

Clyde Fitch's Dramatisations of Gender and Society on the
Fin de Siècle Stage

by

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Abstract

Clyde Fitch was the most successful Broadway dramatist of his time. Following his considerable popularity and success with American audiences, Fitch saw his plays staged across the globe, and particularly in London. His female-led dramas of contemporary life, though popular with audiences in his own time, received scant praise and often censure from the playwright's critics, both in America and the UK. Writing and producing plays from 1890 until his death in 1909, Fitch's plays, and the critical discourse surrounding his productions, intervened in fin de siècle debates concerning gender, sexuality, and fears of moral degeneration.

Influenced in construction, technique, and stage-craft by French naturalism, Fitch's plays utilised theories of heredity and social Darwinism to explain the psychological motivations of his characters. Central to the narrative of each play, however, was the conflicting message that individual will and strength of character is of greater importance than genetic or social circumstance. Rather than following theatrical convention in punishing the liars, flirts, suffragettes, and fallen women of his plays, Fitch encouraged the sympathies of his audiences with these morally ambiguous characters and insisted, wherever possible, upon happy endings that drew the ire of the conservative male press. Fundamentally, these productions contradicted American and British ideologies rooted in the notion that national prosperity could only be secured through the marriage and propagation of white men and women of 'good breeding'. The gendered biases of Fitch's critics, I argue, often led to dislocated interpretations of his heroines, and to the wilful dismissal of a body of work which successfully marketed marginalised configurations, encouraging inclusivity and acceptance over fear and social division.

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

With a reported income of \$250,000 a year at the height of his popularity, Clyde Fitch was the most commercially successful Broadway dramatist of his time (Phelps 147). Between 1890 and 1909, the prolific dramatist authored at least 62 plays, ranging from historical romances to contemporary social satires. He adapted American novels, French plays, and saw his own original works staged not only in his home country, but also in England, Scotland, Ireland, Italy, Germany, France, Russia, Hungary, and Sweden. Days before his death, Fitch received word that his plays were to be staged as far afield as South Africa and Australia (Bell 62).

Despite Fitch's enormous popularity with audiences at the turn of the twentieth century, critics often dismissed the playwright and derided his work. His plays, even today, are seldom the subject of scholarly analysis. Only most recently have Fitch's life and works become the subject of a full biography (Dearing 2016). As Dearing summarises: 'When not a problem, he is dismissed or forgotten' (529). Fitch's publicly ambiguous sexuality and perceived superficiality, his preference for staging female-led dramas, and his appeal to a predominantly female market all contributed to both the dismissal of his work by the (predominantly male) critical establishment. A number of key works, published within the last couple of decades, however, reposition Fitch as a key figure in queer theatre history (Marra 2002), and draw attention to the gendered critical biases that contributed to his relative obscurity (Sehat 2008, Saxon 2011).

In this thesis I examine those critical biases in more detail, contrasting the critical responses to Fitch's plays in his home country to those in the UK. While Fitch's work is

often discussed in terms of melodrama versus realism, he was influenced also in construction, technique, and stage-craft by European drama and the naturalist movement. Fitch's plays utilised theories of heredity and social Darwinism to explain the psychological motivations of his characters, and the essential conflict between individualism and biological determinism is a largely overlooked but critically significant aspect of Fitch's work. I will also, therefore, examine how theories of heredity influenced the construction, staging, and interpretation of his leading women (and men). As Fitch's plays were popular with audiences composed primarily of women, and as he was often derided as playwright who wrote exclusively *for* those women, I consider how his plays catered to his audiences and why there was such a marked disparity between public and press responses. Significantly, contextualising my analysis, I consider how the plays examined in this thesis engaged with the wider gendered social issues of the *fin de siècle*.

As a dramatist, Fitch worked tirelessly throughout his career. He described himself as living 'entirely in and for [his] work, but not as a pastime, nor as a business', explaining: 'I have no other principal interest, no business, no wife or children. I give all to my work and the few friends I can count on my hands' (Moses and Gerson 281). In 1901 alone, at the height of his career, seven new Fitch plays premiered on stages in New York and London, while earlier productions continued to run (Moses and Gerson 391). As his career progressed, Fitch increasingly produced his own works. He involved himself at every stage of production, from construction, to set and costume design, to casting and rehearsals. He imagined and insisted on the finest details of scenery, creating for his audiences an illusion of reality that often went along with a sense of grandeur: the deck of a cruise ship, the lavishly decorated interior of a New York sitting room.

Above all, Fitch aimed to please his public, declaring the audience to be 'the true censor, and the final critic' ("The Play and the Public" xx). Fitch felt there was a 'great field

in America' for such plays that could function as historical 'social documents' ("A Talk with Clyde Fitch"). It was a practice that he observed in European theatre, and that he felt he could replicate in his home country so long as 'the manners and customs of the people at the time' were 'given with accuracy of detail' (ibid). It was what he felt his audience wanted:

Give us our own life, they are saying in general. We get enough lords and ladies, perfect and imperfect, from England. Give us a man and woman of our own. [...] See how we welcome and take to our hearts any true reflection of our native country existence. [...] Show us our own social predicament, and see how we will welcome it. We have troubles of our own, they say ("The Play and the Public" xxv).

The plays explored in this thesis – *A Modern Match* (1892), *Gossip* (1895), *The Climbers* (1901), *The Moth and the Flame* (1898), *Sapho* (1900), *The Girl with the Green Eyes* (1902), *The Truth* (1907), *The House of Mirth* (1906), *Girls* (1908) and *The City* (1909) – catered to this demand, depicting turn of the century American men and women in settings both at home and abroad. In New York drawing-rooms, studio flats, lawyers' offices, and Parisian apartments alike, Fitch staged contemporary dramas that addressed contentious social issues of his time: business fraud, political corruption, divorce, women's suffrage, and the Victorian sexual double standard that located women's sexuality – and particularly sex outside of marriage – as immoral.

Tice Miller declares Fitch's social comedies 'provide a special insight into the growing role of women in American cultural life' (164). Similarly, Saxon asserts Fitch's 'reputation as a writer of plays for women both on and off stage parallels the shifting role of the actress and the changing shape of audiences in the late-19th-century American theatre' ("Sexual Transgression on the American Stage" 737). The American audience in the nineteenth century underwent a gendered shift, with women replacing men as the 'primary theatregoers' of the 'legitimate' theatres (Butsch "Bowery B'hoys and Matinee Ladies" 374). In the 1890s, Butsch asserts, 'men attended, but seldom without female

companions' (ibid). Fitch attracted the attention of that audience, skilfully crafting his plays to appeal to women. The move, while a profitable one on Fitch's part, contributed significantly to the negative criticism his female-led plays received in the press. While Fitch professed a fondness for the so-called matinee girl¹, critics bemoaned his plays for appealing to her².

The presence of ladies in the auditorium, however, did not necessarily result in what Butsch terms a 'tame' or passive audience. Brothel dramas, depicting fallen women in various guises, were popular fare at the turn of the century, both in America and England; 'American theatre,' argues Johnson, 'was a central locus of cultural interest in prostitution' (1). The female audiences who enjoyed such dramas, argues Saxon, 'were not passive and not quiet,' and were willing to engage with dramas of sexuality ("Sexual Transgression" 738). In her exploration of brothel drama in America, Johnson describes how the 'female sexual body [...] signified ambiguously in performances' (5). Depending on the choices of the actresses, Jonson argues, their performances 'subverted and reinscribed normative gender roles and sexual scripts' (ibid).

In this thesis, performance styles and public perceptions of actresses are considered alongside the critical and public response in the analysis of these plays. As will be evidenced, Fitch's selection of a particular actress for a particular role had a marked impact upon the critical and public response to a number of his plays, in particular: A

¹ 'Personally I Love the matinee girl! She believes in youthful love, ideals, self-sacrifices, and I want to. She believes in romance in real life – I want to. And she is no fool. She is quick with her ridicule, ever ready with her discernment of what is true and what is stage pretense' (Fitch, "The Play and the Public" xivi).

² Fitch responded to criticism from John Corbin: 'When you say I made two of my serious (more or less) plays popular with the matinée girl, etc., I feel distinctly that you belittle two plays that *made* my reputation in a dignified way' (Moses 280).

Modern Match (1892), *Gossip* (1895), *Sapho* (1900), *The Girl with the Green Eyes* (1902), and *The Truth* (1907).

Building upon his experience performing in female roles during his college years,³ Fitch exhibited a marked talent for staging female-led dramas throughout his professional career. He became known as the 'maker of actresses', renowned for his creation of successful 'star vehicles', launching the careers of young starlets such as Ethel Barrymore, Maude Adams, and Clara Bloodgood. Fitch immersed himself in every aspect of production, not only writing the scripts, but performing them before his actresses so that they might imitate his tone of voice, his gestures in one moment or another (Marra "Clara Bloodgood (1870-1907), Exemplary Subject of Broadway Gender Tyranny" N.Pag.).

Archie Bell, Fitch's friend and biographer (1909), describes the interaction between the playwright and actress in detail:

In reading women's parts, a difficulty almost inevitable to the ordinary actor, Fitch excelled. It is fair to all concerned to say that no woman appearing in the principal part of one of his dramas ever gave a performance or reading to the part equal artistically and dramatically to that of the author himself. If they rose to unusual heights of dramatic expression, it was because they were able to grasp the manner and method from him. He knew the stage value of a drooping eyelash, a momentary pause, a whisper and a step (71).

A letter from Fitch to actress Eleanor Robson, written in 1906, provides further testament to the playwright's attention to detail. He advises Robson how to say her line, 'No, don't go':

³ Fitch first became personally acquainted with the theatre during his years at Amherst College, between 1882-1886, where he found a place within the exclusively male college's dramatic society during his Junior and Sophomore years. The aspiring playwright took on roles writing, producing, designing, and acting (Moses and Gerson 21). He became notorious in Amherst history for the productions he had a hand in making, and for his spectacular performances in leading female roles. Appearing as Lydia Languish in *The Rivals* in 1884, Fitch became the first undergraduate ever to perform in Senior dramatics (ibid 21-2).

It occurs to me the last time you say it (when he obeys you) it might be nice, if, instead of being strong, *i.e., more* urgent, you dropped your voice and looked all your awakening sentiment at him straight in the eyes, and with a little pause after the “no”, and with some sentiment in the “don’t go”, lowly uttered, blushingly, smilingly and with a sort of fluttering look away, half shyness, half embarrassment; as if you were blushingly willing, in the way you said it, to give him a *hint* of what you were beginning to feel!! I wonder if I have made this clear? (Moses and Gerson 307, emphasis original).

The *New York Times* published an article detailing his methods: ‘Clyde Fitch at rehearsal does one thing no stage manager I have known can do, he becomes womanly’ (Pendennis, “Clyde Fitch Conducting a Rehearsal”). While lauding Fitch as ‘the most successful interpreter of modern women in the modern theatre,’ the reporter cast Fitch’s gender in ambiguity and belittled him for his displays of femininity, arguing that ‘[n]o man’ can imitate women ‘except at the expense of his dignity’ (ibid).

As well as the actresses themselves, the costumes they wore could be instrumental in success – or even the failure – of a play, according to critics. Reviews for Fitch’s plays often went into great detail about the actress’s dresses, with discussions of her attire sometimes eclipsing any analysis of her performance. Lillie Langtry’s extravagant attire in *Gossip* was cited frequently as a draw for audiences: ‘All fashionable London,’ declared the *Era*, ‘is going to see the wonderful dresses worn by Mrs Langtry in *Gossip*’ (“Theatrical Gossip” 29 Feb. 1896). Olga Nethersole’s ‘diaphanous Greek dress’ in *Sapho* (1900), along with her performance, caused a fervour in New York that culminated in an indecency trial. Even in the courtroom, Bradley asserts, interrogations of *Sapho*’s morality ‘took a back seat to an “obsessive” discussion by male commentators about the revealing nature of [Nethersole’s] trial clothing’ (72). Male critics characterised women patrons of the theatre as passive consumers of fashion, and it is a notion that persists in recent studies of the period. ‘Ladies might go to theatre,’ asserts Butsch, ‘to imitate the star’s dress instead of her character’ (*The Making of American Audiences* 68).

It is little wonder that Marra describes Fitch as ‘the foremost architect of feminine perfection in American legitimate theatre’ of his time (“Clara Bloodgood”). Fitch built his tremendously successful career, Marra, argues, ‘by propounding a reassuringly codified ideal of American womanhood’ (Marra and Schanke 5). What I show in this thesis, however, is that Fitch’s stagings of feminine imperfection were of greater significance in his work, though not always understood or appreciated by his critics⁴.

Both Fitch’s friends and his harshest critics attributed Fitch’s preference and talent for staging heroines to a perceived ‘femininity’ inherent in the playwright himself. As Elizabeth Marbury, Fitch’s friend and agent described:

His characterizations of women were as a rule more convincing than were those of men, for there is no use in blinkering the fact that his own nature was a composite one and that possibly he inherited more qualities from his gentle Southern mother than he did from his war-like, Connecticut father (82).

What Marbury and Fitch’s friends framed as the playwright’s dramatic strength⁵, however, his critics considered a deficit. Fitch himself was often subject to personal attacks aimed at his apparent femininity. ‘To the end of his life,’ wrote Lowe in 1920, ‘he kept his dandified air, his affectations, and his great interest in the ladies’ (69). The article was titled: “Clyde Fitch, A “Sissy” Boy Who Became a £250,000 A Year Dramatist” (ibid). As I will show in this thesis, those same critics who dismissed Fitch as a ‘sissy’, were guilty also of dismissing or overlooking the strengths of Fitch’s most prominent American heroines.

⁴ Corbin criticised Fitch for ‘giving us women with petty foibles, small aspirations, narrow affections’ instead of portraits of ‘deep and noble womanhood’ (“Mr Clyde Fitch’s Own Way”).

⁵ ‘I have always maintained that the world owes much of its beauty to this combination of feminine sensitiveness and of virile accomplishment. Each attribute supplements the other, and art has often become the richer for this duality. The mind of a man with the heart of the woman makes an ideal exotic’ (Marbury 83).

Marra asserts that the critical establishment 'made [Fitch's] preoccupation with fashion and manners into a metaphor for his method' ("Clyde Fitch's Too Wilde Love" 23). A man seemingly concerned with what was conceived as the feminine and therefore superficial space of fashion in both his personal and professional life, it was implied, was capable of producing nothing more than shallow plays. Drama critic John Corbin argued that Fitch's plays were all too often devoted to 'sensation hunting in scenic effects' and 'to the elaborate picturing of the superficial details of social functions' which 'seldom have had more than the most superficial importance in the essential action of the play' ("Mr. Clyde Fitch's Own Way"). Fitch vehemently rejected such accusations, accusing his critics in return of failing to understand the depths of his plays: 'more than ½ of the people don't see underneath, nor realise what I mean by it [...] I am used to being judged on the surface; it is evidently to be one of my chief curses' (Moses and Gerson 202).

When *The Frisky Mrs Johnson* (1903) proved a hit with the opening night audience, but was derided in the morning reviews, Fitch expressed his frustration to a friend: 'I give it up! They don't want me any more, apparently, at any cost – at any price' (Moses and Gerson 230). Five days later he wrote to Arthur Byron: '[the Press] will not have it that I can do what I do do, and in any event, they will prevent it if they can' (ibid 231). Fitch's friend and biographer Archie Bell concurred; the press were biased against Fitch and their responses had become formulaic and predictable: 'It was the habit to treat Fitch lightly in the public prints. Every club reporter in the country knew just how a Fitch play should be reported' (47).

Certain of Fitch's American critics featured prominently above others in both his personal and professional life. Edward A. Dithmar, dramatic editor of *The New York Times*, and John Corbin, who wrote for both *The New York Times* and *The Sun*, were both personal friends of Fitch. Although they supported the playwright, however, they could

also be his harshest critics. Fitch accused Corbin of following the trend to dismiss his work and of failing to recognise improvements: ‘you, Mr. Critic, *repeat* always, days after, years after – a criticism you once made of my work [...] Do you realize that you are constantly *echoing*, as well as *quoting*, Broadway and Park Row?’ (Moses and Gerson 280, emphasis original). Demonstrating how much he invested, personally and professionally, in his own dramatic endeavours, Fitch expressed frustration about such critical attacks on his work; writing to Virginia Gerson in 1901 he questioned: ‘Didn’t you think Dithmar was unnecessarily hard this morning in his article – why is he?’ (Moses and Gerson 180). Writing to Corbin, Fitch implied a similar bias, heightened by an ironic desire to be seen as impartial: ‘it seems to me you are so afraid of being prejudiced in my favour you are erring as strongly in the other way’ (ibid 279).

Harsher still, however, was *New York Tribune* dramatic critic William Winter. Never a friend to Fitch, Winter was consistently outspoken in opposing the playwright throughout, and even beyond, his career. In his autobiography, William Winter referred to Fitch as ‘the crude and frivolous playwright, the late Clyde Fitch’ (*The Wallet of Time* 313). Winter was instrumental in inciting one of the earliest controversies of Fitch’s career, publishing an article which questioned the authorship of Fitch’s successful first Broadway play, *Beau Brummel* (1890)⁶. Dearinger describes Winter as a ‘sensitive’ but ‘narrow-minded’ and ‘conservative’ critic who ‘resisted most innovations in the theatrical arts’ (79).

It is significant that responses to plays such as *The Truth* (1907) were far more favourable in countries where the public knew, or cared, far less about American critical responses. As Bell attests, Fitch lived to see *The Truth* staged ‘in six or seven capital cities

⁶ For a full account of the scandal, see Dearinger, pages 79-101.

of Europe, simultaneously' (100). In fact, *The Truth* played in at least eight cities outside America: London, Paris, Hamburg, Copenhagen, Christiania, Rome, Berlin, and Vienna. Fitch expressed a 'disappointment' that he 'had to go abroad to be praised for the best qualities worth having in one's work' (Moses and Gerson 363). Thus, the focus on performance history and criticism in this thesis will take a transatlantic perspective, comparing productions and reactions to predictions of Fitch's plays in New York and in London.

Fitch felt the antipathy to his dramatic output in his home country to be a distinctly personal one, declaring: 'when I go to Europe – where I am not known or talked of in advance, and where my work must speak for itself [...] it is the psychology, the truth, and technique, which are praised'; 'where my personality is either unknown or agreeable, my work is taken more seriously, and depths found in it, not dreamed at home' (ibid). The public perception of Fitch as an effeminate dandy in his home country undoubtedly contributed to the genesis of a critical establishment predisposed to deny the depths of his work. This alone, however, does not fully account for the level of animosity inspired towards plays such as *Sapho* (1900), nor the sheer persistence of the American critical body that insisted that the large body of work produced between the male-driven plays *Beau Brummel* (1890) and *The City* (1909) – Fitch's first and last Broadway plays – was unworthy of representing American drama.

Fitch tried to meet the demands of his critics, particularly those in his home country, but became frustrated when his plays prompted the same response time and again:

[T]he environment about the criticism of my work [...] is still the echo of fifteen years ago when I was said to be superficial, writing too fast, etc., etc., an attitude at first struck by the press, because they didn't like the cut of my coat, nor my sensitive shyness which looked like a lack of good-fellowship, or conceit!!' (Moses and Gerson 363).

The charge that perhaps haunted Fitch most frequently throughout his career was that his plays were too 'melodramatic'. Writing in 1904, Corbin typified the general critical opinion: 'Melodrama, harsh and artificial has trod on the heels of the most delicate comedy, and the keenest observation has given way in the same piece to stark artificiality ("Two Young American Playwrights")'. Corbin applauded Fitch's improvements as a dramatist, but called on him to adopt realism:

In the past five years his own way has brought him from the most superficial exterior of life into the very essence of society and character, from crude melodrama to the threshold of pure drama. One has faith that the long way round will not be so much longer before it takes him to his true home of normal, dignified emotions in an inevitable conflict ("Mr Clyde Fitch's Own Way").

Fitch's plays featured and appealed to women, and they also failed to meet explicit and implicit critical demands for strong and masculine realist dramas.

Comments of his perceived limitations plagued Fitch throughout his career: '[A] true and virile portrait of a man was beyond his range'; Fitch 'couldn't write a "man's play"' (Corbin, "Mr Clyde Fitch's Own Way"; "Clyde Fitch's Last Play"). The critical dialogue between Fitch and such critics, when analysed, reflects Jacky Bratton's notion of a division in theatre criticism that privileged male art forms and 'disguised, discounted or appropriated' women's work 'to male control' (16). Popular entertainment, which was 'embodied as female', argues Bratton, 'became the Other of the "National Drama" of male genius' (ibid). Critics assessed Fitch's work within this limited realist critical paradigm, positioning it as inferior to realism and in opposition to 'legitimate' theatre.

Subsequently, as Saxon attests, prevailing narratives of theatre history reduced Fitch's output to that of 'a 'transitional' playwright in the narrative of progression from melodrama to realism' (*American Theatre* 139). Indeed, in *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, Bryan asserts that Fitch's 'melodramas of contemporary society bridge the gap between the tradition of American romantic melodrama and social

realism' (6). This notion of progression, Saxon affirms, is reliant on 'an assertion of hierarchy: realism is constructed, critically, as a 'better' form than melodrama' and, ultimately, the 'production of plays was an assertion of playwriting itself as a manly pursuit.' (ibid 146-7).

Tice Miller (2007), discusses Fitch's work in terms of melodrama and realism:

While he wrote about depicting men and women truthfully on the stage, at heart he was a romantic, not a realist, and viewed the world through the lens of theatre. He drew his characters and plots not from life but from the melodramatic and sentimental theatre of his day (176).

Miller's assessment of Fitch's work implies a failure in craftsmanship on Fitch's part to realistically depict the lives of the men and women of his day.

The gendered standards of the early twentieth century, argues Sehat, continue to impact judgements of Fitch's work: 'Present-day theatre historians have eviscerated the gendered standards that prevailed in early twentieth-century criticism, but they still retain the generic categories and, intentionally or not, the critical judgements that the standards produced' (330). As result, critics continue to dismiss Fitch's plays as being melodramatic, and therefore dramatically weak; as recently as 2012 it has been suggested that 'it is difficult for the critics to write about plays that are so thin. There is nothing much to analyse [in Fitch's work]' (Clum 115).

Despite the critical ire he incurred, Fitch did not altogether reject critical accusations of melodrama in his work. As a dramatist, he considered both realism and melodrama to be popularly misunderstood terms, defending his use of both in an essay titled "The Play and the Public". Fitch made a distinction 'between real melodrama and the false': 'between bathos, crude dramatic emotion, and the real thing' ("The Play and the Public" xl, xli). He explained:

The term, centuries ago, and not so long as that, was applied to a play of violent emotions, as much as violent actions, and was a technical term implying neither

blame or belittlement. To-day it is applied ignorantly as a term of reproach, to plays of violent emotion, and of belittlement to plays of violent action (ibid xxxix-xl).

In order for a play to be successful with its audience, Fitch argued, it must resonate with them on an emotional level. As Fitch well knew, his audiences were diverse in terms of class and education, and he believed that their emotions transcended any inherent or perceived differences:

[I]t is only by an appeal to the emotions common with all human nature that this naturally unwieldy body is moulded into one great sounding-board. The emotions of this body are the traps by which we try to take their minds (ibid xvii).

What critics labelled dismissively as ‘melodrama’ in Fitch’s plays, Fitch intended as a serious effort to connect with his audience and to enable the theme of the play to be carried across. Echoing Fitch’s definition, Peter Brooks (1976) describes melodrama as ‘a mode of conception and expression, as a certain fictional system for making sense of experience, as a semantic field of force’ (xvii). The melodramas ‘that matter the most to us,’ argues Brooks, ‘convince us that the dramaturgy of excess and overstatement corresponds to and evokes confrontations and choices that are of heightened importance’ (ix).

Fitch did not adhere to the binary critical constructions of realism and melodrama prevalent in mainstream theatre criticism. The concepts, as he understood them, were not mutually exclusive. Realism, he asserted, is ‘only simplicity and truth’ (“The Play and the Public” xlii). City life, as Fitch knew it, was imbued with violent and melodramatic emotion:

One cannot live twenty-four hours in any of our cities without seeing vivid pictures of misery and happiness, vice and virtue, crime and punishment, poverty and wealth, in sharpest loudest contrast, - a daily life which is blood and iron mixed with soul and sentiment – melodrama of the ancients, pure and simple (ibid xli-xlii).

Some of the very qualities that critics associated disparagingly with melodrama – heightened emotion and intricate scenery – Fitch considered integral to the realism of his work, arguing the chief aim in theatre to be to ‘create an illusion, both as to practical scenes and as to story’ (ibid xlii). ‘Realism in the emotions of the play and in the paraphernalia of the scenes,’ he argued, ‘is the greatest adjunct to both’ (ibid).

Fitch’s definitions of melodrama and realism, by his own admission, were not in keeping with those of his critics. He suggested that while ‘two-thirds of the general public’ considered realism to mean ‘something ugly, or horrible, or puerile,’ realism could equally capture beauty (ibid xlii). Fitch’s attempts to stage a ‘beautified’ realism, however, came across as false sentimentality to his critics⁷.

What Fitch failed to understand, argues Sehat, was that ‘the demand for realism held an implicit challenge to the feminized stage’ (328). Fitch’s plays, while they appealed often to his audience, quite simply did not fit with the critics’ ideas of what American plays *should* look like. Critics associated melodrama and sentimentality, in whatever form or context, with ‘women’s’ theatre, and thus, ‘the thematic content of [Fitch’s] plays, along with his continued commercial success, consistently provoked critical censure’ (ibid 328, 339).

Fitch’s essay makes it clear that he viewed himself as a realist as well as writer of ‘true’ melodrama, despite critical opinion to the contrary. What is equally apparent in much of Fitch’s work, however, is the influence of naturalism. In her thesis, *Elements of Naturalism in Three Plays by Clyde Fitch* (1982), Nicolini argues that naturalism – originating in France with the work of Emile Zola, and prevalent throughout late

⁷ *Dublin Daily Express*, 1892: ‘Just as the curtain is about to fall the first attempt is made to give a touch of sentiment and womanly feeling to the character of the heroine, but the device is absurd’ (“Marrige in 1892”).

nineteenth century Europe – had a significant influence upon Fitch’s work, and that Fitch’s plays may be counted among the earliest examples of naturalism in America.

As I discuss in my first chapter, French drama undoubtedly influenced Fitch’s work. The playwright frequented Parisian theatres on his almost annual trips abroad. Unsurprisingly, Fitch was well-acquainted with the mode, spending: ‘joyful hours [...] with [novelist] Robert Herrick in Taormina [...] thrashing out the never failing subject of realism and naturalism in art’ (Moses and Gerson 128). Indeed, Zola’s demand that the naturalist playwright stage ‘a natural man, put him in his proper surroundings, and analyse all the physical and social causes which make him what he is’ resonate with Fitch’s later stagings of heroines afflicted with hereditary flaws in *The Girl with the Green Eyes* and *The Truth*.

It is important to note that scholars have often compared and conflated the terms ‘realism’ and ‘naturalism’, at times discussing ‘naturalism as a version of realism, as a genre that grafts realistic detail onto a necessitarian ideology’ (Newlin 5). Pizer argues that while ‘[i]n Europe the terms were used interchangeably in the late nineteenth century and often still are,’ in America they constituted two distinct movements in American literary history, marked by the generational differences between the realists of the 1870s and 1890s and the naturalistic writers of the turn of the twentieth century (*Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism* 4).

Nevertheless, confusion between the terms was apparent in criticism of Fitch’s work. The critical consensus, however, was that the enduringly optimistic tone of Fitch’s work jarred with conventional understandings of either:

Realism, or naturalism, or whatever it is called, means in a great many cases mere sordidness or morbidity. In [Fitch’s] case one hesitates to use such a term because the quality to be described was extremely wholesome and sound (“Busy Eagle’s Week at the Playhouses”).

Houshain describes the brief emergence of naturalism on the American stage in bleak terms, linking pessimistic naturalistic plays to the emergence of morally and sexually controversial plays:

A number of foreign plays and a few authored by Americans attempted to depict an unvarnished view of society, one that was governed by passions and greed. As a result, a genre of aggressive plays that depicted men and women in less than ideal light began to appear (41).

