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Nymphs and Satyrs

Sex and the Bourgeois Public Sphere in Victorian New York

David Scobey

In 1882 hotelier Edward Stokes exhibited William Bouguereau's oil painting Nymphs and Satyr in his saloon in New York's elite amusement district. Despite the painting's risqué subject, upper-class women visited the bar to view the canvas. More generally, these same women began to use "Ladies' Mile," as the district was called, to experiment with forms of public theatricality and self-display that were at odds with older ideals of female modesty and self-discipline. Such experiments were part of a Victorian culture war about public respectability and constituted one source of feminist self-activity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Scenes of the Lady in Public

IN 1882 New York art collector and tobacco heiress Catherine Lorillard Wolfe sold a painting called *Nymphs and Satyr* to a wealthy hotelier, Edward Stokes, for \$10,000. It was the work of William Bouguereau, perhaps the most eminent French academic painter of the second half of the nineteenth century. "Advanced" taste in France and America derided Bouguereau for what was seen as his facile, soulless proficiency. Although he has come down to us in the role of despised antitype to the Impressionist insurgency, in his day the painter enjoyed great transatlantic popularity and prestige, especially among American art collectors. The galleries of bourgeois New Yorkers such as Wolfe or retailing baron Alexan-

der T. Stewart all boasted their Bouguereaus—some commissioned directly from the artist, others purchased from the annual Paris Salon, as *Nymphs and Satyr* had been in 1873.¹

It is small wonder, then, that Stokes chose to display the huge canvas in a flagship setting: the Hoffman House, a leading hotel that he co-owned on Broadway and Madison Square, the very heart of New York's shopping and amusement district. Stokes exhibited the work with the props of high-art spectatorship: an ornate frame and dark velvet canopy. Interestingly, however, he placed it in the hotel *bar*, a fashionable watering hole for Manhattan actors, impresarios, business-

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¹ For the provenance of *Nymphs and Satyr*, see *William Bouguereau, 1825–1905* (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1984), pp. 182–86; and David S. Brooke, *Biography of Bouguereau's Nymphs and Satyr* (pamphlet, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass.). The painting is now in the permanent collection of the Clark Art Institute. My thanks to Martha Asher, registrar, for providing me with the Brooke pamphlet as well as other materials from the museum's *Nymphs and Satyr* file (hereafter Clark Art Institute file). For the artist's popularity among Gilded Age American art collectors, see Robert Isaacson, "Collecting Bouguereau in England and America," in *Bouguereau, 1825–1905*, pp. 104–13; and John Oldcastle, "An American Millionaire's Gallery," *Art Journal* 49 (1887): 153–56. For criticism of Bouguereau's work as facile, see Frank Fowler, "The Lesson of Bouguereau," *Scribner's Magazine* 38, no. 6 (December 1905): 765–68; *Bouguereau, 1825–1905*, p. 185; and T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), pp. 121–32, which contrasts Bouguereau's academic treatment of the nude with the painting of modern nakedness in Manet.

men, politicians, and sporting types. There, despite the artist's stature as an icon of refined taste—or because of it—*Nymphs and Satyr* produced a sensation. One look will suggest why (fig. 1). The canvas portrays a mythological scene of female erotic domination and masculine curtailment, a tableau of nymphs encircling a satyr, teasing him, pulling at him, and ecstatically (but also coyly) dragging him down into a stream. What might have been classicism in Wolfe's private gallery became a kind of high-class tease in the Hoffman House saloon. "Less fortunate in its present environment is the graceful but somewhat pronounced nude composition 'Nymphs and Satyr,'" one journalist lamented in an otherwise hagiographic essay on Bouguereau, "which hangs in one of the ornate bar rooms of the metropolis."²

The "graceful but somewhat pronounced nude composition" was as much of a *succès de scandale* as Stokes must have hoped. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, crowds lined up to view the painting; talk of it circulated in magazines and memoirs; cartoonists caricatured and parodied it. Its image was widely circulated on posters, lithographs, and even porcelain and bathroom tiles. It spawned a vogue for barroom art that led elite establishments such as Chicago's Palmer House and San Francisco's Palace Hotel to exhibit their own classical nudes. Yet the Bouguereau on Broadway was the most famous. Even decades later, the scene of its display was vividly remembered. "I saw the painting many years ago hanging on the long wall of the old Hoffman House bar," one visitor recalled in 1943. "I would set the year as about 1908 or a little earlier when I first saw [it]." *Nymphs and Satyr* served almost as a kind of trademark for the hotel, featured in its advertisements alongside such satisfied patrons as vaudevillian Tony Pastor, Buffalo Bill Cody, and President Grover Cleveland.³

² C. Stuart Johnson, "Famous Artists and Their Work, VIII.—William Adolphe Bouguereau," *Munsey's Magazine* 7 (1894): 537. For accounts of the Hoffman House, its bar, and the exhibiting of *Nymphs and Satyr* there, see the promotional pamphlet *The Hoffman House . . . Its Attractions*. By F. G. DeFontain (1885); Bouguereau, 1825–1905, pp. 185–86; John A. Kouwenhoven, *The Columbia Historical Portrait of New York: An Essay in Graphic History* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1953), p. 364; and Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), p. 111.

³ Ernest D. Willet, letter to Herbert H. Elfers, January 11, 1943 (Clark Art Institute file). For public responses to *Nymphs and Satyr*, see Clark Art Institute file; Bouguereau, 1825–1905, pp. 185–86; William Gerdt, *The Great American Nude: A History in Art* (New York: Praeger, 1974), pp. 103–4; and George Ade, *The Old Time Saloon, Not Wet, Not Dry—Just History* (New York: R. Long and R. R. Smith, 1931), p. 26. My thanks to Peter Laipson for this last reference. The ad depicting Buffalo Bill, Grover Cleveland, and

More generally, the painting served as an emblem of the larger "male sporting culture" that places like the Hoffman House bar helped to stage. One lithograph of the barroom, for instance, portrayed Bouguereau's work amid an array of predatory, voyeuristic, and phallic fetishes of elite masculinity: walking sticks and top hats, a statue of Susanna bathing, hunting trophies, armor, and, most important, cigars (fig. 2). Fine cigars were in fact marketed under the Hoffman House label, in boxes illustrated with Bouguereau's painting. W. T. Robinson's *Still Life*, for instance, portrays a bon vivant's table replete with lobster, ale, sardine tin, half-smoked cigar, and an open box of "Hoffman House Favorita Especiales" on which *Nymphs and Satyr* is reproduced *en abîme*. By the early twentieth century, most American men had probably seen some reproduction or parody of the painting in a saloon, tobacco shop, smoking car, clubhouse, or billiard room. One turn-of-the-century caricature, said to have hung in a New York chophouse, depicts a hobo looking at the work and commenting, "I've traveled the world over and tramped every spot on the map, but I'm damned if I can locate that brook."⁴

The tramp never found the brook, no doubt, because it was not meant for the likes of him. At least initially, *Nymphs and Satyr* was a scene for bourgeois eyes only. During the Gilded Age, female nudity could be respectably exhibited only within the ornate frame of a setting defined by class exclusion and cultural hierarchy. Indeed Bouguereau's canvas laid bare not only the bodies of his nymphs but also a moral transformation that was taking place *inside* that class milieu: the emergence of new norms for the legitimate display of female bodies in public. The new norms formed part of a larger redefinition of respectability, publicity, womanhood, and sex in Gilded Age public culture. We can begin to trace the change by comparing *Nymphs and Satyr* to an

other celebrities in the Hoffman House bar is reproduced and discussed in Kouwenhoven, *Columbia Historical Portrait*, p. 364; and M. Christine Boyer, *Manhattan Manners: Architecture and Style, 1850–1890* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), p. 58.

⁴ For the lithograph and Robinson's *Still Life*, see Brooke, *Biography*; for the use of *Nymphs and Satyr* on cigar boxes, see James A. Crutchfield, "The United States Tobacco Company's Museums," *The Magazine Antiques* 130, no. 3 (September 1986): 503. For the tramp cartoon, see Bouguereau, 1825–1905, p. 186. For "sporting culture" and its norms of manliness, see the illuminating discussions in Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992); and Elliot Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986).



Fig. 1. William Bouguereau, *Nymphs and Satyr*, 1873. Oil on canvas; H. 102½", W. 71". (Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.)



Fig. 2. Interior of Hoffman House bar, ca. 1882. Lithograph, published by Thomas and Wiley. (Library of Congress.)

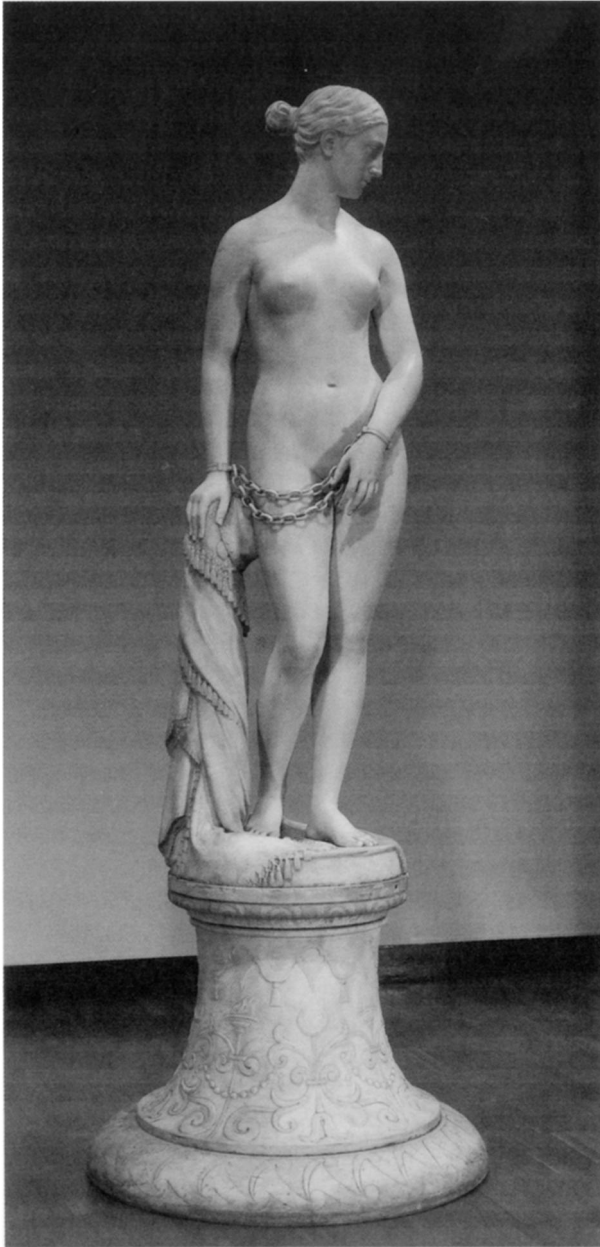


Fig. 3. Hiram Powers, *Greek Slave*, 1851, after an original of 1843. Marble; H. 64 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (figure), H. 25" (base). (Yale University Art Gallery, Olive Louise Dann fund.)

equally sensational representation of female nudity put on display some forty years earlier: Hiram Powers's famous sculpture *Greek Slave* (fig. 3).

