular form, allowing it to cohere (if only for the sake of toppling it from its generic pedestal) into a unified entity. Making room for theater in the house of fiction has often meant granting the novel, in practice if not in theory, a generic coherence to which it only (and only at times) aspired.

What I would suggest, instead, is that we think not about “the” novel, but about the nineteenth-century novelistic field, which was, as we know, not only tremendously complex—divided along lines of class and gender and among the myriad reading publics that made up nineteenth-century Britain—but also the site of bitter generic infighting. The house of fiction was always a house divided, and if we let in theater at the front door, we do not necessarily simplify the battle. But admitting theater does let us perceive generic competition *among* forms, not just between them (e.g., the novel vs. theater). While there may be tension between the novel and the theater, it is much more common, and much more interesting, for novels to use theater not just as a means of defining “themselves” in some sort of monolithic sense but of defining themselves against other kinds of novels. Recognizing all of this not only helps us see the diversity of the novelistic field, but also gives us a better idea of how the literary family put itself together and sorted itself out, how forms of fiction came together and broke apart, all the while nursing various allegiances and antipathies.

The figure of theater was so useful in defining the novelistic sphere precisely because the relationship between novels and popular theater was uneasy at best. The two forms seem to have everything and nothing in common: on the one hand, they are both mass-cultural entertainment, reliant on the ever-increasing number of consumers with money and leisure; on the other and perhaps dominant hand, they enjoyed very different reputations in nineteenth-century Britain. Novels spent much of the century trying to live down

## Introduction

early associations with amorous fiction, scandal writing, and the continent in order to become associated with the prosperous and proper middle classes, with the family, with private and well-regulated reading, and with social progress. Indeed, as numerous twentieth-century critics have it, realist novels not only entertained the middle classes, but they also enabled their self-definition and their rise to cultural dominance. The novel's focus on "interior value" worked to rewrite categories of cultural distinction, even as the novel trained its readership in the psychological and emotional habits required of the new middle-class subject. This was the realist novel's ideal scenario, which was always threatening to spin out of control under pressure from other novelistic forms and from the female and working-class readers who failed to regulate their consumption and so returned a dangerously embodied "interest" to the novel's investment in properly sublimated desires. It was just this sort of embodied interest that marked theater as the inferior cultural product. Associated for much of the century with the lower classes, crowds, and grossly unregulated consumption, theater was aligned both with the unruly masses and with the appetitive individual. Add to this theater's traffic in the desirable body of the actress, which was symbolically connected to the body of the prostitute, and it is easy to see why theater had a harder time than the novel turning exchange value into cultural capital.

From the vantage point of novelistic cultural dominance, then, representations of theater work to provide the nineteenth-century novel with a generic foil and thus bolster the novel's claims of distinction. But theater also works to foil the novel: with its spectacular bodies on stage and tradition of embodied viewing, theater reminds the novel of the very materiality it would like to forget. As novels, especially realist novels, sought to construct a middle-class identity that would transcend the very economic materialism on which nineteenth-century middle-class status was based and through which these novels sold themselves and their vision of the middle-class female, theater recalled an insistent materiality, both through its corporeality and its association with mass commodity culture. Novels themselves, as mass-produced and mass-marketed artifacts, literally more material than theater (concrete books vs. ephemeral performances), were part of the problem, for the tables could be all too easily turned. Because of this slipperiness, theater provided the novel with an unstable opposite that served both to repel and attract. While novels returned to the figure of theater again and again over the course of the century, they did so on shifting ground and with dissimilar, if not competing, agendas.

I argue that the ambivalence—and sometimes outright hostility—with which nineteenth-century novels treat the figure of theater is indicative of the

## Introduction

instability of “the novel” as a category. Not only are nineteenth-century novels ambivalent about their own materiality and phenomenal popularity, but also the novelistic field itself is divided among forms that critics termed high and low, male and female, realistic and romantic. It is worth remembering that, throughout the century, critics worried as much or more about the bad effects of novel reading (or the effects of reading bad novels) than they did about theater. As critics and novelists attempted to differentiate among novelistic sub-genres, and to theorize and define their processes, theater often slipped in as the necessary and definitive third term. While novels might have liked to ward off theater, with its greasy bodies and filthy lucre, they also needed it to define the parameters of their own generic bodies. I argue that this need prompted a novelistic reaction that, to use the language and favorite trope of nineteenth-century novels themselves, can best be termed *hysterical*. As I theorize in chapter 1, novels about theater suffer from a form of “generic hysteria,” in which they body forth both the symptom and the cure of their identity crisis: extreme novelistic self-consciousness.<sup>11</sup> When novels feel the pull of theater, they stage their own production, which is exactly the scene of *novelistic* production and consumption, as elaborate allegories of writing and reading attest. Theater was therefore essential to novelistic self-definition throughout the nineteenth century not only because novels needed a mass-cultural foil, but also because theater worked as a prompt to the novelistic self-allegory through which novels sorted out their place in the literary market. Critics and novelists alike used the figure of theater to distinguish among competing novelistic forms and forms of reading. That this play of forms was in fact formative of ideological realities—new subjectivities, gender and class positions, for example—means that theater cuts a striking figure, not just in the history of novels, but in the history of nineteenth-century life in general.

In analyzing what, following David Marshall, I call “the figure of theater,” by which I mean both novelistic representations (or “figurations”) of theater and representations of individual theatrical characters (or “figures”), I make a two-part argument. First, I address ways in which novels define the novelistic against and through the theatrical, in most cases simplifying complex generic struggles into a set of familiar binaries: novel/theater, private/public, authentic/false. My goal is not to reify these binaries by entertaining them as “fact,” but to see how they work as enabling fictions that allow novels to entertain in themselves and their readers a sense of propriety and distinction. This part of the argument considers how and why the novel squares off against theater, going to great lengths to displace (indeed to usurp the place of) its rival popular entertainment. In an effort to consolidate its own generic identity and its hold over what it characterizes as a “middle-class” audience, the novel represents

## Introduction

theatrical culture as a major threat to middle-class identity and values. These values are described and disseminated (and, arguably, produced) by the novel but imperiled by a theater that is associated with both the low—the lower classes, the lower bodily strata, the lower cultural realm—and the dissolute high.<sup>12</sup> While the much-discussed “rise of the novel” as representational mode coincides with and helps bring about the supposedly subsequent rise of the private bourgeois individual, the public theater—aligned with the unruly masses and the pleasure-loving aristocracy instead of the disciplined bourgeoisie—acts as a kind of sensational goad to this process of mutual aid and congratulation.<sup>13</sup> The theater both inhibits the novel’s ideological work by putting the crowding masses back in mass culture, and drives it by providing the negative example against which the novel defines its own interior realm.