Naturalism has been notoriously difficult to pin down and define perhaps, Walcutt suggests, because as a form it reflects late nineteenth century doubts, as well as faith, in science and nature, and therefore lends itself to contradictions and ambiguity (3-4). Seeking, nevertheless, to characterise the movement in the highly influential *American Literary Naturalism, a Divided Stream* (1956), Walcutt argues that these conflicting scientific/transcendental ideals result in two distinct 'streams' within naturalism: one spiritual, idealistic, and progressive; the other, deterministic, 'pessimistic', and 'fatal' (vii-viii).

In *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism* (1995), Pizer – notable also for *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (1966), and *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism: An Interpretation* (1982) – rejects the notion that naturalism necessarily prescribes 'a specific philosophical base' (8). Citing Frank Norris's description of naturalism as 'the unplumbed depths of the human heart, and the mystery of sex, and the problems of life, and the black, unsearched penetralia of the soul of man' Pizer notes that 'nowhere in his criticism does [Norris] identify naturalism with a deterministic ideology' (ibid 8). Despite making a clear distinction between the two movements, however, Pizer emphasises the similarities between the modes: both, he argues, may be defined very loosely as literature of their

respective generations, 'that was new, interesting, and roughly similar in a number of ways' (ibid 5).

In *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism*, Newlin suggests that considerations of naturalism have, 'in recent years, undergone considerable shifting' (3). Significantly, just as Fitch described realism and melodrama as overlapping forms, Newlin advocates 'exploring naturalism as a version of melodrama' as 'a useful way of understanding its many anomalies and inconsistencies' (5). What the two share, in opposition to realism, Newlin suggests, is the employment of 'emotive effect to produce the acceptance of a thesis' (ibid). The 'narrative strategies of melodrama,' often interpreted as flaws in the dramatist's technique in literary criticism, Newlin argues, 'provided the naturalists with an effective means through which to articulate the impingement of Darwinian and Spencerian thought upon [...] social issues' including – as in Fitch's work – 'marital infidelity,' 'the double standard' and 'sexual deviance' (ibid).

Newlin's interpretation of the critical response to naturalism resonates with the critical response to melodrama in Fitch's work:

When naturalistic fictions seem to depart from the realistic paradigm, usually through the inclusion of sensational effect, sentimental scenes, stilted dialogue, and improbable coincidences, critics often disparage such departures as instances of flawed technique or defective artistry (ibid).

Considering the influence of naturalism and Fitch's adoption of naturalistic techniques, therefore, exposes the tenuous nature of critical arguments that located his plays as inferior to those of realist writers because he utilised methods identifiable as 'melodramatic'.

A *Fin de Siècle* Writer

The period of Fitch's professional career, 1890-1909, falls within the scope of the American and British *fin de siècle*⁸. Translated literally from the French, the term means 'end of the century,' but the period is defined by new beginnings as much as endings, and by excitement and possibility as much as pessimism and decay. As Marshall describes:

[The *fin de siècle*] is an age conscious of itself as an era of new beginnings, but also one whose movements are defined by the extent to which they developed away from their Victorian roots, and transformed them in the light of the cultural and political possibilities of the period (5).

Like the dramas of the time, the period itself suffers from the lack of a clear critical definition. The 'designation of the late nineteenth century as a *transitional* period' between Victorianism and modernism, argue Ledger and MacCracken, 'has led to its back water status in literary and cultural criticism' (1).

Feminist readings of the *fin de siècle* characterise it as a time in which men and women were redefining their roles in society. Ledger and McCracken (1995) describe the *fin de siècle* as a period of 'cultural fragmentation' that 'threw the norms of the Victorian age into crisis' (1). The period was characterised, in Elaine Showalter's words, by 'sexual anarchy'; a time in which 'all the laws that governed sexual identity and behaviour seemed to be breaking down' (*Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, 1992). Women were acquiring greater social freedoms through increasing access to divorce, education, and paid work. As the women's suffrage movement was growing,

⁸Early *Fin de siècle* scholarship typically concerned literature of the late nineteenth century, especially the 1890s. It has become common, however, 'for studies of the *fin de siècle* to examine the period up to and including 1910 or even 1914' (Livesey). In *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* (1995), Ledger and McCracken address a '*fin de siècle* period [...] from the 1880s [...] up until the onset of the First World War in 1914' (4). Brockington (2009) argues for extending the scope of *fin de siècle* analysis as far as 1930 (10).

figures emerged in society challenging traditional Victorian normative conceptualisations of gender: particularly, the New Woman and the dandy.

The 'New Woman,' as Showalter defines her, was a 'sexually independent' figure who 'criticized society's insistence on marriage as woman's only option for a fulfilling life,' and 'who threatened to turn the world upside down and to be on top in a wild carnival of social and sexual misrule' (*Sexual Anarchy* 38). Sally Ledger situates her alongside 'the new socialism, the new imperialism, the new fiction and the new journalism', as 'part of that concatenation of cultural novelties which manifested itself in the 1880s and 1890s' (*The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* 1).

Showalter argues that the New Woman and the male aesthete together 'redefined the meanings of femininity and masculinity,' unsettling the Victorian narrative of separate spheres with the idea that 'sexuality and sex roles might no longer be contained within the neat and permanent borderlines of gender categories' (*Sexual Anarchy* 3, 9). The New Woman and the dandy/male aesthete constituted an unruly body, a threat to national narratives of male dominance and power, and female nurturing and passivity, that had hitherto influenced the structure and power of bourgeois society in America and Britain.

Martha Patterson, like Ledger, emphasises the New Woman's transgressive sexual empowerment:

Lasciviousness was, [...] along with virilization, the most common charge brought against the New Woman. The New Woman's sexuality – supposedly free from social or moral restraints – was viewed as a threat to both the marital fidelity necessary to insure rightful paternity and to the maternal devotion necessary to insure racial progress (40).

While some – like Fitch – embraced the concept of 'new' on offer in this configuration, others feared that it would result in social decline and degeneration. A vast

range of discourses emerged, forming a matrix of positions challenging and policing the traditional gender norms of the nineteenth century; as Senelick explains:

Controversies over divorce reform, disease prevention, female prostitution, and the regulation of public and private behaviour were aired not only in scientific works but in popular journalism; forensics, clinical practice, and eugenics joined jurisprudence in classifying newly discovered or identified variations of human abnormality. An ancillary discipline, anthropometry, even claimed to be able to measure the physical quantum of criminality or perversion in a subject (201).

Scientists sought to categorise and medicalise sexuality. 'The "hysterical woman" [...] and the male "homosexual",' argues Senelick, 'were the two most radical specimens subjected to the microscope' (202). The new 'sexologists' such as Krafft-Ebing published works on perceived "abnormal" and "perverse" sexual practices (Smith-Rosenberg 268). They warned against what they constructed as adverse effects of education on the female reproductive system; excessive mental stimulation in women, argued physicians, could lead to hysteria and sterility (ibid 258).

Fears of race suicide, of endangered whiteness in America and Britain, were thus precipitated and exacerbated, and women's transgressive social behaviour was located as performing a major role in this perceived decline. As Briggs argues:

[T]he primary symptoms of hysteria in women were gynaecological and reproductive [...] maladies that made it difficult for these hysterical white women to have children. As such, hysteria also implicitly participated in a discourse of race and reproduction, which identified white women of the middle and upper classes as endangering the race through their low fertility, while non-white women, immigrants, and poor people had many children (246-7).

Re-affirming the primary role of women as mothers, eugenic discourse implied that the survival of the nation relied on the reproductive capabilities and selective breeding of white native born women (Wolff 126). Women's reproductive imperative, therefore, had to be policed, guarded, and closely scrutinised, for signs of potential transgressions and subversion.

Theatre played a vital role in staging social crises of the *fin de siècle*. Marshall defines the end of the nineteenth century as ‘a period in which the arts are used viscerally to debate contemporary concerns, and in which art itself becomes matter for controversy’ (5). As Fitch’s plays often centre on the lives and marital unions of ‘fashionable’ white American women, this thesis focuses on the increasingly prevalent discursive strategies of racialisation and eugenics, particularly in relation to two plays: *The Girl with the Green Eyes* (1902) and *The Truth* (1907).

I have chosen ten key plays for analysis in this thesis that engage with gendering of the American/British *fin de siècle*. I have grouped plays together (roughly) chronologically, but most specifically thematically. Chapter one explores the portrayal of divorce in three of Fitch’s earlier American social comedies: *A Modern Match* (1892), *Gossip* (1895), and *The Climbers* (1901). Chapter two explores portrayals of fallen women in *The Moth and the Flame* (1898), and *Sapho* (1900). Chapter three focusses on depictions on American Girls in *The Girl with the Green Eyes* (1902) and *The Truth* (1907), and explores how these plays engaged with the discourse of the eugenics movement. Chapter four examines tragic and comedic representations of women seeking economic independence, in the Fitch/Wharton adaptation of *The House of Mirth* (1906) and Fitch’s original comedy *Girls* (1908). A particular focus in this chapter is placed on the plays’ engagement with the women’s suffrage movement. In the final chapter, I explore Fitch’s depictions of masculinity in his final play, *The City* (1909).

In each chapter, I contextualise the productions historically, using not only reviews of the productions (a valuable source for gauging critical response), but a range of social and scientific discourse concerning gender, sexuality, divorce, eugenics, heredity, women’s suffrage, and theatre. The thematic content in each play is considered against the backdrop of such discourse in order to gain a wider picture of how Fitch’s

productions, and the critical discussions that developed in response, interacted with prominent gender social issues of the *fin de siècle*.

Chapter Two

‘I INSIST SHE SHALL LIVE AND BE DIVORCED’:

ADVENTURESSES, ACTRESSES, AND AUTONOMY

In the late-nineteenth century, divorce was increasingly a contended concern in the US; as New Women championed the benefits of education and financial independence over marriage and motherhood, a rise in the number of white middle-class women seeking divorce contributed to turn-of-the-century anxieties about the future prosperity of the nation. Social concerns about divorce were aired and explored widely in the fictions of the period, in novels such as W.D Howells’ *A Modern Instance* (1882), and Henry James’s extensive offering, notably *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), *What Maisie Knew* (1897) and *The Golden Bowl* (1905), and in stage productions such as Augustin Daly’s *Divorce* (1884) and Bronson Howard’s *The Henrietta* (1887).

The issue of divorce and considerations of morality and social probity were treated in a number of Fitch’s plays. The divorce court provided the backdrop for his 1901 comedy, *The Girl and the Judge*, in which the father of the young heroine seeks a divorce from his kleptomaniac wife⁹. Most poignant, however, are the plays in which Fitch’s heroines seek to leave or divorce their husbands. In this chapter I explore the production

⁹ The heroine in *The Girl and the Judge* falls in love with the judge presiding over her mother and father’s divorce. Her parents – her father an alcoholic and her mother a hereditary kleptomaniac – threaten the relationship. In the end, however, the girl and the judge are to be wed, and the parents, having decided not to get divorced just yet, leave town.

histories of three such plays: *A Modern Match* (1891), *Gossip* (1895) and *The Climbers* (1901).

In the *fin de siècle* period, divorce in America was increasing significantly: one in every twenty-one marriages ended in divorce in 1880, and by 1900 the figure had increased to one in twelve (O'Neill). American divorce law at this time was considered the most liberal in western society (MacComb, 6). In the UK, prior to the passing of the 1937 Matrimonial Causes Act, a woman seeking a divorce had to prove either 'cruelty, bigamy, wilful desertion for four years' or 'incest' in addition to adultery, while men could be granted a divorce on grounds of adultery alone (Shanley 39, Eltis, *Acts of Desire* 84). In contrast, women in the US had freedom to divorce their husbands on a multiplicity of grounds, ranging from a singular charge of adultery to 'a variety of physical, mental and social infirmities' (MacComb, 6). American definitions of marital cruelty were broad in comparison to the UK and 'nineteenth-century Americans sentimentalized and idealized women's domesticity and accepted a more passionate ideal of marriage' (Pinar 362).

The nineteenth century divorce court in America, argues Pinar, became a site for the negotiation of acceptable marital codes of conduct, with the majority of cases involving 'men's cruelty to their wives':

The articulation of shifting definitions of matrimonial cruelty evolved as the public expanded its conception of what constituted husbands' marital misdeeds. In the process, women's claims to new standards of husbandly conduct were supported socially (ibid).

While the courts became increasingly concerned with the husband's role in the maternal home, regulating behaviours such as the sexual neglect of wives or the ill-treatment of children, figures suggest the double standard remained intact in society at the turn of the century, with only 10 percent of women filing for divorce on grounds of adultery compared to 28 percent of men (ibid 362, 364).

In post-Civil War America, as divorce laws became more liberalised, prospects became available for divorced women wishing to support themselves independently through paid work (Patterson, *The American New Woman Revisited*, 17). New Women, in particular, argues Freeman, were 'both less likely to stay in an unsatisfactory marriage and less likely to conform to expected wifely duties' (9). Improvements for women's rights within the divorce court, however, did not translate to social equality:

When men took advantage of adultery, cruelty, or intemperance suits to secure a divorce, they ended their marital trouble and enjoyed the freedom that was so often fantasized as a prerequisite to manhood. When women obtained divorces, they were protected from abuse or nonsupportive husbands, but they then enjoyed no freedom from responsibility. With children or without them, divorced women faced a society that refused them the same opportunities for autonomy and independence as men (Pinar 364).

The decision to divorce, for many women, could not therefore be taken lightly, with the potential social repercussions arguably outweighing the benefits. Such opinions are voiced in Fitch's plays. In *Gossip*, remarried divorcee Kittie Barry warns the young heroine in dire terms of the fate that could await her as an unmarried divorcee:

It would be a mercy then if you could die too, but you wouldn't, you'd live on, and suffer, and alone, always – alone. And can you imagine what your loneliness would look like? Ignored by those you know now, leered at by men you despise now, sneered at by women who you would draw your skirts away from if you passed them now. Even little children would soon learn you were something to be shunned! (2-29).

Negative portrayals of women who divorced, in literature and on the stage, often functioned as cautionary tales, warning of the social alienation that awaited women who abandoned their husbands and/or children. In Robert Grant's *Unleavened Bread* (1900), for example, the 'ambitious' and 'self-absorbed' heroine, Selma White, epitomised 'the predatory New Woman, for whom marriage was a stepping-stone and divorce an inconvenience' (Patterson, *The American New Woman Revisited*, 324). Such portrayals,

often detailing the downfall of a female figure who must be intrinsically immoral, positioned divorce ideologically with neglect of maternal and social duty.

In plays such as *The Climbers*, Fitch closely interrogated divorce and social conceptualisations of morality. The final act is taken up by a discussion between two friends, one intent on divorcing her husband, and the other cautioning her to bear ‘a cross for the sake of duty’ and remain with her husband (Fitch, *The Climbers* 106). As is evident in Fitch’s play, such moral diktats tempered the relative ‘freedom’ of American women to divorce their husbands. Ultimately, suggests MacComb, the propagation of seemingly liberating divorce laws ‘ever more strictly encoded’ marriage and domestic ideals: ‘while divorce law seemed a liberating mechanism that was disruptive of marriage and, thereby, of society, it in fact maintained the domestic sphere as the repository of communal value, order and authority’ (6).

The concept of the wife as domestic guardian of the home was as an essential agent in the upholding of ‘American’ values in the late nineteenth century. In “Manifest Domesticity” (1998) Amy Kaplan outlines the ideological associations and shared vocabulary of the discourses of domesticity and Manifest Destiny. Early nineteenth century ‘ideology of separate spheres’ argues A. Kaplan, ‘contributed to creating an American empire by imagining the nation as a home at a time when its geopolitical borders were expanding rapidly through violent confrontations with Indians, Mexicans, and European Empires’ (583). As a result, ‘narratives of domesticity and female subjectivity’ were ‘inseparable from narratives of empire and nation building’ (ibid 584).

Woman’s perceived maternal instinct therefore stretched beyond the bounds of the family home. As May contends: ‘woman’s role involved more than mere housekeeping; it was vital to the future of the nation’ (18). As mothers and wives, it was implied, women would exert a moralising force over their husbands and children, and it

was their duty to do so. What was more, neglect of maternal duty in particular could be equated to neglect of national duty, with rising divorce rates and declining birth rates among native born white women exacerbating fears of impending race suicide (Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl* 39).

Howells's *A Modern Instance* (1882) is often drawn on in literary history as a notable early example of the American divorce novel (Freeman, xii). Freeman summarizes the novel, which depicts the collapse of a marriage:

[Howells] illustrates how divorce reflects western expansion, urbanization, and technology, as well as changing gender roles and rising expectations of emotional fulfilment in marriage. Further, Howells's novel demonstrates how the tension between individual desire and social duty lies at the core of debates about divorce (xii).

It is worth noting that although published before Fitch began writing plays for the professional stage (*A Modern Instance* was published the year before Fitch began at Amherst), Fitch's admiration of Howells's work¹⁰ makes it likely that he would have read the novel, and Howells in turn saw Fitch's plays, offering criticism on *The Climbers*. Tellingly, it is the husband who has abandoned his wife in Howells's novel, and the couple suffer following the collapse of their marriage. The heroine, Marcia Hubbord, is socially isolated at the end of the novel.

Divorce was a popular subject, not only in the nineteenth century novel, but also on the nineteenth century stage. In the same year that Fitch's *Modern Match* opened in New York, Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* premiered at the St James's Theatre, barely more than a year after scholars presume an affair between the two men ended.

¹⁰ Fitch was in correspondence with Howells during his career, expressing professional admiration of his work: 'You see I really represent the *Howells's Age!* By wh [sic] I mean when you were in the first glory & fight of yr [sic] success, I was a boy beginning to "take notice", - never in a scholastic sense either, entirely from instinct & the impulse of my nature [...] I grew up on YOU!' (Moses and Gerson 257).

Both plays depict beautifully dressed women, separated from their husbands but expressing a desire to reunite with their daughters. The shared themes in the two playwrights' works are unsurprising and worth comparing; Marra has explored the impact of Wilde on Fitch at this time, regarding it as not only a result of their personal relationship, 'but also of their shared aspirations and associations' and their shared 'social and professional circles' ("Clyde Fitch's Too Wilde Love" 39). Wilde presented his Mrs Erlynne in a somewhat tragic but sympathetic light. As J. Kaplan asserts:

Not only was his villainess "toned down" to Mayfair standards – she dressed well without overdoing it – her refusal to participate in what Nina Auerbach has called the "conventional abasement" of her type (p. 163) queried the manner in which such figures were traditionally written and read (14).

Fitch's adventuress, Violet Huntley, as I will detail, was not 'toned down' by any standard, but appeared on stage at the end of the play aged and worn, dressed in an exaggeratedly 'French way' and seemingly unremorseful (Fitch, *Modern Match* 80). Dearing describes *A Modern Match* ultimately as 'superficially daring, but morally conservative' (109). Fitch's outright refusal to stage the death of the wayward wife, however, demonstrated a willingness to break with convention and the beginnings of a trend that would emerge in Fitch's contemporary plays: Fitch not only showed a preference for happy endings, but also staged narratives marked by a sense of empathy towards his leading ladies, however controversial.

When an old suitor comes back into her life, the heroine of *Gossip* also considers leaving her husband before realising her error and returning to the man she married. The presence on stage of the popular British actress Lillie Langtry – a known mistress of the Prince of Wales – in the spotlight-stealing role of the twice-married and still desirous Kittie Barry, disrupted traditional narratives by implying that, given a specific set of carefully planned circumstances, a contriving woman could profit from divorce.

The Climbers, through its portrayal of a woman wavering between a sense of duty to her loveless marriage and the pursuit of her own happiness, further subverted ideologies emphasising the importance of the family unit and condemning the act of divorce. As Tice Miller has acknowledged, the play offered its audience a 'convincing argument for divorce' (167). As 'love triangles' are a common trope in Fitch's work, and particularly important to the progression of the plot in *The Climbers*, in my analysis of this final play, I consider Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's conception of the erotic triangle and its implications in reading Fitch's work.

Sedgwick's work on erotic triangles, in her highly influential work *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), provides a critical framework that exposes the oppressive power structures within societies formulated on gendered hierarchies. Her approach, which utilises both Marxist and radical feminisms, examines literary productions of triangular relations between two men and a woman. Sedgwick bases an important part of her model upon the assumption that while homosocial and homosexual relationships between women exist in an unbroken and fluid continuum, the same continuum between men is 'radically disrupted' (ibid 2). She argues that this is, in large part, owing to the historical patriarchal oppression of male homosexuality (ibid 3).

As Yaeger summarises:

Although we can identify an uninterrupted sequence in which women love and affirm other women in both the private and public spheres, male bonding often involves the disruption of such continuity and may provoke a homophobic reaction to candid expressions of passion or to explicit sexual bonding with other men. Obligatory heterosexuality becomes the name, although not the ultimate meaning, of the homosocial game (1141).

Where the expression of desire between men is socially taboo or illegal, the erotic triangle enables men to route their desire for one another through women.

Sedgwick locates her theoretical framework as a 'recasting of, and refocusing on, René Girard's triangular schematization of the existing European canon' (*Between Men* 17). The majority of erotic triangles that Girard identifies in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* are comprised of two men vying for the love of a single woman. Significantly, Girard's theory suggests that the bond between the male rivals is at least as powerful as the romantic bonds between the men and the woman. Such triangles, Sedgwick argues, must not be treated ahistorically, 'but as a sensitive register precisely for delineating relationships of power and meaning, and for making graphically intelligible the play of desire and identification by which individuals negotiate with their societies for empowerment' (ibid 27).

In contrast to Girard's suggestion of a symmetrical structure of power within any erotic triangle, Sedgwick insists that the distribution of power within the male-male-female triangular structure is necessarily asymmetrical, since it operates within the context of a masculinised society that privileges male experiences and relationships over those of women (ibid 22). As a result of this formation, Sedgwick suggests, the primary emphasis will be on the bonds between men, with the woman functioning as a mediator/conduit: *through* the woman, the men are able to express their desire for one another. Sedgwick thus applies to the paradigm Rubin's notion of the 'traffic in women' who serve 'as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men' (ibid 26).

Sedgwick's model, as she developed it, was intended specifically for the analysis of English social structures, and indeed she ends her introduction to *Between Men* with the caveat that 'any attempt to treat [this book's formulations] as cross-cultural or (far more) as universal ought to involve the most searching and particular analysis' (ibid 19). Since its publication however, scholars from various spectra in the field of literary analysis

have applied the basic principles successfully to a plethora of texts, ranging from the works of the Ancient Greek poet Sappho, to the science fiction television series *Deep Space Nine* (Greene, Geraghty). The most basic prerequisite for analysis of erotic triangles through her model is its historical and geographical location within a male dominated social hierarchy, given that it works on the premise that men can use women, through their social positions of power, to express their desire for one another.

It seems reasonable, therefore, to consider the application of Sedgwick's framework to plays such as *The Climbers* which features a conventionally structured male-male-female romantic triangle at the centre of its action while also emphasising the double standard. In Sedgwick's analysis, the heroine in each play becomes essentialised and objectified, stripped of agency; her position within the social hierarchy renders her powerless, while the rivalry between the male characters is privileged. This paradigm, applied to a play such as *The Climbers*, has the potential to diminish the actions of the heroine, distorting a feminist analysis of the play and its important cultural impact.

Where Sedgwick's theory succeeds in certain conditions, but fails in others, is in its reification of women as conduits between men; it marginalises possible agency for women within an erotic triangle asserting a sense of selfhood, or being motivated to transgress the prevailing social order, and it silences the 'New Woman' of the late nineteenth century. As Sedgwick herself acknowledges, 'the isolation, not to mention the absolute subordination, of women, in the structural paradigm on which this study is based [...] is a distortion that necessarily fails to do justice to women's own powers, bonds, and struggles' (*Between Men* 18). The autonomy exhibited by Fitch's heroines, as I will illustrate in my analysis of *The Climbers*, extends beyond Sedgwick's conception. As a writer, Fitch placed his heroines in positions of power, while the men in his plays often

functioned to advance her story line¹¹. Fitch's plays were less about who gets the girl, but about the emotional and psychological growth of the 'girl' herself.

Analyses of the wider production and critical reception of plays such as *The Climbers* through Sedgwick's model reveals, when juxtaposed against a reading of the power structures within the play itself, the architectures of prejudice inherent in the historical casting of Fitch's work as weak, socially irrelevant drama. What is emphasised, ultimately, is not only the extent to which Fitch's plays resist traditional critical reading, but also the extent to which his conceptions of the heroine consciously challenged social expectations, and dramatic and literary conventions of the late nineteenth century.

'Dressed in a Very French Way':

***A Modern Match* (1891)**

A Modern Match was the first of many Fitch plays to depict contemporary New York life. The play, staging five 'contrasting' couples, offers, as Dearinger attests, 'an ambitious look at "modern" marriage' (109). A number of characters broach the idea of divorce in the play, but central to the plot is the dissolution of marriage between Violet and Robert Huntley. When Huntley, the junior partner of a New York banking firm, faces financial ruin, he initially fights to keep his dissatisfied and materialistic wife within the confines of his home. After she continues a flirtation with another man, however, Huntley casts her out, and she flees to Paris with her lover, Rankin. When Violet returns twelve

¹¹ Criticism of Fitch's heroes seeming dramatically weak in comparison to his heroines was common. As T. Miller asserts: 'Fitch has been criticized for writing stock male characters that lacked the nuance and depth of feeling he gave to women' (175).

years later, on the day of their daughter's wedding and in search of money, Huntley rejects her advances, disgusted by her appearance and being newly engaged to the 'noble-minded' widow Mrs Synnott ("Pitou's Company at the Grand"). The *Morning Advertiser* suggested that the plot would be familiar 'to the readers of the records of divorce courts' ("A Modern Match").

Performed by Augustus Pitou's newly formed stock company, *A Modern Match* premiered at the Grand Opera House in Minneapolis on the 14th of September 1891, where the *St. Paul Daily Globe* welcomed Fitch as 'one of the brightest dramatists of the day' ("Pitou's Company at the Grand"). The *New York Times* predicted success, and rightly so ("A Modern Match"). Fitch's new play toured the circuit, playing in Boston, Chicago, and Pittsburgh, before opening for a two-week run at the Union Square Theatre in New York. Audiences responded positively, applauding 'long and loud' and the press response – while not without some jibes at Fitch's craftsmanship¹² – was largely positive¹³ (undated clipping, *New York Times*). In New York, the *Morning Advertiser* reported that the play 'captured the house' on opening night and applauded Minnie Seligman's 'triumph' as the 'repulsive' Violet Huntley ("A Modern Match").

Seligman herself was no stranger to the divorce courts, as the American public were aware. The young actress married her first husband, Dr Kauffman, American editor of the *London Lancet*, in 1886 against the wishes of his family. The pair divorced in 1890 after four years of 'unhappy' marriage, Seligman then marrying her second husband,

¹² '*Morning Advertiser*: 'in the hands of an ordinary company, "A Modern Match" would excite attention chiefly in the rural districts' ("A Modern Match"). *Boston Post*: 'like the rest of [Fitch's] work [...] whatever cause of critical objection there may be, the piece offers much entertainment to the spectator'; 'in the serious portion of this new work Mr. Fitch has attempted a study of American character [...] it cannot be held that victory sits upon the young dramatist's banners' ("Mr Fitch's New Play").

¹³ See Dearing for a more detailed account of the press response (110-111).

Robert Cutting, in a 'secret' wedding that made headlines in the summer of 1892 (*New York Times* "Minnie Seligman a Bride").

Violet Huntley, proving to be a controversial heroine, excited considerable interest from critics.¹⁴ The *New York Times* described her as a 'false wife, a vain capricious woman with few redeeming traits' ("A Modern Match"). The *Boston Evening Transcript* considered her 'monstrous' for abandoning her husband and child ("Theatres and Concerts"). Fitch succeeded, in the estimation of the press, in making 'what is wicked, repulsive' ("Music and Drama" *Boston Evening Transcript*). While she was portrayed as morally bankrupt, however, she escaped traditional repercussions. Convention should have necessitated the death of the wayward wife at the end of the play; as Houchin attests, the fallen woman on stage so invariably ended her downfall in 'madness and death' that for her not to do so 'violated not only theatrical convention, but the "natural" order as well' (45).