Made in 1843 and displayed across the United States in a blockbuster tour in 1847–48, *Greek Slave* was by all accounts the most culturally charged and influential artwork in mid-Victorian America. Like *Nymphs and Satyr*, it was notorious for its melding of classicizing form and trans-

gressive theme and its then-daring handling of female nudity, eroticism, and bondage. Yet *Greek Slave* could hardly be further from Bouguereau's painting. It portrays a Greek woman, naked, vulnerable, her body in chains, her eyes averted, in the moment just before she is led into captivity and sexual violation at the hands of the "infidel" Turks. As Joy Kasson has argued, the figure invokes a nexus of orthodox moral associations: first, to the ideal of virtuous womanhood with its honoring of female modesty, piety, and passivity; and second, to the linked horrors of female sexual subjection and enslavement, here fused (as in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) in the iconography of the slave market. The effect of these associations, embodied in the idealized treatment of the figure itself, was to "clothe" the sculpture in the highest values of its antebellum public, to make the slave's violability represent the power of virtuous womanhood. As one minister-poet wrote, "Unclothed, yet clothed upon, She stands not bare,—/Another robe, of purity, is there."⁵

At the same time, *Greek Slave* provoked genteel unease. During its national tour, groups of clergy inspected the nude to ensure its acceptability to Christian viewers. Similarly, in language that elided the display of the artwork itself with the degradations of the slave and sex markets, the press lamented the figure's exhibition for sale in 1857: "This slave will be exposed, perfectly nude, in the most public places in the city . . . that all the rich nabobs may feast their eyes upon her beauties, and calculate how much she would be worth to ornament their palatial residences." Such prurience was less hysterical than we might think. *Tableaux-vivants* of *Greek Slave* were a stock-in-trade of pornographic model-artist shows in New York's commercial-sex industry. For all its "purity," then, *Greek Slave* exposed something of the double standards and mixed longings of mid-Victorian, middle-class Americans.⁶

A generation later *Nymphs and Satyr* made its splash in a different cultural milieu. For one thing, the painting itself was less a reprise than an inversion of Powers's statue. Here a tableau of

⁵ My analysis of *Greek Slave* owes much to Joy Kasson's brilliant analysis in *Marble Queens and Captives: Women in Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 46–72 (verses quoted, p. 61).

⁶ *Cosmopolitan Art Journal* (1857), as quoted in Kasson, *Marble Queens*, p. 66. For the use of *Greek Slave* in pornography, see Robert Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 92–94; and Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, p. 127.

white women—collective not solitary, ecstatic not passive, free not shackled, shameless not ashamed—take a dark, “Turkish” male as a sexual captive. Although it was displayed at a time of great agitation over sexual censorship and moral policing, this bacchanalian image does not seem to have spurred the level of cultural anxiety voiced by some viewers of *Greek Slave*. To the contrary, it reinforced a vogue for French art and the public display of nudes that marked a sea change in bourgeois aesthetic and moral sensibilities. One art journalist, in a review of A. T. Stewart’s gallery, noted “the extraordinary revolution . . . in American taste” that the public would find there:

The age of Copley and the age of Church have given place to that of Meissonier and Daubigny. In ethics no less than in taste the transformation has been astonishing and complete. It is not so long since the Academy at Philadelphia—because it contained some undraped statuary—was opened one day on the week for “women only” . . . Powers’ “Greek Slave,” itself in the Stewart Gallery, was received with grave misgivings when it first appeared. . . . Of late years the only complaint has been of the difficulty of the sight-seer in having access to this and the other masterpieces.⁷

Between the debut of *Greek Slave* and that of *Nymphs and Satyr*, in short, there was a dramatic change in the codes regulating the public exhibition of female bodies. At the heart of the change, this critic makes clear, was a more open attitude toward respectable bodily display—a permissiveness that, like many Victorian tastemakers, he figures as the influence of “French” art and manners. More important, he suggests that the new openness toward womanhood in public had to do not only with the bodies being looked at but also with those doing the looking. For the people who came to see *Greek Slave* in Stewart’s gallery in the 1870s and 1880s were more than “rich nabobs . . . feast[ing] their eyes upon her beauties,” the predatory sports feared by antebellum critics. Now they included ladies as well. Even more astonishing, ladies also visited Hoffman House to view *Nymphs and Satyr*. So many came that Edward Stokes reportedly had to institute a weekly visiting day to accommodate their intrusion into one of the quintessentially male-homosocial spaces of nineteenth-century American culture. Like the painting itself, we can view its display as a scene of disruptive female agency and (within the gilt-

framed world of elite culture) a small inversion of gender hierarchy.⁸

It is these ladies looking at nude female figures in a barroom who make this story interesting. If the reception of Bouguereau’s canvas was symptomatic of a new configuration of attitudes toward gender relations, sexual display, and public culture, this reconfiguration was in large part the work of genteel women who occupied public spaces and took part in public spectacles that would have been impermissible forty years earlier. Between the tour of Powers’s sculpture and the exhibition of Bouguereau’s painting, elite women and men, in New York and elsewhere, began to forge a new, class-stratified, mixed-sex public sphere. Within it, they replaced earlier ideals of gender segregation and erotic self-discipline with an ethos of heterosocial pleasure and sensuous display. My aim here is to chart these changes in gender norms, sexual demeanor, and public culture by examining the representations and activities of the figure who fostered and embodied them: the lady in public. I will focus especially on the setting in which she first appeared as a protagonist of bourgeois moral transformation in both Victorian cultural iconography and flesh and blood: the shopping and amusement center of Gilded Age New York known as “Ladies’ Mile,” the midtown district where Stokes offered *Nymphs and Satyr* to the scrutiny of ladies and sports.

As we shall see, bourgeois Americans were extremely conflicted about these changes, and their ambivalence made the lady in public a lightning rod of both anxiety and desire. In 1866, for instance, the *Atlantic Monthly* published an account of her promenading on Broadway:

The street attire of *ladies*—or those who aspire, with more or less justice, to that title—is a startling incongruity . . . ; for the . . . bonnet that leaves brow, cheek, and head fully exposed . . . —the heavy masses of unctuous false hair attached to the back of the head, deforming its shape and often giving a coarse monstrosity to its naturally graceful . . . proportions,—the inappropriate display of jewelry and . . . the expensive robes

⁸ For ladies coming to the Hoffman House to view *Nymphs and Satyr*, see Banner, *American Beauty*, p. 111; and Fannie Batchelder Ward, letter to “the American Collector,” January 13, 1943 (Clark Art Institute file). Kasson analyzes gender codes of art-spectatorship in *Marble Queens*, pp. 21–45. For the association of French aesthetic influence with more permissive gender and sexual norms in Victorian America, see David Scobey, “What Shall We Do with Our Walls? The Philadelphia Centennial and the Meaning of Household Design,” in Robert W. Rydell and Nancy Gwinn, eds., *Fair Representations: World’s Fairs and the Modern World* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994), pp. 87–120.

⁷ Oldcastle, “American Millionaire’s Gallery,” p. 154.

trailing on the dirty walk . . . ,—all unite to render the exhibition repulsive to taste.

The overcharged rhetoric here (“coarse monstrosity,” “deformed shape,” “repulsive to taste”) underscores how heavily the writer has freighted the lady’s body with worry over changes in female public demeanor. His concerns are strangely contradictory. On the one hand, the lady in public scandalizes him by her bodily exposure and self-exhibition. On the other, she is artificial and performative, supplementing her body with adornments. Her deforming deceit makes her morally illegible; the writer cannot tell the difference between “ladies” and “those who aspire, with more or less justice, to that title.”⁹

Such anxieties were not ill founded. As historians Lois Banner, Valerie Steele, and Karen Halttunen have argued, ladies did manifest a “new sensuality” after the 1850s, turning to performativity, opulence, and a kind of decorous eroticism in their modes of self-presentation. They began to wear hairpieces, extravagant dress, and that former badge of erotic disreputability, makeup. They rejected the ethereal ideal of antebellum fashion for a more voluptuous body image often associated with Bouguereau’s figures. They also helped to create a new heterosocial culture of amusement whose rituals of sociability and display reinforced these changes in taste and style. As the *Atlantic Monthly* makes clear, the “new sensuality” provoked widespread unease among many middle- and upper-class Americans, especially in New York, the epicenter of a nationwide moral panic in the early Gilded Age. Journalists and reformers decried not only the corruptions of Tammany and Wall Street but also the erosion of sexual and domestic virtue by the luxuries and diversions of Ladies’ Mile. Sketches of fashionable life were filled with tales of extramarital assignments in Broadway stores. A variety of reformers responded by trying to police public space and uplift public culture. The best known of these moral disciplinarians, vice crusader Anthony Comstock, founded the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice in 1873 after being scandalized by the circulation of pornography among his fellow clerks in a fashionable dry-goods establishment.¹⁰

⁹ [H. T. Tuckerman], “Through Broadway,” *Atlantic Monthly* 18 (December 1866): 718.

¹⁰ On the “new sensuality” in middle-class fashion and comportment, see Banner, *American Beauty*, pp. 3–27, 57–85, 108–27; Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York: Oxford University

This conjuncture—new bourgeois sensuality, new bourgeois anxiety—points to an account of nineteenth-century public culture, sexual discourse, and gender ideology somewhat different from that of much Americanist scholarship. The dominant view has been largely shaped by the insights of two historiographies. On the one hand, women’s historians, focused mainly on the era just before the Gilded Age, have elaborated a subtle analysis of the double-edged relationship between Victorian domestic ideology and women’s public self-activity. Such scholars as Kathryn Kish Sklar, Lori Ginzberg, and Paula Baker have shown how middle- and upper-class women both challenged and utilized the ideal of woman’s sphere to claim public agency in higher education, moral reform, and movement politics. For the most part, their work portrays this rich female political culture as *extending* domestic or maternalist ideals into public life; even the most insurgent female activists, it is argued, tended to equate respectable womanhood with the disciplining of erotic desire and physical display. On the other hand, scholars of modern sexuality such as Lew Erenberg, John Kasson, Kathy Peiss, and Christine Stansell have focused mainly on the era just *after* the Gilded Age, tracing the emergence of a public sphere of mass amusements, consumer pleasure, bohemian experimentation, and sexual self-expression. They contrast this phenomenon with a “Victorian” culture of formal, decorous, and homosocial norms, a “before” picture of rigidity and repression against which the cultural and sexual revolutions of twentieth-century mass culture and modernism can revolt. Both groups of scholars have produced wonderful work. It is not my aim to critique them, but they do not fully engage the period that lies be-

Press, 1985); and Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 153–63. For examples of the discourse of sexual anxiety, see such exposé and “slice-of-life” texts as Junius Henri Browne, *The Great Metropolis* (Hartford, Conn.: American Publishing Company, 1869), pp. 23–30; John H. Warren Jr., *Thirty Years Battle with Crime* (Poughkeepsie, N.Y.: A. J. White, 1874), pp. 13–15; Edward Crapsey, *The Nether Side of New York* (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1872), pp. 138–63; and esp. George Ellington, *The Women of New York; or, The Underworld of the Great City* (New York: New York Book Company, 1869). For material on Comstock and Gilded Age social-purity reform, see David Pivar, *Purity Crusade: Sexual Morality and Social Control, 1868–1900* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973); Paul S. Boyer, *Purity in Print: The Vice Society Movement and Book Censorship in America* (New York: Scribner, 1968); Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, pp. 181–96; and Nicola Kay Beisel, *Imperiled Innocents: Anthony Comstock and Family Reproduction in Victorian America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

tween them. When scholars *have* looked at gender and sexuality in the second half of the nineteenth century, most have stressed the contrast between public ideals and personal behavior, between an orthodoxy of separate spheres or passionate self-control and a sensual underworld or private, conjugal otherworld that ignored it.¹¹

Bouguereau's nymphs and their female spectators point to a different cultural conflict, however. It is one that has begun to be illuminated in work by Mary Ryan, Robert Allen, Susan Glenn, and others.¹² It is a conflict *within* the ranks of the respectable—within the world of the *Atlantic Monthly*—over the meaning of public and sexual respectability itself. That conflict appeared in full force in the class-bounded, heterosocial world of Ladies' Mile: a space that blurred ideals of gender segregation, feminine modesty, and moral self-discipline and invited (and incited) the participation of genteel women in settings and practices devoted to pleasure, appropriation, and spectacle. The lady in public elicited deep ambivalence among some observers not because they saw her violating established norms of respectability and publicity but because they saw those norms being contested and remade. In the process, ladies *did* claim new forms of public space and power, but not only in women's colleges, settlement houses,

and reform groups. Their experiments with a culture of amusement, publicity, and display were not politically trivial or embarrassing, although they seemed so to some nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminists. On the contrary, they offer us a glimpse at some important transformations in sexual norms, public culture, and women's politics in Victorian America. Let's begin with a closer look at Bouguereau's painting and then at the world of Ladies' Mile.