The second part of my argument works to complicate the novel’s dialectical model of its relationship to theater, in which “the” nineteenth-century novel operates as the negation and the replacement for theatrical culture. The novel is a notoriously loose genre, a baggy assemblage of narrative styles and modes well known for, indeed in part defined by, its ability to accommodate and transform other forms of narrative. The difficulty in conceptualizing “the” novel is the definite article—precisely because the novel is not itself one (that is, neither singular, nor definitive, nor a genuine article). The novel escapes definition, which is why it cannot exist, even to itself, without elaborate strategies of generic marking and intrageneric positioning. For this reason, attempts to define the novel are often strategic, and critics of the novel have long recognized the term as what Michael McKeon, following Marx, calls a “simple abstraction,” “a deceptively monolithic category that encloses a complex historical process” (20). Recent critical work on the novel focuses on the novelistic skirmishes that took place as the novel worked to establish itself as the representative genre of a turbulent century, and this work reveals the history of the novel as a history of bitter intrageneric warfare. One only needs to glance at the long list of nineteenth-century novelistic genres, each with its own ideological affiliations, to see how complex was the period’s novelistic field: the domestic novel, the historical novel, the sensation novel, the naturalist novel, the New Woman novel, the decadent novel, the adventure novel, and so on. What this generic surplus tells us is that “the” novel could only negotiate the matter of its cultural distinction through its various avatars, each of which had a specific relationship to those *other* simple abstractions, “the middle class” and “the reading public.” None of these generic categories had a monopoly on public or critical approval, although some clearly fared better than others, and none of them came to embody “the” novel with any permanence, although all of them tried and one (the realist novel) nearly succeeded. To read the history

## Introduction

of the nineteenth-century novel is ultimately to read the history of *novels* and the history of how these novelistic forms work to seize cultural approval and to produce their own account of cultural value.

Into this intranovelistic struggle enters the figure of theater, which does much more than produce the novel as cultural category. It provides a third, and generally although not necessarily degraded, term, against which warring novelistic categories can negotiate their position vis-à-vis one another. The figure of theater does this, moreover, while producing, in its own flamboyant way, a generic sideshow that draws the attention—and the heat—to itself. When that heat dissipates and the smoke clears, we are left to contemplate an apparently individual figure, unified and alone, standing in the spotlight of history: the novel.

## Critical Figures

In my examination of theater's very public role as an enabling irritant to the formation of the novel's "private" virtues and to the reformation of the novelistic field, I both draw on and contribute to the growing body of scholarship that seeks to understand the relationship between the novel and theater in nineteenth-century Britain. In the early 1990s, three books in particular—Nina Auerbach's *Private Theatricals*, Joseph Litvak's *Caught in the Act*, and Elaine Hadley's *Melodramatic Tactics*—made the case for the importance of theatricality in nineteenth-century cultural life, politics, and literature. The last of these speaks most fully to the questions of the market that occupy a portion of the pages to come. As Hadley theorizes the "melodramatic mode," a set of rhetorical and behavioral strategies aligned with but not confined to stage melodrama, these strategies acted as a public, communitarian reminder of the social order that predated the consolidation of nineteenth-century market culture. As such, the melodramatic mode was anticlass, anticlassificatory, and potentially disruptive to the new market economy. While "resistant in principle to market culture," however, the melodramatic mode's association with appetitive crowds, particularly women and the poor, and its transmission through the public, commercial spaces of the theater house and the music hall led to what Hadley calls the "perhaps inevitable misapprehension of the melodramatic mode's always complicated relation to market exchange": melodrama, and public performances linked to it, became associated with the very urban mass market to which the melodramatic mode provided a potential brake (188). The novelistic complicity with this "misapprehension" is productive of both nineteenth-century literature's often cool relationship to

## Introduction

the theatrical and to the creation of classificatory distinctions among novels themselves. By *mis*representing public performance's relationship to the market, novelists seized the opportunity to negotiate their own. Novelists and critics negotiate generic position through representation, and it is frequently the represented figure of theater that they must negotiate if they are to arrest literary distinction from the flux of cultural forms.

While one reason for this is the complex association between theater and the market forces that novels could neither take nor leave, another is the simple association between theater and flux of all kinds. Something approaching ontological flux is in fact the topic of Auerbach's *Private Theatricals*, in which she considers theatricality as the dark underbelly of Victorian humanism, the subversive practice of metamorphic play that undercuts the period's firm belief in the one true self (3–18). While my arguments draw on Auerbach's account of theatricality as the “shadowy doppelgänger” of Victorian sincerity and authenticity, they also betray my suspicion about theatricality's inherent “subversiveness.” Indeed, my sense that theater and theatricality most often work to shore up the very ideologies that they appear to subvert places me in what Joseph Litvak calls the “paranoid” (as opposed to the “carnavalesque”) school. Litvak's project in *Caught in the Act* demonstrates the interdependence and final collapse of these two positions in twentieth-century literary criticism and the nineteenth-century novel; his readings unsettle Foucault's famous distinction between “spectacle” and “surveillance” by showing how surveillance implicates itself in theatrical spectacles of power. As Litvak has it, theatricality is a point at which ideology exceeds itself, undoes itself by mobilizing “an already self-divided set of practices capable of serving both reactionary and subversive causes” (26). Seeking out the ideological fissures that theatricality stages in the patriarchal narratives of privacy and domesticity, Litvak raises the curtain on the covert theatricality that lurks within a genre (and a century) that would have appeared to have done away with it. Because of my interest in generic evolution and self-constitution, I differ from Litvak insofar as I examine the novel's reaction to theater as a historical phenomenon rather than the largely ahistorical “theatricality” that he treats.<sup>14</sup> My goal is therefore not so much to track the displacements of theater into a furtive theatricality as it is to demonstrate the place of theater in definitions of and among novels and of a certain set of middle-class ideals with which the novel was associated in the period.