Fitch's decision, therefore, not to stage Violet's death – in strong opposition to the wishes of Pitou¹⁵ – is significant, marking not only a willingness to break with convention, but the beginnings of what would become his increasing trend for sympathetic stagings of sexually and morally transgressive women. Violet's final moments, in this instance however, were pathetic enough to appease most critics. The visibly aged heroine talks wistfully of 'wooing' Death as her next lover, and, after watching her daughter's wedding party from afar, she 'sinks down' with the final curtain ("Music and Drama"; Fitch *Modern Match* 83, 84). Only the *Boston Evening Transcript* took issue

¹⁴ *Boston Post*: 'the piece has been played in many large cities throughout the country, exciting diverse criticism on account of the plot and the peculiarity of the leading character' ("At the Stage Door").

¹⁵ In December 1890, Fitch wrote to Mrs Dithmar: 'Pitou and I are still at X with it. He is determined I shall alter the last act, and *kill off my bad lady!* and I insist she shall live and be divorced – *au naturel!*' (Moses and Gerson 64).

with the ending, finding it 'intimidatingly painful' and unethical, not because Violet survived, but because Huntley neglected his duty to his wife:

[T]o have shown [Huntley] as manfully and nobly accepting that terrible outcome of the sacred "for better and worse" of his marriage vow [...] would have created a far more sympathetic situation, taught a far higher and finer and sweeter lesson. The turning from his door (with a second marriage in near prospect) of the mother of his child, nothing can make other than an antipathetic situation, and an unworthy one ("Theatres and Concerts").

Fitch's play, the critic argued, put forth a dangerous endorsement of divorce: '[o]ur day and time needs no subtle apology or justification for the custom of divorce; and it does need stern and serious lessoning on the sanctity and finality of marriage' (ibid).

Despite a poor review of the American play in British newspaper *The Era* which wrote that, '[i]n construction and delineation of character *A Modern Match* is worthless,' English actors/stage managers William Hunter and Madge Kendal purchased the rights in the UK ("The Drama in America"). Under the new title *Marriage, 1892*, with only minor changes to the script,¹⁶ the play debuted to an 'overcrowded house' at the Gaiety in Dublin on the 21st of October 1892 ("Dublin Day by Day"). It played at the Royalty in Glasgow a week later¹⁷. Although *Marriage, 1892* drew large crowds on opening nights, it did not share the same success as *A Modern Match* in the US.

At the Dublin premiere, *Belfast News* called the play 'strong' and 'the acting excited intense interest throughout' (ibid). London based 'ladies' newspaper *Hearth and Home* noted similarly that the 'enthusiasm of the audience was immense, and the "calls

¹⁶ The changes to the script included the insertion of a scene at the beginning of the final act in which characters open and discuss wedding presents, and minor changes to lines, e.g. the omission of the line 'more dead than if she were buried in the ground like Synnot' and the insertion of the final line (to be spoken by Violet's daughter Dorothy): 'Father, isn't it a perfect day? I'm so happy! Isn't it a lovely thing to have a future to look forward to?' (Fitch, *Marriage 1892* Act 3, page 29).

¹⁷ Some sources mistakenly record the play as having been staged at the Royalty in London rather than Glasgow, likely following from Moses and Gerson's record of Fitch's productions (389). The play in fact never made it to London.

most overpowering in their heartiness” (“People, Places & Things”). If the audience were willing to endorse the play on opening night, however, critics, for the most part, were not. *Freeman’s Journal* concurred, calling the play ‘a miserable story’ that ‘failed [...] to satisfy those who came to the theatre’ (“Mr and Mrs Kendal at the Gaiety”). The *Dublin Daily Express* called the play ‘dull’ and suggested that the audience must have been ‘good-natured and long suffering’ to remain for the entirety ‘without expressing any signs of the weariness which it was calculated to cause’ (“The Gaiety Theatre”).

Like the *Boston Evening Transcript* in the US, the *Dublin Daily Express* objected to the play’s treatment of divorce, and husband’s rejection of his ‘erring’ wife in particular.

The critic described the final scene:

[Fitch] has departed from the usual groove in allowing [Huntley] to be consoled with his partner’s widow and by making him refuse to forgive his erring spouse, when she returns in the usual fashion to beg his forgiveness on her daughter’s marriage. The audience is, indeed, left to assume that the rich and titled banker will take steps to obtain a divorce (“The Gaiety Theatre”).

The paper declared the play ‘unwholesome’ and, in another review published two days later, argued that there was ‘no good to be gained by insisting upon thrusting before the public gaze details which are usually reserved for the Divorce Court’ (ibid; “Marriage in 1892”).

In Glasgow, the reviews were just as poor. The *Glasgow Herald* likened the play to ‘Yankee notions’ which it described as ‘the nondescript articles which nowadays come to us in large variety from America’ (“The Royalty Theatre”). Although the audience was ‘undoubtedly interested,’ the critic suggested it was merely ‘a sort of hopeful interest – a patient waiting for something which, truth to say, really never came’ (ibid). The *Era* declared it was ‘received with scant favour’ (“Marriage, 1892”). The most prevalent criticisms of *Marriage, 1892* were that the play was unworthy of the Kendals, and that

the role of Violet in particular was unsuited to the esteemed Mrs Kendal¹⁸. The Kendals were both highly regarded in the late nineteenth century. Madge represented the epitome of the skilled and accomplished English actress, ranked without a superior in her home country, and would be made a dame in 1927 (Duncan 22).

Fitch attended the opening night in Dublin, later commenting on it in an interview:

The play went very well, but this was Mrs. Kendal's first adventuress. Tanqueray came later, and there was a general feeling of disapproval at seeing her assume so wicked a character ("A Chat with Mr. Clyde Fitch in His Home About Things Theatrical").

Hearth and Home, however, put a positive spin on the role, arguing that while '[s]ome of Mrs. Kendal's admirers "couldn't bear to see her act such a horrid woman,"' it made a 'refreshing' change to seeing so many 'bad women play good women' on the stage and the *Belfast News* called her '[t]antalisingly heartless' ("People, Places & Things"; "Dublin Day by Day"). *Hearth and Home* enticed its readers with a brief description of the 'somewhat *risqué* play,' but the British/Irish press at large objected to the so-called 'French' themes in *Marriage, 1892* ("People, Places & Things"). *Freeman's Journal* called it 'one of the most unwholesomely bad imitations of the French class of modern dramatic work that one can conceive.' ("Mr and Mrs Kendal at the Gaiety").

French drama, and French actresses, were synonymous with eroticism during the late nineteenth century. Parisian theatres catered primarily to male desires, despite the

¹⁸*Dublin Daily Express*: 'It seems that Mrs Kendal's talent should be wasted in endeavouring to give vitality to such a character as Violet Huntley [...] The part is not suited to Mrs Kendal, nor are her talents suited to the character' ("The Gaiety Theatre"). *Freeman's Journal*: 'the wonder is that Mr. and Mrs. Kendal should have so far risked their reputation in Dublin as to produce such a play' ("Mr and Mrs Kendal at the Gaiety"). *The Era*: Mrs Kendal's 'talent was thrown away on such a sorry task' ("Marriage, 1892"). *Glasgow Herald*: 'scarcely worthy of the Kendals [...] in such a part Mrs Kendal is not well suited' ("The Royalty Theatre"). *New York Times*: 'Clyde Fitch's "Marriage" has been slated at Glasgow. Mrs Kendal has seldom been seen to less advantage than in the play' ("Signor Lago's Failure").

presence of women in the auditorium: 'the theatre was *supposed* to offer a strongly erotic experience to men – and theatre was intended to be more meaningful to male than female spectators' (Berlanstein 105). Prostitutes in the auditorium, metonymically evoking the fictional courtesans on stage, were considered by theatre managers in Paris to be an asset to the 'elegance and playfulness' of the atmosphere (Berlanstein 106). Suggestions of theatre reform in Paris were met with defiance from the establishment who defended 'theater's carnality' and rejected attempts at 'purification' (ibid). 'A theatre that was not sexually charged,' argues Berlanstein, 'would have been unfamiliar, undesirable, and even un-French' (ibid).

However, in the name of protecting the virtue of young fashionable women in the audience, London theatres were subject to strict codes of censorship. When staging English adaptations of 'indecent' French plays it was common practice to censor the production by the 'excision of unsettling debates, toning down of sexual guilt, sheltering of young innocence, and injection of sentiment' (Eltis, *Acts of Desire* 81; 97). By branding Fitch's play as 'French,' the press implied its potential for moral corruption.

While Fitch did, throughout his career, make a point of rejecting any suggestion that his American plays were 'French' in theme or style – in 1908 he would defend three of his most successful ventures against Moses's claims that they were 'more French in flavor than American' – it remains evident that French drama had a significant influence on Fitch's work. Fitch himself, as can be evidenced from his letters¹⁹, was a frequent patron of the Parisian theatres, and adapted a significant number of French plays.

Within *A Modern Match/Marriage*, 1892, Fitch appropriated markers of supposed 'French' culture to indicate Violet's unrestrained sexuality to American and British

¹⁹ See Moses and Gerson.

audiences. Violet's choice of risqué Paris as a haven for her and her illicit lover was recognisable for the audience, and when she returns in the final act it is with a 'gaunt' face, 'still beautiful,' 'dressed in very French way,' with 'highly rouged face' and 'colored' hair (*A Modern Match* 80). Huntley acknowledges the changed appearance of his wife, staring pointedly at her and uttering an 'expressive "UGH!" of horror and disgust' (ibid). The moment has the potential for comedy, playing on her exaggerated appearance and failed attempt to appear alluring. In America, *The New York Times* described the moment as the 'most lurid and "theatric" point' in the play, and Violet herself as '[w]ickedness, very effective in rouge and a dark red wig' (undated clipping, *New York Times*).

Violet's 'French' appearance, and her pursuit of men with money, led to her being categorised by the *Boston Post* as a stage 'type' familiar to nineteenth century audiences: the adventuress ("A Modern Match," "Mr. Fitch's New Play"). The paper likened Violet to Clorine, the courtesan heroine in Émile Augier's²⁰ *L'Aventurière* (1848), and to subsequent British adventuresses, Becky Sharp in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847), and Lizzie Greystock in Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds* (1871) ("Mr. Fitch's New Play").

The adventuress was standard fare in French theatre, owing to a social and literary preoccupation with adultery (Eltis, *Acts of Desire* 85, 95). Frequent changes and alterations to the laws of adultery and divorce, argues Eltis, 'both reflected and fuelled heated debates on sexual morality' (ibid 84). In the US and UK, the term 'adventuress' was used to indicate a woman who exploited marriage and divorce as a means of acquiring social status and financial wealth, but could be stretched to include scheming and seductive fallen women, particularly those of French extraction. The adventuress figure, as J. Kaplan rightly notes, was a 'complex' one 'with a long pedigree' and prefigures

²⁰ In 1901 Fitch's *The Marriage Game* debuted on Broadway, an adaptation of Augier's *Le Marriage d'Olympe*.

in literature as stretching from ‘the “dark women” of Gothic melodrama’ to those of more ‘up-scale’ productions such as Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* in the 1860s (14).

Both J. Kaplan and Powell cite Jerome K. Jerome’s 1889 description of stage character types in *Stage Land* as defining the characteristics of the ‘adventuress’ in the late nineteenth century (14; 30). Jerome humorously describes her as a figure of ‘black-hearted villainy and abandoned womanhood,’ adding that she is ‘generally of foreign extraction’ (*Stage-Land*). According to Jerome: she smokes, has a business-like manner, dresses extravagantly, and suits neither domestic life nor motherhood: ‘she possesses rather too much sarcasm and repartee to make things agreeable round the domestic hearth’; ‘if she ever had [a child] she has left it on someone else’s doorstep’ (ibid). Significantly, she is to be found among the would-be social climbers of the poorer classes; while she ‘dresses magnificently’ it is not by virtue of her own financial wealth: she herself is ‘stone broke’ (ibid).

Violet, we are told in the play, acquired her wealth and social status through marriage to Huntley, and, losing both, she seeks a new source of income in the form of her lover Rankin. The *Boston Post* described her as taking up ‘the trade of what is politely called an adventuress [...] a very professional adventuress, indeed’ (“Mr Fitch’s New Play”). *The Era*, dispensing with such politeness, described her as a ‘courtesan’: ‘a thoroughly cold-blooded creature who sells herself for money, and has so little shame of woman-hood that she continually affronts her husband and the audience by boasting of her vice’ (“The Drama in America”). As Johnson (2006) has shown, the line between the multitude of fallen women types – which included both seductresses and seduced women – and prostitutes was a hazy one, with such characters being ‘fundamentally indistinguishable’ to late nineteenth century audiences (4).

Violet places a high value on money and material possessions, but thinks little of her husband or child. When her husband Huntley is confident that her love for him will 'help [her] bear poverty again,' Violet snaps that she 'would do anything rather than be poor again' (Fitch, *Modern Match* 13). Indeed, the only love Violet will fully admit to, when pressed, is 'love for money' (ibid 50). Her inadequacy as a mother and lack of inherent maternal instinct is emphasised in the opening act when she implores her aunt to kiss her daughter goodnight: 'won't you go up-stairs and kiss Dorothy good night for me; the child is such a bother!' (Fitch, *Modern Match*, 5). As Patterson attests, 'the American Girl's most important duty was a maternal one' (*Beyond the Gibson Girl* 37). With racial progress apparently dependent on the propagation of white men and women of 'good breeding', to reject one's maternal duty was to deny one's duty to the nation (ibid 40).

Within Fitch's plays, maternal affection, or the lack of, often provides a significant indication of character: morally ambiguous characters may redeem themselves through a renewed devotion to their children, but neglectful parents risk dramatic consequences and the ire of the audience. Violet's final decision to abandon her daughter, despite Huntley's plea for her to 'think of your child' in the third act, solidifies her status among the latter group (Fitch, *Modern Match* 42).

When Huntley finds Violet in the arms of Rankin in the third act he declares her unfit 'to breathe the same air as her daughter,' arguing that it is no longer in Dorothy's best interest for Violet to remain in the household (Fitch, *Modern Match* 62, 63). Vindicating Huntley's decision to keep the child from her mother, Dorothy flourishes in the years that Violet is absent. The *Chicago Tribune* described Dorothy at the end of the play as having 'been reared in accordance with proper teachings and influences' following Violet's departure ("Will Play 'A Modern Match'").

In contrast to the typical melodrama heroine, Jerome suggests that adventuresses such as Violet redeemed themselves in entertainment value, by at least exhibiting drive and independence: '[s]he can do something to help herself besides calling for "George"' (ibid). Indeed, in certain instances Violet is assertive, refusing to submit to her husband while expressing desire to escape the restrictive confines of their marriage. Reading her early arguments for separation in the play, it is easy to see why Fitch's heroines were compared with Ibsen's²¹:

Do you think I will submit to anything like that? I am tired of your jealousy, and moods. I married you for a husband, not a guardian. [...] I will not stay with a man like you to be watched and treated like a child. I will go home to my Aunt – there at least I shall be free (Fitch, *A Modern Match* 24).

Dearinger argues that 'Violet's assertion of independence might seem a cry for women's equality,' in another context, but in leaving her husband and child, 'she is merely selfish' (109). By having her abandon her child in favour of money and freedom, Fitch damned Violet in the eyes of the audience, but morality in *A Modern Match* is not expressed in explicitly black and white terms. Huntley, and the vision of marriage he shares with his dissatisfied wife, are far from idyllic: '[f]or the sake of our child I will force you to stay, and live out the married lie before the world' (ibid 43). In other moments too, Huntley appears overbearing and aggressive:

We shall live together, you and I, to the world man and wife, to ourselves stranger. I shall watch you like a hound, be careful – there is a place for cowardice in your heart, if not love' (ibid 50).

Violet later 'cries and cringes before him' as 'he takes her by her wrists' to expel her from the house (ibid 63). Within the context of the play, Violet faces dire consequences for

²¹ *New York Times*: 'Mrs. Bloodgood was not inclined to consider [Fitch's heroine] a new type – but she paid Mr. Fitch the compliment of describing the parts he usually writes as "Ibsen women."' ("Clara Bloodgood on "The Truth"").

shirking her marital and maternal duty but, importantly, Fitch does not present continued marriage as a viable option.

Therefore, despite Violet's transgressions in the play, the final scene, while condemning the fallen heroine, also serves to inspire a note of pity, mostly referred to as 'sentiment' in the press. The *New York Times* argued that with Violet's 'last appeal to the unforgiving husband,' Seligman 'made her auditors share her emotion' (undated clipping, *New York Times*). In Dublin, with Mrs Kendal in the role, the draw of sympathy was even stronger; *Hearth and Home* described her final moments on stage:

[Violet] comes back, brazen, impenitent, on the very day her girl is married, and watches, from concealment, the wedding procession disappear, then rushes forward, gathers up the flowers on which her child has trodden, presses them to her lips, and falls sobbing to the ground, most of us felt "there is good in the poor creature after all" ("People, Places & Things").

While evidence of sympathy from members of the auditorium does little to alter Violet's fate, it does suggest an audience more willing to empathise with the plight of the fallen woman than was widely acknowledged in the press. With a sympathetic staging of Violet at the end, the moral of the play becomes murky. Within the traditional frame of such a narrative, Violet, a dangerous and sexually transgressive fallen woman, should meet her downfall, with the audience fully assured that her fate is well-deserved. To pity her in her final moments, however, is to question the validity of her crimes. The *Glasgow Herald* complained that Fitch 'in the end completely fails to [...] suggest a moral, far less to give it emphasis' ("The Royalty Theatre").

When the play had premiered the year before in Minneapolis, the *Era* hoped to find a reflection of British society in the play:

A Modern Match [...] is no fanciful farce of the past, but, as we gather, a rather realistic drama of the present day [...] Many of the characters in the play are said to be portraits of members of the "New York Four Hundred," but whether that body is the equivalent of the "upper ten thousand" of London, or some more occult society, we honestly do not know" ("Theatrical Gossip" 10 Oct. 1891).

When it premiered in Glasgow, however, the *Herald* complained that Violet was unrealistic: '[Fitch] makes her as unlikely as she is unlovely [...] The kind of woman he evidently seeks to depict surely never had a living prototype. She is silly beyond sufferance' ("The Royalty Theatre"). The critic found Violet's sympathetic staging to be jarring and insincere: '[Violet] is sentimental and vicious [...] the sentiment is cheap and maudlin, and the vice is of the gutter' (ibid). The *Dublin Daily Express* agreed: '[j]ust as the curtain is about to fall the first attempt is made to give a touch of sentiment and womanly feeling to the character of the heroine, but the device is absurd' ("Marriage in 1892").

In America, reviewers had no trouble identifying 'living prototypes' for Violet Huntley. Minnie Seligman, in her preparation for the role of Violet in Fitch's play, worked on the character for an entire summer prior to rehearsals, visiting 'Newport, Saratoga, Long Branch and similar resorts' in order to study 'such types of character' where they 'would naturally be met' ("A Modern Match" *Boston Post*). These fashionable resorts, according to Aron, were places where vacationers were 'swept into a current of activity' which included a variety of social activities, and were significantly places where women were perceived to be predominant, both in number and in their influence over events and activities. The press located the resorts as female, and therefore constructed them in reports as places of snobbery, gossip, immorality and artifice (Aron 90-1).

Aron describes the overall effect at such places to have been one of "theatre," with guests on parade (women's bodies in particular were notably 'on view') in a visual spectacle of the social matrix informing both codification and reception (92). Most intriguingly, guests may indeed have been 'acting' social roles, performing, in effect, conformity to conceal transgression: '[a]nyone who could follow the rituals might be

included, thereby giving potentially unsavoury characters access to respectable society' (ibid 92-3). The adventuress on stage was influenced by her literary prefigures but, crucially, she, like other literary constructions of women, was drawn from codifications of such audaciously performative adventuresses.

The result of Seligman's study of women at the resorts, noted the reviewer for the *Boston Post*, was 'an exceedingly realistic impersonation' of an adventuress ("A Modern Match"). Likewise, other Boston reviewers remarked: '[t]he tale is not new. It is enacted every day'; 'Mr. Fitch has attempted a study of American character and conditions that invites immediate, close comparison with life' ("Music and Drama"; "Mr. Fitch's New Play").

With Violet's similarities to stock and 'real-life' adventuresses, critics disagreed as to whether Violet could be considered a 'type' or an original and realistic individual. The *Boston Post* argued that Fitch achieved only the basest staging of the theatrical adventuress type and nothing more:

Mr Fitch [...] has not produced much farther than an outline, so far as character is concerned [...] it cannot be thought that Mr. Fitch has drawn Violet as an individualized person or – in any more than the mildest sense – that he has suggested a type of character ("Mr Fitch's New Play").

The *Boston Evening Transcript*, however, argued that Fitch achieved a dramatically realistic portrayal of the heroine:

Violet is not and could not be offered as a type; as an individual she is possible and suggestive. The irony of heredity speaks in the skilful showing of her as the daughter of a shallow and selfish mother²² who yet never "oversteps prudence;" her character is well developed, from the cold society girl, willing to marry for money, to the abandoned adventuress, callous to everything but money ("Theatres and Concerts").

²² The critic refers to Violet's mother, meaning her aunt; Violet has been raised by her aunt and her mother is not in the play. Other critics make a similar mistake.

Audiences in Chicago, too, noted Fitch's use of heredity as a negative driving force for his heroine, with one critic linking the technique to Ibsen (Dearing 110). Violet's shady ancestry is hinted at by her aunt who implies a history of sexual promiscuity and illegitimate births and suggests that 'the least said about our family the better' (Fitch, *Modern Match* 27). Violet and her aunt were lacking in money and social status prior to Violet's marriage to Huntley. Fitch thus implies a link between hereditary weakness, manifesting as 'unrestrained' sexuality, and lack of wealth and breeding that was common in nineteenth century discourse.

With morality framed as hereditary in the late nineteenth century, as Richardson attests, the perceived moral corruption of the poor became an inescapable and predetermined biological fate:

From the hereditarian standpoint, no amount of moralizing the poor, or uplifting their souls, would help; neither God, nor education, nor philanthropy were any use against defective germplasm – or ill-judged marriage to a degenerate partner (24).

The notion that the poorer classes were genetically weaker – i.e. less intelligent and more prone to moral corruption – than the wealthy, and that they therefore posed a threat to the national gene pool, contributed to fears of social degeneration and decay, becoming one of the main tenets of the American and European eugenics movements of the early twentieth century. Raised by her aunt to transcend the bounds of her social status by pursuing men for wealth and status, Violet, within this context, posed a threat to the integrity of the upper class American gene pool, and to the future prosperity of the nation.

The influence of heredity and social status on the individual became common themes in Fitch's contemporary social plays. Violet's hereditary weaknesses in *A Modern Match* raised questions that evolved and resonated throughout Fitch's career: if Violet's

actions, as immoral as audiences may have considered them to be, are determined by her genetics and social circumstances, is she to blame for them? Is it possible for her to overcome her own character? Is she a villain or a victim? And should she be condemned or pitied?

‘What’s the Matter with Divorce?’:

***Gossip* (1895)**

Much like in *A Modern Match*, and later in *The Climbers*, the young heroine of *Gossip* considers divorcing her husband for another man. Her decision is suggested to be motivated by neurasthenic impulses – Dr. Robins is treating Gertrude for her ‘nerves’ – an affliction often associated in women with an apparently disruptive increase in independence and education (Fitch and Dietrichstein 1;17²³). In America, a small number of reviewers renounced the play on moral grounds – an unsurprising reaction given prevailing national anxieties over increasing divorce rates and declining birth rates among middle-class white women.

Convincing Gertrude to remain married to her ‘good’ husband, and stealing both the stage and headlines in the process, however, was Lillie Langtry in the supporting role of Kittie Barry. A captivating, comedic, and larger-than-life woman twice married herself, Mrs Barry was typical of Langtry’s repertoire, but her intervention in the discourse of divorce was, in this instance, significant; while she sombrely cautions Gertrude against a seemingly impulsive decision, Mrs Barry’s own personal success in the divorce court –

²³ In Fitch’s original manuscripts, page numbers are listed by act and then page number, with the page numbers for each act beginning again at 1. Where citing directly from the original manuscripts, I have kept this format.

‘[h]appiness hangs like a cherry out-side my cage and so I open the marriage door to get it’ – and her visible consumption of men – ‘she never has less than five adoring admirers in her train’ – seem to offer a counter argument (ibid 1-2, 2-12). What is suggested ultimately in the play is that while wives, just like their husbands, are duty bound to honour their vows to ‘good’ spouses, divorce may be a profitable venture for women who deem their husbands to be falling below par.

The play was the first of three collaborations between Fitch and Leo Dietrichstein. Produced by Langtry’s stock company, it premiered at Palmer’s Theatre in New York on the 11th of March 1895 before touring cities in America and Canada²⁴. Building on her success in the US, Langtry took the play to England, opening at the Grand Theatre in Islington, London on the 3rd of June in a production that was heavily anticipated in the press. *Gossip* toured across England²⁵ until the end of the year, returning to London for the re-opening of the Comedy Theatre. Reviewers as far apart as Glasgow, Belfast and New York commented on this ultimate production. The play was well received as an amusing comedy by audiences on both sides of the Atlantic, with Langtry’s fashionable French wardrobe and dazzling jewels exciting much interest. Upon seeing the play staged at the Comedy Theatre – a venue perceived to have high dramatic standards – however, London critics questioned the artistic and moral standards of the American play.

Set in Trouville – a popular and fashionable French resort town – *Gossip* centres on a married American couple. Gertrude, the nervous and dissatisfied wife of Richard Stanford, is tempted to leave her husband when Count Marcy emerges on to the scene. Marcy, it transpires, is the long-lost love of Gertrude’s youth. Though she has feelings for

²⁴ *Gossip* toured in various American cities including Chicago and Boston; in Canada the tour was confined, owing apparently to necessity, to a single week in which it played in Toronto, Hamilton, Ottawa, and Montreal (“The Engagement of Mrs. Langtry”).

²⁵ Cities of the British tour included Portsmouth, Brighton and Birkenhead.

him, Gertrude initially rebukes his advances. When her husband, giving too much credence to social gossip, accuses her of worse, however, she resolves to run away with him, and writes him a letter saying as much. The exuberant divorcee Kittie Barry saves the day, and the heroine from social scandal, convincing her to remain with her 'good' husband, retrieving the letter from the Count's apartment, and risking her own reputation in the process.

In New York *Gossip* premiered the same week as Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* opened at the Lyceum and Dithmar compared the two plays in the *New York Times*²⁶. Emphasising their light, visually appealing, and therefore superficial nature, Dithmar dubbed them both 'Plays of the Meringue Glace Variety' and in general the American press echoed Dithmar's assessment²⁷ ("The Theatrical Week"). While disappointed with the 'flippant and often irrelevant' treatment of the subject matter in both plays, Dithmar praised them for being 'fresh and unconventional' with clean dialogue and 'unusual' situations (ibid). Dithmar chastised Fitch (and Dietrichstein and Wilde), not for his sentimentality, but for his cynicism in the treatment of his unsympathetic heroines; one 'hysterical' and 'illogical,' the other 'utterly frivolous' (ibid). The appearance of *Gossip*

²⁶According to Dearing, the two plays shared more than a New York premiere date: 'Fitch [...] peppered *Gossip* with allusions to Wilde's successes, off-hand references to "an ideal husband" and to "Lord Goring," a character in Wilde's play. New York theatregoers would have been in on the joke' (142).

²⁷ Another review in the *New York Times* suggested that while *Gossip* was 'well written,' containing 'many telling lines' and 'skillfully (*sic*) managed' situations, it just missed the mark of good drama: 'more than half of the wit – gossamer-like little jests that would "go" well at a dinner party of twelve – was not strong enough to cross the footlights' (Mrs. Langtry's *Jewels*). 'The *Boston Post* suggested, however, that '[w]hile the piece is purely a comedy of a very light and attractive nature, there is still a thread of serious interest running through it' ("Mrs Langtry at Boston Museum").

alongside Wilde's clever but, in Dithmar's words, equally 'cynical' and 'depressing' play, left the critic desirous of the sentimental romances he usually decried²⁸ (ibid).

In his own words, Fitch took Dithmar's comments 'earnestly to heart,' writing to thank him for the review:

I would rather have had that kind, good criticism in the *Times* to-day, and *double* the damning I've had in most of the papers during the week, than pæans of praise from all the rest of the press, and real condemnation from you (Moses 100).

Significantly, Dithmar had recognised Fitch's intent as a writer: 'you have realized exactly what I was striving for, - honest simplicity of language and unconventional treatment to conventional situations' (ibid).