Bouguereau in America

William Bouguereau was the most fashionable of modern masters for wealthy New Yorkers. His oeuvre suggests why he may have been appealing to bourgeois urbanites whose images of virtue and bodily display were becoming increasingly conflicted. For the painter is himself fascinatingly ambiguous on these issues. On the one hand, from the late 1860s, he was celebrated for his (to us) cloying genre scenes of family intimacy, maternal love, and child's play, all of which sold well in the United States. On the other hand, he created some of the nineteenth-century's most memorable images of sensuous physicality, erotic captivity, and narcissistic longing. It was crucial to Bouguereau's success, and to his symptomatic role in American genteel culture, that this transgressive persona was contained within the thematic and formal hierarchies of academic painting. His most culturally orthodox work tended to be executed in the "lower" medium of the genre scene; his most perverse images were almost always rendered in the idealizing form of the mythological tableau. It is as if Bouguereau had to transgress and propitiate at the same time, paying for the right of moral experimentation with the coin of aesthetic orthodoxy. His erotic studies were pursued within, rather than against, bourgeois hierarchies of art and civilization.¹³

Americans seem to have embraced both strains in the painter's work. Critics praised him as an artist of the Ideal, the exponent of a high, ennobling Culture: "In all his works Bouguereau exhales an atmosphere of beauty and refinement," an 1890 essay enthused. "Association with the products of his brush can not fail to ele-

¹¹ For mid nineteenth-century women's public activity, see Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catherine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Lori Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality and Politics in the Northeastern United States, 1820–1885* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); and Paula Baker, *The Moral Frameworks of Public Life: Gender, Politics, and the State in Rural New York, 1870–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). For scholarship on gender, cultural experimentation, and mass amusements, see Lew Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890–1930* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981); John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in New York City, 1880 to 1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); and Christine Stansell, *Modern Americans: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000). For the differentiation of public norms and private behavior in Victorian sexuality, see Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*; Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience, Victoria to Freud: Education of the Senses*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); and Carl N. Degler, "What Ought to Be and What Was: Women's Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century," *American Historical Review* 79 (December 1974): 1479–90.

¹² Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825–1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*; and Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

¹³ For an overview of the artist, *Bouguereau, 1825–1905* is the most helpful source. The erotic and perverse strains in his work are discussed in Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), esp. pp. 123–24, 275–77.

vate the soul and make the mind more susceptible to the influence of the Beautiful." At the same time, the painter was celebrated as the great virtuoso of female physicality; he rendered women's flesh at once desirable and ethereal, making its eroticism beguiling because it was confined within a sanctioned realm of mythological fantasy. "There is nothing in art more seductively bewitching than Bouguereau's nymphs," a journalist wrote. Theodore Dreiser, as always an extraordinary amanuensis of American longing, captures both aspects of the artist's popularity in *The "Genius"*; his young hero is captivated by a Bouguereau nude who seems to embody both erotic and maternal desire. "Eugene had never seen such a figure and face. It was a dream of beauty—his ideal come to life. He studied the face and neck. . . . He marveled at the suggestion of the breasts and abdomen, that potentiality of motherhood that is so firing to the male. He could have stood there hours dreaming, luxuriating." Bouguereau, in short, elicited an extraordinarily contradictory response from Gilded Age Americans. In his "blend of erotic fantasy and arcadian perfection," as one art historian puts it, they found a Rorschach test for their own divided loyalties concerning sex, womanhood, and display.¹⁴

More specifically, *Nymphs and Satyr* made a stir because it both expressed and contained transgressive female sexual power. Its theme of dangerous eroticism would have been obvious to any Gilded Age viewer. "Nymph" and "satyr" gained currency as terms of sexual pathology during these same years. By the mid nineteenth century, *nymphe du pavé* was a common American term for streetwalker; the medical neologisms "nymphomania" and "satyriasis" began to appear in scientific publications in the 1870s and 1880s.¹⁵ Moreover, erotic excess and dominative exchange are clearly treated in the image itself, with its grouping of "light" women turning the tables on a dark, horny male. Bouguereau organizes the

painting along two visual axes that enact its inversion of sexual power. The first moves downward, from nymph to satyr to nymph, the axis of male decline; the other arcs up and to the right, ending in the uppermost nymph's bacchic gesture. The painter performs the provocative trick of making the middle nymph's leg seem to replace the satyr's and, at the same time, emerge as if from between his legs. This symbolic appropriation is repeated in another nymph's grasp of the satyr's horn. By contrast, all his other appendages point down: ears, nose, beard, chin, hooves. This is not merely an image of encirclement but one of a seizure of phallic power.

And yet such a reading is too literal and heavy-handed. For these nymphs are strikingly nonprimordial; they convey little of the sexual uncanniness that we see in other late nineteenth-century "idols of perversity." Indeed Bouguereau circumscribes their power in a number of ways. He goes out of his way to bathe them in illumination, even violating realistic requirements of light and shadow for the bottom right figure. He renders their exertions strangely *unexertive*; they show none of the distortions of will, longing, or cruelty in their muscles. Most important, their features and expressions do not convey sexual excess or appropriative power. Rather we see something complex and sexually disruptive in its own right, but quite different: an amalgam of innocence and coyness, unselfconsciousness and sophistication. These nymphs are more Isabel Archer than Isadora Duncan. They do not give themselves over to ecstatic adventure or ageless impulse; rather they *perform* ecstasy and impulse for us. Their performance is itself a mode of transgressive power. It is not genuinely horrific and deadly, but it is not quite safe either.

Put another way, Bouguereau endows his figures with the same mixture of exposure and artifice that characterized the *Atlantic Monthly's* sketch of the Broadway promenader. Like her, the nymphs seem a combination of "graceful proportions," "coarse monstrosity," and "inappropriate display." Some commentators faulted the painting precisely for this staginess and contradictory tone; *Nymphs and Satyr* seemed to such critics consummately insincere, its disingenuous classicism disguising a distinctively modern, worldly sensibility. "The trouble with the picture is that the people are ladies, not Maenads, or Bacchants," the influential American critic Earl Shinn wrote. "Their undressing is accidental and prurient. . . . Look at any of their faces, and you

¹⁴ Carroll Beckwith, "Bouguereau," *The Cosmopolitan* 8 (January 1890): 264; Johnson, "Famous Artists," p. 540; Theodore Dreiser, *The "Genius"* (London: Constable and Company, 1928), p. 53.

¹⁵ For medical usages, see G. Frank Lydston, "Sexual Perversion, Satyriasis, and Nymphomania," *Medical and Surgical Reporter* 61, no. 10 (1889): 253–58, 281–84; and Ronald Hamoway, "Medicine and the Crimination of Sin: Self-Abuse in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of Libertarian Studies* 1, no. 1 (1977), which records a usage of "nymphomania" and "satyriasis" from 1873. My thanks to Peter Laipson and Martin Pernick for directing me to these medical-historical sources.

feel that they need not insult your reason by pretending not to write modern French or read the fashion-newspaper."¹⁶

Shinn's reading is perceptive, but his indignation misses the point. It was precisely the fact that "the people are ladies"—modern, urbane, fashionable ladies—that made *Nymphs and Satyr* so resonant for Gilded Age viewers. Of course, given the complex gender distinctions of Victorian culture and the sexual narrative of the image itself, that resonance must have been quite different for bourgeois men and women. To male viewers, the appeal of the painting would seem straightforward. It offered them a whiff of pornographic fantasy. The very theatricality and worldliness of the canvas—in a barroom, framed in its velvet and mahogany—at once indulged and undid its scenario of male submission. This sort of masculine response is captured wonderfully in a doggerel sonnet by one Brian Penaleton, composed when the painting resurfaced in the art market in the 1940s: "And you, oh faun, the Naiads drag you still/Down to their pool with gleeful merriment," the poem concludes, "I pity you, as over you they gloat,/Yet in your place, who wouldn't be a goat?" For such viewers, *Nymphs and Satyr* must have functioned somewhat the way a *Playboy* cartoon does today, demarcating a masculine space in which propriety and perversity could be fused and defused. In fact, in 1994 *Playboy* featured a cartoon that parodied the painting toward just that point (fig. 4). Here the satyr turns back to a fellow sport as he is being dragged into the woods by buxom, horny nymphs, chuckling, "That's what I like about women. They're never satisfied."¹⁷

What did the scene in the Hoffman House bar mean to the ladies who entered the establishment? Given the paucity of direct evidence, it is impossible to be sure. Yet one reminiscence, written a half-century later in a letter to the painting's new owner, suggests the mix of propriety and urbanity, of female daring and male protection with which a "new woman" of the 1890s imagined herself viewing the painting. "Now that you are the proud possessor of 'Nymphs and Satyr' will you let me tell you something that may interest you," Fannie Batchelder Ward wrote to "the American Collector" from her Gramercy Park

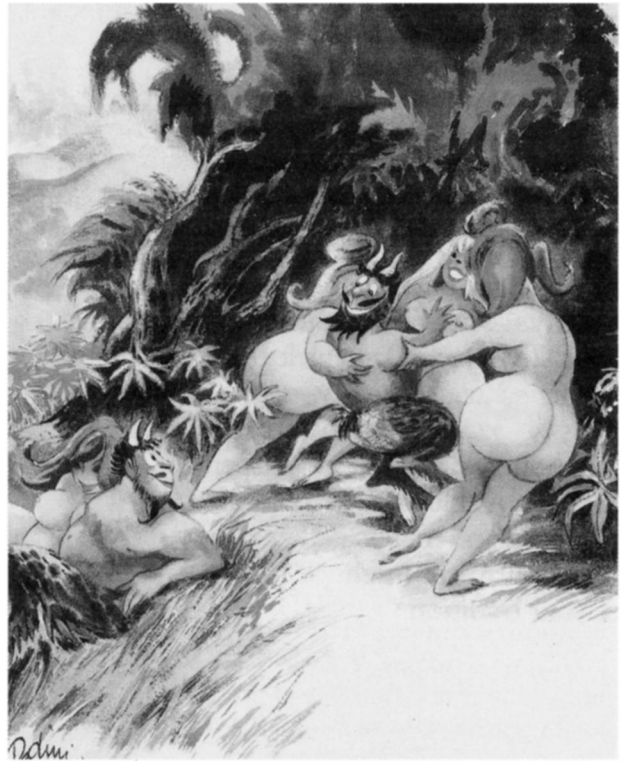


Fig. 4. Dedini cartoon. From *Playboy* (January 1994): 238.

hotel. "When I was a young actress playing the Ingenue in 'Reilly and the 400' in 1893 I was dining at the Hoffman House Sunday evening with a well known New York man. I said to him—'I would love to see the beautiful painting by Bouguereau in the Hoffman House Bar. Do you think it would be proper for you to take me there.' 'Perfectly proper for me to take you.'" Was Ward—clearly a worldly and up-to-date young woman of the 1890s—simply claiming the right to view Art wherever it appeared? Did she understand her impulse as transgressive, as a kind of sexual double-reverse? Is it her boldness or her tentativeness that matters most here? The place to begin answering these questions is the district within which Ward's encounter took place: the landscape of restaurants, theaters, actresses, and ingenues that surrounded the Hoffman House bar. For when women like Ward went into the bar to view *Nymphs and Satyr*, they drew on cultural changes taking place in that midtown world to enact a complex social drama of their own. They were seeking out avatars of themselves on Ladies' Mile.¹⁸

¹⁸ Ward to "the American Collector."

¹⁶ Earl Shinn, *Art Treasures of America* (Philadelphia: Barrie, 1879), quoted in Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, p. 276.

¹⁷ Brian Penaleton, "To Bouguereau's 'Nymphs and Satyr'" (typescript, Clark Art Institute file); *Playboy* (January 1994): 238.