Following Litvak (and Hadley, to a lesser extent), recent scholars have seen the relationship of the novel to theatrical culture as (at least) double.<sup>15</sup> One recent book in particular, J. Jeffrey Franklin's *Serious Play*, focuses on the constituent yet antagonistic relationship between theater and the novel.<sup>16</sup> Like

## Introduction

Litvak, Franklin concerns himself with the ways in which theatricality—the various discourses of performance and play—both enables and disrupts the formation of interior, “authentic” character and the private world of the novel and its readers. Franklin, however, sets out to historicize Litvak’s paradigm and develops an account of the Victorian novel’s rise to dominance that reveals a “historical contest that reached culmination in the first half of the nineteenth century between two, major, competing cultural forms: the realist novel and the popular theater” (81). This historical contest shapes up as a battle of representations (in which the novel defines itself against its own damaging representations of theater) and over market control. I find this historical and market-centered approach particularly helpful, and I agree with Franklin that “these two cultural forms determined (through the combined choices of individual authors and institutions, obviously) their formal properties and thematic territories *in direct reference to each other*” (92). Where I depart from Franklin, however, is in my unwillingness to see the market divided between *two* forms, no matter how persuasively the nineteenth-century novel seeks to represent the antagonism in these binary terms. While the figure of theater certainly allowed for a simple, reactive definition of the novel, it also allowed novelists and critics to negotiate generic competition *among* novelistic forms. My focus on the burgeoning nineteenth-century literary market (a market not just in realist novels but in different types of novels) allows me to consider how novelistic representation of theater and theatricality helped manage relations among novels, readers, and the market.

## Market Figures

The novel bore a special relationship to the market in the nineteenth century, having in fact grown up alongside of it.<sup>17</sup> Despite, or more likely because of, this privileged relationship, novels are often at their most phobic when dealing with questions of their own materiality and marketability, their inevitable dissemination out into the vast unknown. As numerous studies have shown, this anxiety can be read throughout the pages of the nineteenth-century novel, and it can be felt in the novel’s seemingly paradoxical distaste for the mass audience it would seem to court.

The novel did not begin its cultural run as the market’s darling. Current accounts of the novel’s difficult and uneven “rise” in the eighteenth century describe how novels needed to grab their share of the nascent literary market by pushing aside competing literary genres, such as the romance, the scandal chronicle, and the amorous tale. And in order to elevate themselves over these

## Introduction

other genres, in order to legitimate themselves as culturally valuable, novels needed to negotiate their relationship to “pleasure” and to “entertainment.”<sup>18</sup> As William Warner has shown in *Licensing Entertainment*, the novel became available as an apparently unified category only after critics, novelists, and especially literary historians worked to disavow its former connections to amorous pleasures and to offer a reformed and reforming vision of the novel as pedagogical force. However paradoxically, the “elevated” novel (which is to say, those eighteenth-century novels that have come to occupy canonical status) achieved a place of legitimacy in the cultural market only by playing down its relationship to the economic market. Concerns about the novel’s status as popular product, and about its *productive* relationship to its consumers, were coeval with and underwrite the novel’s elevation. Indeed, Patrick Brantlinger claims that we can take these concerns as the novel’s own particular signature: “The inscription of anti-novel attitudes within novels is so common that it can be understood as a defining feature of the genre; accordingly, any fictional narrative which does not somehow criticize, parody, belittle, or somehow deconstruct itself is probably not a novel” (*The Reading Lesson*, 2).

However concerning and potentially sinister, the novel’s proliferation in the eighteenth-century literary market was but a shadow of things to come in the nineteenth century. High book prices kept production (and consumption) relatively low throughout the eighteenth century, although the emergence of lending libraries allowed a new breed of middle-class readers to read books that they could not afford to buy. “By 1800,” Lee Erickson writes in *The Economy of Literary Form*, “most copies of a novel’s edition were sold to the libraries, which were flourishing businesses to be found in every major English city and town, and which promoted the sale of books during a period when their price rose relative to the cost of living” (126). Aimed largely at middle-class, female readers, these lending libraries made reading a shared, social, and more or less proper activity, and they allowed the novel’s “reading public” to congeal as an entity. All of this changed, however, with the arrival of Sir Walter Scott on the novelistic scene. So outrageously popular were Scott’s historical romances that they prompted publishers to bring out cheap editions that would be available to individual consumers, not just lending libraries. Erickson notes that “as they experimented with formats, publishers discovered that there were distinct audiences for the expensive three-volume novel, the cheap one-volume reprint, the magazine serialization, and finally, fiction issued in parts” (142). While this was a lucrative discovery, it was also a rather fatal one, for the “discovery” of diverse reading publics, divided along lines of social class, would haunt the novel and the literary market for the rest of the century. Numerous attempts were made to stabilize and regulate the growth of the novel’s publics, among

## Introduction

which we must count the rise in influence and consequence of the periodical review and the growing dominance of the three-volume novel that was the mainstay of the “select” lending libraries. While the triple-decker took hold in the 1830s and contributed to what Brantlinger describes as the taming—the making respectable and bourgeois—of mainstream fiction, the novel could never quite shake its association with the unwashed masses, the “crowd” that John Klancher identifies as a key image for the creation of early-nineteenth-century reading publics. For every image of “the” reading public as a unified community of respectable, like-minded readers, there is a corresponding one of monstrous dispersal. Indeed, the threat of this dispersal, this massing of unknown readers, reactively produces what Garrett Stewart has described as the intimacy of authorial address in the Victorian novel. The “gentle reader” of the nineteenth-century novel is always singular, always individuated over and against the ungentle, clamoring masses. As Stewart writes in *Dear Reader*, “it is one central effort of nineteenth-century fiction to reprivatize such an overgrown commonwealth of reading within an undeniable sales economy” (9).

Although the triple-decker novel was riding high, the fiction of the individual reader (a reader formed by and in fiction) and of a reading public of discerning, individual readers was troubled throughout the 1830s and 1840s by the undiscerning tastes of the “penny public.” With their working-class appetites for rather strong stuff—Gothic fiction and sensational crime fiction, for example—the penny public represented the low end of the market spectrum. By the 1850s, with the explosive popularity of “railway novels” (cheap editions purchased in train stations and speedily paced for a journey), it was no longer possible to look the other way. In 1858, when Wilkie Collins “introduced” the readers of *Household Words* to “the Unknown Public,” he forced an acquaintance that had gone actively unacknowledged for a very long time. Worse yet, he claimed for this mass public the power of the majority, for it was, he claimed, “a public to be counted by millions; the mysterious, the unfathomable, the universal public of the penny-novel Journals” (217). By the 1860s, England was ripe for the “sensation” panic that seized it, and critics debated in hysterical tones the mutually damaging relationship between this brand of feminized popular fiction and the mass audience that hungered for it. Detractors bemoaned the cheapening of the artistic product and of authorship itself, which became measured in terms of popularity, rather than moral influence or aesthetics. As Erickson writes of the expanding nineteenth-century market, “The great irony of the transformation in the conditions of literary production was that authors felt their influence on society diminished even as they saw that the possibilities for it were enormously

## Introduction

expanded—hence their ambivalence toward the publishing marketplace where a commodity value was placed on their work” (189). In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the split between “high” and “popular” culture became magnified even further, and the market became so fractured that unification was no longer possible—or, from the high-cultural perspective, desirable. By the end of the century, the aestheticized and now *extremely* elevated novel left the mass market and its novels behind altogether.