Following its Islington premiere in London, critics initially affirmed *Gossip* as 'sprightly' entertainment ("Mrs. Langtry's New Play a Success"). When it opened at the Comedy later that year, however, critics complained that the comedy was trivial and vulgar, and therefore unsuited to the venue. Clement Scott, writing for the *Illustrated London News*, argued a line between what was acceptable in venues perceived to cater to the uneducated masses, and those that entertained London's fashionable elite:

There is no reason that Mr. Clyde Fitch's new play, "Gossip," should not go down without hostile comment at certain American "one stand" theatres on tour; and with the attraction of Mrs. Langtry, with her beautiful dresses and decorations, it is conceivable that the play would pass muster in certain English provincial towns. But when poor "Gossip," with all its crudeness on the surface, is brought to the very best comedy theatre in all England [...] then it is not unreasonable that an audience with a trained and educated palate should find the new dish very little to taste [...] weak and inoffensive, but not up to the comedy stamp of Mr. Carr's theatre ("The Playhouses").

²⁸ 'Now, we have had quite enough of mock heroics and sentimentality on the stage, and it would be pleasant to be able to hope that they had been banished altogether. But two such new plays as these in one week make one sigh for a little of the wholesome sentiment, simple pathos, and homely humor of some of the old plays; for a real love story, with a loveable heroine and a hero sufficiently heroic to overcome the obstacles that always beset the course of true love in romance; for something to surely touch the human heart' (Dithmar, "The Theatrical Week").

Scott's remarks emphasise critical hierarchies based on class, education and nationality; American art suffers in comparison to European forms, while critics perceive patrons from rural towns to appreciate low entertainment based purely on spectacle or bawdry comedy, reserving legitimate and apparently more intellectual drama for elite audiences in the capital.

Other reviewers agreed wholeheartedly with Scott. The *Pall Mall Gazette* called *Gossip* 'a mistake – except at Islington,' adding that 'the sooner it is replaced the better it will be for the fame of the Comedy Theatre' ("Gossip," at the Comedy"). The *London Evening Standard* argued that the play was not 'in accordance with the artistic aim with which it has been understood that Mr. Comyns Carr entered upon the management of this house' ("Comedy Theatre"). The reviewer expressed 'regret and surprise' that 'considering the reputation of the Comedy Theatre for good taste [...] so many of the lines [...] should be so coarse and vulgar' (ibid). The critical preconception that lewd material would not suit the tastes of fashionable London audiences did not reflect the reality. Indeed, the audience at the Comedy appear to have gone unoffended by any of the more suggestive lines in the play – delivered mostly by Langtry – with reviewers noting the positive response to the play throughout opening night²⁹.

The play's treatment of divorce raised further ire from a small number of British critics, who made a point of emphasising the play's grounding in American divorce law. Henry James Byron's weekly periodical, *Fun*, jibed ironically at 'the "holy" bond of (American) matrimony' and 'the charming laws of [...] America' that allowed the women of Fitch's plays to divorce and (re)marry as they saw fit ("Waftings from the Wings"). In

²⁹ *The Globe*: 'It was favourably received' ("Gossip"). *The Morning Post*: 'The Play was well received, and ought to be a success' ("Comedy Theatre"). *London Evening Standard*: 'it may be added that there was much good-natured applause throughout the evening' ("Comedy Theatre").

British reviews, the condemnation of women divorcees and American divorce law was evident. *The Globe* asserted – though theatregoers didn't seem to mind – that English audiences would be more critical of the play's depictions of divorce, given the comparatively rigid divorce laws for women in the UK:

A comparison of "Gossip" with recent works which have caused some scandal at home and abroad, leads to the conclusion that if social problems reach normally in America a stage less acute than is manifested here, it is because facilities for divorce act as a lenitive ("Gossip").

American audiences, the critic implied, were dulled to the problems of their own society. A key issue raised in *Gossip*, that would not have gone unnoticed by American audiences, however, could be described as being very American indeed; Gertrude suffers from a nervous, or 'neurasthenic' disposition. Her husband refers in the play to the 'nervous depression' for which they have sought the help of a doctor and 'from which she [...] never fully recovered' (Fitch and Dietrichstein 1;20). In line with nineteenth century American understandings of neurasthenia, Gertrude also suffers from fatigue and headaches.

Middle-class American women, such as Gertrude, were apparently at the greatest risk of developing nervous disorders owing to their inherent fragility:

Contemporaries noted routinely in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s that middle-class American girls seemed ill-prepared to assume the responsibilities and trials of marriage, motherhood, and maturation. Frequently women, especially married women, complained of isolation, loneliness, and depression. Physicians reported a high incidence of nervous disease and hysteria among women who felt overwhelmed by the burdens of frequent pregnancies, the demands of children, the daily exertions of housekeeping and family management. The realities of adult life no longer permitted them to elaborate and exploit the role of fragile, sensitive, and dependent child (Smith-Rosenberg 199).

Indeed, Stanford, discusses his wife in child-like terms, reducing her to a fragile and dependant girl, unequipped to face the trials of adult life without husbandly and medical intervention. In the opening act, for example, he describes her as 'the most adorable little

woman in the world, who unfortunately is neither strong nor well' (Fitch and Dietrichstein 1;7).

The characterisation of Gertrude highlights what Smith-Rosenberg recognises as the contradictions inherent in nineteenth century definitions of the 'True Woman' and the 'Ideal Mother':

The True Woman was emotional, dependent, and gentle – a born follower. The Ideal Mother [...] was expected to be strong, self-reliant, protective, an efficient caretaker in relation to children and home. [...] Especially in the nineteenth century, with its still-primitive obstetrical practices and its high child-mortality rates, she was expected to face severe bodily pain, disease, and death – and still serve as the emotional support and strength of her family (199).

Gertrude fits the former definition, but fails to meet the criteria for the latter. According to Stanford, Gertrude was 'a serious [...] sort of girl' when he met her, 'in better spirits for a while following their marriage, but fell into her 'nervous depression' following the loss of their infant child (Fitch and Dietrichstein 1;20).

Neurologist George Miller Beard (1881) popularised neurasthenia as a psychopathological term in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and theorised that increased mental activity heightened the risks of nervousness in women (*American Nervousness* vi). As a result, physicians associated nervous disorders in women with education and a rejection of motherhood and marriage. Tellingly, Gertrude complains to her doctor that her symptoms are worse after she begins to consider leaving her husband, affirming the perceived link between the increase of independence, education, and nervous disorders in women (Fitch and Dietrichstein 2;9).

Where they mentioned her at all, critics described Gertrude as an irrational woman, driven by her emotions³⁰. In the play, however, conversing with Mrs Barry and

³⁰ As well as insinuating her selfishness, the *New York Times* referred to Gertrude's 'whimsical moods,' painting her actions as irrational: '[f]or unexplained reasons she has

defending her decision to leave her husband for the love of her youth, Count Marcy, Gertrude argues that she is 'sensible at last' (Fitch and Dietrichstein 2;27). Emphasising her autonomy and her right to individual fulfilment – both of which necessarily conflict with her duty to her husband and, by extension, the American nation – Gertrude reasons that one's 'husband should be, must be the man you love' (ibid 2;27). Mrs Barry responds humorously that such thinking is 'modern and wicked' (ibid).

Warning Gertrude of the gossip that would result from a public divorce, Mrs Barry describes it as inescapable and pervasive: 'carrion in the air,' 'fire in the street,' and 'scented perfume in our drawing rooms' (Fitch and Dietrichstein 2;6). Such gossip, she declares, is capable of '[drugging] the heart of those who love us best [...] [eating] into our own brains, and [driving] us mad' (ibid). Her description is rhetorically graphic, yet rooted in social reality. She questions Gertrude's future should she ultimately be left divorced and unmarried to Count Marcy:

And those who would still love you with their broken hearts, like your husband (he would I know) those you yourself could not help but shut out from you, and so you would live alone! Oh, it is too terrible for me to imagine (2-29).

Indeed, Hymowitz and Wiessman describe women divorcees in nineteenth century America as 'social pariahs, disgraced in the eyes of their families and often shunned by "polite" society [...] branded as "bad" and "loose"' (91).

Mrs Barry herself, however avoids any social stigma associated with either her divorce or her remarriage:

Gossip and scandal sit side by side on the sea wall aiming stones at her, but they miss her at every throw. Where another woman will lose her whole reputation

consented to a loveless marriage, although her heart has long been given to a French nobleman ("Mrs Langtry's Jewels").

Dithmar described her as a 'hysterical, illogical woman' who 'secures no sympathy' ("The Theatrical Week")

through the ordinary devotion of one man, she never has less than five adoring admirers in her train and no one can find any reason to object (*Gossip* 1-2).

An actress who would be a divorcee herself by 1897, Langtry was equally familiar with social speculation and gossip, and also used it to her advantage. R. Lawrence suggests that rumours of her 1877-1880 affair with Edward, Prince of Wales lured audiences to her plays in America. Notable as a social beauty and fashion icon, Langtry's off-stage reputation played a significant role in her acting career. As an actress, she was conscious of her ability to excite the attention of both the audience and the press. Head describes her production of *Gossip* as a prime example of Langtry superimposing 'spectacle upon art' (35).

Reviewers across the board seemed more interested in Langtry's extravagant costumes than in any other aspect of the production. Her attire made headlines, with her dresses and jewels exploited as a draw to audiences ("Mrs Langtry's Jewels", "Mrs Langtry's Wonderful Tiara", "Fashions Four Months Hence"). While her jewels were, for most, unattainable objects to be gazed upon and envied from the stalls, her dresses held attainable as well as aspirational value for women of the audience. Langtry's gowns for her role in *Gossip* were reportedly the creations of Parisian designer Monsieur Madeleine LaFerrière ("Mrs Lily Langtry"). Much was made of the fact that they were believed to represent LaFerrière's idea of the styles that would prevail at the fashionable seaside town of Trouville (and the setting for *Gossip*) the following summer, the implication being that women could regard Langtry's attire as a prediction of forthcoming fashions (ibid). Marketisation was becoming increasingly common in theatre at the time; responding, apparently, to the desire among middle-class women to imitate the dress of the leading ladies, imitation gowns became newly available in department stores (Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences* 68, 77).

Langtry's deliberate and calculated use of her costumes created further spectacle. As Head argues, the Parisian dresses Langtry wore were suited to the wealthy American character she played, yet she overdressed in certain scenes, donning, for example, an elaborate ball gown even though the script offered no discernible cause for her attire, the scene being set in an apartment(35-38). The diamonds she wore had such an effect on the audience that critics in New York argued they distracted viewers from the action of the play ("Mrs Langtry's Jewels"; Dithmar, "The Theatrical Week"). A journalist for the *Indianapolis Journal* humorously reported that Langtry had indeed been reluctant to wear her diamond tiara for such reasons ("Mrs. Langtry's Wonderful Tiara"). After resolving to use it only 'in case of emergency,' the reviewer suggests, Fitch apparently ran to her dressing room on the second night to exclaim 'For heaven's sake wear your tiara' (ibid).

While intended as a light-hearted jab at the play, the article highlights the sensation caused by the emergence of Langtry in her diamond tiara. The *New York Times* described the much-discussed scene in detail:

Mrs. Langtry entered the bachelor's apartment wearing a coronet of diamonds, a necklace and brooch of diamonds and rubies, and other gems that (to be American and practical) must have represented an outlay of \$100,000. Her attire was so wonderful, so dazzling, so recklessly inappropriate – as it seemed – that a murmur of surprise ran through the auditorium. The play was forgotten. The best of the scene went for nothing ("Mrs Langtry's Jewels").

The scene, the *Times* declared, had been 'utterly ruined' by the appearance of the jewels (ibid). Significantly, however, the *Times* blamed Fitch and Dietrichstein for the fault rather than Langtry, arguing it to be the writers' fault 'that more was not made of the lady's jewellery and her fondness for wearing it all early in the play' (ibid). Dithmar complained that time was spent on admittedly 'clever' scenes that 'should have been devoted to preparing the audience for that dazzling display of diamonds' ("The Theatrical Week").

After a box of Langtry's famed jewels – reportedly worth £40,000, and including three diamond tiaras and a number of diamond necklaces – were stolen from a bank, Langtry turned the scandal into a gag; in Birmingham, as she handed over her jewels to her financially struggling husband in the play, she reportedly declared: 'My jewellery, *or what is left of it* [...] Sell it, pawn it, I don't care, but don't send it to the bank' (Langtry 228).

Langtry's sensation-hunting tactics were self-referential, and, as Head concludes: '[t]he presentation of the actress took precedence over that of the character' (38). It remains, however, that Langtry was a great draw for audiences who went to see the play. Even while condemning *Gossip* as an altogether 'bad play,' the *Chicago Tribune* attested to the audience's 'warm' response to Langtry, lamenting that she 'should have been handicapped' by the 'doomed' play ("Mrs Langtry Returns to Gotham").

R. Lawrence argues that in England Langtry was never subject to the same degree of 'Langtrymania' as in America and Canada. However, as the press response to *Gossip* illustrates, Langtry's appeal to British audiences was substantial, with the actress cited as the primary draw for audiences to see the play ("Mrs. Langtry's New Play a Success," "Theatre Royal," "Amusements in Birkenhead," "Our London Letter"). As Clement Scott suggested in the *Illustrated London News*, 'the play owed much to her' and her performance in Britain granted her another 'step up the ladder of fame' ("The Playhouses").

Likewise, the enticement of Langtry's wardrobe was much the same for theatregoers in Britain as in America. Throughout April, two months before *Gossip* premiered in the UK, an article circulated describing Langtry's costumes as 'prophetic frocks,' predicting fashions 'four months hence' ("Up-to-Date Dresses," "Fashions Four Months Hence," "Musical and Dramatic Notes," "This Morning's News"). The *Sketch*, however, argued that Langtry's elaborate French wardrobe spoiled her: 'the papers are

raving about her dresses, and the rumor of their splendour will attract many. To me they seemed ill-chosen, and instead of enhancing her beauty they almost nullified it' ("Gossip," at the Comedy").

The same reviewer compared Langtry unfavourably to the distinguished English actress Madge Kendal (who starred as Violet in the London version of *A Modern Match/Marriage* 1892), arguing that Langtry had taken up 'a typical Kendal part' that could have been 'really interesting' had it been played by the other actress (ibid). Langtry's style, he suggested, was 'amateurish' and her method was 'vulgar' (ibid). The *Sketch* was not the only British periodical to compare the two actresses, others suggesting that not even the Kendals could have made the play suitable for the Comedy³¹. In her exploration of women Shakespeare³² actors in the Fin de Siècle, Duncan argues that Kendal 'consistently polarize[d] herself and Langtry' (48). Langtry's celebrity status as an actress was founded on her notoriety as a social beauty, and fuelled by the rumours of her affair with the Prince of Wales. According to Duncan, both Kendal and Langtry women had social links with aristocracy, but Kendal 'self-fashioned as a kind of theatrical aristocrat,' emphasising her theatrical ancestry – both her father and brother were stage actors – and craftsmanship, while Langtry was in comparison 'artistically *nouveau riche*, an interloper and self-made woman' (47).

³¹ *Pall Mall Gazette*: 'It is poor commonplace stuff with nothing in the style of its treatment to redeem its authors' choice of themes and characters which have been done to death in what is known as 'the Kendal repertoire' [...] we are not at all disposed to find fault with them for trying to turn a Mrs. Langtry into a Mrs. Kendal' ("Gossip," at the Comedy).

Clement Scott, *Illustrated London News*: Given to such experienced artists as Mr. and Mrs. Kendal, whose style, of course, it would suit, the result would have been precisely the same' ("The Playhouses").

³² Both Kendal and Langtry performed in a number of Shakespeare plays, often taking up the same roles, most notably that of Rosalind in *As You Like It*. See Duncan chapter 1. "The Lily, The Matron, and Rosalind".

Following her 1882 stage debut as Rosalind, thirteen years prior to the premiere of *Gossip*, suggests Duncan, Langtry was ‘subject to a profession-wide revolt against the *fact* of her as an actress, debate over her ‘right’ to perform overshadowing assessment of her ability’ (47). Duncan argues that by 1890, however, reviews of her performance in the same role indicate ‘the beginnings of a cultural shift from the elevation of female artlessness towards appreciating female skill’ (59). Indeed, while there was still an overwhelming focus on Langtry’s image and costumes, and while publications such as *The Sketch* and the *Pall Mall Gazette* criticised her ‘amateurish’ performance, dwelling on the question of the play’s suitability for the Comedy,³³ both *The Globe* and *The Era* complimented Langtry’s improving style³⁴. In America, the *New York Times* also complimented the actress’s ability, arguing that her performance ‘could scarcely be excelled’ (“Mrs Langtry’s Jewels”).

With the play intended for Augustin Daly’s stock company, Fitch originally designed the role of Mrs Barry for Irish-born actress Ada Rehan³⁵ (Daly 623). Daly returned *Gossip* to Fitch after the part of the remarried divorcee was rejected by Rehan, the actress having found it ‘not congenial’ (623). Langtry, however, was happy to take up both the play and the part. The *Glasgow Herald* described Mrs Barry as ‘a keen-witted but good-natured woman of the world,’ declaring that such a role suited Langtry ‘admirably’ (“Music and the Drama”). That a part deemed unfitting for Rehan should fit Langtry, in the eyes of critics, has much to do with public perception of the actress. As

³³ *The Sketch*: ‘Mrs. Langtry has grown far more amateurish in style than she used to be.’ (“Gossip,” at the Comedy”). *Pall Mall Gazette*: ‘[Langtry’s] performance is just about worthy of the piece, and far from worthy of the Comedy Theatre’ (“Gossip,” at the Comedy”).

³⁴ *The Globe* declared that Langtry ‘displayed some genuine comic gifts,’; *The Era* argued that Langtry had improved since Islington and ‘now acts it with admirable ease and naturalness’ “Gossip”; “The Comedy”).

³⁵ Similarly, Oscar Wilde wrote the part of Mrs. Erlynne with Rehan in mind.

Duncan suggests, Langtry profited from roles that 'reflected her accrued cultural meanings' (21). Mrs Barry, as a 'belle Américaine,' an American beauty, an outspoken character with a morally dubious past, was a role that would have resonated with the audience's impression of Langtry (Fitch and Dietrichstein 1;1).

Divorcees and other women in what R. Lawrence terms 'complicated relationships' were significant among Langtry's repertoire. In 1899, the year following her own divorce, and four years after the premier of *Gossip*, Langtry starred as Mrs Trevelyan in one of her most famous productions, Sydney Grundy's *The Degenerates*. The role bore marked similarities to *Gossip*: Mrs Trevelyan is a divorcee, intent on saving a younger friend from repeating her own mistakes. When the production premiered in London, a correspondent for the *New York Times* described Mrs Trevelyan as a woman 'conversant with all the phases of shady life,' noting that the stories of both she and Langtry were 'much the same' ("Mrs Langtry's New Play"). The article declared explicitly that the play dramatised Langtry's 'own experience,' a view that was common among theatregoers (ibid).

Such roles ultimately proved most profitable for Langtry. As Eltis suggests, critics and audiences resisted Langtry's early attempts to re-type herself in sentimental roles, but she went on to 'make a fortune producing herself in a repertoire rooted in her sexual celebrity' (*Acts of Desire*, 154). That Langtry was successful precisely because she was, performatively, convincingly like the sensational women she performed on stage, suggests an audience that was desirous of more than passive and sentimental feminine icons.

Indeed, it was increasingly common in the late nineteenth century for actresses like Langtry to profit from stagings of female sexuality. As Eltis suggests:

Plays centring on female desire and transgression, in which the audience's attention was focussed on the actress's body and its imagined sexual history, proved a profitable theatrical commodity for theatre managers, and one which the actresses themselves were quick to exploit (*Acts of Desire*, 154).

In *Gossip*, Mrs Barry argues that it would be immoral and unjust for Gertrude to leave her husband:

[I]n a fit of momentary rage you are going to drag the name you took from your husband and promised to honor for his sake, in the dirt - you are going to break up his life in return for the unselfish love he has always given you (Fitch and Dietrichstein 2;29).

Mrs Barry here pits herself firmly in support of wifely duty and honour. Emphasising the selfishness of a divorce, Mrs Barry asks if Gertrude would suggest the same course of action to her own daughter: "Go – shame him, shame me, shame all that love you! but satisfy yourself?" Would you say that? (ibid). The *New York Times* argued that Langtry 'touched a true note of feeling' in this 'appeal to the erring young wife,' adding that it had been 'well worded by Mr. Fitch and his co-laborer' ("Mrs Langtry's Jewels"). The newspaper reiterated the message for the sake of its readers: '[w]hat would you say if your baby girl had lived, and grown up to be a woman, and married, and thrown herself away as you threaten to? That is the idea' (ibid).

Mrs Barry articulates clearly that any fault lies with Gertrude, rather than her husband. Women who want to divorce their husbands, she argues, are guilty of needing a change within themselves, rather than a change in husband (Fitch and Dietrichstein 2;5). She draws on her own experience as evidence that a change in husband will not always satisfy a dissatisfied wife:

I wasn't happy with Pennington, because he wouldn't give me anything I wanted, now I'm restless with Tommy – God bless him – because he lets me do every blessed thing I wish. The point is this – the husband is always a husband. He who replaces the husband is only another (Fitch and Dietrichstein 2;5).

While implying that marriage itself is always a 'trap' for women, Mrs Barry's descriptions paint women as insatiable consumers in the market of men and marriage, tapping in to anxieties about the effect of the same consumerist culture that apparently drove American women to see Langtry's plays.

In the opening scene of the play, Mrs Barry's husband describes what he perceives proudly (as an American) as the consumeristic excesses inherent in American culture: '[Americans] are for everything big! [...] With us the man who is not too rich now-a-days, hasn't enough. He who has no indigestion has not dined. He who is not madly in love has not loved at all' (Fitch and Dietrichstein 1;5). While he embraces the consumerism of his country, he goes on to evoke the uncomfortable consequences of an insatiable desire for more, the inevitable 'indigestion' of the consumer. Strikingly, he discusses the consumption of goods and romantic relationships in similar terms, implying increases in expectation and demand within both.

Patterson identifies expressions of consumer-related anxiety in depictions of early twentieth century Gibson Girls in the drawings of Charles Dana Gibson, where in at least two instances Gibson depicted them literally as entomologists and jugglers – scrutinising under a magnifying glass and juggling miniaturised male suitors – at a time when the 'demanding and capricious' American Girl appeared to 'control the market in men and consumer goods' (*Beyond the Gibson Girl*, 40). These images, suggests Patterson, made uncomfortable consumption for the male viewer. Conceived of as passive 'desirous object' yet performing the active role of 'sexual selector,' such a woman might continue to browse the market even after apparently selecting her mate (ibid).

Such concerns resonated with the same set of fears that the new women threatened against American motherhood. 'The New Woman's sexuality,' argues Patterson, 'supposedly free from social or moral restraints – was viewed as a threat both

to the marital fidelity necessary to insure rightful paternity and to the maternal devotion necessary to insure racial progress' (ibid). For white middle-class American women, however, part of performing one's national duty lay not just in marriage and mothering, but also in the selection of an appropriate husband. As Patterson has illustrated, writer and advocate for social reform Charlotte Perkins Gilman suggested, in her works, that while men were likely to 'please themselves with a superficially attractive mate, women, as mothers of the race, would work to ensure racial progress' (*Beyond the Gibson Girl*, 40).

Fitch, in *Gossip*, offers a counter narrative to Gilman, however. Mrs Barry, in the second act, declares herself in favour of quick and easy 'American' divorce, arguing it to be 'very handy' (*Gossip* 2;12). She delivers a monologue on the subject:

What's the matter with divorce? I don't know anything about it over here, but at home it's "very handy". Say my marriage is a mistake – I am bored, and want to escape – you come along and I encounter my ideal. Happiness hangs like a cherry out-side my cage and so I open the marriage door to get it. You please me, I please you, life is before us. Presto! There is my hand, a minister, or a mayor, a question or two (with easy answers) a fee, and a handshake. How do you do, good-bye, I went in miserable, Mrs. Jones –

(*Looking miserable*)

and I come out happy Mrs. Smith –

(*Beaming*)

Now what's the matter with that! (2;12)

Both the comedy of the script and the actress's performance of the scene avoided overtly subverting Victorian principals. Mrs Barry's closing question, '[n]ow what's the matter with that!' functions as a punch line, but her attitude to divorce is alluringly carefree while framing divorce as an easy and potentially enjoyable venture. Her argument rests largely on the individual's right to seek happiness, suggesting that a disappointing marriage may easily be rectified in the divorce court. In the scenario she describes, women have the power to discard and take-up husbands at their whim.

In the final act of the play, when Gertrude has apparently realised the error of her ways in wanting to leave her husband, she declares that she 'was first a spoiled child, and then a spoiled wife' (Fitch 4;7). The implication being that married women who want more, or simply other, than their husbands are spoiled and excessively demanding, and therefore at fault. Despite her assertions, however, Gertrude seems far from 'spoiled' in the context of the play. Rather, she is portrayed initially as a meek and undemanding. In contrast, Mrs Barry amuses with outlandish demands of her husband: 'look here, Tommy, I can pardon you for not being one of the Bayards of France, but take my word for this, I will not forgive you for being stingy. Go, buy me a yacht' (Fitch and Dietrichstein 1;15).

Though Mrs Barry counsels Gertrude strongly against divorcing her husband, she does not suggest that she regrets her own divorce or is in any way striving to stop her friend from repeating her own mistakes. Defending her own decision compared to Gertrude's, she argues that she divorced her husband 'decently,' while Gertrude 'will only ruin [herself] and the law will laugh at one more un-fortunate' (Fitch and Dietrichstein 2;28). Such a stance infers that, by following certain codes of behaviour, divorce may be undertaken in a way that is more acceptable to society.

For Mrs Barry, the biggest distinction between an acceptable and unacceptable divorce lies in the character of the husband: 'Pennington was not a good man like Stanford, or Tom. If he had been, I'd have hung on to him for dear life' (ibid). In her argument that, although one should stay with a 'good' husband, it may be advantageous to divorce a 'bad' one, she neglects to define precisely what constitutes a husband 'bad' enough to divorce. Indeed, her earlier description of her own decision to divorce, following a brief marriage at a young age, suggests that she supports the idea that a woman is justified in seeking divorce when a husband is merely not the best suited to her. The message, ultimately, is conflicted by the construction of Gertrude as a nervous

and 'spoiled' – woman, thereby locating the desire to divorce as irrational and selfish (Fitch and Dietrichstein 4;7).

Thus, *Gossip* presents its audience with conflicting ideology concerning the role of women in society and their right to divorce. On the one hand, it is made clear that Gertrude has a moral duty to remain with her husband, yet there remains a suggestion that, were her husband not the best possible mate on offer, she may be justified in divorcing him. However, such justification seems almost impossible to secure within a social framework that marks divorcees as self-serving, while threatening to ostracise them from 'decent' circles. Complicating matters further, medical discourse on nervousness equated women's social and economic independence with a strain on the nervous system and, therefore, a perceived threat to their health. Gertrude finds balance and equilibrium in *Gossip* when she accepts her husband as her 'ideal'; for American women seeking divorce from a dissatisfying (but not dangerous or threatening) marriage, such discourse demands a choice between physical health and individual fulfilment.

'My Own Life, My Own Happiness':

***The Climbers* (1901)**

Building on his experience in writing plays like *A Modern Match* (1890), *Gossip* (1895) and *The Moth and the Flame* (1898), *The Climbers* represented, by many accounts, Fitch's most successful and serious staging of contemporary American life to date and a departure from the lighter comedies that the public associated with his name. With the new play, he turned his critical gaze to the wealthier inhabitants of his New York milieu, interrogating further the moralities of divorce. Howells declared that Fitch's *The Climbers* succeeded in capturing the 'essence of New York' and most American critics agreed that

it represented a triumph for American theatre (“The Recent Dramatic Season” 475). Subsequently, *The Climbers* became regarded as one of Fitch’s best works. It was adapted into film in 1915, 1919 and 1927, and revived on stage in New York by the Metropolitan Playhouse as recently as 2017 (“Clyde Fitch’s Sharp Satire”).

Following in the footsteps of British actress-managers such as Lillie Langtry, popular and successful American actress Amelia Bingham adopted the play as the debut for her newly formed stock company. Much like *Gossip*, the central plot of *The Climbers* concerns a married woman torn between a sense of duty to her husband and her love for another man. In *The Climbers*, however, the husband, Richard Sterling, is a nervous alcoholic who has been shamed by his fraudulent loss of money on Wall Street, and the wife, Blanche, is a caring mother. As such, the play troubles the notion that it is the moral duty of the mother to remain married to the father of her child.