Ladies' Mile

Ladies' Mile lay roughly between Fourth and Sixth avenues and ran along Broadway from about Ninth Street—where Stewart's dry-goods emporium anchored the district—through Union and Madison squares. A fashionable residential neighborhood before the Civil War, it was converted to elite shopping, amusements, and sociability in the quarter-century after. Of course there had been shopping and entertainment centers in antebellum Manhattan, but these were scattered throughout the lower city, part of a mixed landscape that served a heterogeneous public. Between 1850 and 1890 that dense, jumbled landscape exploded outward into a vast metropolitan area of functionally differentiated districts and socially stratified neighborhoods. Ladies' Mile was a key piece of the metropolitan mosaic: a midtown enclave accessible to suppliers' warehouses on the lower West Side and linked by transit to elite uptown residences and by telegraph to downtown wholesalers and financiers. It was New York's first extensive, centralized, specialized amusement and retail district catering to a genteel clientele.¹⁹

Here New Yorkers and visitors would find grand hotels like Stokes's Hoffman House; fashionable restaurants like Delmonico's, one block to the north; the city's leading theaters, such as Wallack's and Daly's on Thirteenth Street; and such sumptuous luxury shops and dry-goods palaces as Stewart's emporium, Tiffany's on Union Square, and Macy's on Sixth Avenue and Fourteenth Street. Here too, on Broadway and Fifth Avenue, were two of New York's most fashionable promenades, where "ladies" and "gentlemen" came to see and be seen on weekday afternoons and Sunday mornings. Along Sixth Avenue, behind the big hotels, were high-class brothels and gambling rooms, and further west was the extensive vice district known as the Tenderloin. Within and around Ladies' Mile, then, was spent much of the enormous surplus that accrued to New York from its newly won power over U.S. finance, trade, and information flow.

¹⁹ My discussion of Ladies' Mile is indebted to the painstaking and visually sumptuous reconstruction of the district's architecture and geography in Boyer, *Manhattan Manners*, pp. 43–129. In my *Empire City: The Making and Meaning of the New York City Landscape* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), I analyze the processes of urban development and geographic specialization that contributed to the emergence of the midtown district.

Equally important, the district's shops, show-rooms, theaters, eateries, and publishers made it the national center for an emerging public sphere of elite amusements, genteel fashion, luxury consumerism, and commercialized refinements. New York's leadership in matters of style, sociability, and leisure was neither complete nor uncontested; scholars have only begun to track the uneven process by which the city became the social and aesthetic headquarters of a unified American bourgeoisie. Yet it is clear that during the Gilded Age, Manhattan established itself throughout the country as the benchmark for respectable taste about what to wear, sit on, eat, and see.²⁰

By the late 1870s and 1880s—the era in which the name *Ladies' Mile* seems to have been coined—midtown Manhattan boasted a complex topography of leisure institutions and consumer bazaars and a well-established identity as “the very heart of the world of amusement, gayety, and fashion.” The district had become the definitive scene of New York's urbanity and metropolitan prestige, “the central point of the life and splendor of New York” as one guidebook put it. Such language points to the rapidity with which leisure and display were established as core values of Gilded Age public culture, at the expense of earlier norms of republican simplicity, virtuous self-mastery, hard work, and piety. Before the Civil War, middle-class magazines and guidebooks remarked very little on leisure and consumption in New York. They portrayed the city as a “great center of commercial enterprise” and a “busy hive of industry.” Thirty years later, such texts present us with “the Paris of America,” whose “inhabi-

²⁰ For the geography of Ladies' Mile, see Boyer, *Manhattan Manners*; Margaret Moore, *End of the Road for Ladies Mile?* (New York: Drive to Protect the Ladies' Mile District, 1986); James McCabe Jr., *New York by Sunlight and Gaslight* (Philadelphia: Hubbard Brothers, 1882), pp. 134–56, 165–77; *Illustrated New York* (New York: International Publishing Company, 1888); *New York Illustrated* (New York: D. Appleton, 1885); and Moses King, *New York: The American Cosmopolis* (Boston: M. King, 1893). For the theater district, see John W. Frick, *New York's First Theatrical Center: The Rialto at Union Square* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1985); and Mary Henderson, *The City and the Theater: New York Playhouses from Bowling Green to Times Square* (Clifton, N.J.: J. T. White, 1973). For the geography of the vice district west of Ladies' Mile, see Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, esp. pp. 197–210. For promenading and elite sociability, see David Scobey, “Anatomy of the Promenade: The Politics of Bourgeois Sociability in Nineteenth-Century New York,” *Social History* 17, no. 2 (May 1992): 203–28. For the role of the midtown culture industries in the consolidation of national canons of aesthetics and consumption, see Scobey, *Empire City*; and David Scobey, “Looking West from the Empire City: New York and the National Landscape” (unpublished manuscript).

tants are joyous, mercurial, and pleasure-loving.” Ladies’ Mile thus embodied a new sort of civic and national identity, ritualized in an urban scene where splendor and spectacle now connoted civility rather than corruption.²¹

The turn to splendor and spectacle was embedded in the landscape of Ladies’ Mile itself. The district’s roughly processional form—an axial boulevard connecting a series of squares—reinforced its role as a space of urbane, quasi-ceremonial display. “[Broadway] is a *show street*,” wrote Charles Astor Bristed, a patrician litterateur and scion of New York’s wealthiest family. “And such streets are of immense . . . advantage to a city. It can scarcely be a city without them.” The theatricality of the landscape was intensified by a growing monumentality and opulence in its architecture. Grand edifices like Tiffany’s Italianate palazzo (1869) or the Moorish Madison Square Garden (1889) made a spectacle of consumption and amusement, “glorif[ying] the gregarious extravagance of the people.” This monumentality was tempered by New York’s characteristic architectural eclecticism and the lack of uniform building controls such as those that regulated the reconstruction of Paris and Vienna. The result was a congeries of scales and styles that gave Ladies’ Mile a “brilliant and ragged look.”²²

The mix of extravagance and eclecticism made the district a fitting theater for the improvised choreography of strolling, amusement, and shopping, which were the constitutive activities of Ladies’ Mile. “It is a favorite promenade of the idler and pleasure-seeker,” reported sketch writers and guidebooks, “a place to lounge in, and shop in, and look at shop-windows in.” What distinguished the district was a certain kind of movement, at once uncoerced and unconstrained, organized around the display of goods and the self-display of people. “While the lower part of Broadway is filled . . . with urgent business,” wrote *Harper’s Monthly*, “the upper part is chosen for purchases and promenade by a much more brilliant throng.” The key component of that “throng” was bourgeois women. “Ladies” may

or may not have been numerically preponderant in Ladies’ Mile, but they were certainly its representative constituency, defining its function and ethos along with its name. “Broadway from Fourteenth Street to Madison Square is a brilliant spectacle,” one guidebook reported, “of America’s leading belles of fashion.”²³

The centrality of the lady meant that midtown Manhattan served as a scene of complex transformations in class, gender, and sexual norms. On the one hand, the respectable commingling of ladies and men required that Ladies’ Mile be secured as a class enclave; its leisure, consumption, and display practices depended on, and in turn reinforced, the regulation of class boundaries and the marginalization of social subordinates. This does not mean that everyone in midtown was propertied or fashionable. On the contrary, like every site of elite sociability in Victorian America (most of all, the genteel home), Ladies’ Mile required a multitude of working-class “others” to perform the labor of producing its bounty and refinements. It was filled with “respectable” service workers such as carriage drivers, shop girls, and clerks as well as some of New York’s most notorious casualized laborers: sewing girls, delivery boys, hawkers, and prostitutes. Their job was to create a bourgeois public sphere, a district of amusement and consumption that was marked as both open and exclusive as well as cosmopolitan and protected by the presence of ladies.

On the other hand, the exclusive character of midtown made it a space of experimentation and change in sexual and gender ideals. Ladies’ Mile permitted new forms of heterosociability between genteel women and men. It discouraged earlier traditions of masculine camaraderie grounded in commercial enterprise, republican politics, and antebellum popular culture. It invited bourgeois women to assume qualities such as untrammelled mobility, visual exposure, appropriative will (the qualities of Bouguereau’s nymphs), characteristics that were were at odds with earlier ideals of domestic seclusion and physical modesty (the ideals of *Greek Slave*). In place of the moral influence that was accorded women in antebellum domestic ideology, the culture of Ladies’ Mile offered them the power of performance. “Woman out of the house is always magnificent,” commented an essayist in *Harper’s Monthly*, most of all “when . . . she sallies out of a shopping expedition. On such

²¹ *Illustrated New York*, p. 65; *Miller’s New York as It Is* (New York: J. Miller, 1866), pp. 20, 21; King, *American Cosmopolis*, p. 20.

²² Charles Astor Bristed, *A Few Words of Warning to New Yorkers, on the Consequences of a Railroad in Fifth Avenue* (New York: W. C. Bryant, 1863), p. 12; [Tuckerman], “Through Broadway,” p. 718; [William Rideing], “Life on Broadway,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 56 (January 1875): 232. Scobey, *Empire City*, and Boyer, *Manhattan Manners*, stress the ideological importance of the turn to monumentalism in New York’s commercial architecture.

²³ *Illustrated New York*, p. 54; Bristed, *Words of Warning*, p. 11; [Rideing], “Life on Broadway,” p. 234. *Illustrated New York*, p. 56.

occasions, she surrounds herself with an atmosphere . . . through which she looms in proportions not altogether her own; a spirit of imperativeness and supremacy invests her, and the men among whom she mingles drop into a sort of nebulous inferiority."²⁴

Clearly this writer's tongue is well-lodged in his cheek, but the sketch registers an important truth. Ladies' Mile was a scene of new forms of pleasure and power for bourgeois women. It gave them entrée into a new social regime that replaced antebellum norms of gender segregation and cross-class solidarity with a new stress on class hierarchy, heterosocial experimentation, and legitimate public display. Within the territorial and stylistic boundaries of this enclave, ladies were able to recast the sexual and moral boundaries of their "sphere." They were able to enter elite saloons to look at erotic nudes. We can trace this transformation more closely by looking at two of the most important activities staged in Ladies' Mile: elite amusements (especially the "legitimate theater") and luxury consumption (especially women's fashions). Both underwent dramatic change between the 1840s and the 1880s, the period in which they were incorporated, along with Bouguereau, into the midtown district.

Ballet-Girls and Grecian Bends

Theater historians point to the third quarter of the nineteenth century as a threshold-era in the business and social history of the stage. Economically the antebellum system of local stock companies headed by actor/managers gave way to an oligopoly of professional agents and national touring troupes headquartered in New York's Union Square. At the same time, upscale theater owners sought to organize a mixed-sex, middle-class market for themselves by ridding the stage of its former associations with disreputability and vice. Theaters earlier had attracted rowdy, socially heterogeneous audiences that were stratified by class and status *within* the space of the house itself. Artisans and middling folk had dominated the "pit" in front of the stage; elite viewers occupied the boxes of the "dress circle"; laborers, street-children, and prostitutes occupied the "gallery" above. Prostitution had been a key element in the economics of show business. Brothels were clustered around theaters, and theater own-

ers would provide them with free tickets as a way of drawing male customers. Moreover, antebellum audiences tended to behave inimically to middle-class codes of decorum and self-control, responding noisily and often disruptively to both the performers and the play. Needless to say, the theater's association with cross-class manliness, sexual vice, and "rough" demeanor made it a space into which respectable women rarely ventured.²⁵

Beginning in the late 1840s, owners and managers tried to reshape the market base and cultural mores of the best houses. They began to exclude prostitutes, price the lower classes out, convert the plebeian "pit" into a middle-class "parquet," enforce decorous behavior on pain of ejection, and draw in a respectable family trade. They sought, in short, to draw a class boundary *around* the theater, to incorporate it into a genteel, heterosocial culture of amusements. (Similarly, elite restaurants began to open their doors to a mixed-sex clientele, as Delmonico's did in the mid 1860s.) Lawrence Levine, John Kasson, and other historians have shown that this sanitizing and disciplining of the stage was part of a larger process of class and cultural stratification in Gilded Age America. The "legitimate theater," as it came to be called, in part reflected the growing acceptance of amusements in liberal Protestantism and genteel reform. It also represented the efforts of a cultural gentry to establish its oversight of a heterogeneous public sphere through the instituting of "highbrow" standards of refinement.²⁶

²⁵ For the social and cultural order of the antebellum theater, see Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*; David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); and Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For a concise discussion of the economic reorganization of the theater in the early Gilded Age, see William R. Reardon and Eugene K. Bristow, "The American Theater, 1864-1870: An Economic Portrait," *Speech Monographs* 33, no. 4 (November 1966): 438-43. For the role of prostitution in the antebellum theater, see also Claudia Johnson, "That Guilty Third Tier: Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Theaters," in Daniel Howe, ed., *Victorian America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976), pp. 111-20; and Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, pp. 108-11.