## Female Figures

Crucial to the perception and management of the nineteenth-century literary market was the figure of the female reader, who was both that market’s ideal consumer and most troubled product. Because I consider how the female figure (and the feminization of generic figures) was used to negotiate the entertainment market and to necessitate changes within it, I would like to suggest a few ways in which nineteenth-century women were tied both to the novel and to theater. Indeed, the figure of the middle-class woman, and particularly the woman reader, has been integral to critical accounts of the famous “double rise,” the conjoined rise of the English middle classes and the rise of the novel.<sup>19</sup> While I consider neither of these rises particularly smooth, and anything but spontaneous, I am nonetheless indebted to those critics who have described the productive conjunction among novels, the emergent middle class, and women. This book is influenced by Nancy Armstrong’s argument in *Desire and Domestic Fiction* that the rise of the domestic woman secured for the middle classes a position of moral authority over both the “immoral” aristocracy and the equally “immoral” laboring classes, and that it did so by locating the “value” of woman in her “qualities of mind” rather than her social or financial status. Written representations of the self—eighteenth-century conduct books, educational tracts, and above all, novels—participated in “a struggle to individuate wherever there was a collective body, to attach psychological motives to what had been the openly political behavior of contending groups, and to evaluate these according to a set of moral norms that exalted the domestic woman” (5). This turn inward to the psychologized subject, a singular and privatized subject that was “first and foremost a woman” (8), signaled a major political victory for the emergent middle classes but tolled the death knell for those remnants of a prior, collective culture that persisted in the lively eighteenth-century traditions of masquerade, popular theater, and public fairs.<sup>20</sup> The novel, of course, had an active hand in this; in the last decades of the eighteenth century, as Armstrong writes, “the novel provided a means of

## Introduction

displacing and containing long-standing symbolic practices—especially those games, festivities, and other material practices of the body that maintained a sense of collective identity” (18).

In Armstrong’s model of political and cultural change, transformations occur through a process of symbolic representation. She writes that “culture appears as a struggle among various political factions to possess its most valued signs and symbols. The reality that dominates in any given situation appears to be just that, the reality that dominates” (23). As Armstrong and others have argued, the novel as middle-class mouthpiece came to dominate the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because it most skillfully produced and manipulated—indeed, came symbolically to possess—the figure of woman. Given the political and generic significance of this figure, then, it comes as little surprise that a point on which the novel is quite vociferous about its theatrical foe is precisely when it comes to “productions” of femininity. Antitheatrical tracts of the period were particularly distressed about the threat that theater posed to the nation’s womanhood, especially given the theater’s proximity to the public profession of prostitution. The novel picks up on this distress, fueling it and feeding off of it. When the novel “figures” theater, then, the figure of woman frequently focuses generic conflict as a crisis of gender; theatrical performance is often seen as provoking or embodying a disruption in the crucial process of gendering identity. While the novel—as the self-designated mode of the psychologized, individualized subject—presents female character as a matter of “nature,” theatrical performance denaturalizes femininity as role playing.<sup>21</sup> The ideal of essentialized female identity that the bourgeois novel does so much to put in place is (apparently) compromised by the return of various theatrical practices and associations that the novel actively works to *displace*.

The model of femininity that is displaced over and over again by the nineteenth-century ideal of domesticated, privatized female subjectivity is a model that held particular sway in the eighteenth century, an account of woman as sexually voracious, highly changeable, and inherently theatrical.<sup>22</sup> This account belongs to a world in which binary gender relations are not yet entirely fixed, the “separate spheres” are only beginning to form, and the figure of theater dominates the British cultural imagination. As David Marshall has written of the early eighteenth century, this era “saw itself in explicitly theatrical terms” despite (or perhaps because of) the proliferation of antitheatrical discourse (“From Readers to Spectators,” 275).<sup>23</sup> The theatrical metaphor found its way into both journalism (*The Spectator*) and fiction, informing all manner of social relations and providing a model for such protean fictional characters as Daniel Defoe’s Moll Flanders, a character Marshall reads as embodying the

## Introduction

ontological instability of play-acting. It was, of course, the “ontological subversiveness” of theater that provoked the most heated antitheatrical attacks, as Jonas Barish reminds us; acting was seen as violating the “concept of an absolute identity” and undermining the notion of a true, legible, human self. That this threat to the “human self” was always tied to issues of gender becomes clear in even the earliest of antitheatrical writings, as in Barish’s account of Tertullian’s *De Spectaculis*: “One’s identity, for Tertullian, is absolutely given, as one’s sex is given; any deviation from it constitutes a perversion akin to the attempt to change one’s sex” (48–49). While it was precisely the possibility of changing one’s sex that explains much of the allure that theater and theatrical entertainments held for the eighteenth century (as evidenced, for example, in traditions of masquerade, theatrical cross-dressing, and the eighteenth-century fascination with the figure of the hermaphrodite), these sexual transformations were outlawed by the political sea changes that brought about the rise of the middle-class woman.

Like the rise of the novel and the rise of the middle classes with which the emergence of this new feminine ideal is linked, the rise of the private woman was gradual, uneven, and beset by returns of a prior, more public model of femininity, which we see acted out and negotiated in the pages of the novel.<sup>24</sup> These are often returns not only of the mother figure (in which case gender conflict takes allegorical shape as generational conflict), but also of the figure of theater, suggesting the extent to which theatrical genres were inextricably bound to outdated models of female nature and conduct in the nineteenth-century cultural imagination. It also suggests that in the nineteenth-century novel, generic competition between the theater and the novel (and among novels) works to focus and manage competing representations of woman. This is also true the other way around—conflict between competing models of female gender works to focus and manage underlying generic conflicts.