As D. Lawrence (2007) shows, fallen man plays – a variation on the more typical fallen woman narrative – became standard fare in late nineteenth century theatre (“Sowing Wild Oats”). Unlike their female counterparts, the men were almost always ‘saved through the intervention of a good woman’ (ibid 889). Further distorting theatrical convention, however, Fitch’s fallen man in *The Climbers* followed the course typically set out for women, succeeding in the final act in his attempt at suicide, thus freeing his wife to marry a more suitable American man without the necessity for a divorce.

What is most significant about *The Climbers*, I argue, is the extent to which the heroine, and not the fallen hero, drives the action of the play. The autonomy asserted by Blanche Sterling – played in the US by Bingham – is especially remarkable given the structure of relationships in the play. As Sedgwick illustrates in *Between Men* (1985), the asymmetrical matrix of power within a male-male-female romantic triangle necessitates that the woman functions as little more than a conduit for the privileged expressions of

male desire. Blanche, however, like other Fitch heroines, asserts a sense of her own autonomy and identity that goes beyond her status as a wife and signifier of masculinity. Building on the groundwork of the heroines in *A Modern Match* and *Gossip*, Blanche Sterling is not a trophy to be won, but a woman with the power to choose. The failure of the majority of critics to read Blanche seriously as the heroine of the play, however, left many – particularly those in London – with the sense that the play was devoid of meaning, and contributed to a wider misreading of the play itself.

In 1901, six years after the opening of *A Modern Match*, Clyde Fitch was at the height of his career. The year had barely begun before the playwright saw four of his plays running simultaneously in New York, each drawing ‘crowded houses’ (Moses and Gerson 177). *The Climbers* opened at the Bijou Theatre, Broadway, on the 15th of January 1901, and continued there for an extended run. On the 28th of January in the same year, Fitch’s vaguely historical romance *Barbara Frietchie* (1899) returned to New York at the Academy of Music, Ethel Barrymore starred in *Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines* at the Garrick Theatre from the 4th of February, and two days later, on the 6th of February, the pastoral comedy *Lover’s Lane* premiered at the Manhattan Theatre. Before the year ended, a further three new Fitch plays³⁶ would premier in New York in addition to another³⁷ performed exclusively in London. In total, the year saw seven new Fitch plays premier, alongside numerous revivals and tours of his earlier dramas.

The Climbers opens in an unusual manner for a social comedy. Act one takes place in the aftermath of a funeral, with the cast in full mourning dress. In their Fifth Avenue drawing room, Mrs Hunter and her unmarried daughters learn that they have been left

³⁶ *The Way of the World, The Girl and the Judge, The Marriage Game.*

³⁷ *The Last of the Dandies* was performed at Her Majesty’s Theatre in London, October 24, 1901.

virtually penniless in the wake of the death of Mr Hunter, he having lost the money in a string of failed investments. Throughout the play, Mrs Hunter contrives to regain her financial status, first arranging for her daughter to marry the wealthy social climbing Mr. Trotter, and then by marrying him herself.

The Hunter's eldest daughter, Blanche, is already married, and unhappily. Her husband, Sterling, drinks and neglects his wife. The audience soon learns that he too is having financial difficulties, having speculated away a vast amount of money. Blanche, however, resolves to stand by him. When Blanche's aunt Ruth leaves her own money in his care, he repeats the mistake and faces both public disgrace and criminal proceedings. Complicating matters further, and encouraging the heroine towards a divorce, is the noble Warden, a man who has hitherto remained valiantly on the side-lines despite his love for Blanche, and with whom she finds the comfort and support lacking in her own marriage. The play ends conveniently for the pair with Sterling's suicide.

When Fitch first pitched the idea for *The Climbers* to theatre manager Charles Frohman, he refused the play and so did 'every important theatre manager in New York,' (Moses and Gerson 174). Amelia Bingham, however, accepted the play enthusiastically as the first to be performed by the Amelia Bingham Stock Company (Moses and Gerson 174). According to the *St. Louis Republic*, Bingham witnessed actress-managers in London 'making a strong and successful fight against their masculine competitors' and wished to do the same on American soil ("Amelia Bingham is Her Own Manager").

Significantly, in doing so, Bingham also distanced herself from self-promoting celebrity actress-managers such as Lillie Langtry by emphasising a desire to advance her company rather than herself: 'I wanted a play, not a part; [...] I wanted something for the Amelia Bingham Stock Company; not for Amelia Bingham alone' (ibid). Like Fitch, she aspired to put America on stage: 'I believe thoroughly in plays of modern life [...] When I

build my theater – I shall do it some day – I hope to make it the home of the American drama’ (ibid). Concerned with a loss of legitimacy in theatre, however, the pervasively critical William Winter viewed the actress’s venture into theatre management as an ominous symptom of the encroaching culture of celebrity in theatre:

Miss Bingham, in presenting herself as a star, follows the fashion of the hour. Eminence on the American stage is no longer exclusively the result of ability and achievement, but a matter of proclamation and advertisement, and anybody can be conspicuous who chooses to make the necessary arrangements (“New Play at the Bijou”).

Trusting in the playwright’s experience, Bingham allowed Fitch free reign with the arrangement of the play, leaving ‘every detail of the production to his judgment’ (“Various Dramatic Topics”). The decision proved a profitable one. Dithmar attributed the success of the play to a combination of Fitch’s ‘remarkable skill as a director of rehearsal and a designer of stage pictures,’ the ‘taste and liberality’ of Amelia Bingham, and the skill of the actors (““The Climbers” and “When Knighthood was in Flower””). Following suit, theatre managers increasingly allowed Fitch the same level of artistic control. As Phelps suggests: ‘[a]fter the success of *The Climbers*, managers wisely left details of production to him. When a new play was accepted, he chose the cast and conducted all rehearsals as an absolute dictator’ (175-6).

The Climbers ran at the Bijou for a remarkable 200 performances. Writing to Marguerite Merington during rehearsals in December 1900, Fitch declared Bingham’s company ‘the best [he’d] seen in N. Y., for many years or ever!’ (Moses and Gerson 175”). By all accounts, they were outstanding³⁸ (““The Climbers” Produced by a Remarkable

³⁸ One reviewer for the *New York Times* noted the ‘triumph’ of socialite-turned-actress Clara Bloodgood as Julia Godesby, suggesting that she performed the role ‘gracefully,’ lending an ‘air of good breeding’ to what was in his opinion a ‘vulgar’ role (“Various Dramatic Topics”). According to Dearing, Fitch preferred Bloodgood’s acting style over Bingham’s in *The Climbers* (243). Bloodgood subsequently became a favourite of

Cast”; “New American Comedy Acted by a New Stock Company”; “Various Dramatic Topics”; Winter, “New Play at the Bijou”). Winter, however, complained that despite *The Climbers*’ ‘uncommonly rich and beautiful scenery,’ it amounted to ‘a curious medley of frivolity and gloom, pretending much but meaning little’ (“New Play at the Bijou”).

Drawing attention to the critical prejudices against Fitch’s work – prejudices historically attributable to William Winter and the *Tribune* – the *New York Times*, while not finding the play without fault, argued that *The Climbers* was a worthy American drama and ‘not the kind of piece to be curtly dismissed or sneered out of existence by senile or prejudiced reviewers’ (“Various Dramatic Topics”). Another article in the same paper called it ‘an exceedingly smart [...] addition to our small stock of American plays’ (“New American Comedy Acted by a New Stock Company”). Phelps later referred to *The Climbers* as the first ‘of any real importance after Beau Brummell’ and the *New York Times* declared that *The Climbers* reached ‘the high-water mark of the American drama’ during its initial run: ‘Since then no American except Mr. Fitch has excelled it, and it may be questioned whether he has’ (178; “*The Climbers* Revived”).

Encouraged by the positive response to the play, Bingham’s company continued to play *The Climbers* in venues across America throughout the next four years, reviving it in New York in 1902 to a ‘large and brilliant audience’ at the Bijou, and again in 1904 at the Princess Theatre (“Runs That Continue”; ““The Climbers” Revived”). Piquing interest across the Atlantic, the play opened in London at the Comedy Theatre on the 5th of September 1903, starring English actress Lily Hanbury along with an English cast, and enjoyed a good run of 73 performances (Wearing 154).

Fitch’s, going on to star in leading roles in *The Girl with the Green Eyes* (1902), *The Coronet of the Duchess* (1904), and, finally, *The Truth* (1907).

Critics greeted *The Climbers* with less enthusiasm in London and it divided the first night audience in opinion. *The Era* called it 'an unsatisfactory play with a good deal of wasted cleverness in it': 'Like many other pieces of American origin, it shows craftiness rather than craft and more artfulness than art' ("The Climbers"). The *Sketch* concurred that *The Climbers*, with its 'want of skill in construction' did not match up to the British standard of drama: 'so far as drama is concerned, our wide-awake neighbours are rather fast asleep and somewhat unsophisticated' ("The Stage from the Stalls" 16 Sept. 1903). Other critics offered conflicted accounts of the play, finding it amusing and entertaining for all its apparent shortcomings ("Comedy Theatre. "The Climbers""; "*The Climbers*. American Satire as the Comedy Theatre"). A critic for the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* defended the merits of the play against its 'very young and very inexperienced' detractors:

I must humbly ask to be allowed to think that there is some really good work in Mr. Clyde Fitch's play at the Comedy Theatre. It is not a perfect piece, truly, but it has stage notions, good construction, and plenty of human character ("The Climbers").

According to reports, the audience on opening night responded with a mixture of applause and hostility³⁹. However, the poor reception of the play could be attributed largely to the Englishness of the cast rather than the failures of its author⁴⁰. As a distinctly

³⁹ *Times*: '[t]he applause from the stalls at the fall of the curtain was mingled with some sounds of disapproval from the pit and gallery' ("Comedy Theatre" *The Times* Sept 7 1903). *Globe*: 'The reception, as has been said, was to some extent unfriendly' ("Comedy Theatre. "The Climbers""). *Era*: '*The Climbers* had a mixed reception; and, after the principal performers had been called and applauded [...] the audience left the theatre without any demand for the appearance of the author' ("The Climbers").

⁴⁰ *Era*: "The American flavour of the piece was considerably lost by the transference of the leading parts to a distinctly English cast; and the "local colour" – the domestic "cakewalk," the allusions to New York life, and Transatlantic slang were necessarily wasted on a London audience' ("The Climbers"). William Archer, quoted in *New York Times*: 'the entirely American types it portrays were presented by obtrusively English actors, who could not but, in part, denaturalize them' (Of Some Plays and Players Seen

American play, it was located as beyond the capabilities of an English cast to perform realistically – a quality that Fitch usually strove for in the production of his work. The English accents and mannerisms of the cast jarred with the scripted American slang and New York setting. William Archer reproached the audience's response as 'wholly unjust,' arguing that it was easy enough to see through the unfortunately 'denaturalize[d]' performance to 'the substantial merits of the play' ("Of Some Plays and Players").

There remained one objection to the play, however, that was shared by critics on both sides of the Atlantic: *The Climbers* was not the wholly satirical play that they wanted it to be. In New York, a few weeks after its premier, Dithmar defined, in his opinion, *The Climbers*' chief failing: 'the main issue disappears and most of the play does not concern the climbers and their climbing' ("Clyde Fitch in his New Role as Foremost American Dramatist"). Similarly, in London the *Times* argued that the title of the play 'suggests a theme of profound and searching satire – a theme which is quite out of Mr. Fitch's compass' and the *Sketch* was disappointed to be given 'poor melodrama' in place of 'a true social satire' ("Comedy Theatre" 7 Sept. 1903; "The Stage from the Stalls" 16 Sept 1903).

The Climbers does contain satirical elements. Fitch's unflattering portraits of the vain and mercenary Mrs Hunter and her daughters – representing members of the New York smart set – and the newly wealthy and social climbing Mr Trotter were drawn from Fitch's experiences with 'Fifth Avenue society' (Dearing 236). A scene in the first act particularly impressed critics. On the day of Mr Hunter's funeral, the newly widowed Mrs Hunter and her daughters, resigned to wearing black for the rest of the season – 'It breaks

in and out of London"). *Sketch*: 'Some of the [cast] used American slang, but it did not sound very well' ("The Stage from the Stalls").

my heart not to wear my ball dress' – sell off their newly acquired winter wardrobe to some opportunistic acquaintances:

[T]hey brought over piles of clothes from Europe this year, and we want to get hold of them before any one else has a chance – get 'em cheap before they have an idea anybody else'll buy them [...] I heard the Reed girls planning to come tomorrow. They didn't dare come to-day. Those girls haven't any sand! (Fitch, *The Climbers* 34, 39).

Howells called it 'a passage of fresh and native comedy as I have ever seen on our stage,' arguing that the women represented 'the spirit of the most commercialized society in the world' ("The Recent Dramatic Season" 475).

However, as critics rightly noted, these characters do not drive the main action in the play; rather, *The Climbers* concerns itself with the romantic struggles of Blanche, Sterling and Warden. As Sedgwick shows, the effect of the 'love triangle' narrative was to dramatically prioritise the experiences of the male characters and diminish those of the women. Blanche's agency, however, extends beyond this conception while Sterling and Warden are subordinated as ornaments to her narrative.

Warden is undoubtedly the hero of the play, and Dearing positions his long-enduring silent and socially prohibited devotion to Blanche as a reflection of Fitch's, secret, homoerotic romantic experiences: 'Warden's "love that is never spoken" echoes the covert cry of the "love that dare not speak its name"' (240). The premise outlined in the play is that '[w]e're all climbers of some sort in this world' (Fitch, *The Climbers* 71). Sterling's losses in Wall Street speculation, and his fraudulent use of others' money, are the result of his climbing 'after wealth and everything it brings,' while Blanche's desire for a divorce stems from her desire to climb 'after *happiness* and all it brings' (ibid, emphasis original).

Reflecting the views of the turn-of the-century press, T. Miller categorises the relationships between Blanche, Sterling and Warden as a 'romantic subplot,' in spite of

the fact that Fitch placed a significant amount of dramatic emphasis upon this strand of the play (166). As the marriage between Blanche and Sterling deteriorates, the relationship between Blanche and Warden strengthens and the audience is witness to the heroine's struggle to decide her own best course of action. Should she adhere to her early views on the immorality of divorce and remain married to a man she does not love, or should she pursue her own happiness?

As in *A Modern Match*, certain characters in *The Climbers* suggest that marriage, used or abused, can amount to a profitable career for a woman. Following the death of Mr Hunter and the subsequent loss of the family's fortune, Mrs Hunter rejects the proposition of employment for her daughters, declaring marriage to be 'the easiest way for them to earn their living' (ibid 18). Following her own advice, Mrs Hunter herself weds Trotter, the newly wealthy bachelor intended for her daughter, Clara. Trotter makes it clear that he marries Mrs Hunter for the 'style and position' that fortune alone cannot grant him, showing that men may also utilise marriage for personal gain (ibid 80).

Nevertheless, Blanche, the heroine and would-be divorcee of *The Climbers*, emerges in stark contrast to any adventuress or social climber. Fitch's stage notes describe her in 'antithesis' to her materialistic mother: 'a handsome, dignified woman, young, sincere, and showing, in her attitude to the others and in her own point of view, the warmth of a true, evenly-balanced nature' (ibid 3). Bingham, according to the *New York Times*, carried that role 'with grace and dignity' ("New American Comedy"). Likewise, the *Daily Mail* declared Lily Hanbury's performance 'full of charm and feeling' ("*The Climbers*. American Satire at the Comedy Theatre").

In the opening act of the play, Blanche describes the continuation of her marriage in disheartening terms: 'It's months since you showed me any sign of affection'; 'You are not the man I thought when I married you'; 'I *live* with you. First you robbed me of my

respect for you; then you dried up my heart with neglect' (Climbers 21; 60). She warns Sterling that if he continues to neglect her, she will 'go the last step' and leave him (ibid 23). Echoing Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), she declares: 'Doll wives are out of fashion, and even if they weren't, I could never be one' (ibid). Blanche's refusal to act as a 'doll' for her husband and her concomitant assertion that such passive wives are 'out of fashion,' aligns her ideologically with suffragist demands for autonomy and self-expression within marriage. Social views on the role of the wife had already undergone significant changes since the mid-nineteenth century, and would continue to shift. As Patterson highlights:

By the 1920s, increasing numbers of social theorists rejected the idea that marriage meant an emotionally detached father exerting his right to familial control and a submissive mother dutifully tending the house and children, in favor of one in which emotional intimacy and sexual expression created a companionate bond (*The American New Woman Revisited*, 17).

At the same time, Patterson suggests, progressives, liberals and suffragists increasingly defended 'a woman's right to seek a divorce if she and her spouse had become irrevocably estranged' (ibid).

The reference to *A Doll's House* would not have been lost on Fitch's audiences. Moi locates Ibsen's play to imply an incompatibility between motherhood and Nora's pursuit of her individual identity:

'Nora [...] refuses to define herself as wife and mother. This refusal comes just after she has asserted that she has duties towards herself, and just before she says that she is first and foremost a human being, thus aligning the meaning of "human being" with "individual" and opposing it to "wife and mother"' (244).

Themes of women's autonomy and the right to divorce a bad husband were recurrent in a strand of *fin de siècle* literary work by American women that included Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). As Patterson suggests: 'virtually all of the white women writers who

crafted New Woman protagonists define at least some of them by the oppression they face as wives and/or mothers' (8). This is not to suggest, however, that such writers located motherhood as a direct source of oppression, or sought to encourage women away from marriage and childrearing; Gilman later emphasised the importance of motherhood to the development of society in her 1910 essay "The New Womanhood" (Patterson, *The American New Woman Revisited* 147).

Like Gilman, Fitch positions motherhood and fatherhood as vital and noble pursuits. To be a mother, or, indeed a wife, does not necessitate the loss of Blanche's identity; rather, the play implies freedom of choice, and freedom of expression, to be what are essential to Blanche's fulfilment as an individual. To stay married to Sterling when she would choose Warden would necessitate the loss of both and, in the final act, Blanche accordingly evokes a bleak picture of marriage to the man she does not love: 'Opposite you at the table, receiving our friends, keeping up appearances, yes – but nearer to you than that? No!' (Fitch, *The Climbers* 113).

It becomes increasingly apparent, as the play progresses, that Sterling constitutes both an undesirable husband for Blanche, and an unfit father for their son. When he first takes the stage, it is with 'hair greyer than his years may account for' and a manner that 'betrays a nervous system barely under control' (Fitch, *The Climbers* 20). According to Schwartz, Sterling is one of a number of Fitch characters that display obvious characteristics of neurasthenia (*Broadway and Corporate Capitalism* 73). Portrayed as a volatile man without the strength to redeem or rehabilitate himself, Sterling appears increasingly 'under the influence of liquor,' and handles his wife roughly as he loses control of his own actions (Fitch, *The Climbers* 23). As Schwartz asserts: 'Sterling [...] pays for this lack of control by taking his own life – the price of nervousness run amok' (*Broadway and Corporate Capitalism* 73). As such, Sterling stood in antithesis to the ideal

American man at a time when Theodore Roosevelt was calling for men to show honesty, strength, bravery, a sense of duty, and moral courage (*The Strenuous Life*).

In the first act of *The Climbers*, Warden declares Sterling ‘a *moral* coward’ and the epithet sticks (Fitch, *The Climbers* 30, emphasis original). As one *Times* reviewer described Sterling: ‘He is merely a weak, mean-natured man, with neither pluck nor luck. [...] You can always predict what at any given moment will have happened to Sterling. He will have fallen as low as he can’ (“Comedy Theatre” 7 Sept. 1903). For the *Times*, the inevitable fate of the character was a failure of the play. Sterling was, ‘an unprofitable subject, as Mr. Fitch has chosen to handle it, because no room is left for doubt’ (ibid). Yet, his characterisation is crucial in the construction of a narrative that justifies and empathises with Blanche in her desire for a divorce.

Victorian ideology encouraged women to stay within unwanted marriages for the sake of their children (or lose them altogether) and critics condemned theatrical adventuresses such as Violet Huntley for the neglect of theirs. Audiences of *The Climbers*, however, were asked to consider the consequences for the child were Blanche to stay married to a man like Sterling – a radical dramatisation of the dangers for children of a wife remaining with a corrupt husband. Not only, Warden professes, would the exposure of Sterling’s fraudulent embezzlement mark Blanche as ‘the wife of a thief,’ but it would also brand his son as ‘the son of a convict cheat’ (Fitch, *The Climbers* 70). Blanche makes it clear from the outset that she feels Sterling’s actions pose a danger to her son, rationalising that it may damage his life as much as her own were she to stay within the marriage: ‘Disgrace [...] threatening *my* boy!’; ‘Surely, it wouldn’t be for [my son’s] good to be brought up under the influence of his father!’ (Ibid 49, emphasis original).

Positioned alongside Blanche, in her quest to protect her son’s honour in *The Climbers*, is Warden. Blanche makes it clear that it is Warden, not Richard Sterling, who

has been fulfilling the role of husband in giving her happiness, taking care of her and, perhaps most significantly, in protecting the honour of her child (Fitch, *The Climbers* 94). Where in *A Modern Match* and *Gossip*, men who lure wives from their husbands are cast as fools or villains, in *The Climbers*, Warden remains honourable. Dithmar called him 'the real hero of the drama,' while another *New York Times* reviewer declared him to be 'an estimable gentleman' ("*The Climbers* and *When Knighthood was in Flower*"; "New American Comedy Acted by a New Stock Company"). Indeed, these two American critics affirmed that Warden was 'the greatest strength' of the play (ibid).

Where Sterling appears weak, Warden performs triumphantly as the American hero:

Edward Warden, though in reality scarcely younger than Sterling, looks at least ten years his junior. He is good-looking, practical, a reasoning being, self-controlled. He is a thorough American, with fresh and strong ideals of his race (Fitch, *The Climbers* 26).

Warden exemplifies Roosevelt's conception of the ideal man: a strong, healthy, and honourable American ("The Strenuous Life").

In the final act of the play the dramatic tensions between Blanche, Sterling and Warden come to a climax. As Blanche's family weigh in with their opinions, this act features the most rigorous interrogation of divorce throughout the play. For many critics, uninterested in Blanche's narrative, these final scenes were the weak point of the play. The *New York Times* argued that it 'falls off in the last act' ("New American Comedy"). As the final curtain falls, Sterling is laid out on a sofa having taken a fatal dose of chlorol; Blanche and Warden, believing him to be sleeping, stand together as Warden relays Sterling's message: 'He is going away for good' (Fitch, *Climbers* 129). In New York, the *Evening World* found 'the final effect [...] depressing' and the *New York Times* described the curtain descending on the perplexed audience 'in silence' ("The Climbers" Produced

by a Remarkable Cast”; “New American Comedy”). The scene, Dithmar argued, had been ‘greatly improved’ in New York since the opening night through virtue of being shortened (ibid). For Dithmar, the issue was one of dramatic exhaustion: there was ‘no more story to be told in the play’ following the climax of the third act (“*The Climbers* and *When Knighthood was in Flower*”).

In London, both the *Era* and the *Sketch* agreed that the ending was poor, with the former describing the ending as ‘cheap and obvious’ (“*The Climbers*”). Although the *Times* applauded the ‘fresh and ingenious detail’ of the scene, describing the suicide as a ‘very skilful piece of theatrical manoeuvring [...] on the part of Mr. Fitch, and a very clever bit of acting, too, on the part of Mr. Sydney Valentine,’ the critic was only ‘mildly interested in the hapless Mrs. Sterling and her tame lover’ (“*The Comedy Theatre*” 7 Sept. 1903). For the majority of critics on both sides of the Atlantic, the key interest in the play lay either in Sterling’s tragic downfall, or in the situations surrounding the minor characters of the play.

William Archer, in contrast, defended the merits of both the final scene and the portrayals of Blanche and Warden. Interviewed in the *New York Times*, Archer argued that Warden’s scenes, with both Blanche and Sterling, ‘were real drama,’ and that the emotion of the final scene was ‘natural and interesting’ (“*Of Some Plays and Players*”). For Archer, *The Climbers* was a dramatic success, the high points of which were the very moments that other critics overlooked.

At the opening of the final act, Blanche is intent upon leaving her husband, citing her love for Warden, her lack of love for Sterling, his disgrace, and above all her desire for happiness in life, as justification for a divorce. In her subsequent deliberation, Blanche finds herself caught between her Aunt Ruth’s moralistic warnings against divorce and her mother and sister’s approval. Her mother’s affirmation that ‘[w]e all have a right to

happiness if we can get it' has the opposite effect than intended, however. Blanche laments, 'I wish *they* wouldn't advise me to do what I want to do,' having no desire to imitate her materialistic and frivolous mother (Fitch, *The Climbers* 102, 106). In an effort to distance her own motives from the opinions of her mother, Blanche stresses that her mother's situation with Trotter, and her own with Warden 'are not analogous' (ibid 103).

Ruth makes her stance on divorce clear from the outset: 'I am an old-fashioned woman and don't believe in divorce!' (Fitch, *The Climbers* 50). As another character humorously responds, her views are 'out of date': 'More people get divorced nowadays than get married' (ibid). Duty to stay within unhappy marriages is set firmly with the past, associated with antiquated Victorian values, while casual and widespread divorces are cast ostensibly as the present reality, linked to the rise of middle class American culture. Ruth connects Blanche's desire for divorce with the self-indulgence of fashionable society:

The watchword of our age is self! We are all out for ourselves; the twentieth century is a glorification of selfishness, the Era of Egotism! Forget yourself, and what would you do? The dignified thing! You would live quietly *beside* your husband if not *with* him (ibid 106).

Ruth mourns the loss of Victorian morality, viewing the emergent middle class culture of the twentieth century as selfish and egotistical, but her injunctions to '[b]e strong,' to 'be an example to other women' come across as severe and bleak in comparison to Blanche's animated but logical responses (ibid).

In true Fitch fashion, the argument between Blanche and her Aunt circulates back to Blanche's responsibility as mother. Blanche advocates raising her son away from the negative influence of Sterling, but Ruth argues that remaining with Sterling would teach the child the importance of marital duty: 'If he saw you patiently bearing a cross for the sake of duty, can you imagine a stronger force of good on the boy's character?' (ibid 106).

As T. Miller suggests, the rigidity of Ruth's arguments begins to 'diminish the validity of her standards' (166). Blanche responds with one of the most poignant lines of the play: '[b]ut my own life, my own happiness?' (Fitch, *The Climbers* 106). *The Climbers* asks its audience to make a moral distinction between Blanche's desire to escape a harmful marriage and the 'snapshot, rapid-transit, tunnel divorces' that her aunt Ruth stands against (ibid 102).

Despite the assertions of certain critics that Blanche heeds the warnings of her aunt Ruth and decides to remain with Sterling in a self-sacrificing manner, she continues to waver in her decision throughout the final act and, by the end of the play, even Ruth – the strongest opponent of her divorce – concedes that Blanche and her son would be better off without Sterling ("This Week's Playbills"; "*The Climbers*. American Satire at the Comedy Theatre"; "Comedy Theatre" *The Times* 7 Sept, 1903; Fitch, *The Climbers*, 119). Howells argued that the tragedy of Sterling's suicide was 'superficial and really ridiculous,' and with good reason ("The Recent Dramatic Season" 475). Sterling's suicide at the end of *The Climbers* functions primarily to allow the heroine and hero of the play to unite, without risking moral outcry from the audience.

Privileging the experiences of the male leads, both the American and British critical establishments, in their assessment of *The Climbers*, overlooked Blanche's important narrative and they were disappointed with the play as a result. Their viewpoint, which was strongly contradicted by the playscript – and by a smaller number of critics – can be explained by Sedgwick's paradigm of 'between men'. As I have already pointed out, romantic triangles were an established and familiar trope in nineteenth century literature and theatre. Reading this seemingly traditional structure in *The Climbers*, especially within the context of an enduring patriarchal hierarchy in both the social and

critical spheres, it seems predictable that male critics would turn their focus to the men in the play, rather than the heroine.

Fitch's plays avoided explicit and controversial stagings of divorce, but they did offer increasingly liberal explorations of its morality when undertaken by women. As such, the thematic content of Fitch's productions was more serious and socially relevant than his critics gave him credit for. In the three plays explored in this chapter I have identified significant trends in Fitch's work that I will further explore in the rest of this thesis, including Fitch's use of heredity as a driving force in the lives of his characters, his reluctance to stage the punitive death of a heroine, and his willingness to stage sexually and morally transgressive heroines in a sympathetic light.