²⁶ For the institutionalization of cultural hierarchy and social discipline in the theater, see, in addition to the sources cited in note 25, John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990); Peter Buckley, "To the Opera House" (Ph.D. diss., SUNY Stony Brook, 1984); and Bruce A. McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820-1870* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992). On the growing legitimacy of amusements

²⁴ [Rideing], "Life on Broadway," p. 235.

All the more remarkable, then, was the fact that the new theatrical fare on Ladies' Mile was relentlessly sensuous, spectacular, and transgressive. The hallmark of the elite stage after the Civil War was not cultural uplift but scenic and bodily display. The new style was inaugurated on July 12, 1866, when *The Black Crook* opened at Niblo's Garden, one of the leading theaters in Manhattan. A Gothic confection lifted from the *Tales of Hoffman*, the ballet-drama became an instant sensation in New York because of its unprecedented lavishness of scenery and exposure of the female body. "[The dancers], who wear no clothes to speak of, so gracefully and prettily disported as to draw forth thunders of applause," reported the *New York Times*. "No similar exhibition has been made in an American stage that we remember, certainly none where such a combination of youth, grace, beauty, and *elan* was found. . . . [It] is decidedly the event of this spectacular age."²⁷

Two years later the theatergoing public witnessed an even more transgressive sensation: the hit run of Lydia Thompson and the so-called British Blondes at Wood's Theater. As Robert Allen argues brilliantly in his study *Horrible Prettiness*, this English burlesque troupe matched the ballet-girls of *The Black Crook* in their undress and bravura dancing, but they added the performance of a wise-cracking, topical, semi-improvised, low farce that elicited both acclaim and unease from genteel critics. "[T]hough they were not like men, [they] were in most things as unlike women, and seemed creatures of a kind of alien sex, parodying both," William Dean Howells wrote in *Atlantic Monthly* during the Blondes' Boston run. "It was certainly a shocking thing to look at them with their horrible prettiness, their archness in which was no charm, their grace which put to shame."²⁸

The success of these shows recast the commer-

cial and sexual order of the New York theater. First of all, it institutionalized a new, upscale brand of "show business" organized around the phenomena of hits, stars, and spectacles. *The Black Crook* ran for nearly three years. It was the first long-run musical in Broadway history. The British Blondes toured to huge crowds throughout the country. Both shows inspired sequels, imitators, parodies, and a vogue for scenic extravagance and urbane commercialism on the legitimate stage. At the same time, the new theater fostered a turn to eroticism in both the content of performances and the actor-audience relationship. "Decency and virtue ha[ve] been crowded from the ranks by indecency and licentiousness," wrote journalist, former actress, and women's rights activist Olive Logan in a widely read critique. "A coarse rage for nudity ha[s] . . . come to be the ruling force in [our theaters]." Scantly dressed women had long graced the New York stage, of course, but only in variety and bawdy houses that had catered to a rough male crowd. What was new about the "leg business," as Logan called it, was the moral *laissez-passer* it received from the respectable public. The ballet-girls and burlesquers enjoyed not only commercial popularity but a remarkable degree of public acceptance. Wined and dined on Ladies' Mile and shown off on the carriage promenades of Central Park, they were perhaps the first presentable sexual celebrities in Victorian America. "[T]heir portraits, hung about town in public places, were surrounded by crowds of gaping men," Logan commented angrily. "[T]hey were exalted to the pinnacle of public favor . . . , as if they had been demi-goddesses."²⁹

The "public places" that Logan had in mind were the watering holes and clubrooms of sporting gents, places like the Hoffman House bar. She viewed the new theater as a concession to the regime of male voyeurism and female display ensconced there. And surely she was partly right. Ballet-girls and burlesquers could be seen as similar to the nymphs in Stokes's bar, representing a form of womanhood that was simultaneously high and low, sensually charged yet socially accepted—a womanhood, so to speak, with flesh-colored

among liberal Protestants, see Richard Wightman Fox, "The Discipline of Amusement," in William R. Taylor, ed., *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and Culture at the Crossroads of the World* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1991), pp. 83–98. On the introduction of a mixed-sex clientele in elite restaurants, see Erenberg, *Steppin' Out*, p. 11.

²⁷ *New York Times*, September, 13, 1866. See also W. L. Slout, "The Black Crook: First of the Super Nudies," *Players: The Magazine of American Theater* 50, nos. 1–2 (1974–75): 16–19; Julian Mates, "The Black Crook Myth," *Theater Survey* 7, no. 1 (May 1966): 31–43; and Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, pp. 108–17.

²⁸ William Dean Howells is quoted in Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, p. 25. For an elaborate account of the British Blondes' tour, see Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, pp. 1–21, 121–56; he analyzes Howells's ambivalent response to them on pp. 132–37.

²⁹ Olive Logan, *Apropos of Women and Theaters* (1869), p. 124; and Olive Logan, *Before the Footlights and behind the Scenes* (1870), pp. 583, 585. On the rise of "leg shows" in the 1860s and 1870s, see also Ellington, *Women of New York*, pp. 348–49, 355; and Faye E. Dudden, *Women in the American Theater: Actresses and Audiences, 1790–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 149–81.

tights. Yet, as we saw with Bouguereau's nymphs, it would be misleading to assume that such fantasies appealed only to bourgeois men. Victorian ladies turned out in droves to see the ballet-dramas and burlesque shows. On opening night of *The Black Crook*, fully half the house was female. Moreover, bourgeois women were beginning to dress and comport themselves according to norms of performativity and physical display that they learned partly from the stage. Especially after the Civil War, they shopped, dressed, and socialized in ways that played with the line between refinement and transgression. They used the stores and promenades of Ladies' Mile to reconfigure notions of publicity, sex, and respectable womanhood.³⁰

Like the legitimate stage, fashion and retailing underwent a process of centralization and stratification in the 1860s and 1870s, one that established midtown New York as the national capital of genteel consumer taste. A burgeoning middle-class market in furnishings, clothing, and luxury goods took its cues from Manhattan fashion magazines and shopping bazaars. Dry-goods palaces were especially central to the new consumer culture. By accelerating the fashion cycle, concentrating a vast array of commodities under one roof, and instituting policies of fixed prices, low margins, and rapid turnover, stores like Stewart's and Macy's sparked a business revolution that transformed the antebellum shop into a modern department store. Their commercial success encouraged an aesthetic culture that legitimized the adornment and display of both the genteel home and the female body. In part, as Susan Porter Benson and William Leach have shown, midtown entrepreneurs and editors accomplished this by identifying shopping with the ideals of Arnoldian "civilization." They included genteel fiction, poetry, and reform essays in their magazines and parlors and picture galleries in their stores.³¹

³⁰ Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, p. 114, cites attendance figures for men and women at *The Black Crook*; Banner, *American Beauty*, pp. 122–27, discusses the influence of Gilded Age actresses on women's fashions.

³¹ For the early history of American department stores, see Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Random House, 1973), pp. 101–9; Ralph Hower, *A History of Macy's of New York, 1858–1919: Chapters in the Evolution of the Department Store* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1943); and Henry Resseguie, "Alexander Turney Stewart and the Development of the Department Store, 1823–1876," *Business History Review* 40, no. 3 (Autumn 1962). For the legitimation strategies pursued by nineteenth-century retailers, see Neil Harris, "Museums, Merchandising, and Popular Taste: The Struggle for Influence," in Neil Harris, ed., *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cul-*

As in the theater, the turn to cultural hierarchy also brought more daring appeals to spectacle and sensual pleasure. The design of the retailing palaces on Ladies' Mile monumentalized consumption. Organized around grand vistas and processional spaces, appointed with chandeliers, mirrors, polished hardwoods, and plate glass, the stores invited shoppers into a fantasy space of aristocratic luxury, grandeur, and seductiveness. Sometimes the eroticism of the scene of consumption was explicit: "Many married women in New York form very indiscreet acquaintances with clerks," noted one journalist. "So well is this fact known that some shopkeepers make it a rule to employ the finest-looking young men they can. . . . This is one of the reasons why shopping becomes such a passion with the women." As such comments make clear, the sales clerk was a figure of erotic anxiety precisely complementary to the ballet-girl. Yet, even where retailing strategies were less blatant, the effect of display aesthetics in Ladies' Mile was to animate goods and arrest the attention of people before them. Twenty years before *Sister Carrie* celebrated the beckoning power of department-store goods, guidebooks and magazines were filled with intoxicated accounts of "the infinite variety of indescribabilities" in midtown stores, which "cannot but rivet the gaze." In one common tableau, a (male) narrator/flaneur looks at a (female) shopper viewing a shop display, a metadrama of commodified sexuality and voyeurism. "[H]andsome women standing at every shop-window," one guidebook said, "[are] even more fascinating than the glowing colors shining behind the plate-glass."³²

Genteel consumerism thus tended to commodify genteel women as well, making them, as

tural Tastes in Modern America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 56–81; Susan Porter Benson, "Palace of Consumption and Machine for Selling: The American Department Store, 1890–1940," *Radical History Review* 21 (Fall 1979): 199–221; William Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890–1925," *Journal of American History* 71, no. 3 (September 1984): 319–42; and Rosalind Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

³² Ellington, *Women of New York*, pp. 343–44; *New York Illustrated*, p. 17; *Lockwood's Illustrated Guide* (New York: Howard Lockwood, 1872), quoted in Boyer, *Manhattan Manners*, p. 105. William Leach notes that A. T. Stewart was especially well known for hiring attractive male clerks; see William Leach, *True Love and Perfect Union: The Feminist Reform of Sex and Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), p. 234. For a reading of the tableau of consumer voyeurism and commodity fetishism in late nineteenth-century fiction, see Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981); and Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing, and Zola* (New York: Methuen, 1985).

one journalist wrote, “walking frames for the display of dry-goods.” Shifts in fashion reinforced this turn to bodily spectacle. During the 1860s and 1870s, dress styles grew more extravagant and specialized, requiring an elaborate wardrobe and expensive accessories such as bonnets, parasols, and fringing materials. Standards of beauty and female demeanor changed too. As Lois Banner has argued, the antebellum ideal of the angelic woman, ethereal and miniaturized, was supplanted by a heavier, more voluptuous body ideal (inspired partly by the British Blondes). At the same time, the ethos of sincerity and self-disclosure that had anchored female respectability and middle-class sociability before 1850 gave way to what Karen Halttunen calls “a new acceptance of the theatricality of social relationships.” Ladies began accentuating their thighs, arms, and bust with corsets, bustles, and padding. They also began to wear false hair and cosmetics. As on the stage, fashion artifice lost its earlier association with prostitution. These trends reached perhaps their most extreme form in the late 1860s with the introduction of the “Grecian Bend,” an outfit that incorporated high-heeled shoes, a clinging line, a tight corset, and a large bustle to reduce the waist, uplift the breasts, and thrust the buttocks back. “The wells on the bust and hips . . . show that the style was not hit upon by accident,” dress reformer Mary Tillotson angrily wrote, “but was planned by beings sufficiently depraved to gloat on the spectacle.”³³

In short, Ladies’ Mile served as the staging area and dressing room for a series of experiments in female deportment and display. These took place across a variety of cultural institutions and practices—the stage, the press, fashion, shopping, and rituals of sociability—but they were connected in complex circuits of influence, imitation, commentary, and spectatorship. Together they helped to organize a new kind of bourgeois public sphere in Victorian America, one that permitted forms of heterosocial pleasure and sensual spectacle that had once been out-of-bounds to respectable Americans, especially respectable

women. However, the effect of such experiments was circumscribed spatially by the terrain of Ladies’ Mile and socially by the class hierarchies it reinforced. And it must be stressed that they still embodied an ideology of women’s distinctive mission: no longer, perhaps, to uplift American society through virtuous self-restraint but rather to refine it through “civilizing” practices of leisure, consumption, and display.