These gender slippages, which are also then generic slippages, work not only to undermine or underscore the emergence of the private woman, but also to point up a basic contradiction in the nineteenth century’s construction of femininity. What we see when we focus on the two models of femininity that I have described is not how radically incommensurable they are, but how similar; the emergent model of privatized femininity appears not so much to negate its predecessor, as to include it. The same woman who is constructed as private, interior, and restrained is at the same time associated with the body, with specularity, and with irrationality. This contradiction arises in part because the same oppositional logic that placed “woman” within the private sphere also constructed her as the complementary opposite of “man.” And if man was granted province over the higher faculties—rational thinking, analytical ability, and

## Introduction

observation—woman ruled (and was ruled by) the lower, emotive realm. No matter that female sentiment was accorded a certain kind of moral authority, it also tied woman more closely to the body, because “feeling” moves easily back and forth between the psychological and the corporeal, as the body of the female hysteric so aptly illustrates. The figure of the female therefore performs double and often contradictory work: on the one hand, she is the agent of privatization and domestication, prized for her interior qualities of mind, on the other she is the bodily object of male scrutiny and the irrational “outside” to the fortress of masculine rationality.

One way in which nineteenth-century culture in general and novels in particular worked to manage the contradictions inherent in the feminine domestic ideal was to split the figure of woman into two parts, described often by twentieth-century criticism as “the virgin and the whore” or “the woman and the demon.”<sup>25</sup> Such splitting took the pressure off the process of idealization by displacing the troublesome aspects of femininity onto a degraded and disposable female figure. While this binary formulation is among the most well embalmed of critical assumptions about the nineteenth century, it deserves to be revived for the particular leverage it provides in working out not simply issues of gender but related generic issues. When reconfigured as a split between the “natural woman” and the “actress,” the traditional virgin/whore dichotomy not only helps us see the stage mechanism behind the rise of the idealized domestic woman, but it also exposes the favored strategy by which the novel both incorporates theater and works theater out of its system.<sup>26</sup> Since the actress invariably embodies the “residual” qualities of corporeality, sexuality, and theatricality, her almost equally invariable removal from the text helps purify her emergent counterpart and routs stage business from the pages of the novel.

Indeed, “business” is the ticklish point. The ideal of a naturalized femininity is not only beset by the theatricality that unmask identity as a production (in the theatrical sense), but also by the theater’s tie to the masses and mass culture, which underscores the idea of material production (in its economic sense). This is yet another way in which theater unsettles the novel on a score on which the novel is much more vulnerable than theater. It highlights the scene of mass production and consumption, which is the key to the novel’s success. Much more so than theater, the novel is limitlessly reproducible, and, as numerous critics have remarked, its cultural and financial success relies upon the reproduction of its form and ideals within the reader. The “natural” femininity that the novel supposedly and paradoxically produces in its heroines and readers relies upon textual proliferation and the ideological reproduction

## Introduction

that occurs when the novel achieves its ideal circulation to its mass, largely female, readership. If reading is the scene of ideological reproduction, however, the scene of reading cannot withstand too flagrant a show of its ties to the market, and it is this tie that the figure of theater both unveils and so often works to screen. Because of the precarious nature of reading as ideological and market consumption, the most visible command performance in the novels I address is that of the female reader, whose figure must negotiate the conflict between women's multiple ties to the voracious appetites of the market and the consuming fiction of women's private, readerly, removal from the public sphere. As private readers were also public consumers, the bourgeois novel had its work cut out for it: represent as private the very female reader whose public, book-buying (or at least renting) interest it had also to excite. Worse yet, excited interest was equally the province of theater, which also made its money from traffic in women, but in ways the novel was keen to disown.

### Refigurations of Theater

In approaching the family squabbles between the novel and the theater from the point of view of the novel, I am not so much taking sides as I am taking stock of the novel's attempts to write the generic history of the nineteenth century. A brief look at nineteenth-century theater history, in fact, suggests the extent to which this project was largely successful. While the novel went about what was essentially a campaign of negative representations, the theater gradually made itself over in its rival's image. As the century wore on, "legitimate" Victorian theater became increasingly *like* the novel—more thoroughly and intricately narrative, more domestic, and more self-consciously middle class.<sup>27</sup>

This theatrical transformation—what Mary Jean Corbett has called the "*embourgeoisement* of theater"—might be expected to mark an easing of the hostilities whose shadowy and sometimes corrosive presence can be felt within the novel. And to some extent it does, but because the novel/theater split is not the only generic antagonism at stake when the novel figures theater, theater's elevation cannot completely settle the score. What it does mark is a change in the market fortunes of nineteenth-century theater, which had suffered a decline in both status and box-office receipts when in the early decades of the century middle-class theater-goers increasingly decided to stay home.<sup>28</sup> The split between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" drama—originally set in place by the Licensing Act of 1737, which granted a monopoly on spoken drama to "patent theaters" Covent Garden and Drury Lane, but legally abolished when

## Introduction

theaters were deregulated in 1843—did little to clear theater’s bad name with the middle classes, even though it worked towards categorizing theatrical space and quarantining the laboring classes in the realm of the illegitimate. Theater maintained its associations with the lower classes not only because of its ties to carnival spectacle and because of its nature as a collective amusement, but also because, as Hadley has argued, it provided both a venue and a model for political dissent and class uprising.<sup>29</sup> When “society” came back to the theater in the last three and half decades of the century, a return that was not complete until the 1890s, it did so because both the theater and the drama had become more recognizably middle class. “Cup and saucer” dramas such as T. W. Robertson’s *Society* (1865) and *Caste* (1867) brought the stage closer to the drawing room, both in subject matter and set design. A new, more intimate theater space designed to make bourgeois theater patrons feel “at home” catered to middle-class tastes. (One should note, however, that at the same time melodrama was moved out from under the sign of illegitimacy to form the backbone of the new middle-class drama, the cultural splitting that we have come to expect took place yet again and the music halls came to embody the “low” aspects of theater: corporeality, sexuality, working-class audiences.<sup>30</sup>) The rise in respectability of acting as a career—a professionalization begun in the eighteenth-century but not ratified until Henry Irving became the first actor to be knighted in 1895—and the increasing domestication of the figure of the actress also worked to lure middle-class audiences back to a theater made over in their own image.<sup>31</sup> The critical debate that took place in the 1880s over the propriety of the acting profession for middle-class women demonstrates the extent to which middle-class assumptions had been applied to theater by the last two decades of the century.<sup>32</sup>