The gendered divide between Fitch's (male) critics and his (female) audience affected the reception of these plays throughout his career. Despite Fitch's most fervent efforts to put heroines such as Blanche in positions of power, to portray them as fully autonomous beings, his intention was inevitably lost on the majority of male critics, though not on the women in the auditorium whose patronage in New York saw the play exceed 200 performances in its initial run. As I will argue in the following chapters, it became a common trend in the criticism of Fitch's work to dismiss, or frame as immoral, heroines who were well-received by women in the audience.

Chapter Three

'A MESSAGE TO DAUGHTERS AS WELL':

PROSTITUTES, MOTHERS AND FALLEN WOMEN

During the late nineteenth century, fallen women appeared on stage in many guises. Eltis argues that theatre's fallen women of this period may be divided into three categories – 'the seduced maiden, the wicked seductress, and the repentant Magdalene' – and that sometimes the fallen woman could be a combination of all three ("The Fallen Woman on Stage" 223). Traditionally, all met a similar fate; Victorian literary convention ordained 'that a woman's fall ends in death' (Auerbach "The Rise of the Fallen Woman" 30). As the previous chapter illustrates, early Fitch plays such as *A Modern Match* (1891) subverted this theatrical tradition, with Fitch refusing to kill his adulterous leading lady in the finale. Plays such as *Gossip* (1895) and *The Climbers* (1900), in which the moral status of the heroine is much more ambiguous – each heroine being restored to propriety and her position within orthodox middle class society before consummating her descent – threatened even more to disrupt the sanctity of the domestic home, blurring the distinction between the respectable middleclass housewife and the courtesan.

Further developing the theme in *The Moth and the Flame* (1898) and *Sapho* (1901), Fitch scrutinised the psychology and social fate of fallen women in greater detail, and with significant dramatic impact. *Sapho*, with its leading lady Olga Nethersole, incited voyeuristic fascination and moral outrage, culminating in the spectacle of a well-publicised and infamous indecency trial. As in *A Modern Match* and *The Climbers*, the merit of the heroine is determined through her commitment to her child, a signifier of feminine virtue and domesticity that offsets the perception of her as a dangerous prostitute.

Fitch was one of numerous American and European dramatists who extended the Victorian trend of staging the fallen woman. As Eltis and Johnson have shown, the fallen woman featured prominently on the British and American stages around the turn of the

twentieth century in the works of playwrights such as Henry Arthur Jones, Arthur Wing Pinero, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, David Belasco, and Eugene Walter (Eltis, "The Fallen Woman on Stage" 222, 227; Johnson 21). Johnson describes fallen women and prostitutes as 'veritable obsessions' in *fin de siècle* American culture: 'Streetwalkers, courtesans, and other fallen women were the ubiquitous subjects of best-selling books, vice commission reports, pornography, fashion, and [...] theatrical hits' (1). Eltis attributes the preoccupation with fallen women on the London stage to the influence of French playwrights such as Alexandre Dumas, Victorien Sardou, and Emile Augier ("The Fallen Woman on Stage" 222). The frequent incarnations of wayward wives in the mid-to-late nineteenth century French dramas prompted Henry James's assertion that: 'adultery is their only theme' (cited in Eltis *ibid*).

During the Progressive Era in America, there was a marked fascination with 'prostitute' plays, and the nation became engrossed with the experiences and fates of courtesans. In her exploration of sexualised fallen women on the American stage, Johnson emphasises 'the Progressive Era's tendency to characterize so-called fallen women as prostitutes', citing Belasco's *Zaza* (1898) as one instance in which a 'fallen' heroine was portrayed as a prostitute in the press (223-4). Despite receiving no money in return for her sexual encounters with men, her sexuality (and sexual experience), combined with her 'dubious' profession as a music hall singer, were enough to assure critics such as William Winter of her clear association with the courtesan. Winter openly admonished the production of what he referred to as 'tainted plays':

It is notable [...] that from the time when Pinero's play of "the Second Mrs. Tanqueray" was launched upon our Stage the dramatic current has been running steadily and with renewed force toward a literal, brazen, shameless portrayal of depraved persons, iniquitous conduct, and vile social conditions (*The Wallet of Time* 376).

Johnson has explored the 'brothel drama' genre in detail, noting the 'locus of cultural interest in prostitution' at this time and the 'Bourgeois and upper-class' delight in 'slumming via the theatre' (1,3). The notion that such an audience favoured explicitly superficial and sentimental forms of entertainment, as Saxon asserts, is a 'fallacy' owing to an inscribed 'feminised passivity to secure the identity of the American bourgeois woman, as the myth of feminine propriety within dominant masculine cultural operations' (*American Theatre* 143). Critical arguments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century implied that material portraying female sexuality would pervert and taint the pure minds of young American girls – those essential to the stability of bourgeois society and the American national image, as the counterpart to the white heroic male. Such anxieties lead to controversy surrounding plays such as Fitch's *Sapho*; Saxon suggests that the public and official reaction to the play had at its heart 'the perceived threat to young people – young American Girls' ("Sexual Transgression on the American Stage" 746).

Middle and upper class American anxieties concerning the preservation of feminine propriety, and the potentially contaminating influence of certain forms of entertainment, led to harsh criticism of women, both on stage and in literature – any who subverted the myth of female passivity and the asexual body of the American girl. Johnson notes the trend for criticism around this time to focus on a particular brand of women, common to the brothel drama: those she dubs 'sisters in sin':

What remains consistent to brothel drama – whether it actually depicted a brothel or not – is the centrality of the prostitute and various fallen woman characters who were understood by Progressive Era audiences to be fundamentally indistinguishable from prostitutes. The genre, featured therefore not only madams and white slaves in bordellos but also courtesans, mistresses, and women seduced by men (4).

Saxon argues that '[t]he production of 'brothel drama' in the United States can be traced to the introduction of *Camille* onto American stages' ("Sexual Transgression" 738). Significantly, actresses such as Matilda Heron in 1857, and Clara Morris in 1874 emphasised the 'emotionalism' of *Camille* in American revivals (ibid). Saxon describes American productions of *Camille* as transgressing 'gendered behavioural codes' through stagings of a 'disturbingly sexualised courtesan heroine' while 'seeming to conform to moral convention' (ibid). As Eltis affirms, some of the earliest stagings of the fallen woman in melodramas were lacking in 'internal motivation': 'the fallen woman on stage was a convenient plot-mechanism rather than the focus of sympathetic analysis' ("The Fallen Woman on Stage" 223). Following Alexandre Dumas's 1879 production of *La Dame aux Camelias*, which Eltis situates as 'the first to centre on the psychology and character of the courtesan' a number of playwrights – Fitch included – granted further attention to the human behaviour and motivations of their fallen women in naturalistic plays (ibid 226).

Fallen women equally fascinated audiences across the Atlantic. Eltis identifies 'tale[s] of the tortured and doomed prostitute' in a variety of discourses including 'paintings, plays, novels, newspaper articles, and treatises on medicine, religion, and social regulation' in Britain (ibid 225). The heroine of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1892) is a prime example. In 1897, the year prior to the premier of Fitch's *The Moth and the Flame*, the first theatrical adaptation of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* opened in New York. American playwright Lorimer Stoddard's adaptation ran for 88 performances at the Fifth Avenue theatre, with Minnie Fiske taking the leading role of Tess.

As Breen notes, Stoddard refrained from staging the earlier chapters of the book, opening the play at the time of Angel Clare's arrival at the Dairy, thus earning

‘contemporary critical praise for his suppression of the novels “offensive” incidents’ (211). While the controversial sex/rape scene was not staged, the details of Tess’s seduction/rape by Alec D’Urberville, as recounted in the first act, remained largely as they had been in the novel. One *New York Times* reviewer saw the decision to include mention of ‘the extenuating circumstances invented by the dramatist’ as necessary in order for the audience to retain any sympathy for the heroine, arguing that ‘the spectator would lose sympathy if she were shown to be culpable’ (“Tess as a Stage Heroine”).

Hardy depicted Tess as a seduced fallen woman, distinguishable from the adulteress or courtesan. A popular narrative in the late Victorian period, the seduction tale typically depicted a naive young lower class woman seduced and ruined by a wealthy upper class man. Odem argues that the seduction narrative, which had ‘long been popular in nineteenth-century melodrama and novels’, was adapted by late Victorian reformers ‘to their own social context and political purposes’: ‘Influenced by the Victorian belief in inherent female purity and passionlessness, reformers charged that male vice and exploitation were responsible for the moral ruin of young women and girls’ (495). Odem further argues that the seduction narrative, while generally not based on social reality, captured the ‘sense of sexual vulnerability and danger that young women faced’ (498).

Like the stage prostitute, whose death was often a moral inevitability of her own actions, the seduced fallen woman was doomed from her moment of sexual transgression. While the typical consequence for fallen women of any ‘type’ on stage was death, unmarried working class British and American women in society who became pregnant faced ‘the economic burden of caring for the child, [...] social ostracism and possible family rejection’ and, as a result, ‘sometimes resorted to [...] infanticide or illegal and often dangerous abortions to end a pregnancy’ (ibid).

Owing to the work of social reformers, the prostitute and the seduced fallen woman became further conflated with one another, not as sexual deviants, but as innocent victims; as Kunzel suggests: 'reformers popularized an image of the prostitute as the victim of male lust forced to live a life of shame' (20). In the context of social reform, the shift was a progressive one for the protection of women, emphasising the sexual double standard and placing the blame with men who abandoned pregnant women. At the same time, however, the all-encompassing notion of the fallen woman as victim threatened to reduce her to a passive and pitiable figure, stripped of any sexual power.

Nina Auerbach's study of the fallen woman in Victorian fiction refers to the 'absolute transforming power of the fall,' affirming that 'once cast into solitude, the fallen woman [...] is irretrievably metamorphosed, as even the enlightened Hardy insists in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*' (*Woman and the Demon* 160). Whether portrayed as sexual deviant or innocent victim, the fallen woman's inevitable exile affirms the irreversible nature of the fall, suggesting that female purity, once lost, cannot be regained. Of utmost significance was the symbolic separation of the fallen women from the domestic sphere:

No doubt the Victorian imagination isolated the fallen woman pitilessly from a social context, preferring to imagine her as destitute and drowned prostitute or errant wife cast beyond the human community, because of her uneasy implications for wives who stayed home. Characteristically, Victorian literature plays with her professional alliance with virtuous wifedom only to snatch the two apart at the last minute (ibid 159).

To allow a woman, once 'fallen', to re-enter the domestic home or retain her visibility in society was to threaten conventional ideology of marriage, family, and female sexual purity. As Eltis affirms: 'On stage, good and bad women were worlds apart, and contact between them had to be carefully policed' ("The Fallen Woman on Stage" 226).

Efforts were made too to protect those women viewed as respectable (i.e. middle class and refined) in the theatre auditoria from the apparently corrupting influences of prostitutes and working class women. As is often evident from the press response to Fitch's plays, critics often viewed the presence of a large number of fashionable and wealthy patrons attending and approving of a drama as a marker of its legitimacy,⁴¹ and it remained the duty of theatre managers to maintain propriety in their venues. As part of the effort to attract middle-class women to their venues, most theatres, by the 1870s, had been cleared of the prostitutes that frequented them as places of business in the early nineteenth century (Butsch "Bowery B'hoys and Matinee Ladies" 386). New York theatre managers encouraged an audience divide based on class through the pricing of theatre tickets from the 1840s, raising prices to draw in wealthier patrons (ibid). Thus, working class women, who sat in the pit (later reformed into the higher priced parquet) in the 1840s⁴², were excluded from 'legitimate' venues or relegated to the upper tiers.

Even in the more progressive plays of the 1890s onwards, that 'began to question settled conventions by raising questions about how such women should be judged, whether they could be rehabilitated, whether men should be similarly judged,' argues Eltis, '[t]he answers to such questions were [...] mostly conservative' (227). The fall, for Fitch's heroines, however, was not only forgivable, but reversible: in both *The Moth and the Flame* and *Sappho*, Fitch's heroines made dramatic returns from their falls to the safety

⁴¹ Reporting on the opening of *The Moth and the Flame* in Philadelphia, the *New York Times* described the audience 'which represented socially the best people in Philadelphia [...] those rarely seen but at the opera'. The critic went on to note the 'approval' of the audience at the end, and to describe the 'general impression' that indicated that 'the play was of good literary quality' ("The Moth and the Flame." Clyde Fitch's New Play Successfully Presented in Philadelphia").

⁴² Butsch describes 'brash working girls, who paid no heed to middle-class rules of respectability' in the 1840s sitting 'in the pit where their Bowery beaux could be among their friends' ("Bowery B'hoys and Matinee Ladies" 382).

and convention of marriage, achieving redemption within the context of the play, if not always in the eyes of the critics. Such stagings not only suggested that the sexual experiences of unmarried women might go unpunished, but further troubled the dichotomy of the housewife and the prostitute.

In *The Moth and the Flame*, Fitch utilises a typical seduction narrative to encourage sympathy for Jeanette, a working class woman left pregnant and abandoned by the wealthy man who promised to marry her. In *Sapho*, however, the fallen woman is the seductress. The model, Fanny LeGrand, in this respect bears obvious similarities to Zaza and Camile – both roles performed by Nethersole before her debut as Fanny. But where Zaza and Camile meet traditionally tragic ends, *Sapho* grants Fanny the same future as Jeanette: a chance to live, married to the father of her child. In both plays, Fitch emphasises the maternal devotion of his heroines, paralleling the fin-de-siècle shift to view children in terms of their emotional rather than economic value by staging young boys, tearful and clinging to their mothers' skirts, in dramatic scenes.

Sapho offers an intriguing critical contrast to *The Moth and the Flame* in that its seduction narrative is a gendered inversion of the earlier play. While *The Moth and the Flame* tells the story of a young woman who is seduced by the roguish Fletcher, only to find out he already has a child by another woman, *Sapho* depicts a young man, seduced by a woman, only to find out she has a child fathered by another man. In the final moments of both plays, the more 'worldly' and experienced seducers, Fletcher and LeGrand, forgo love and consent to marry the respective parents of their children. Not only is LeGrand in *Sapho* placed in the active role of seductress, but Jean, her lover, is framed as a passive and naïve.

Portrayals of 'weak' men on the *fin de siècle* stage provided an opportunity for heroines to take the spotlight. As D. Lawrence affirms:

By showing men to be flawed, the position of the central male protagonist in late-Victorian social drama becomes considerably weakened. Strength is now found in leading female characters such as the good wife who forgives and supports her philandering husband, or the fallen woman who struggles against the society which ostracises her (891).

This is certainly the case in Fitch's *Sapho*. In exploring Fitch's evolving portraits of fallen women, therefore, it is also helpful to consider his fallen men. Jean is situated as the naïve fallen man in *Sapho*, and fallen men featured frequently in Fitch's work. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Fitch called fallen men to account for their sexual and financial transgressions, staging their suicides and social expulsions in *The Moth and the Flame* and *The Climbers*, and – as I will discuss in the final chapter of this thesis – he returned to the same themes in his final play *The City* (1909). The fallen man emerged in the 'progressive' drama of the *fin-de-siècle* (D. Lawrence 889). D. Lawrence has explored this theatrical trope in contrast to the fallen woman in late nineteenth century drama. Referring in his analysis to the work of playwrights such as Wilde, Pinero, Ibsen, Jones, and Grundy, D. Lawrence asserts that the fallen man became the subject of a group of plays by middle-class male authors whose plays scrutinised the morality of upper or leisure class men (889).

As men, and as members of the middle or upper-class, such characters were privileged in narratives of male authors; in contrast to the fallen woman, asserts D. Lawrence, 'the upper-class fallen man is nearly always reclaimed through the auspices of female purity' (ibid 896). Though he may attempt suicide, he 'is nearly always saved through the intervention of a good woman who sets out to reform him' (ibid 889). It was a trend that D. Lawrence attributes largely to the need for authors to pander to the conscience and ambitions of the 'philandering male in the audience' (896).

As indicated in the previous chapter, and as I will further explore here, Fitch's depictions of both fallen women and men broke with the conventions of even such

apparently 'progressive' male playwrights. While Fitch exhibited an increasing tendency to stage his fallen women sympathetically, granting them happy endings in his later plays, his stagings of fallen men were more critical and on more than one occasion his tragic heroes succeeded in their attempts at suicide⁴³.

'You Shall Not Write Bastard on the Forehead of *My Child*':

***The Moth and the Flame* (1898)**

In *The Moth and the Flame*, performed two years prior to *The Climbers*, Fitch presented his audience with another 'level-headed' heroine with a decision to make. Where Blanche in *The Climbers* would waver between two men, leaving the final decision somewhat up to fate, Marion in *The Moth and the Flame* was calm and resolute. In a climactic scene in the second act, Marion's wedding to the wealthy philanderer Fletcher is interrupted by the entrance of his former fiancé Jeanette, child in tow, at a key moment as the priest demands that any person who objects to the marriage declare it, 'or hereafter forever hold his peace' (Fitch, *The Moth and the Flame* 38).

Positioning Marion in a 'love triangle', in the wings stands the ever-devoted and honourable Douglas, hoping both to save Marion from Fletcher and win her for himself. Marion, however, takes charge of the situation for herself, sending Fletcher off to marry Jeanette for the sake of the child they have together with the understanding that he will afterwards leave the country. Well-dressed, educated and socially-minded Marion

⁴³ Both Sterling in *The Climbers* (1900) and Mr Walton in *The Moth and the Flame* (1890) succeed in their attempts at suicide.

contrasts favourably to those the *Evening Star* termed 'the flippant young girls of smart society' depicted by the supporting cast in the play ("Lafayette Square").

Fitch's characterisation of fallen woman Jeanette was that of a sympathetic victim, trying to do her best for her child - a clear marker in Fitch's work of a 'good' woman. Shockingly, for audiences at the time, Fletcher responded to Jeanette's pleas by striking her. The play was popular with audiences, as can be evidenced by its extended run of 125 performances. As I discussed in the previous chapter, however, male critics were predisposed to prioritise the narratives of male leads vying for the love of a heroine while necessarily also diminishing her experiences. While critics praised the play as a whole, they recast Fitch's female-led drama as a male-driven modern tragedy: uninterested in Marion and Jeanette, they discussed Fletcher at length, even expressing 'a touch of pity' for his 'bad break' at the church (Dithmar, "The Week at the Theatres" 17 April).

When *The Moth and the Flame* first premiered at the Chestnut Theatre in Philadelphia on the 14th of February 1898, it was to an extensive audience, whose number was only limited 'by the seating capacity of the house' ("The Moth and the Flame": Clyde Fitch's new Play Successfully Presented in Philadelphia.). Owing to the 'positive sensation' of the opening night, the Theatrical Syndicate booked the play for the Lyceum for an indefinite run that Easter (Moses 127-9). Widely differing accounts of the entertainment value of Fitch's latest society play⁴⁴ piqued the curiosity of those who had

⁴⁴ Differentiating *The Moth and the Flame* from Fitch's lighter (and apparently more superficial) comedic works, critics described it as: 'a play of an entirely different type than Mr. Fitch's later productions, dealing with a modern society theme' (*Evening Star*, "Lafayette Square"); 'a modern society play treated in a different vein from that of any recent production' (*The Evening Times*, "Coming to the Theatres"); 'a dramatic study of American social life at the present day' (*New York Times*, "The Moth and the Flame": Clyde Fitch's New Play Successfully Presented in Philadelphia).

yet to see it, and *The Moth and the Flame* was highly anticipated by the time it made its Broadway debut on the 11th of April ("The Week at the Theatres" 10 April). *The Sun* attributed discussion of the play among 'people in touch with theatrical affairs' to the first and second acts: a costume party disrupted by the off-stage suicide of the heroine's father, followed by the church wedding scene ("Affairs of the Theatre").

Dithmar called it an 'unmistakably successful comedy' and Fitch's 'best work' to date ("The Drama" 24 April 1898, 8 May 1898). When the play toured, the *Cornell Daily Sun* and the *Wilmington Morning Star* both hailed it as a 'high class drama' ("The Moth and the Flame"; "The Moth and the Flame"). Fitch later wrote to Corbin that the play had been 'the biggest pick-up I had after an eight years' slump' and 'the incentive to all my modern plays' (Moses 344). *The Moth and the Flame* showed at the Lyceum for a total of 10 weeks, the run lasting until the end of the season. The popularity of the play was such that the fiftieth performance at the Lyceum was marked by 'an appropriate souvenir,' although the practice was 'contrary to the usual conservative policy of the theatre' ("Theatrical Gossip" *New York Times*).

In spite of its success, prominent theatre critics did not find the play without fault. While praising Fitch's 'observations of social life, his wit and constructive skill,' Dithmar noted 'the extravagance of the dialogue' and complained, most significantly, that the characters of the play did not succeed in eliciting the sympathies of their audiences ("The Drama" 8 May, "The Week at the Theatres" 17 April). Scottish critic William Archer dismissed the play's popularity, arguing it was the result of the clever staging of the society wedding 'with all its frou-frou and tattle-tattle,' cautioning readers that the play was otherwise 'a crude piece of very unreal realism' (27-8). For most critics, however, the wedding scene was the highlight of the play, notable for more than its impressive scenery. The *Evening Star* called it a 'strong dramatic situation' that unfolded 'in a most thrilling

manner' and *The Sun* argued that, along with the fancy dress/ suicide scene, it was 'virile enough to prove the author's courage' ("Lafayette Square"; "Affairs of the Theatre").

The *Moth and the Flame* is an expansion of *The Harvest*, a one-act play of Fitch's that would become, almost word for word, the wedding scene. *The Harvest* was performed at the Theatre of Arts and Letters on the 26th of January 1893. *The Harvest* opens and closes on the chapel wedding of Jack and Eleanor. The groomsmen discuss the ethics of Jack leaving his past behind to 'become a good man and honest citizen' through his marriage to 'a nice girl' against his responsibility to marry 'one of at least two girls' that he has ruined socially through his love affairs with them. The bridesmaids criticise Eleanor for her 'philanthropic fads,' her charitable work, and her foolishness in marrying a man about whom she knows little (Fitch, *The Harvest* 5,6,14).

The wedding is interrupted by the emergence of the groom's chequered past in the form of Jeanette, a woman he apparently left some time ago both with a son and a false promise of marriage. Eleanor refuses to believe Jeanette's accusations and demands that the wedding continue until, in the closing moments of the play, Jack strikes Jeanette loudly and dramatically across the head in front of their child and everyone else in the church and audience. In *The Moth and the Flame*, Jack became Edward Fletcher, Eleanor became Marion Walton, and this scene, the second act.

Preceding the church scene, the opening act introduces the characters in the middle of a 'children's party' at the Waltons' in which the adult guests are all dressed in costume. The audience learns that Douglas Rhodes, a lifelong friend of Marion's, has been infatuated with her since childhood. Marion, however, prefers Fletcher, despite his 'fast' reputation, and becomes engaged to him moments before the party is interrupted by the off-stage suicide of Marion's father. Like Sterling in *The Climbers*, Mr Walton faced financial ruin and public disgrace having speculated with (and lost) money, including that

belonging to his sister-in-law. In the final act, Marion convinces an extremely reluctant Fletcher to marry Jeanette for the sake of his child. The audience is reassured, however, that Jeanette will not have to endure an abusive husband; Fletcher will 'sail on tomorrow's steamer' (Fitch, *The Moth and the Flame* 59).

Dithmar attributed much of the dramatic failing of the latter play to the characterisation of Marion. His analysis inferred that the heroine disappointed more than any personage in the play, owing to her 'too feeble appeal to our sympathies' ("The Week at the Theatres" 17 April). Despite Marion being, in his words, 'human and feminine and "logical,"' Dithmar argued that 'nobody cares much for her' (ibid). The disappointed critical opinion of Marion is one that, to some extent, pervaded: Dearinger argues that it is 'not without cause' that Marion is referred to as a 'stick' in the play, citing her charity work and devotion to Fletcher as evidence that she comes across as 'too good to be human' (174). Fitch's narrative makes it clear that Marion is socially minded and educated. Both qualities, in a woman, were cause for social ridicule. Marion's society friends complain comically of the 'plain covered books she reads and all her "university settlement" stuff in the slums, and her working-girls club and things' (*The Moth and the Flame* 35). The joke, however, hit more at the ignorance and superficiality of the leisure class than at Marion herself.

Marion's failure to make a significant impression upon her audiences can, to an extent, be attributed to her position, in Segwick's terms, 'between men'. Like Blanche in *The Climbers*, Marion is situated within a triangular relationship, with Fletcher and Douglas competing for her love and hand in marriage. In the first two acts, Marion emphasises the rivalry between the two men, privileging their narratives over hers. Marion is rendered essentially powerless, unable effectively to assert her own sense of intelligence, individualism and will – the very qualities Fitch ascribed her with. At the

beginning of the third act, however, Marion rejects Fletcher, not in favour of Douglas, but contriving with Jeanette to arrange Fletcher's marriage to her. By the final act, therefore, it is the women of Fitch's play who succeed in organising the lives of men.

Fletcher, first and foremost, is the villain of the piece, with Douglas as the contrasting 'good' American man. The moral polarisation of the two characters, and their subsequent rivalry over Marion is emphasised with their costumes in the opening act: Fletcher wears '*dark sailor clothes*,' while Douglas wears a '*white sailor costume*' (Fitch, *The Moth and the Flame*, 11, 5, emphasis original). Marion ignores her friends' and Douglas's warnings against the so-called wealthy 'libertine'⁴⁵ Fletcher in the first act of the play, insisting she doesn't 'judge a man by his reputation' (*The Moth and the Flame* 20). Before she enters the church in the second act, the groomsmen discuss his past and the ethics of marrying Marion when he has fathered children to 'at least two girls' that they know of (*The Moth and the Flame* 33). Fletcher has concealed his past in an attempt to get Marion to marry him, and in the final act of the play his status as villain is further asserted, as he attempts to blackmail her into marriage threatening to expose her through knowledge of her father's crimes⁴⁶: 'I won't leave the house because it's *mine*. And so will you be! [...] I'll buy you with your father's reputation!' (ibid 54).

Fletcher shows himself to be most reprehensible, however, when he strikes Jeanette: '*He strikes Jeanette a blow [...] Jeanette falls when struck. The child clings with both arms about its mother's waist*' (ibid 43, emphasis original). Marion's description

⁴⁵ *New York Times* referred to Fletcher as a Libertine ("The Week at the Theatres" 10 April 1898).

⁴⁶ Like Sterling in *The Climbers*, Mr. Walton speculated with (and lost) family money left in his care. Facing financial ruin, public disgrace, a prison sentence and a possible divorce, he commits suicide off-stage during a party at the family home in the first act: '*As they stop laughing there is the sound of something heavy falling in the room above. The chandelier trembles slightly, the lustres sound*' (Fitch, *The Moth and the Flame* 18).

emphasises the dramatic significance of the event in the following act, offering it as the reason for her loss of faith in him: 'A man who would strike a woman will do most anything, and think where he did it, and *why*? Because she was pleading and fighting for the rights of his child!' (Fitch, *The Moth and the Flame* 53). *The New York Times* deemed it the action of 'an ill-tempered, brutal fellow' ("The Week at the Theatres" 10 April). As Schwartz notes, it was a shocking scene for the time:

By striking the mother of his child in church (and onstage), Fletcher went beyond nearly all of the era's stage villainy in terms of vile actions. Indeed, at the end of the 1950s, directors were still reluctant to stage the striking of a woman (*Broadway and Corporate Capitalism* 180).

Despite this, critics found Fletcher a compelling and somewhat appealing character. The *Era* called him a 'graceful and gentlemanly villain' and the *Evening Star* described him as both an 'honorable and dishonourable man of the world' ("American Amusements"; "Lafayette Square"). Fletcher was the singular exception to Dithmar's assertion that none of the characters of the play elicited any sympathy. *The New York Times* critic wrote: 'we are all a little sorry for Fletcher when he loses his temper in the church, because that is such a "bad break" for a man of his kind. I think we are a little sorry for him, too, when he starts for Europe and Asia just before the last curtain' ("The Week at the Theatres" 17 April). The *Sun* concurred that, despite being a 'villain,' he had 'certain sympathetic traits of character and excusability of motive' ("Affairs of the Theatre"). These comments imply the critics' willingness – or at least a desire – to overlook Fletcher's misdeeds that stems from the villain's social position and 'gentlemanly' charm.