It would be wrong, however, to minimize the changes that took place in Ladies’ Mile. Victorian reformers and moral conservatives did not. They responded with widespread calls for social, sexual, and aesthetic discipline. We have already glimpsed several instances of this cultural counterreaction: Olive Logan’s attack on the “leg shows” in the Gilded Age theater; the critique of fashion by dress reformers such as Mary Tillotson; and the unease toward the female promenader and the burlesque star expressed in the Bible of gentility, the *Atlantic Monthly*. Beginning in the 1870s—years of national economic crisis and political scandal—such views spurred many middle- and upper-class Americans, both women and men, to participate in a broad array of campaigns for sexual restraint, moral regulation, and the reinforcement of gender difference. The best known were the mass, female-led agitations for temperance and social purity; however, these movements converged with many smaller-scale efforts to police the energies and desires activated by Ladies’ Mile. Strict new codes of chaperonage and home-visiting, for instance, placed female sociability more securely in the parlor. Cosmetics regained their association with vice and remained illicit until early in the twentieth century. Luxury consumption underwent tutelary reform as well. A cadre of genteel tastemakers undertook in the 1880s to purge bourgeois home furnishings of their “French” artificiality and eroticism. A proper home “bears the same relation to the loose and wanton [Louis] Quatorze and Quinze regimes,” argued Harriet Prescott Spofford in one prescriptive manual, “that virtue bears to vice.”³⁴

³³ Ellington, *Women of New York*, p. 29; Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, p. 157. For the shift from an ethereal to a voluptuous female body ideal, see Banner, *American Beauty*, pp. 106–27. For the growing use of adornments and bodily artifice among fashionable women, see also Stella Blum, ed., *Victorian Fashions and Costumes from Harper’s Bazar, 1867–1898* (New York: Dover Publications, 1974). For the Grecian Bend, see Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, pp. 137–56; Mary E. Tillotson, *Progress Versus Fashion: An Essay on the Sanitary and Social Influence on Women’s Dress* (Vine-land, N.J.; n.p., 1873), p. 2.

³⁴ For overviews of temperance and social-purity reform, see Barbara Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1981); Ruth Bordin, *Woman and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873–1900* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981); Pivar, *Purity Crusade*; and John D’Emilio and Estelle E. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), pp. 139–67. For evidence of the new conservatism in social customs, see Banner, *American Beauty*, pp. 132–33; and Kenneth L. Ames,

Such calls for social, moral, and aesthetic discipline were by no means all of a piece. They had diverse, often conflicting, sources of support: women's rights activists, Midwestern evangelicals, metropolitan aesthetes. Yet they shared a structure of feeling that is familiarly "Victorian" to us: an impulse to moral regulation, physical or sexual restraint, and the curtailment of desire. Perhaps it is not surprising that the exemplary figure of this disciplinary impulse was also the reformer most preoccupied with policing the pleasures of midtown New York: Anthony Comstock. As noted, Comstock founded the Society for the Suppression of Vice out of disgust with the licentious reading habits of his fellow clerks in a Manhattan dry-goods store. As Assistant Postmaster General, charged with banning obscene materials from the U.S. mails, he concentrated his crusade on New York's vice, amusement, and publishing centers. Although he did raid and prosecute brothels, Comstock's *bête noire* was more often *discursive* than physical acts. He sought to arrest the flow of indecent representations through the public sphere, going after publishers of erotica, purveyors of nude photographs, performers in pornographic theater, advertisers of abortifacients, and distributors of birth control material. Comstock targeted the more "legitimate" aesthetics and amusements of Ladies' Mile too. In 1887, for example, he arrested Roland Knoedler, Fifth Avenue's most fashionable art dealer, for selling photoreproductions of nude artworks by such French artists as Cabanal, Lefebvre, and, of course, Bouguereau. At other times, he tried to close down gymnastic exhibitions in Madison Square Garden, the annual show of the Art Students League, and the Broadway production of George Bernard Shaw's comedy of sexual manners, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*.³⁵

"Meaning Artifacts: Hall Furnishings in Victorian America," in Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach, eds., *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), pp. 240–60. For overviews of dress reform, see Leach, *True Love and Perfect Union*, pp. 213–60; Banner, *American Beauty*, pp. 86–105; and Gayle V. Fischer, *Pantaloon and Power: Nineteenth-Century Dress Reform in the United States* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2001). For the efforts of the Victorian "aesthetic movement" to reform American domestic furnishings, see Scobey, "What Shall We Do with Our Walls?" and Harriet Prescott Spofford, *Art Decoration Applied to Furniture* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1877), p. 153.

³⁵ Comstock's career, ideological values, and cultural and political effect remain remarkably understudied. I have found most helpful Boyer, *Purity in Print*; Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, pp. 181–96; Nicola Beisel, "Morals Versus Art: Censorship, the Politics of Interpretation, and the Victorian Nude," *American Sociological Review* 58 (April 1993): 145–62 (which insightfully analyzes Knoedler's

It was these forays against the new public culture of urbane art and amusements that finally cost Comstock his following in the early twentieth century. To the middle-class cosmopolitans and iconoclasts who came of age during those years, "Comstockery"—the derisive term was coined by Shaw—connoted the massive rigidity and repression that was thought to typify bourgeois culture as a whole in Gilded Age America. Writers such as Heywood Broun and John Dos Passos enshrined the vice crusader as the icon of a "puritanism" against which they were proud to rebel. Moreover, this metanarrative of a modern revolt against Victorianism has continued to influence contemporary research on nineteenth-century culture. Even recent scholarship often echoes the assumption that Victorian public culture was inert, repressive, and confining. As one of the most capable historians of nineteenth-century sexuality writes, "More than any other single individual, Anthony Comstock came to define sexual respectability in postbellum America."³⁶

The story that I have been sketching here is meant to complicate that modern(ist) account of "the Victorian." It portrays Comstockery as a powerful but contested moment within Victorian culture, not as its essence. Comstock and his compatriots were important, I would argue, not because they held undisputed sway over the moral imagination of genteel America but because they registered its divided loyalties. The very vehemence of cultural conservatism was symptomatic of a great moral struggle between the claims of desire and discipline. It was a struggle that preoccupied and, to a great extent, defined bourgeois Americans as they lived through the legitimization crisis of the Gilded Age.

The history of the Victorian culture wars remains to be written. We do not know, for instance, if there were predictable determinants—class, occupational, regional, religious, ethnic—of who frequented the Hoffman House bar or supported the Society for the Suppression of Vice. We do not even know if these were different sorts of people. We have not yet discovered to

arrest and subsequent exoneration); and Alyssa Picard, "Policing Urban Space: Anthony Comstock in Turn-of-the-Century New York" (unpublished manuscript in the author's possession).

³⁶ Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, p. 161. So far as I know, we do not yet have a comprehensive intellectual history of "Victorian" as a historical category, including its derogation by modernist intellectuals. For the role of Comstock in the modernist metanarrative, Heywood Broun and Margaret Leech's polemical biography, *Anthony Comstock, Roundsman of the Lord* (New York: A. and C. Boni, 1927), would be the best place to begin.

what extent and at what pace metropolitan centers like New York penetrated and influenced the national hinterland with their cultural experiments. Yet I do think that the turn to sensuality and spectacle in midtown Manhattan amounted to more than a cultural blip, caused (for instance) by the dislocations of civil war. What then is the larger significance of this story? What difference did barroom nudes, ballet-girls, and Grecian Bends make? Let me end by sketching some possible answers.

The Politics of the Sixth-Avenue Horsecar

The history of Ladies' Mile gives us a glimpse of several linked transformations in the lives and values of bourgeois women and men during the last third of the nineteenth century. I want to underscore four changes in particular: in the social and moral codes governing urban public culture; in elite sexual norms; in dominant conceptions of respectability and transgression; and in the changing scope of women's public agency. For each of these themes, Ladies' Mile carries new and sometimes unexpected implications. Taken together, they suggest a novel account of Victorian America.

Most obviously, Ladies' Mile tells a story about the transformation of public culture. Organized around new practices of elite sociability, commercial amusement, and opulent consumerism, midtown New York embodied a social and moral regime quite different from that of antebellum urban culture. Instead of the strict gender segregation and masculine social mixing that typified politics and public amusements before the Civil War, here was a world that privileged class distinction, heterosociability, and the public circulation of respectable women. The result was not—or not simply—the decorous realm of cultural hierarchy that scholars have recently depicted as the hallmark of the Gilded Age bourgeoisie.³⁷ Rather, Ladies' Mile melded refinement and decorum with pleasure and self-display. For women in particu-

lar, it made sensuality and spectacle into currencies of appropriate demeanor.

These changes suggest a more nuanced portrait of Victorian social life as well as a different analysis of the commercial and consumer culture that followed it. Historians of cabarets, amusement parks, and the movies have argued persuasively that such institutions catalyzed a moral revolution in early twentieth-century cities.³⁸ They tend to contrast this brave new world of commodified fantasy, consumer self-fashioning, and sexual sophistication with a less compelling picture of Victorian moralism and constraint. The energies and desires of mass culture, it is often argued, were drawn upwards primarily from working-class, immigrant, and African American communities. The story of midtown New York suggests a more complex genealogy. I do not mean that Ladies' Mile was a kind of Coney Island in dry dock. It embodied a class culture of limited experimentation and not a mass culture of popular everyday experience. Nonetheless, I suspect that the freedoms of the modern city trickled *down* from Victorian theaters and dry-goods bazaars in addition to bubbling up from turn-of-the-century dance halls and nickelodeons.

The emergence of this new public sphere was bound up with a second theme: changing bourgeois sexual norms. The story of Ladies' Mile forms part of the larger reevaluation of Victorian sexuality that historians such as Carl Degler, Peter Gay, Timothy Gilfoyle, Karen Lystra, and Michel Foucault have initiated. These scholars have significant differences among themselves, but their work is grounded in a shared critique of what Foucault called the repressive hypothesis: the notion that modern middle-class identity was constituted through the suppression of erotic desire, and more generally that such desire is to be conceived as instinctual, extrahistorical, socially exogenous, and hence socially disruptive. In contrast, they analyze sexuality as a historically constructed, changeable phenomenon, and they portray nineteenth-century culture in particular as surprisingly "sex-positive." Much of the new research situates Victorian sexuality within a topography of "public" and "private" norms, contrasting an official code of purity and self-control with less visible spaces of illicit or conjugal plea-

³⁷ For scholarship stressing the role of cultural hierarchy in nineteenth-century class formation and public culture, see Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow*; Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); and Paul DiMaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America," in Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson, eds., *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 374–97.

³⁸ See, for instance, Erenberg, *Steppin' Out*; Kasson, *Amusing the Million*; Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*; and Lauren Rabinovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies, and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

sure. Foucault goes further, challenging the very salience of the official code itself. Far from diminishing sexuality, he argues, nineteenth-century medical, moral, psychological, and aesthetic discourses obsessively *produced* it across both the “public” and “private” domains of social life, installing eros as the inmost, “natural” essence of the modern subject.³⁹

Ladies’ Mile clearly belongs in this revisionist paradigm. Yet its implications for the history of sexuality differ from those of courtship or masturbation. Midtown New York was not a “private” realm of bourgeois eros. It does not tell much about the bedroom practices or “real” sexual attitudes of Victorian women and men, nor, despite the vice districts that surrounded it, was it organized for the pursuit of subterranean, disreputable pleasures. Rather, it embodied a contrary phenomenon: the rise of an ethos of public sensuality and respectable erotic display.⁴⁰ Moreover, although its spectacles and pleasures *did* have the effect of sexualizing bourgeois identity, Ladies’ Mile does not, in my view, tell a Foucauldian story of subjection and normalization—a tale that we might entitle “Discipline and Purchase.” Its culture did not tend to fix eros as natural and inward but rather to project it as something artificial and performative. In fact, it identified sexuality precisely as a desire *for* social performance. The result seems to have been a relatively open site of gender experimentation and cultural conflict.