It is a sign of the rising fortunes of theater that theatrical critics and performers had anything to debate at all. For the first half of the nineteenth century, the terms *actress* and *propriety* enjoyed only an oppositional relationship.<sup>33</sup> During the decades of theater’s moral rehabilitation, however, the actress received a corresponding refiguration. In an 1859 article for the *English Woman’s Journal* entitled “A Few Words about Actresses and the Profession of the Stage,” the anonymous author seeks to turn the “terra incognita” of the actress’s life into familiar home turf: “That there are fascinations and dangers and sins in abundance connected with theatrical life we confess; but how much sincere and active virtue, how many poetic aspirations, what persevering industry and effort and endurance, are part of it as well!” (385–86). Asking readers to “strip away from their idea of the actress for awhile, both the soiled drappings of vice and the glittering but worthless stage tinsel,” the author proceeds to do that very thing by stressing the labor of the acting profession

## Introduction

and by detaching the honest professional from her “depraved” sister, the sexual outlaw who in this account of the theater is merely an exception to the hard-working rule (387). In this split between the professional actress and the whore, the author observes the “natural antagonism between virtue and vice” in which “the woman of pure life . . . [finds herself] in silent conflict with evil” (392). Acting, in other words, is split (although unevenly so) between a legitimate profession for women and the oldest one. By the 1880s, however, acting had firmly established itself as a respectable profession, and participants in the debate over the social role of the actress focused on issues of domestic rather than sexual labor. Can an actress be a good mother? Can she keep a middle-class home? As Corbett has persuasively argued, the lives and autobiographies of late Victorian actresses such as Dame Madge Kendal (“The Matron of British Drama”) were designed to demonstrate the coincidence between the actress and the ideal middle-class woman. Corbett writes that “Kendal’s queenly preeminence depended on the close fit between her staged public performances and her known ‘private’ character as exemplary wife and mother who was as devoted to imposing a salutary feminine influence on the theater as to upholding familial values and virtues” (121). The actress became fully respectable and fully middle class, that is, by appearing not to act: “Late Victorian actresses had to ‘be themselves’ in order to succeed, for what the theater required of them was precisely that” (135). With the ontological subversion that had sent Puritans running for the exits now purged from a newly bourgeois theater, the figure of the actress came to reign over the stage as she would a middle-class home.

At least for a while, the theater entered a middle-class idyll. Drama became triumphantly bourgeois, serious, and socially minded, and the English middle class delighted in seeing itself and its ideology represented. As the century approached its close, however, that ideology came increasingly under attack from the feminist movement, the socialist movement, the visibility of “the homosexual,” the progressive drama, and even its stalwart champion, the novel. What the dates of the present study roughly bracket, therefore, is a certain heyday of middle-class ideology—a period that witnessed its gradual rise in the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth, as well as its embattled decline at the end of the nineteenth century. This is not to say that the middle classes plummeted from their exalted position of moral authority and cultural hegemony in one abrupt, vertiginous dive. Indeed, they have held onto something approaching moral hegemony throughout the twentieth century and into this one, but by the end of the nineteenth-century the ideology of middle-class life, like the ideology of empire with which it was intimately related, was on a downward ebb.

## Introduction

I begin this project with the 1778 publication of Frances Burney's first novel, *Evelina*, and conclude with the controversial publication of George Moore's *A Mummer's Wife* in 1885. My aim throughout is to tie literary events into broader cultural and historical events, to demonstrate how the novelistic production of certain figures of theater and theatricality undergirds, and occasionally undermines, the production of a certain middle-class ideal. The period of that ideal's ascendance corresponds, again rather roughly, to the period of theater's cultural eclipse; by the time theater had reworked itself to serve a middle-class ideology, that ideology required ever greater maintenance. Indeed, by the time the theater had begun to look like the Victorian novel, that novel had for all practical purposes ceased to exist. The sturdy triple-decker novel that had come to embody normative Victorian narratives of middle-class domesticity had been replaced by what Elaine Showalter calls "the slim, exquisitely bound novels of the fin de siècle, with their gilded covers and Beardsley designs, [that] suggested a very different image of character and sexuality: the celibate, the bachelor, the 'odd woman,' the dandy, and the aesthete" (*Sexual Anarchy*, 16). Written primarily by men, these novels marked the beginnings of the elite literary culture that would become modernism in the first decades of the twentieth century. How the figure of the theater participated in both this fall of the middle-class novel at the end of the nineteenth century and its much-ballyhooed rise in the last decades of the eighteenth is a subject of the following chapters. How theater figures in the negotiations that went on within the novelistic field during the decades in between is the main topic of this book.

## Chapter Outline

Each chapter in this book considers a pair (and in the case of chapter 5, a trio) of novels to better understand and illustrate the way individual novels position themselves through and against other forms. My argument thus enacts on the level of form the impossibility of definitively constituting either the generic form of any one novel or "the" novel in general. Any novel must be understood in relation to the competing forms against which it both makes sense of itself and competes for a share of the nineteenth-century market.

I begin by considering the ascension of the novel in Britain against the decline in mass entertainment that occurred in the late eighteenth century and continued during the first decades of the next. Focusing on the careers of Frances Burney and Jane Austen, my first chapter demonstrates how Burney's

## Introduction

*Evelina* (1778) and Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) participate in both the shift from mass entertainment to private reading and the rise of the middle-class subject. Beginning with Burney's diaries about her own stage fright, I analyze ways in which these two novels enact their theatrophobia, displacing and colonizing the visual world of theatrical entertainment through elaborately staged scenes of reading. This generic self-consciousness works to separate the interior processes of the developing domestic novel from the exterior productions of theater and to construct the private realm of the literary as a specifically feminine preserve. The "privatization" of the novel, however, is frustrated by both the novel's own materiality and by the dangerous habit of embodied, or theatricalized, reading.