Indeed, Schwartz argues that critics sympathised with Fletcher in part because they identified with him 'as a young man attempting to put his past behind him and assume a new life, only to be trapped by fate and circumstance' (*Broadway and Corporate*

Capitalism 72). Dithmar's assertion that the church scene represents a "bad break" for Fletcher emphasises the extent to which male critics, and the upper class men in the auditorium, were predisposed to emphasise with the rakish male on stage. Fletcher, after all, did not target married women or the daughters of upper class men. His comments to Marion that he is 'not the only one' and that 'this sort of thing exists all around us' hint at the pervasive culture of philandering upper (or leisure) class Victorian men (Fitch, *The Moth and the Flame* 40). Such men were perceived increasingly as 'effeminate, idle and immoral' in contrast to the more moral and physically robust men of the emerging middle-class (D. Lawrence 889).

Dearinger attributes audience infatuation with Fletcher to the 'likeable' actor Herbert Kelsey (176). Within the play, the secondary characters discuss the draw of the charismatic rogue; like the male critics, the women of the play find him to be 'quite the most amusing man in town,' despite knowing him to be 'awfully fast' and 'one of those men who live all over the place' (Fitch, *The Moth and the Flame* 8). Comically summing up the general opinion of him, Ethel declares: 'I don't care whether he's bad or not, he's charming enough to make up for it' (ibid). Even in the final act of the play, after witnessing the scene in the church, Mrs Lorrimer, a serial divorcee, remains attracted to him: 'bad as he is, there is something about that man that takes right hold of me' (ibid 59).

Fletcher was not the only fallen man to appear in Fitch's successful play; Marion's father, like Sterling in *The Climbers*, faced financial ruin, public disgrace and a prison sentence after embezzling money to speculate on the stock markets. Fletcher marked the similarities between the two characters and argued that Mr Walton had 'cheated those very people who loved him': 'that's only what I did. He was no better than I' (Fitch, *The Moth and the Flame* 55). The impact of Walton's suicide was apparent in the reaction of the audience on the opening night in Philadelphia. Although the performance was

deemed a resounding success, 'and the approval was definite at the end,' according to the *New York Times*, *The Moth and the Flame* on this night was 'coldly received' before the end of the first act ("The Moth and the Flame": Clyde Fitch's New Play"). Given that these are the moments in which the audience learns of Mr Wolton's financial transgressions, his impending ruin and his act of suicide, and given also that the audience on that night 'represented socially the best people in Philadelphia,' their cold response implies unease with Fitch's unforgiving depiction of upper class immorality (ibid).

In the final act of the play, Fletcher sets sail for Europe, leaving behind his name, but not his person, for his wife and son: 'I've bought lots of pleasure at the cost of other people's; now I'm going to pay my debt, I suppose, with some misery on my account' (Fitch, *The Moth and the Flame* 59). Fitch emphasises, throughout the play, the paternal duty that fathers have to their sons, if only in acknowledging them officially. The trend became increasingly common among writers of this period. Impoverished orphans appeared in many guises in fiction throughout the nineteenth century, perhaps most notably in the works of Dickens, and the morality of philandering men was scrutinized in plays such as American playwright and actor James Herne's *Margaret Fleming* (1890). In ending the play with Fletcher cast out of society, separated from the woman he loves and the future he envisioned, Fitch holds his villain to account for his early neglect, staging the potential consequences for men who abandon their illegitimate children. While the outcome may have been a miserable one for Fletcher, Fitch described the ending as a happy one (Moses 113).

Describing Jeanette as a 'meddlesome woman,' however, Dithmar laid blame with her rather than with Fletcher. Such arguments converge with Evangelical notions of the fallen woman as sinful, contributing to a culture that cast the woman as the guilty party in instances of sexual transgression. Echoing the critic's attempts to excuse Fletcher's

assault of Jeanette, Fletcher deflects the blame to Marion for trying to blackmail her in the third act: 'I didn't come here to do it; she made me angry. She drove me to it' (Fitch, *The Moth and the Flame* 55).

With Jeanette, Fitch drew on the sympathies of her audience through her emotive, melodramatic outpourings in the wedding scene. *The Sun* referred to her simply as 'the wronged woman' and indeed Fitch portrayed her as a victim ("Affairs of the Theatre"). Most significantly, however, he portrayed her as a loving mother. The majority of Jeanette's entreaties to Fletcher in the church focus on the consequences for her child, raised without the name of his father. She begs the couple not to 'take away this innocent boy's name,' and finally in the emotional climax that causes Fletcher to lash out at her 'cries out ... a wild, heart-broken, desperate cry': 'you shall not write Bastard on the forehead of my child!' (Fitch, *The Moth and the Flame* 42, emphasis original). Throughout the scene, the child stands close to Jeanette, clinging to her skirts as a physical and visual reminder of what is at stake.

Jeanette, as Fitch staged her, was pitiable, but not repulsively so. When she enters the church, she is described as 'a young and attractive looking woman, fashionably, but quietly dressed' (Fitch, *The Moth and the Flame* 38). Her pretty but unaffected appearance distinguishes her visually from common imaginings of the prostitute or temptress. There are no reminiscences, for example, of Fitch's 1890 adventuress Violet Huntley who, after running off to Paris with a man other than her husband, returned to the stage in 'French' dress, with noticeable rouge and bleached hair. Fletcher's assertions that Jeanette is 'that sort of thing,' 'from the streets' and 'up to all the tricks' thus land insincerely in this instance, giving only the impression of his own panicked and desperate state (ibid 42).

Where the *Evening Star* categorised Jeanette as a 'loving and weak woman,' Marion was 'the strong, loving woman, who works for the poor in the slums,' and 'is interested in all sorts of charitable things' ("Lafayette Square"). As Schwartz asserts, Marion's college degree and charitable social work are indicative of a certain brand of 'American *fin-de-siècle* modern womanhood' (*Broadway and Corporate Capitalism* 71). Indeed, her participation in such activities mark Marion as an American New Woman. Hinting at this resemblance to New Women, the *New York Times* referred to her as a 'self-willed young woman of the present hour' ("The Moth and the Flame." The 'Society Drama' by Clyde Fitch Acted at the Lyceum Theatre").

As Eltis has demonstrated, New Women were staple fare in the fallen woman plays by the turn of the twentieth century ("The Fallen Woman on Stage" 230). Situated alongside the fallen woman, she argues, the New Woman acts 'as a contributory source of disruption and misguided rebellion against the "natural" order,' leading other women astray with her radical and disorderly influence (ibid). In Fitch's play, however, it is his rational New Woman that restores order, bringing about the marriage of Jeanette and Fletcher. She is 'misguided' only in her early desire to marry Fletcher herself.

The ideal American girl, in contrast to the New Woman, was more concerned with finding a mate than with her own academic education. As I described in the previous chapter, educated and socially active middle-class white women, particularly those who attended college, risked their reproductive health according to physicians. As Smith-Rosenberg asserts, the college woman 'who favoured her mind at the expense of her ovaries' risked destabilising her 'delicate physiological balance' and suffering the physical consequences: 'Her overstimulated brain would become morbidly introspective. Neurasthenia, hysteria, insanity would follow. Her ovaries, robbed of energy rightfully theirs, would shrivel, and sterility and cancer ensue' (258).

An educated woman, Marion fit uncomfortably into the role of heroine as future wife and mate for either of her suitors. As a 'logical' woman, 'bearing herself with dignity under the fury of Fletcher's fit of passion' and resolving matters with 'a deliciously logical sense of justice' she distanced herself from conventional stage heroines (Dithmar, "The Week at the Theatres" 17 April). The stock heroine in late-nineteenth century theatre, as Jerome summarised satirically, was 'always in trouble – and don't she let you know it, too': 'she weeps a good deal during the course of her troubles, which we suppose is only natural enough, poor woman' (*Stage-Land*). Marion indeed had more than a fair share of 'troubles' throughout the action of the play. With the exception of her father's death at the end of the first act (a moment in which Dithmar approved of her emotional outburst), however, Marion does not cry in response to adversity, but instead exhibits emotional strength and a desire to bring about a solution.

It is as a result of her apparent common sense and logical demeanour that she not only refuses to marry Fletcher, but refuses also to weep and cry about it – both points that Dithmar in particular criticised her for. After learning of Fletcher's past and witnessing him strike Jeanette on their wedding day, Marion looks upon Fletcher 'with an expression of scorn' before leaving 'with determination' (Fitch, *The Moth and the Flame* 43). The following morning, Marion's mother declares that Marion 'hasn't shed a tear' and it soon emerges that Marion, true to her altruistic nature, is trying to bring about the legal marital union (though not the bodily reunion) of Jeanette and Fletcher (ibid 47). Marion attributes her outwardly calm response to her ability to be 'reasonable' about the situation (ibid).

Dithmar's complaint that '[w]e do not weep for her or with her,' suggests that Marion disappointed critics, in part, because she did not fulfil her expected role of weeping passive heroine ("The Week at the Theatres" 17 April). The agency of Fitch's

heroines is significant, particularly given the dramatically 'weak' heroes who stood alongside (or rather, somewhat behind them). Butsch suggests that matinee girls – who were a significant demographic of Fitch's plays – 'had no interest in the character of the play but only in the matinee idol,' typically a handsome and charismatic actor ("Bowery B'hoys" 397). The popularity of Fitch's female-led dramas indicates that Fitch's so-called 'matinee girls' were interested in more than romantic heroes to swoon over; they were equally, if not more specifically, responsive to the increasingly dynamic and human heroines of Fitch's plays.

'They Loved Me for the Bad':

***Sapho* (1900)**

Sapho (1900), an adaptation of the French novel/play by Alphonse Daudet, proved to be the most controversial play of Fitch's career. Fitch's natural portrayal of the sexually experienced and thus morally ambiguous model Fanny LeGrand (*Sapho*), as performed by English actress Olga Nethersole, caused a sensation and moral outrage in New York. The most contentious scene, at the end of the first act, saw the young and naive Jean Gaussin carry Fanny – dressed in a diaphanous white gown – up a spiral staircase to her bedroom with the intimation that he would spend the night. Adding to the perceived immorality of the play, Fitch and Nethersole staged Fanny not as a villain, but as a sympathetic and maternal female lead. In subsequent productions in London, with the staircase scene having been removed, *Sapho* did not generate anywhere near the level of controversy it experienced in New York, and a number of critics responded well to Nethersole's naturalistic portrayal of the heroine. Where Daudet intended his

novel/play as a didactic tale, dedicating it as a warning to his sons for ‘when they are twenty years of age,’ Nethersole professed an alternative intention: ‘[Daudet] wrote it as a lesson for sons; I interpreted it as a message to daughters as well’ (“Olga Nethersole Discusses Tuberculosis and “Sapho””).

The play opens with a Parisian ‘ball in full swing’ populated by artists, dancers, and some of the wealthier men of Paris (Fitch, *Sapho*, 1;1⁴⁷). Fanny emerges on to a balcony in a ‘white guazy silk’ Greek dress, and is from there lowered with the aid of the men (ibid 1;11). Jean, being in attendance at the party, becomes infatuated with her, but does not realise she is the infamous ‘Sapho’ – a woman who has had numerous lovers, including the sculptor who was inspired to create a statue of the Greek poet in her image. In the midst of the party, Flamant – one of Fanny’s former lovers – is arrested for forgery. Jean and Fanny leave the party together and from there ensues the infamous staircase scene.

The second act, taking place some months later, reveals the pair apparently residing together secretly in Jean’s Parisian flat. Jean’s family, however, wish him to return home to marry the young Irene. When Jean realises, through the unwitting intervention of Dechelette – the host of the first night’s party – that his Fanny and the notorious ‘Sapho’ are one and the same, he demands they end their relationship. His resolve weakens, however, and so the third and fourth acts take place in their provincial home. Away from the city, they have been posing as man and wife. They await the arrival of a young boy. Jean, at first, is unaware that he is the son of Fanny and Flamant. Seeing him with Fanny, however, Jean realises the truth and leaves her once again. He returns in the final act, hoping to resume where they left off. Fanny now, having grown tired of

⁴⁷ Except where stated, all quotations refer to the American manuscript of the play, sourced from the Amherst College Clyde Fitch archive.

trying to live up to Jean's expectations of her, has agreed to reunite with Flamant who is no longer in prison and who promises to care for her. The curtain falls as she leaves Jean and the house for the final time, a train awaiting to take her to be with the father of her child.

Sapho first played at Power's theatre in Chicago on the 1st of October 1899. The *New York Times*, reviewing this initial production on opening night praised the 'smooth and well-balanced performance' with settings and costumes of 'the highest order' ("Sapho" in Chicago). The play, it was declared, would be 'a permanent success' (ibid). From there, *Sapho* toured a number of other venues before premiering in New York at Wallack's on the 5th of February 1900. By the time *Sapho* reached Broadway it had generated a significant amount of interest from audiences and critics alike. As the *New York Times* noted, *Sapho* had 'drawn crowds in many other cities and caused a hot but futile discussion of the relation of morality to art in many newspapers' ("The Week's New Bills" 28 Jan 1900). The *Washington Post* noted the 'endless discussion and immense box office receipts' generated by the play ("A Powerful Production of Clyde Fitch's Dramatization of Sapho").

Fitch wrote *Sapho* at the request of leading lady Olga Nethersole. Where Daudet's version had been staged in both New York and London without incident, the *World* made a call for censorship of Fitch's play. The 'yellow page' newspaper accused *Sapho* of 'corrupting the public's morals, defiling the minds of youth, of indecency, depravity, levity, and unaesthetic influence' (*World* 7 Feb 1900 14, cited in Saxon 737). Subsequently, on the 21st of February 1900, Olga Nethersole and her co-star Hamilton Revelle were arrested along with Nethersole's tour manager and the manager of Wallack's Theatre. By the 6th of March, the play had been shut down. *Sapho*, and Nethersole in particular, were the prime subjects of a widely publicised indecency trial.

As Saxon shows, the critical reception of the play, prior to its New York debut, 'did not suggest that there was anything particularly untoward [...] that would justify censorship' and yet in New York, *Sapho* 'was greeted as anything but respectable' (736-7). Dearing argues that the press became far more fervent in its moral disapproval of the play once 'it became clear that the play was making money' and that the *World's* attack was prompted largely by a gap in sensational news and the need of 'a new story to boost sales' (213).

While criticism had indeed been more balanced early on in the play's history in America, it was not without those eager to denounce *Sapho* as wicked and immoral. In Cleveland, the press printed the sermon of Rev. R. A. George who described the play in nefarious terms:

moral sewage [...] full of moral miasma all the way through, without a redeeming feature in it [...] There were many good and pure people in that audience, but there were many who drank in that moral poison as sweet nectar ("The Play of "Sapho": Full of Moral Miasma, Rev. R. A. George Declares").

Such criticism, however intended, increased publicity and curiosity about the production. William Winter described the play as 'a vulgar, commonplace, tiresome story about a harlot and a fool [...] shameful and ineffably trivial,' arguing that such works brought forth the 'degradation of the Theatre' (*Wallet of Time* 312). Winter's criticism lay blame not merely with the playwright, but also with the actress. After berating Olga Nethersole's seeming 'desire to identify herself, exclusively, with characters of degeneracy and plays of morbid delirium,' Winter turned his criticism to other actresses, 'too numerous to mention' who 'have wrought in the same vineyard of eleemosynary labor, and with like results' (*Wallet of Time* 311).

Perhaps most worryingly, for those morally opposed to the play, *Sapho* was immensely popular with audiences of young American women. As Saxon asserts: 'That

young women would understand and laugh at the sexual proclivities of Fanny Le Grand was a major source of distress' ("Sexual Transgression" 745). Nethersole responded to such recriminations in the *Washington Post*, arguing that she was 'only trying to depict real life' and that in any case: 'I do not act for young girls but for intelligent men and women' ("A Powerful Production of Clyde Fitch's Dramatization of "Sapho").

Fitch later argued that while it may be the function of the press to chaperone and protect the 'young person,' it is 'false morality' to condemn a play because bad people appear in it' or 'because the subject of immorality is seriously treated in it' ("The Play and the Public" xivi). Ultimately, Fitch argued, a play may be deemed moral if the result is to 'sicken and disgust [the audience] with the wrong thing' or 'frighten [the audience] with the inevitable result of breaking the laws or the commandments' (ibid). Fitch's *Sapho*, however, inspired something far more controversial than fear or disgust. As a reviewer of the New Orleans production asserted, Fanny Legrand 'wholly wins the sympathies of the audience': 'Miss Nethersole and Clyde Fitch between them make a woman so winsome and loveable that everybody wants to forget about her horrible past' ("Amusements: The Tulane Theatre").

In striving to make their *Sapho* a more sympathetic heroine, many interpreted Fitch's play to be more sinful than the original: 'The infamous *Sapho* of Daudet, evil as she was, is even less repulsive than the *Sapho* of Clyde Fitch' ("A Powerful Production of Clyde Fitch's Dramatization of "Sapho"). Fitch and Nethersole's attempts to naturalise a fallen seductress, according to the *Telegraph*, increased the immorality of the production: 'The audacity of the story of "Sapho" is supposed by the realism of the stage. [...] [Nethersole] is the incarnation of the "woman with a past," and the character becomes the more pernicious by reason of her naturalness' ("Sapho"). The *Cincinnati*

Inquirer concurred, objecting to the dangers of placing 'a halo above [Sapho's] head' (undated clipping).

For William Winter, in any case, no consequence within the play could justify the 'tainted' play itself. 'The misrepresentative theatrical portrayal of sexual vice' he argued, 'will sooner blunt, deject, and vitiate purity of mind and pervert rectitude of principle than it will create an impulse to clean living' (*Wallet of Time* 316). Significantly, Winter described those who advocated tainted plays on the grounds of didacticism as 'weak sisters of the male sex, or of no sex at all' (ibid 315). Drawing also on imagery of 'emasculated puppies', Winter's comments associate the purveyors and consumers of plays such as *Sapho* not only with perversion, but also, more specifically, with sexual 'inversion' and a lack of masculine potency (ibid). His claims echo the gender biased criticism aimed at Fitch's own apparent lack of masculinity and, as Saxon asserts, '[foreground] the ambiguity that surrounded Fitch's sexuality, an ambiguity that attracted negative attention' (Saxon "Sexual Transgression on the American Stage" 739).

Despite the prosecution, and even Nethersole herself, attributing blame to the script and author, Fitch himself was never charged (Dearinger 214-5, Saxon ibid 745). Sailing off as he did annually for Europe, Fitch somewhat uncharacteristically 'distance[d] himself from the play, intellectually, psychologically and literally' while Nethersole remained in the limelight both on and off stage (Saxon ibid 741). The trial itself became something of a show in which Nethersole was the star. Just as one of the main charges brought against the play concerned the revealing nature of Nethersole's greek dress in the opening act, discussions of the play's morality in the press 'took a back seat to an "obsessive" discussion by male commentators about the revealing nature of [Nethersole's] trial clothing' (Bradley 72).

The public fascination with Nethersole and accounts of the scandal from Fitch's somewhat biased biographers, Moses, Gerson, and Bell, along with more recent criticism, as Saxon asserts, 'place Nethersole firmly at the centre' of the play's turbulent history ("Sexual Transgression" 739-40). While Houchin (2003), Johnson (2006), and Dearing (2016), attribute the scandal to the actions and public opinion of Nethersole, Saxon argues that Fitch's role, as the author and as a somewhat controversial public figure himself, was of equal importance ("Sexual Transgression" 737-40). Saxon questions the notion that Fitch was led by Nethersole in his construction of the heroine, or that she made any serious alterations against his wishes once the script was finished, arguing that his 'professional behavior [...] and his relations with actors and actresses suggest that this would have been unusual' (740).

In a *New York Times* interview given by Fitch in late January 1900, when *Sapho* was playing and beginning to cause a stir in New York, the playwright, while not naming names, acknowledged the possibility of an author being influenced by an actor or actress: 'In writing a play for an individual there is usually an attempt to throw one's self in sympathy with him to look upon the character from the point of view of the person who is to take the part' ("A Talk with Clyde Fitch"). Fitch, however, was eager to stress that he strove always to write his own plays, uninfluenced by the desires of others, declaring that 'the writer cannot be too much hampered by this. The first object is the story, and it must tell itself in its own way naturally' (ibid).

Examination of overviews of Fitch's work may give the impression of *Sapho*, with its controversial heroine, as the exception to the 'standard' Fitch play. In addition to his contemporary American society dramas, the dramaturge experimented with form, genre, time and setting, writing everything from a historical Civil War romance to a frontier western. Diverse as they were, however, for the large part his productions were

unmistakably 'Fitch'; even in *The Cowboy and the Lady*, argues Wattenburg, one may discern the 'stamp of the New York upper class' (77). No other Fitch play managed to generate anywhere near as much moral controversy as *Sapho* and, as Saxon attests, Fitch 'would never again write a play about such a powerful and public sign of potential sexual transgression' ("Sexual Transgression" 746).

While the American reception of *Sapho* has been well explored by Houchin, Johnson, Saxon, and Dearing, the London production, which occurred two years later and did not cause anything like the sensation in New York, has not been examined in detail. Likely owing to the scandal that occurred in New York, as well as the necessity of attaining approval for license by the Lord Chamberlain's examiner of plays, *Sapho*, when it premiered in London on the 1st of May 1902, had been, as the *Illustrated London News* put it, '[m]ercilessly cut down' ("Sapho" at the Adelphi" 10 May 1902).

The London manuscript shows a significant number of changes from American versions of the text. Most notably, the controversial staircase scene, the climax of the first act, has been excised. Act one, taking place solely at Dechelette's, begins with a song and ends with a waltz. While some critics were impressed⁴⁸ with the spectacle of the scene, others struggled to see its significance. The *Globe* argued that the entire opening act 'should be excised,' the *Stage* found it 'of little value to the play considered dramatically,' and the *Sketch* called it 'needless and silly' ("Adelphi Theatre. "Sapho""; "London Theatres"; "The Stage from the Stalls" 7 May 1902). By comparison, the opening act in the US was described, not as a lavish ball, but 'a startlingly realistic orgy [...] unquestionably wicked, but at the same time extremely well done' and the final moments

⁴⁸ The *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* called it 'one of the brightest and loveliest things of the kind the stage has known' ("Sapho" at the Adelphi Theatre" 28 June 1902).

of the scene – as Jean carried Fanny up the spiral stairs – were met in at least one instance with ‘ribald outbursts from the gallery’ (“Amusements: The Tulane Theatre”; undated clipping, *Cincinnati Inquirer*).

The staircase scene in New York, although effective and often drawn out by Nethersole, had been relatively brief within the context of the play. By comparison, the insertion of all the revelries in the opening act, which included, in addition to the lengthy chorus and the dance, a recitation of a four verse poem, extended the opening act significantly. In addition, owing to the excision of the staircase scene, the second act began with a lengthy discussion between Jean and his uncle which included a monologue from Jean describing the night he carried Fanny up the stairs (Fitch, *Sapho*, Lord Chamberlain’s Plays, 1900-68, 45-46). On opening night, the play was too long – the *Stage* called it ‘unnecessarily drawn out’ – not finishing until after midnight (“London Theatres”). The *Tatler* critic lamented that he ‘sat through four mortal hours’ (J.M.B., “The Return of Miss Nethersole and Mr. Hawtrey”).

Tired and frustrated by the end of the play, some of the audience – identified as those in the gallery – greeted the final curtain with apparently vulgar ‘hooting and hissing,’ directed at Nethersole (Chicot, “Motley Notes”). The *Sketch* found it ‘deplorable’ that they ‘took advantage of the darkened theatre to insult a woman’ (ibid). Owing to the response of the audience that night, some of the lengthier discussions and passages of the play were cut down and critics noted its vast improvement for the fact (“Chit Chat”; ““Sapho” at the Adelphi Theatre” 28 June 1902).

Despite the changes made for the play to be licensed by the Lord Chamberlain’s examiner of plays, *The Times* did not pass up the opportunity to declare the play a spectacle that ‘vulgarises vulgarity’ (“Adelphi Theatre”). Nethersole’s performance, the reviewer suggested, would appeal to ‘a certain class of playgoers’ that were unlikely ‘to

be turned from their purpose by criticism' (ibid). When the play premiered in Dublin later that year, it generated some controversy⁴⁹ – though it did not struggle to gain an audience – owing largely to a very brief review of the play in *Freeman's Journal*: 'the only advice which can be tendered to the public in reference to the performance is to stay away from it' ("The Gaiety Theatre"). For the most part, however, reviewers of the London production seemed perplexed by its reception in New York.

The *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* wondered what 'all the American fuss' was for, declaring that while it was overlong, they found 'no fault [...] with *Sapho* by reason of its immorality' ("Sapho" at the Adelphi" 10 May 1902). Neither could the *Tatler* comprehend how it had 'raised such a tornado of notoriety in America,' finding it no more shocking than Zaza or other 'lurid studies of primitive feminine types quite foreign to this country': 'nothing but hysteric spasms designed for the leading lady in the limelight' ("The Return of Miss Nethersole and Mr. Hawtrey").

Sapho held strong with audiences at the Adelphi, running for 71 performances until the 12th of July that year, but it divided critics. Where American critics had debated the relationship between art and morality, with a small number defending Fitch's production with the aesthetic defence 'art for art's sake,' for the *Times*, *Sapho* was simply 'bad art' ("Adelphi Theatre"). The *Sketch* argued that of all Fitch's plays, none were 'quite so bad as "Sapho," one of the poorest specimens of clumsy play-hashing that I can recollect' ("The Stage from the Stalls" 7 May 1902).

⁴⁹ Nethersole responded to the *Freeman's Journal* notice by writing to demand a retraction, which they refused. She addressed the audience after a performance of the play, describing what she viewed as an unwarranted attack on her business, as well as the claims by *The Irish Independent and Nation* that the play was 'vile and unclean'. She also revealed that she had received a significant number of anonymous and harassing letters while in Dublin. See the *Era* 18/10/02 "Theatrical Gossip" and 25/10/02 "Olga Nethersole at Dublin".

The *Times* suggested that only ‘tedium and disgust’ could have been expected from the play’s subject matter (“Adelphi Theatre”). Other reviewers suggested that Fitch had neglected to ‘do full justice’ even to Daudet’s novel by crafting the play purely to showcase Nethersole’s ‘showy’ talents (“An Actress, and Two Plays”; ““Sapho” at the Adelphi” *Illustrated London News*, 10 May 1902).

Nethersole was undoubtedly a significant draw for audiences in the UK and on opening night they ‘received her with frenzy’ (“Adelphi Theatre. “Sapho””). In an interview taken that year, the *Era* described the enigmatic and assertive impression that Nethersole projected:

She compels attention; she arouses interest; and in conversation you feel, even if you had not known it, that you have a brilliant, highly strung, impulsive woman before you. A woman all nerves, with a rapid brain and quick perception of what she wants and how to carry out and convey all she means (“London’s Lady Managers”).

The *Era* described her as ‘one of the finest emotional actresses on the English stage’ and for many critics in London, Nethersole’s acting lived up to, and even surpassed expectations, especially in her emotional scenes (“Sapho”). The *Stage* argued that the ‘mixed reception’ on opening night ‘had certainly no reference’ to Nethersole: ‘for her impersonation of Fanny Legrand in the crucial scenes in the second and third acts of the present version has been hailed with rapturous enthusiasm’ (“London Theatres”). The critic applauded Nethersole’s ‘emotional intensity’ and ‘expression of passionate fervour’ calling it ‘one of the strongest pieces of acting seen in London for some time’ (ibid). The *Sketch* dubbed her artistic abilities ‘genius’ (“The Stage from the Stalls” 7 May 1902).

Other critics, however, did not find Nethersole’s acting style to their taste: it was too emotional, too embellished, and altogether too much for many of them. The *Tatler* complained of her ‘inveterate mannerisms – exaggerations of gesture (such as showing the whites of her eyes); her needless emphasis; her contraltoness [...] and her

pronunciation' (J.M.B. "The Return of Miss Nethersole and Mr. Hawtrey"). The *Illustrated London News* similarly complained of her 'protracted elaboration of detail' and 'over-emphasis,' and *The Times* described the performance as 'more hysterical than a patient at the Hospital for Nervous Diseases of Women' ("Sapho," at the Adelphi" 10 May 1902; "Adelphi Theatre").