It was this linkage of sexual publicity, female autonomy, and class privilege that made the lady of fashion, parading herself on Broadway, so problematic to moral conservatives. They viewed her as perilously close to the antitype of public womanhood, the prostitute. The changing imagery of prostitution mirrored this anxiety concerning bourgeois female display. Before the Civil

War, reformers tended to portray prostitutes in the figure of the poor country girl, seduced or pauperized into a life of dishonor. It was her visible distance from respectability that made her symbolically charged. By the 1860s, the ur-figure of reform and exposé writing had become the courtesan, the elite prostitute whose charms and wealth made her a simulacrum of the lady in public. The fashionable lady was in turn shockingly similar to the *nymphé du pavé*. “[T]here was a time,” one expose writer lamented, “when dressing to display every personal charm was peculiar to an unfortunate class of beings, regarded as lost to all the modesty and dignity of the sex; but . . . this distinction between the lost and the reputable no longer exists in our great cities, where leaders of fashion . . . prepare their lovely bodies to be gazed at . . . in all their proportions.”⁴¹

Such concern over female self-exhibition partly reflected the actual growth and visibility of the New York vice economy. As Timothy Gilfoyle shows, the 1860s and 1870s were “halcyon years” for the city’s sex trades.⁴² Yet it also marked a crisis of moral legibility *within* the respectable public. The fashionable frequenter of Ladies’ Mile was not necessarily a “fallen woman,” of course, but her physical adornment and frank theatricality eroded the semiotic of virtue and vice; she threw the meaning of respectability up for grabs. Antebellum culture had defined respectability in terms of virtue, self-mastery, and the subjection of desire. The world of burlesque and Bouguereau recast it in terms of pleasure, self-display, and the staging of desire. Ladies’ Mile blurred the line between propriety and transgression, encouraging a mixture of sensuality, publicity, and refinement that seemed simultaneously (or indistinguishably) polite and scandalous.

The growth of scandal represents one of the most telling symptoms of this renegotiation of respectability. The Gilded Age was a golden age of scandal, notorious for its political and financial “barbecues” and for a rash of sexual transgressions. Sensational incidents like the 1836 murder of prostitute Helen Jewett had long circulated from the urban demimonde, of course. Yet it was in the 1860s and 1870s that *elite* sex scandal—the

³⁹ These scholars define the public/private dichotomy of Victorian sexuality in quite different ways. Degler, “What Ought to Be and What Was,” emphasizes the divergence between moral ideals and actual behavior. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, portrays an urban sporting world of prostitution and vice that served as a rival subculture to the mainstream orthodoxy of self-control and passionlessness. Lystra, *Searching the Heart*, and Gay, *Bourgeois Experience*, stress the acceptability of sexual pleasure and passion within the conjugal privacy of middle-class marriage. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1 (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

⁴⁰ Banner’s account of the category of “sensuality” helpfully lays out the distinction I am trying to make: “I am not concerned in this work with the subject of private sexuality. . . . Rather my focus is on what I call ‘sensuality,’ or the public expression of sexuality through behavior that could be called erotic” (Banner, *American Beauty*, p. 15).

⁴¹ Chambers’ *Miscellany of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*, quoted in Banner, *American Beauty*, p. 76. For discussions of the indistinguishability between “courtesans” and “ladies,” see Ellington, *Women of New York*, pp. 232–34; Warren, *Thirty Years*, pp. 20, 50; Matthew Hale Smith, *Sunshine and Shadow in New York* (Hartford: J. B. Burr, 1868), p. 375.

⁴² Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, p. 117.

exposure of erotic wrongdoing at the heart of respectable society—became a recurrent, generic category of public discourse. The Beecher-Tilton adultery case was the best-known example of the phenomenon, but others included the 1878 arrest and suicide of Fifth Avenue abortionist Ann Lohman (known as Madame Restell); the exposé of Byron's incestuous relationship with his sister (published in 1869 in defense of the poet's widow); and the killing that same year of journalist Albert Deane Richardson, who was shot by his lover's former husband in the counting room of the *New York Tribune*.⁴³

The growing importance of sexual scandal to Victorian public culture was clearly bound up with the shifts in sociability and sensibility that I have been sketching. Institutionally it required an apparatus of publicity that the midtown culture industry brought into being. Morally it depended on the ethos of sexual spectacle that Ladies' Mile introduced to the consuming public. This may be why so many of the era's sexual protagonists were themselves key figures in the new bourgeois public sphere. Henry Ward Beecher was the preeminent public orator of the age—tourists flocked to his Brooklyn church on Sundays—and a best-selling romance writer. Theodore Tilton edited the country's leading religious journal. Richardson was a celebrated Civil War correspondent and Western travel journalist. His lover Abby Sage McFarland pursued a successful career as an actress, anthologist, and magazine writer. To genteel critics, these linkages between commercial culture and sexual disorder came as no surprise. Drawing on traditional republican and evangelical suspicions of luxury and leisure—and foreshadowing at the same time modernist attacks on

mass culture—they attributed the epidemic of sex scandals to the seductions of fashion and consumerism. Journalist Edward Crapsey attributed the wealth of abortionists such as Madame Restell to ladies "too intent upon the frivolities of social life" to permit "any interruption of their giddy pleasures." E. L. Godkin scorned the Beecher-Tilton principals as the products of a "chromo-civilization" whose sham refinements undermined the "ideals of labor and self-denial." The result was "a sort of mental and moral chaos," he warned, "in which many of the fundamental rules of living . . . seem in imminent risk of disappearing totally."⁴⁴

To twentieth-century readers, such jeremiads on the perils of promenading and chromolithography may seem quaint. For one thing, our own tabloid culture, not to mention Foucauldian social theory, has tended to show the socially regulative effects of a culture of sexual celebrity. Scandals may have been deeply disturbing affairs to genteel observers, but they were also deeply cautionary. They made a spectacle of both the pleasures and dangers of desire, containing the fantasy of transgression within a drama of surveillance and shame. And yet in another sense, the critics of Ladies' Mile were right. The sexualization of public culture *did* have the power to unsettle and even undo what Godkin called "the fundamental rules of living"—most of all, rules governing life between the sexes. It is striking, for instance, how often women's rights activists and issues figured centrally in the sex controversies of the era. Beecher's alleged adultery was exposed by suffragist and sex radical Victoria Woodhull, who sought to use the affair as a brief for free love. Abby McFarland's decision to quit her alcoholic, abusive husband was aided by a circle of feminist friends—especially well-known journalist Lucia Gilbert Calhoun. Her ex-husband's trial served as a rallying point for efforts to reform divorce and marital property laws. For bourgeois women, in short, transgressive dramas of sexual publicity could provide the occasion for transformative acts of sexual politics.⁴⁵

⁴³ Historians have only begun to explore the role of scandal in nineteenth-century America, but there are good monographic treatments of particular episodes. For the murder of Jewett, see Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, pp. 92–99; and Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998). For the Beecher-Tilton affair, see Altina L. Waller, *Reverend Beecher and Mrs. Tilton: Sex and Class in Victorian America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982); and Richard Wightman Fox, *Trials of Intimacy: Love and Loss in the Beecher-Tilton Scandal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). For the career, arrest, and suicide of Madame Restell, see Eric Homburger, *Scenes from the Life of a City: Corruption and Conscience in Old New York* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 86–140. For the controversy over Harriet Beecher Stowe's exposé of Byron's incest, see Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), pp. 244–56. For the Richardson murder and the trial and acquittal of Daniel McFarland, see George Cooper, *Lost Love: A True Story of Passion, Murder, and Justice in Old New York* (New York: Pantheon, 1994).

⁴⁴ Crapsey, *Nether Side*, p. 147; E. L. Godkin, "Chromo-civilization," in E. L. Godkin, ed., *Reflections and Comments, 1865–1895* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1895), pp. 202, 204. Godkin's essay was originally published in the *Nation*—which he edited—on September 24, 1874. The "chromo" in the title refers to chromolithographs, which Godkin treated as the emblematic commodity of a vapid, middle-class consumer economy.

⁴⁵ For Woodhull's role in the Beecher-Tilton affair, see Waller, *Reverend Beecher and Mrs. Tilton*, pp. 1–4, 132–38. See also Woodhull's address about the affair to a gathering at Cooper In-

This discussion seems to me the last and perhaps most important implication of the story of Ladies' Mile; it pushes us to reimagine the sources of political activism for Victorian women. The enlargement of female public agency is, of course, a central theme of nineteenth-century women's history. For the most part, scholars have told that story through the study of movement politics (especially the temperance and suffrage movements), women's education, and female-led civic reform efforts such as charity organization societies and settlement houses. For the most part as well, they have told it in ways that contrast women's activism to the world of bourgeois amusements, consumption, and sensual display depicted here. Ellen DuBois and Linda Gordon, for instance, stress the sexual conservatism of nineteenth-century feminists in their pathbreaking article "Seeking Ecstasy on the Battlefield." William Leach similarly foregrounds the efforts of women's rights activists to discipline female dress and public demeanor; as he pithily puts it, "Fashion was a powerful adversary to feminism."⁴⁶

This sense of a conflict between "feminism" and "fashion," between a public sphere of women's self-activity and one of bourgeois amusement and consumption, is surely accurate. As we have seen, much of the Victorian criticism of luxury, leisure, and display came from female activists such as Mary Tillotson and Olive Logan. "If you make dolls of women, and shut them up in palaces without . . . [an] interest in the great outer world of struggle and suffering," argued *Revolution*,

stitute, New York, January 9, 1873, reprinted as "The Naked Truth; or, The Situation Reviewed!" in *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*, January 25, 1873. For the role of Calhoun in McFarland's divorce, see Cooper, *Lost Love*, pp. 79–89, 102–9; for a discussion of the Richardson-McFarland affair among women's rights advocates, see Elizabeth Cady Stanton's lecture at Apollo Hall, May 17, 1870, "'Woman's Right' to Divorce," *New York Times*, May 18, 1870.

⁴⁶ For the historiography of women's public activism in nineteenth-century America, see Sklar, *Catherine Beecher*; Sklar, *Florence Kelley*; Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence*; Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848–1869* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978); Nancy Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822–1872* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982); and Baker, *Moral Framework*. For emphasis on sexual conservatism and public self-discipline among Victorian women's rights activists, see Ellen Carol DuBois and Linda Gordon, "Seeking Ecstasy on the Battlefield: Danger and Pleasure in Nineteenth-Century Feminist Sexual Thought," in Carol S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 31–49; Leach, *True Love and Perfect Union*, p. 213). Ryan, *Women in Public*, represents a notable exception to this analysis although her study devotes more attention to the "public" of movement politics than to the "public" of public sociability and display.

tion, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony's Brooklyn-based weekly, "all the intensity of their feelings will be expended in fashion and frivolity, in gay dress and gorgeous furniture." In an 1892 talk, Jane Addams echoed these views, tracing her political activism to a rejection of the claustrophobic life of aimless cultivation for which young ladies of her class were prepared. Describing a scene that may well have taken place in Ladies' Mile, Addams movingly conveyed the class distance and, for women, the felt distance from meaningful labor, that the world of urbane consumerism represented to her:

You may remember the forlorn feeling which occasionally seizes you when you arrive early in the morning a stranger in a great city: the stream of laboring people goes past you as you gaze through the plate-glass window of your hotel; you see hard workmen lifting great burdens; you hear the driving and jostling of huge carts and your heart sinks with a sudden sense of futility. The door opens behind and you turn to the man who brings you in your breakfast with a quick sense of human fellowship. You find yourself praying that you may never lose your hold on it all. . . . [C]ivilization has placed you apart.