Chapter 2 turns to the work of an author known for his melodramatic plots as much as for his grand historical novels, Sir Walter Scott. I claim that by reworking the association between the novelistic and the feminine forged by novelists like Burney and Austen, Scott reinscribes the Romantic novel into a male canonical tradition and recasts its relationship to performance. This argument focuses on a pair of novels published in the same year: the despised *St. Ronan's Well* (June 1824), Scott's only domestic novel and the nadir of his career, and *Redgauntlet* (December 1824), the novel that marks Scott's triumphant return to the favor of his critics and his public. While *St. Ronan's Well* attends to the scene of private theatricals in its plot of romantic intrigue, *Redgauntlet* returns to the familiar *Waverley* territory of Scottish history. As a response to the *St. Ronan's* fiasco, *Redgauntlet* encodes an allegory of its generic history and forecasted reception, turning the feminized theatricality of its predecessor into epic political drama. The figure of performance thus serves to distinguish between what one critic called the "feminine frippery" of domestic narrative and the healthy masculinity of historical romance. The Romantic novelistic field, divided into male and female realms and readerships, is stabilized by the figure of theater.

Scott's use of theatrical figure to validate a completely different project from Burney or Austen not only demonstrates the flexibility of the figure but also highlights a common strategy: all three novelists construct a series of doubles that allow the novel (whether epistolary, domestic-realist, or historico-romantic) to define itself by exclusion. My third chapter focuses on this tactic, with a reading of two novels from the 1840s, the decade in which mass readership exploded and the novel finally "arrived" as a middle-class institution. In Charles Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840) and Geraldine Jewsbury's *The Half Sisters* (1848), the practice of doubling or splitting allows the figure of theater to facilitate both the construction of the private, essentialized subject

## Introduction

and the related construction of the novel as the narrative mode of that subject. Both novels, although drastically different in their stances on theater and women, use this strategy to remove a tainted theatricality from the domestic and novelistic sphere and to prop up an ideal figure of femininity. At the same time, both Dickens and Jewsbury display mid-century fears about the unregulated growth of the literary mass market. Their efforts to domesticate the novel and to consolidate a unified, Victorian reading public set up the high-cultural backlash that is the primary focus of the rest of the book.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the “Victorian public” and the “Victorian novel” were as conceptually unified as they would ever be. Both were about to be ripped apart by the sensational events of the 1860s, which began the polarization between “high” and “popular” culture that would eventually define modernism. Chapters 4 and 5 examine the role of theater and performativity in debates over the novel’s aesthetics and moral function during the last half of the nineteenth century. Chapter 4 addresses the outcry over “sensation” in the 1860s, and chapter 5 focuses on the 1880s high-art attack on bourgeois censorship, while both consider English reworkings of the same French novel, Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857). I argue in chapter 4 that while Flaubert uses the fatally performative body of the female reader to produce the identities of both the male artist and the high-realist novel, Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *The Doctor’s Wife* (1864) resurrects that body to construct a much more popular realism. Writing against Flaubert and against the critics who denounced sensation fiction as socially shocking and morally diseased, Braddon composes an antisensational sensation novel that seeks to reconstitute the middle-class subject around a healthy and reformed idea of performative reading.

George Moore, for his part, finds this cure much worse than the disease and stakes out for himself a position that would transcend altogether the gross materiality of middle-class consumption. Adopting the disinterested pose of male rationality that returns not only to Flaubert but also to an eighteenth-century aesthetic tradition of the masculine republic of taste, Moore locates himself outside and above the mass market about which he writes in abject detail. Aligning popular fiction with low theater, Moore traffics in the low and the filthy to define the high against the feminized middle. In his own rewriting of *Madame Bovary*, the controversial naturalist novel *A Mummer’s Wife* (1885), Moore makes explicit the theatrical subtext that had been at the heart of the *Bovary* story all along. Like the fin de siècle writers that would follow him, Moore appropriates the *terms* of mid-Victorian debates about literary propriety (sensation, shock, disease) for an entirely different agenda: to separate the high-art object from the body of the vulgar reading masses. As I argue in this book’s final chapter, Moore uses the figure of theater to produce an idea

## Introduction

of literary high culture that would be the end of the love affair between middle-class propriety and “the” novel.



I would like to return to *The Mask* for a particularly well-drawn example of the problems of generic and literary distinction that occupy this book, problems made all the more urgent by the sensation debates of the 1860s, when *The Mask* was in publication. Seldom are the connections among novels, theater, and the market made more clearly than in *The Mask*'s parody of a Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins joint venture, *No Thoroughfare*. Published as the Christmas number of *All the Year Round* in 1867 and immediately adapted for its dramatic debut on Christmas Eve at the Adelphi Theater, *No Thoroughfare* was a huge success. Losing no time attaching itself to such a lucrative enterprise, the February 1868 edition of *The Mask* offered its readers *No Thoroughfare: The Book in Eight Acts*. A parody of serial publication, both domestic and sensation novels, and melodramatic tactics, this *No Thoroughfare* presents itself as a direct novelistic avenue to theatrical receipts.

Act 1 opens on Walter Wilding, a wine merchant in Cripple Corner who has survived the Foundling Hospital (“the lucky bag of infants”) to find his mother and then to inherit her business. Wilding’s longing for family works as a send-up of cheery Dickensian domesticity, but the family tableau quickly turns to horror in acts 2 and 3 as Wilding discovers that he is not who he thinks he is, that he never knew his real mother, and that he has no true claim to his inheritance. Having signed a new will, leaving all of his property to the rightful heir (or, in default, “to the Brunswick Square Asylum for Mysterious Infants, with a view to the encouragement of sensation-novel writing”), Wilding is accosted by the true “author of [his] being,” Charles Dickens. What ensues is a parody of authorial control, sensational language, and market necessity, as Dickens tells his character, “I had thought and hoped to have worked you up into something interesting, or at least amusing. You have deceived me fearfully. It is my own and my partner Wilkie Collins’s wish that you should be put out of the way, that—you should die!” (17). When Wilding protests, Dickens reminds him that “I have killed far better, nobler creatures than you. Notably, did I kill little Paul Dombey. Similarly, did I kill little Nell. Besides, I am going to America to give readings. Collins cannot manage you. You are neither comic nor sentimental. You must be got rid of!” (17). Ignoring Wilding’s pleas for mercy and his promises to be more comic in future, Dickens seizes “a gigantic pen” and runs his main character through the heart. Dying, Wilding cries, “Oh Dicky Wilkins! Dicky Wilkins! What have I done to deserve this?” (17).