For both Addams and the editors of *Revolution*, claiming a public life meant refusing the fashionable life. The resulting commitments could be quite different: to the settlement reformer, an ameliorative project of "social motherhood"; to the suffragists, a radical republican project of equal rights. Yet they both grounded the ideal of female self-activity in a politics of virtue—a mastering of desire—that they viewed as antithetical to the performances and solicitations of Ladies' Mile.⁴⁷

I would argue, however, that Ladies' Mile was not so simply at odds with women's activism. Certainly women activists did not always think so. When B. Altman and Company opened its new store in 1870, *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly* described the emporium in words that might have been lifted from a puff piece: "In such an establishment, the idea of an Eastern Bazaar is completely carried out. A lady enters and finds herself in the midst of a lavish display of everything that could be thought of in the way of fancy goods." One month later, New Yorkers were offered a shocking lesson in just how enticing such displays

⁴⁷ *Revolution*, April 9, 1868; Jane Addams, "The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements" (1892), reprinted as Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (New York: New American Library, 1981), pp. 92–93.

could be: Elizabeth B. Phelps, a wealthy benefactor of women's causes and vice-president of the National Women's Suffrage Association, was arrested for shoplifting at Macy's. Renowned lecturer Anna Dickinson represented a less extreme case of the bonds between fashion and feminism. Dickinson was a gifted orator, much admired for her brilliance and forcefulness. Her addresses on abolitionism, temperance, and women's reform established her as a star of the American lyceum circuit during the 1860s. She was also a devotee of dress and display, appearing at the lectern in Tiffany gems and bright silks. Her charisma and dramatic sensuality elicited a passionate, even erotic, response from friends and audiences. They also grounded her own self-conception as a public figure. In the mid-1870s, Dickinson abandoned lecturing for a career on the Broadway stage.⁴⁸

Other female activists negotiated the links between Ladies' Mile and women's politics in the opposite direction, using their foothold in the commercial culture of midtown New York as a base for public action. Lucia Gilbert began her career at the *Tribune* covering society balls and then went on to investigate New York slaughterhouses. Entrepreneur Ellen Demorest used the fortune from her Union Square dress-pattern business to support various reform and women's causes. *Demorest's Weekly*, the fashion journal in which she marketed her patterns across the country, published debates on such issues as coeducation, cooperative housekeeping, female labor, and women's rights. Indeed the editors of both *Demorest's Weekly* and its rival *Harper's Bazar*—Jane Croly and Mary Booth—were influential feminists in their own right. Croly was especially famous as the first president of Sorosis, the pioneering women's reform association. Along with Demorest and a network of other writers, editors, and activists, she founded the club in 1868 in response to the exclusion of literary women from the celebration of Charles Dickens's visit to New York. Sorosis is remembered today mainly as the precursor of twentieth-century women's clubs,

but it was very much the product of the urbane, commercial milieu of Ladies' Mile. Throughout the Gilded Age, in fact, the club conducted its discussions and agitations over elegant meals at Delmonico's.⁴⁹

For some of the most politically and professionally visible women in Gilded Age America, the two versions of the lady in public were continuous rather than contradictory. I do not want to overstate this claim, replacing the idea of the social-purity reformer with that of a "fashionable feminist." Clearly both sets of values and experiences were in play among bourgeois women in late-nineteenth century urban America, which is just my point. Victorian culture wars had unsettled the established borderlines between virtue and pleasure, respectability and transgression, and many women were conflicted—among themselves and sometimes *within* themselves—about how to redraw them. I do not think that we know yet for whom, to what extent, and with what consequences the world of Ladies' Mile offered new models of identity, sexual demeanor, and political agency. To answer these questions, we need to learn about figures such as Anna Dickinson, Jane Croly, and Victoria Woodhull, the metropolitan journalists, editors, lecturers, and performers who were among the most influential public intellectuals and commercial culturemakers of their time. Such women affected politics, sexuality, and public culture in Victorian America in ways quite different from those of better-known reformers such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frances Willard. Yet I suspect that their stories will prove equally significant.

For such women, and for much of their public, Ladies' Mile seems to have represented something more than a scene of self-alienation. It beckoned them *into* public life, perhaps even offering them, at times, a kind of political pedagogy. Woodhull, for instance, clearly used the ethos of Ladies' Mile—its performativity and erotic spectacle—in her agitations for female suf-

⁴⁸ "Dry Goods Trade," Woodhull and Claflin's *Weekly*, November 12, 1870, quoted in Leach, *True Love and Perfect Union*, pp. 227–28. For the arrest of Elizabeth B. Phelps—not to be confused with writer Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, author of the best-seller *The Gates Ajar*—see Elaine Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 9–10, 120–25. For Dickinson, see Leach, *True Love and Perfect Union*, pp. 254–55.

⁴⁹ For the career of Lucia Gilbert Calhoun, see Cooper, *Lost Love*, p. 79. For that of Demorest, see Ishbel Ross, *Crusades and Crinolines: The Life and Times of Ellen Curtis Demorest and William Jennings Demorest* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963); Demorest's husband was, not coincidentally, the owner of a dry-goods emporium and one of the biggest real-estate developers on Ladies' Mile. For the career and politics of Croly, see Ross, *Crusades and Crinolines*; and Leach, *True Love and Perfect Union*, pp. 138–39, 154, 183–85, 201–2, 226, 235–39, 252. For the history of Sorosis, see Leach, *True Love and Perfect Union*, pp. 184–85; and Ross, *Crusades and Crinolines*, pp. 92–105.

frage and sexual liberty. Charismatic and eloquent, she made oratory into passionate theater. On one notorious occasion, a meeting in Cooper Union at which Anthony Comstock had threatened to arrest her, she mounted the stage disguised as an old Quaker woman. Throwing off her gray cloak, she began exhorting the crowd on free love and the Beecher-Tilton revelations. Woodhull's sex radicalism and genius for outrage made her an outlier among her peers. Yet even a more genteel activist like Logan believed that the world of midtown Manhattan could draw women into other public terrains as well. A former actress who attacked "leg shows" and a suffragist who defended fashion and commercial amusements, Logan embodied as well as anyone the complex changes in sexual politics and public culture that I have been tracking. In an 1869 essay, she wryly invoked the Sixth Avenue horsecar—the line that brought women through New York's vice district to midtown stores and theaters—as propaganda for female suffrage. "As for voting, I wouldn't think of doing such a thing," Logan wrote, teasing her imaginary adversaries, "because, as you say, gentlemen, how unfeminine for women to meet the rough crowd—to come into contact with horrible men—who would push us and squeeze us! It is true, we have met the same crowds at the theater, and in the . . . horse-cars; . . . I think women get as much squeezing in a Sixth avenue car . . . as they are likely to get at any poll . . . After a liberal course of horse-car, any woman who survives is qualified to vote."⁵⁰

Nymphs and Satyr

On April 24, 1869, the "sisters of Sorosis" feted the New York Press Club with a dinner at Delmonico's. The Press Club had recently held a breakfast for Sorosis—an event at which, to the women's dismay, they had been expected to sit passively while being hosted and toasted—and they were determined to return the favor in every sense. After a light meal, the press men were amiably forbidden to speak while their hosts offered up a panoply of toasts, addresses, and songs. What followed was a gentle piece of sexual satire. The

first toast was to "The Man of the Period," a parody of the popular sketches on "The Girl of the Period" then being published by English writer Elizabeth Linton. It was followed by such tongue-in-cheek tributes as "Man the Monopolizer," "The Professional Woman," "The Newspaper Man from a Domestic Point of View," and (in a wink at Lydia Thompson's burlesque troupe, still in its hit run on Broadway) "Blondes and Brunettes." The evening was itself a genteel burlesque that turned public codes of gentlemanly camaraderie and ladylike modesty on their heads. Sorosis had staged it as a comedy of inversion, not unlike the one that would be enacted in, and in front of, *Nymphs and Satyr*.⁵¹

Three years after the dinner, just before Bouguereau was beginning work on his painting in Paris, Edward Stokes burst into public notoriety for the first time. It was not as an art collector or hotelkeeper but as a protagonist in one of the Gilded Age's most lurid sex scandals. Heir to a Philadelphia fortune, allied by marriage to an established New York family, Stokes had pursued an affair with a captivating, marginally successful actress named Josephine Mansfield. Mansfield was, at the same time, mistress to another rich New Yorker, Jim Fisk. Fisk was an infamous Wall Street speculator, renowned dandy, and sometime business partner with, and litigant against, Stokes in a Brooklyn oil refinery. The two men engaged in a fierce financial and sexual struggle throughout the late 1860s and early 1870s. Fisk had Stokes arrested for embezzling stock; Stokes and Mansfield blackmailed Fisk by threatening to publish his love letters; Fisk bribed one of Mansfield's servants to expose the extortion plot under oath; and Mansfield in turn sued her lover for libel. During the suit, Stokes was compelled to reveal his shocking behavior and was publicly humiliated. The next day, January 7, 1872, he assassinated Fisk on the stairs of the Grand Central Hotel. After being tried three times for the crime—the first trial ended in a hung jury, the second in a guilty verdict that was vacated on technical grounds—Stokes was finally convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to four years in prison. It was in 1881, five years after his release from Sing Sing, that he acquired his share of the Hoffman House and with it a complex respectability as the proprietor of a fashionable but rakish gath-

⁵⁰ Logan, *Apropos of Women*, p. 10. For Woodhull's performative politics, see "The Naked Truth"; and the illuminating analysis of that address in Kate Masur, "Performing Naturalness: Victoria Woodhull in 1873" (unpublished manuscript in the author's possession).

⁵¹ "The Sorosis Entertains the Press," *New York Times*, April 25, 1869; Ross, *Crusades and Crinolines*, pp. 98–99.

ering place. One year later he bought *Nymphs and Satyr*, exhibiting his own memoir, perhaps, of sexuality in public.⁵²

Stokes died in 1901, leaving behind a life of litigiousness and a trail of gossip. His estate sold the Bouguereau, and the new owners, reportedly more conservative in their sensibilities, placed the canvas in storage. There it remained until Robert Sterling Clark bought it in the early 1940s and exhibited it in a wartime benefit for, appropriately, the Free French movement. Yet even when it languished in storage, *Nymphs and Satyr* never lost its symbolic power as the badge of a certain bourgeois daring and desire. In 1915, long after it had disappeared from public view, *Harper's Weekly* published a parody of the painting "with apology to Bouguereau" (fig. 5). The occasion was the death of Anthony Comstock. In place of the satyr, the cartoonist had penned in the mutton-chopped face of the well-known censor, replete with horns and pointed ears, being dragged down into the muck by nymphs. The accompanying poem, "The Passing of St. Anthony," made clear the double legacy of Victorian culture that has been the burden of my story: "So when we



Fig. 5. Oliver Herford, *Pen and Inklings: The Passing of St. Anthony*. From *Harper's Weekly* (July 3, 1915). (University Library, University of Michigan.)

⁵² A scholarly treatment of the Fisk-Stokes affair is sorely needed. For basic (although not always reliable) information about the events leading up to Fisk's death, see the "instant books" published at the time of the murder as well as modern popular biographies of Fisk: Willoughby Jones, *The Life of James Fisk, Jr.* (Philadelphia: Union Publishing Company, 1872); R. W. McAlpine, *The Life and Times of Col. James Fisk, Jr.* (New York: New York Book Company, 1872); Robert M. Fuller, *Jubilee Jim: The Life of Colonel James Fisk, Jr.* (New York: Macmillan, 1928); and W. A. Swanberg, *Jim Fisk: The Career of an Improbable Rascal* (New York: Scribner, 1959). For material on Stokes's trials, see coverage in the *New York Times* throughout 1872 and 1873, esp. July 16, 1872; January 5, 1873; June 11, 1873; and October 30, 1873. For Fisk's career as a Wall Street operator and ally of Jay Gould during the railroad "wars" and gold manipulations of the late 1860s, Charles Francis Adams's analysis in *Chapters of Erie and Other Essays* (Boston: J. R. Osgood, 1871) remains unsurpassed.

cast you for the gay/Old satyr in the famed
tableau/A two-fold compliment we pay/
To you—and Monsier Bougeureau/
For 'tis no more than fair to say/
Each one of you has played his
part/Each done his best in his own way/
To popularize the Nude in Art."⁵³

⁵³ *Harper's Weekly*, July 3, 1915; my thanks to Alyssa Picard for discovering this gem. For the provenance of *Nymphs and Satyr* in the twentieth century, see *William Bouguereau, 1825–1905*, pp. 182–86; and Brooke, *Biography*. Robert Sterling Clark's estate donated the painting to the Clark Art Institute in 1959.