## Introduction

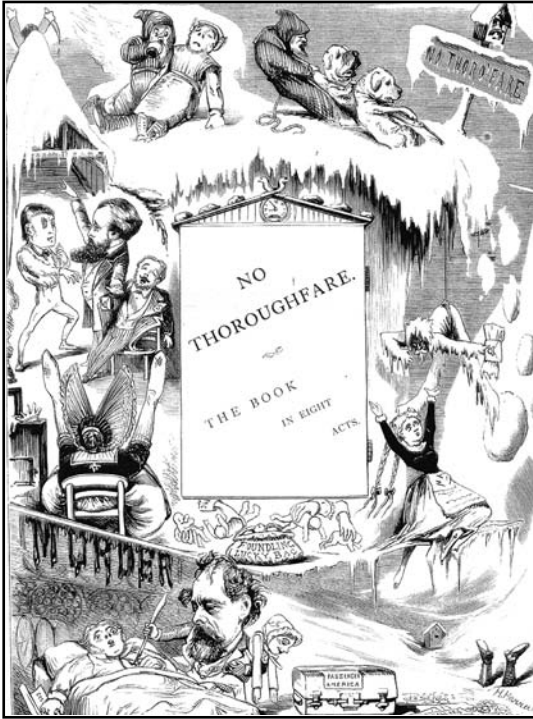


FIG. 2 “NO THOROUGHFARE: THE BOOK IN EIGHT ACTS” BY ALFRED THOMPSON  
Appearing in *The Mask: A Humorous and Fantastic Review of the Month*, edited by  
Alfred Thompson and Leopold Lewis, vol. 1 (February–December 1868), p. 15.

It is clear that Wilding deserves to die not because of something he has done, but something he has failed to do: create “interest.” The accompanying illustration makes the financial tie-in clear (see figure 2). In the lower left-hand corner of the image, which draws from the entwined genres of sensational advertising and melodrama, Charles Dickens plunges the fatal pen into Wilding’s chest. Beside Dickens’s suitcase, which reads “Passenger America,” is a pile of coins and paper dollars. Wilding dies because murder sells, and because Dickens and Collins—or “Dicky Wilkins,” in their conflated form—are both authors and businessmen. Of course sometimes it pays to keep a character alive, as we see in act 6, when the Swiss villain Obenreizer tells the new main character, George Vendale, of his evil plans: “Fool! I should have [killed you] long before, but Wilkie Collins has prolonged your life by his continued interpositions on your behalf. I could have . . . killed you a dozen times, unsuspecting idiot as you

## Introduction

have shown yourself to be, had he not wanted to work up the interest; but here we stand in a sensation scene, with avalanches around us. And here you must die!" (18). Sensation fiction's cliffhangers (literalized here when Vendale is thrown over an Alpine precipice and saved by the enterprising heroine and her rescue dogs) "work up interest" for both audience and authors alike. Collins himself—he of the "Unknown Public," no less—makes the equation between curiosity and revenue clear when he appears in the final act to dispatch fate:

I want to wind this business up. George Vendale, you will marry Marguerite of course. You are the real Walter Wilding. His late dear mother was your mother, so you will enjoy the property. Obenreizer I shall kill with an avalanche by and by. Bintrey will marry Madame D'or. I don't know what to do about Joey Ladle, but out of compliment to Charles I shall make him marry Mrs. Goldstraw in the drama. I have no doubt he will then come out stronger than he has done in the book. . . . I think [Dickens and I] have got through it pretty well, and, if you doubt it, go and take your places at the Adelphi Theater directly you get back. You must pay, mind you, as, in consequences of our arrangements with the manager, no complimentary admissions can be given. (18)

Appropriately, this final act is called "The Tag," which is true both to the dramatic sense of the term (in which the tag is the closing lines in a speech) and its monetary one: this closure bares its price tag, as Collins instructs his own characters (and his reading audience) to buy tickets for the play. In the illustration of this scene, Collins stands to the left, gesturing dramatically, while characters start and swoon around him; a woman sits on a chair with her back to the viewer and her legs spread as she pops out infants for the "Foundling Lucky Bag." As he directs closure, interacting directly with his embodied characters, Collins looks like nothing so much as a theater director, tutoring acting technique and already anticipating the moneymaking melodrama his novel will become.

In the March number of *The Mask*, the editors comment on the actual dramatic success *No Thoroughfare* enjoyed at the Adelphi: "It is a hit in every sense of the word, more particularly in the sense which is the pleasantest of all in managerial consideration. Its 'money' draw has never been equalled in the annals of the theatre. Let the public once understand that the manager, the principle actors, and authors, are each and every one of them 'coining money,' and they will rush to contribute to the collection" (34). Interest begets interest, and money produces more money, and Lewis and Thompson would clearly like to coin some of their own by cashing in on the hit of the moment. But there is something counterfeit about the whole thing: in their description of the public

## Introduction

hysteria that produces revenue out of nothing, we can sense disapproval of the “Intelligent” public’s lack of discerning taste. The public follows financial success, not cultural value, and in so doing makes the reviewer’s job somewhat obsolete. And, indeed, the entire project and tone of *The Mask* is uncomfortably poised between review and *revue*; even Lewis and Thompson seem unsure if they are out to offer critical opinion or an appreciative showcase. Perhaps because their own project is so confused, it is boundary confusion that becomes a hallmark of *The Mask*, both as *modus operandi* and as satirical target. The boundary-free world that Lewis and Thompson create—in which novels meld with theater, authors appear in their own creations, and Dickens and Collins become a murderous authorial hybrid—calls out for the very distinctions that it is so often satire’s goal to enforce. This carnival, in other words, asks its public to consider the places where things belong.<sup>34</sup> Even as it attempts to generate money from nothing, *The Mask*’s satirical treatment of *No Thoroughfare* betrays a certain queasiness with the authorial greed that responds only to the economic pressures that run the literary and dramatic market. “Dickie Wilkins” makes authorship cheap—makes it, even, a kind of murder for hire—by pandering to the market. The cheap thrills of the sensation novel, moreover, are indistinguishable from the melodramatic thrills of the stage. Dickens and Collins are not only authors and businessmen but also show people, and their rush to the stage makes a spectacle of authorship (quite literally so, with Dickens’s lecture/performing tour of America). Their quick production—tied to limitless reproduction in the disturbing image of the faceless, laboring woman—undermines “real” literary value. Of course value for money is what *The Mask* purports to offer: something paradoxically “true” offered from behind the protective shelter of the title’s theatrical figure; the hard truths of market culture unmasked as the driving force behind literary and theatrical production; the reality of authorship delivered through melodramatic caricature. Lewis and Thompson may have mistaken the public’s appetite for their particular production, but they knew what it is the goal of this book demonstrates: theater as historical fact and rhetorical figure held a productive place in nineteenth-century literature’s imaginary domains.