More than one critic felt he had identified the 'problem' with her performance. The *Times* suggested she 'exaggerates and comes down with a heavy hand. That seems to be the great flaw in Miss Nethersole's method' ("Adelphi Theatre"). *The Athenaeum* argued Nethersole's performance to lack that 'harrowing effect' of Gabrielle Rejane, but suggested that the fault lay with Fitch's deviations from the Daudet adaptation: 'It is not that she acts badly [...] But, deprived of satisfactory environment [her performance] loses its effect, and leaves us angry rather than otherwise stimulated or moved' ("The Week" 603). The critic suggested that Nethersole would 'do well to get a simple translation of the original' and enact it 'with no more alteration than censure demands' (ibid). Offering another view, the *Sunday Review* praised Nethersole's acting ability and emotional range, but suggested her 'limitation' lay in her inability to connect with the audience through her performance: 'She never touches you through the character impersonated. It is of her art that you are always conscious' ("An Actress, and Two Plays").

While these critics indeed proved themselves 'conscious' of Nethersole's acting technique, and endlessly willing to offer instruction on how she might improve it, journalist and social reformer Florence Fenwick Miller, or 'Filomena', writing for her "Ladies' Page" in the *Illustrated London News*, came to the actress's defence. For Florence Miller, Nethersole's performance surpassed any of those by French actresses Gabrielle Rejane and Jane Hading, or indeed 'any other actress at present to be seen' ("Ladies' Page"). Florence Miller called Nethersole's Fanny Le Grand the 'most extraordinarily

powerful piece of emotional acting you have ever seen' (ibid). Florence Miller attributed the lack of praise from other theatre critics to the fact that 'the critics are men, and no man can appreciate the circumstances' (ibid).

For Florence Miller, much of the appeal of *Sapho*, lay in the emotional appeal of Fanny Le Grand. Rather than a stock temptress, or the femme fatale of Daudet's novel, Fanny Le Grand, as Fitch and Nethersole crafted her, was a far more sympathetic and altogether more human character. Nethersole described her naturalistic style of acting:

I not only want to act the part, I want to be the part, or it is no good to me. I like characters that give me scope – that play upon the human chord, and strike the human note at the outset (quote from *Era* interview, "London's Lady Managers").

For many in London, Nethersole succeeded in her aim; as the *Era* asserted, 'the actress gave us a real woman – not faultless in virtue or deep in wisdom, but with a loving, pitiful nature, strong passions, and bitter bad luck' ("*Sapho*"). Fitch and Nethersole's divergence from the novel was noted in a number of reviews⁵⁰. Dearinger outlines the key differences between the two heroines, noting that, in contrast to Fitch and Nethersole's attractive and 'warm-hearted' Fanny Le Grand, Daudet's was 'pathetic but calculating and hardened by experience', showed visible signs of age and physical decay, and had initiated romantic relationships with women as well as men (204).

In the original version of the script, *Sapho* ends with Jean awaking with the realisation that Fanny has left him and crying out for her. Dearinger describes how, following the initial week in Chicago, Fitch changed the ending of the play 'to keep the focus on Nethersole': 'Jean now slept on, not waking to find that his beloved has left him' (211). The last image as the curtain fell became Fanny's face, peering back into the scene

⁵⁰ For example, the *New York Times* reported: 'Mr. Fitch has not stuck too closely to the original story, they say, as he has endeavoured to make the character of Sapho more "sympathetic"' ("Miss Nethersole in "Sapho," Miss de Wolfe in "The Surprises of Love").

of her great passion' (211). Fitch retained the change to the script in the London version, with the stage directions indicating that Jean 'sleeps' throughout Fanny's farewell and departure:

She casts a lost hurried look at him, and seizing a small bag and bird cage hurried out and is hurrying past the window, with her handkerchief to her eyes, and pulling her veil to hide her tears. A moment's stillness (Fitch, *Sapho*, Lord Chamberlain's Plays, 1823-99, 146).

Saxon argues that Jean's body in this final scene exemplifies 'both neurasthenic collapse and the 'rest cure' advocated for the female sufferer of the condition' and he has thus been, by this point in the play, 'unmanned in every possible way' ("Sexual Transgression" 745). By choosing, in later versions, to end the play with the focus on Fanny, Fitch prioritizes her experiences over Jean's.

Fanny's relationship to Jean, like her previous relationships, is motivated by her desire to love, rather than greed or malice: 'I don't want them to throw away their money and themselves on me. [...] When I love, I want to make all the sacrifices, I want to give all myself' (Fitch, *Sapho* 1;23). For her, the act of loving is itself an act of self-sacrifice and performance. Living as Jean's seemingly 'pure' and submissive 'wife' in the French countryside, Fanny enacts the mid-Victorian ideal of true womanhood. The model-come-homemaker paints the image of the Victorian domestic existence that Jean desires at the end of act two:

We'll make these three rooms into a little paradise of a house. When you are studying, I shall sit off at one side, quiet as a mouse! Satisfied just to look at you! When you are through with your books, if you want it – a little song for you, and a kiss for me, and then off you go to your work, and when you come home at night there will be a dinner for you made by these two very same hands, with dishes for a King sir! (ibid 2;19-20)

While Jean's existence is associated with books, knowledge, and the world of work, Fanny is confined to the domestic sphere, a newly born 'angel in the house'.

By the end of the play, Fanny comes to the realisation that her relationship with Jean, in many respects, is no different than with any other man in her past. In order to love him she has had to sacrifice herself so that she could live up to his ideals. She asks Jean: 'I've given you my life, what more do you want?' (ibid 3;36). She describes herself as 'exhausted' as having 'loved too much,' incapable of any more self-sacrifice or performance for the sake of men (ibid 4;18). Fanny's desire for life outside married life with Flamant and their child in a 'pretty house in the country' resonates with her failed attempts to enact the life of a seemingly pure and submissive wife with Jean in their country cottage. Where Fanny had been the one to love and make sacrifices for Jean, Flamant is willing to offer the same level devotion to Fanny, demanding nothing in return. Fanny acknowledges the benefits of such a relationship:

As I've said once, I've loved too much, I am exhausted, used up. I want now in my turn to be loved too much, to be cared for, to be spoiled! That won't bring me wrinkles, nor grey hairs — we are to be married... and he feels that in this it is I who do him a great favour!... Just compare the difference! (ibid 4;18).

After she has been living in the countryside as a 'wife' to Jean, a neighbor advises Fanny to marry Jean in earnest, arguing that 'nobody'd be the wiser' and she could continue her 'marriage' in all its respectability (ibid 3;8). That Fanny has so successfully masqueraded as a respectable married woman, and that she could so easily continue to do so, as Saxon argues 'flies absolutely in the face of the social codes that marked difference between proper and improper women: if one could not "know" the difference, if "nobody'd be any the wiser", that marker becomes dislocated, and the definitions of the pure "American girl" and the "putrid" transgressor disappear' ("Sexual Transgression" 743). Fanny Le Grand, a sexually experienced seductress, is able to assume the image and markers of the apparently innocent and virtuous American girl with ease, thus 'expos[ing]

the model and the structuring impulses that participated in its formation' ("Sexual Transgression" 736).

Highlighting the performative nature of their 'married' life in the countryside, Fanny describes herself as 'pretending' 'for Jean's sake' (Fitch, *Sapho* 3;37). Rather than contrasting her own parody of marriage to the 'real' thing, Fanny Le Grand questions whether there is any difference in essence between herself and a 'virtuous' wife: 'Could the most faithful wife in the world married to you by law and the Church, and every other blessed thing, have been one whit truer to you than I've been?' (Ibid 3;36).

Instead of casting Fanny Le Grand as seductress and villain, Fitch questions the culpability of the men she has apparently misled and discarded. Dechelette describes Fanny as having 'idealized Flamant as she did all of her lovers,' attributing the failure of the relationships to the fact that she 'was always disappointed in them' (ibid 2;24). Fanny voices her awareness of Jean's imperfections, when she describes her intentions for her boy's future: 'I'll bring him up well, if I can, to be like Jean - no, not like Jean. I want him to be a strong man, tender to women, yes, tender to women, but strong, all the same' (ibid 4;4). The inference being that Jean, in her opinion, is weak.

As much as she may have idealised men, Fanny, in turn, has been idealised in many conceptions by the men she fascinated. In the opening scene, the men literally place her on a pedestal, in place of the goddess Aphrodite, and she has functioned in various guises as a muse, inspiring a number of poems as well as the statue of the Greek poet Sappho, her namesake. Her relationships have necessitated the repeated refashioning of her public identity. Fatigued with infatuated men who have sought ownership of her in return for gifts and declarations of love, Fanny utters a line that not only echoes Ibsen's Nora, but also Blanche in *The Climbers*: 'I'm tired of these men who want to make dolls of us women' (ibid 1;23). In the second act, Fanny Le Grand contrasts

these men to Jean, arguing that while they had loved her 'for the bad' in her, Jean 'called out the best,' bringing forth 'a new woman' in place of the 'old sinful creature' Sapho (ibid 2;35). This 'new woman,' however, is no more an essential – that is, fundamental and innate - identity than the 'Sapho' of her past.

Fanny, as a heroine, resists categorisation, and thus challenged fin-de-siècle definitions of femininity. In her many contradictory incarnations, both in the play and in the press, as temptress, seductress, fallen woman, repentant sinner, domestic wife, and American girl, no single identity, arguably, rings truer than any other. What is most significant is her newfound devotion to, and love for, her child. It is as a mother that Fitch establishes her most firmly by the end of the play, and indeed, in London, the *Stage* described Nethersole portraying 'long-suppressed maternal fondness' with 'true feeling' ("London Theatres"). Far from being the devoted mother, in Daudet's novel and play, Fanny leaves Jean on a selfish impulse; it is clear that she no longer loves him (or never did) and does not want to go away with him as he says they must. She envisages a poor future for the two of them: one in which she ages dramatically, Jean repents his sacrifice, and she is left to 'pay for all' (Daudet 204).

The *Washington Post* argued that despite the new 'element of self-sacrifice in her renunciation of Jean, a la Camile,' Fanny, in Fitch's play, 'as in the book,' acted in 'pure selfishness' ("A Powerful Production of Clyde Fitch's Dramatization of "Sapho"). Yet in Fitch's *Sapho*, when Fanny leaves Jean at the end of Fitch's play, she does so for the sake of her child, Joseph, declaring, 'I mean to devote the rest of my life to him' (Fitch, *Sapho* 4;4). She describes the draw of conventional duties that necessitate a future as wife and mother: 'duties now, that I once could have ignored, or not even acknowledged, but now I can't turn my back on them [...] there is my child, and my place is beside his father, he holds me there' (ibid 4;18).

Fanny seeks a kind of redemption, willing to sacrifice herself for her child rather than for other men, and also a chance to leave behind her life as 'Sapho' to become a legitimate mother and wife. Most importantly, Fitch's narrative allows her to do so. Fanny, at the moment in which she writes her farewell to Jean, is exhausted and emotionally drained, but she also claims a sense of power for herself and her future in leaving Jean. She is not destitute and abandoned at the end of the play, and there is no suggestion that she will either return to her old life in Paris or be cast out from 'decent' society: while there is a note of sadness at the end of the play, she leaves to be married to the father of her child, for a life in which she will be 'loved too much, [...] cared for, [...] spoiled' (ibid 4;18).

Fanny Le Grand may seem on the surface a far cry from the portraits of American girlhood examined by Marra and exemplified in plays such as *Her Own Way* and *The Girl with the Green Eyes* ("Clyde Fitch: Transvestite *Metteur-en-Scène* of the Feminine"). Rather than an exception to Fitch's 'usual' heroine, however, I would argue that Fanny may be read not only as a natural progression of Fitch's earlier staged fallen women, but furthermore as a key turning point in his own considerations of the 'American girl'. The groundwork for the controversially sympathetic seductress may be found in Fitch's earliest American social play. Fitch's refusal to stage the death of adventurous Violet Huntley in *A Modern Match* (1895), and his later sympathetic portrait of fallen mother Jeanette in *The Moth and the Flame* (1898) demonstrated a disinclination to punish so-called fallen women or seductresses.

In addition to this, following *Sapho*, Fitch showcased the inner 'flaws' of outwardly perfect socialites in plays such as *The Girl with the Green Eyes* (1902) and *The Truth* (1907). A common theme in these plays, shared with *Sapho*, is that of women struggling to conform to the ideals envisaged for them by men and society. This, above all – the

heroine's detrimental compulsion to perform *for* the men in her life, and the dramatised culpability of the hero – I argue, positions Fanny Le Grand alongside her Fitchean sisters, and positions *Sapho* as a significant moment in the evolution of Fitch's American social dramas.

Chapter Four

'A REAL ISSUE OF SYMPATHY'; EUGENICS AND THE AMERICAN GIRL

Fitch has an enduring reputation as a playwright who crafted and staged perfect female icons. Yet while he showcased the talents of actresses such as Maude Adams, Maxine Elliot and Ethel Barrymore, in *Sapho* (1900) Fitch staged a sexually transgressive heroine without the moral judgment implied by a conventional dramatic downfall. In two of his later plays, *The Girl with the Green Eyes* (1902) and *The Truth* (1906), Fitch further blurred the lines between his idealised and transgressive heroines, staging seemingly perfect American Girls with 'hidden' defects: Jinny has a jealous disposition; Becky lies compulsively.

The work of geneticists in the latter half of the nineteenth century led to widespread acceptance that character traits such as these could be inherited, in the same manner as physical characteristics. In 1866, Austrian scientist Gregor Mendel published experiments that outlined basic laws of inheritance. While his work initially had little influence in the scientific field, in 1900 three other scientists⁵¹ rediscovered his work independently, each publishing studies that reaffirmed the notions of heredity and genetic determinism, marking what Harper terms 'the beginning of modern genetics' (54).

⁵¹ Hugo de Vries, Carl Correns, Erich van Tschermak

Public knowledge about heredity and genetics, however, in both America and the UK, was procured largely from eugenic discourse in which heredity theory provided 'scientific rationalizations for class and racial prejudice' (T. Wolff 3, 4). As T. Wolff demonstrates, eugenic theory came to occupy a significant space in the social culture of early twentieth century America:

Eugenics exploded onto the journal and newspaper scene after 1904, with dozens of periodicals carrying hundreds of articles between 1900 and 1935. Between 1900 and 1925 at least 500 American books on eugenics were written by non-scientists and aimed at general audiences (4).

In *Mendel's Theatre: Heredity, Eugenics, and Early Twentieth-Century American Drama* (2014), T. Wolff explores the complexities of the relationship between heredity theory and theatre, positioning the work of both European and American dramatists against the backdrop of the eugenics movements⁵². Both the eugenics movement and the work of modern European playwrights, argues T. Wolff, influenced American dramatists, since both 'illustrated the theatrical potential of heredity theory':

Heredity theory brings together three overlapping issues that directly concern dramatists, namely, visibility and spectatorship, the place of the past in the embodied present, and autonomous identity and agency. [...] [F]or modern American dramatists in particular, the tremendous cultural excitement generated by the confirmation of Mendelian heredity theory – primarily as it was widely circulated and promoted by eugenicists – meant that these ideas became newly contested, invigorated, and resonant (5-6).

The Girl with the Green Eyes and *The Truth* deal with issues of autonomous identity and agency in particular; as women apparently afflicted with hereditary flaws, his heroines cannot refrain from being jealous or deceitful, no matter their intentions or the wishes of their husbands.

⁵² T. Wolff's analyses focus primarily on the works of European dramatists Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, and George Bernard Shaw, in addition to American dramatists such as Susan Glaspell and Eugene O'Neill.

As T. Wolff has established, early twentieth century theatre played a significant role in the propagation of eugenic discourse which 'required an audience to demonstrate the ways in which heredity appears on the body' (12):

American eugenicists relied on theatre to promote the message that biological heredity is visible in the embodied present and that it is controllable. Concurrently, American dramatists were borrowing from, even as they contended with, the rhetoric and ideas of the eugenic version of heredity theory (1).

The British and American Eugenic movements of the early twentieth century each responded to an apparent 'problem' in society, 'usually framed as a serious degeneration of quality, commonly intelligence, that was already happening and would lead, unless checked, to national or racial disaster' (Harper 406). While Eugenic groups surfaced in both the UK and the US, momentum in the US was far more pronounced, with each growing in response to differing social concerns.

In the UK, eugenic measures were largely suggested in response to constructed concepts of degeneration, as they pertained to the lower classes in particular. British sociologist Francis Galton first coined the term eugenics as early as 1883. Influenced by the evolutionary theories of his cousin Charles Darwin, Galton suggested that desirable characteristics were to be found among Victorian aristocracy, while high birth rates among the supposedly unintelligent working classes posed a threat to British society. In 1886 British periodical, the *Spectator*, published an article suggesting that the United States adopt Galton's principles in order to mentally, morally and spiritually improve their society by fashioning 'an aristocracy of merit to supersede the great stockjobbies who have created a plutocracy in the place of an aristocracy' ("Mr Galton's Aristocracy").

By 1907 the Eugenics Education Society was founded in England with the aims: 'to uphold the ideal of parenthood [...]; to proclaim that the racial instinct is, therefore, supremely sacred, and its exercise, through marriage [...] to be exercised in the service of

the future of the race' ('The Eugenics Education Society' 1). In early twentieth century America, the factors contributing to the growth of the eugenics movement were even more complex:

They included the emergence of the United States as a dominant world power; unprecedented levels of immigration; mass African migration to Northern cities; the women's right's movement and especially the related issues of reproductive rights and sexual freedom; rapid urbanization; and [later] World War 1 (T. Wolff 3).

Eugenic discourse, T. Wolf asserts, 'responded to these developments and to the resulting instability of national, class, gender, and racial boundaries' (4). In particular, T. Wolff argues women's bodies to have been used as 'sites of negotiation' by the eugenics movement' (12).

Eugenic discourse in the US further compounded and justified fears of race suicide, and racial, gender, and class prejudice. Within this context, it was the American Girl's duty to find and marry the ideal mate, producing genetically privileged children to ensure the future of the American nation. Conversely, the 'well-bred' American man was encouraged to marry a woman fitting the prevailing ideals of American girlhood. It was a narrative that necessarily and overtly excluded those groups who did not fit within the strict confines of such ideals. The American eugenics movement was dedicated not only to 'the improvement of the human race through better breeding,' but also to 'the elimination of the dysgenic elements from society' (T. Wolff 3).

As a sexually ambiguous man, Fitch himself would have been classed among the so-called dysgenic populace. Where the Catholic church had framed homosexuality as a moral sin, fin de siècle sexologists insisted it was a physiological condition (Smith-Rosenberg 269). Notably in *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), Krafft-Ebing described what he termed 'congenital homo-sexuality' as 'a functional sign of degeneration, and as a partial manifestation of neuro-psychopathic state, in most cases hereditary' (225). As Smith-

Rosenberg demonstrates, such arguments continued to equate homosexuality with notions of depravity:

[Sexologists] insisted that sexual perversity, especially homosexuality, was a physiological abnormality [...] commonly it constituted a vicious form of congenital degeneracy, a hereditary taint. As such it formed the dark side of evolution, progress reversed, on the way to destruction (ibid 269).

Following the turn of the twentieth century, however, in opposition to the degeneracy theorists and eugenicists who framed homosexuality as a degenerate perversion, a number of scientific and personal defences of homosexuality were published in the US. Perhaps most notably, under the pseudonym Xavier Mayne, Edward Irenaeus Prime-Stevenson published *The Intersexes: A History of Similisexualism as a Problem in Social Life* (1908).

Opposed to the notion that same-sex love should warrant a felony, Prime-Stevenson offered various historical and contemporary accounts of gay and lesbian individuals. Like Krafft-Ebbing, Prime-Stevenson argued that homosexuality, or 'uranianism'⁵³, could be inherited (39, 153). Seeking to make a distinction between sexuality and morality, however, Prime-Stevenson argued 'similisexual impulses' to be 'ineradicable' and not indicative of 'physical, intellectual or moral degeneracy' (71, 153, 409). In this instance, heredity theory was utilised by the author not to condemn homosexuality, but to defend it.

Even while defending male and female same-sex attraction, however, Prime-Stevenson berated 'effeminacy' and 'un-virility' as 'shameful' in comparison to the masculine ideals of 'bodily vigour and sexual force, [...] aggressive mental, physical and

⁵³ Prime-Stevenson suggested that in addition to the male and female sex, there were two additional 'intersexes': the Uranian ('outwardly and inwardly masculine yet not fully a man') and the Uraniad ('the feminine sexually masculinized; of which sex many "women-seeming" women are members') (20).

ethical superiority' (410). While arguing for compassion and understanding, the author also advocated certain eugenic measures:

If a man believes that in "the blood, the bone, the soul of his breed," even if not obviously in himself, the similisexual instinct has been active, he should question his right to marry. His son or daughter may suffer what he has escaped. If he do not forego marriage, then he may wisely avoid offspring' (153).

As both a (privately) gay man, and perceived effete, Fitch knew all too well the pressure to conform to, and the consequences of failing to meet, the prescribed standards of gender and sexuality.

Oscar Wilde, a former paramour of the young Fitch, was publically convicted of gross indecency in 1895, dying in exile in France in 1900. While Fitch was understandably fastidious about keeping any details about his romantic life out of the public eye, he made no attempts to alter himself to please his press. As Dearing argues:

If the "truth" of his sexual identity was not a subject that his time allowed him to discuss in public, he constructed no pretense of heterosexual romance to please the press. He did not appear at social events with an eligible, unmarried woman on his arm. His personal "truth" was as clear to the world as it was to him (428).

All the while, the playwright who adorned his home – and a key scene in *The Girl with the Green Eyes* – with nude male statues, made no attempts to downplay his passion for design or to subdue his own unconventional way of dressing. Phelps recalls an evening when the two of them attended the premier of a new play:

He had on an extraordinary suit, only partially concealed by a gorgeous overcoat, and on his head was the most amazing hat ever worn by a male creature. Every one we met stopped to stare; so far as I could make out, he was quite unaware of the sensation he produced (146).

According to Phelps, Fitch later remarked that he 'would rather be misunderstood than lose [his] independence' (147).

Similarly, in *The Girl with the Green Eyes* and *The Truth*, rather than critiquing his heroines for their genetic weaknesses, Fitch staged Jinny and Becky sympathetically,

damning instead the husbands who demanded an out-dated and rigid model of perfection. Where critics struggled at times to accept the happy ending afforded to these heroines, Fitch's plays offered a narrative counter to eugenic discourse in which apparently undesirable inherited traits should be forgiven and accepted in light of the overall (moral) character of the individual. Resolution in each play is brought about when the husband learns to accept his wife for who she is, even while society and the American critical institution in Fitch's time would never fully accept him or his work.

As Kim Marra has shown, Clyde Fitch was an active participant in the production of American Girl iconography, with 'American Girl plays' having 'overwhelmingly dominated the most successful phase of [Fitch's] career' ("Clyde Fitch's Too Wilde Love" 44). At the turn of the century, such American girlhood was epitomised in the drawings of Charles Dana Gibson. Gibson's pen and ink drawings of the so-called 'Gibson Girl,' promoted 'independence, self-actualisation, and sexual assertiveness' while still conveying a sense of maternal duty (Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl* 31, 37).

Visually, the Gibson Girl represented white middle-class ideals of American femininity. Patterson defines her as 'the pinnacle of evolutionary accomplishment [...] serving as the foundation for American dominance on a world stage' (ibid 34). Marra describes her as 'the ultimate trophy wife – reward and signifier of heroic American manhood' ("Clyde Fitch's Too Wilde Love" 43). Both an ideal for women to emulate and an object for men to obtain, the Gibson Girl stood seemingly alongside the heroic American male as the antithesis to more transgressive and progressive fin-de-siècle gendered 'types': the New Woman, the Dandy, and the Aesthete.

Both *The Girl with the Green Eyes* (1902), and *The Truth* (1906) saw leading actress Clara Bloodgood staged to Gibsonesque perfection before audiences of young American women who were encouraged by the press to admire not only her performance, but also

her outfits. The *New York Times* dedicated a full page purely to detail Bloodgood's various costumes in *The Girl with the Green Eyes*, and the practice of fixating actresses' attire in the media was not an uncommon one ("Mrs. Bloodgood Discusses Costumes for the Stage"). However, the ideals of womanhood suggested by Bloodgood's staged image were, if not wholly unsustainable, rigorously demanding of both the actress and those who sought to emulate her. Indeed, Marra reads Bloodgood's suicide 'as the tragic but logical outcome of a desperate struggle to fulfil inhuman role expectations exacerbated by the representational conventions of Fitchian commercial theatre' ("Clara Bloodgood (1870-1907)" N.Pag.).

Marra attributes Fitch's seeming compulsion to fashion and stage ideal feminine icons to a deep rooted transvestive impulse that can be traced back to his own performances in female roles at Amherst college ("Transvestite *Metteur-en-Scène* of the Feminine"). In addition, Marra links Fitch's stagings of American Girlhood to the images of commercial illustrators such as Charles Dana Gibson and Howard Chandler Christy ("Clara Bloodgood (1870-1907)" N.Pag.). She argues that his representations of women thus fail to meet the empirical demands of theatrical realism:

[R]ather than producing empirically verifiable representations of actual women, the playwright/director's primary expertise lay in naturalizing the ideal or rendering in four dimensions the iconography Gibson and Christy rendered in two. That his heroines appeared "lifelike" to contemporary critics and audiences is a measure of the extent to which women offstage as well as on were compelled to emulate the perfect icon (Ibid).

Rather than staging feminine perfection however, in *The Girl with the Green Eyes* and *The Truth* Fitch staged flawed heroines sympathetically while critiquing the values and ideology of the American and British social elite.

Marra argues these two plays to 'illustrate how Fitch shaped his plots to express and contain transgressive passion', suggesting the transgressions of the heroines to have a marked personal significance for the playwright:

Jinny Austin grows irrationally jealous over the attention that her husband seems to be paying another woman. In her carnation-green eyes, one can read Fitch's flashes of jealousy over Wilde's interest in Bosie Douglas, especially given Wilde's preference for his lovers to play the woman's part. [...] Becky Warder's lying has more encompassing implications, since lying, the need to dissemble, the need to "pass," historically has been the queer *modus operandi* ("Clyde Fitch's Too Wilde Love" 44-5).

Marra's analysis of the productions further suggests that within the structure of each play the heroine, through the auspices of her forgiving heroic husband, purges her flaw by the final curtain, restoring the heroine to her pedestal as the pinnacle of feminine perfection and bourgeois respectability (*Transvestite Metteur-en-Scène* 31, "Clyde Fitch's Too Wilde Love" 45).

Neither play, however, offers any real assurance that either heroine has changed or overcome her apparent flaws. Fitch's critics saw the ambiguity in the final act as a fundamental mistake on the playwright's part. Recent critics, too, have tended to view the plays in this light. Dearing argues that '[n]either Jinny's final repentance. [...] nor the suggestion that she might suddenly become emotionally stable offers any real promise that the Austins will have anything other than continued marital discord' (299). T. Miller similarly expresses doubts about the veracity of the ending, arguing that the final moment 'seems more *deus ex machina* than real' (171). What T. Miller and Dearing's criticism shares with the American critics of Fitch's own time is the idea that the reconciliation between the married couples undermined the drama of the preceding acts, that the happy ending is both forced and tenuous.

In *The Girl with the Green Eyes*, Jinny's husband Austin is the one profusely begging her forgiveness, assuring her that from now on 'you shall be as jealous as you

like' (Fitch, *The Girl with the Green Eyes* 98). He'll remain to 'explain and kiss away those doubts' (ibid). In *The Truth* Becky's husband, Tom, is equally repentant, and with reason. Like Torvald in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Tom, 'treats his wife as a doll wife' (T. Miller 172). In the final scene, Tom describes the process of his own ideological metamorphosis:

I began to see things white and clear both ahead and behind me. [...] The further away from the excitement and anger I got, the saner I grew. And all the time Becky's final words kept ringing in my ears, and they rang *true* [...] And as I passed over our life together, second by second of happiness, I found only proof after proof of her love for me! Yes, I did Becky one great injustice, and I want to ask her to forgive me' (Fitch, *The Truth* 229-230).

The closest either heroine comes to denouncing and eradicating her flaw is Becky's assertion that she has 'learned to loathe [...] and be afraid of' lies, with the small promise: 'I'll try' (ibid 236). What Fitch's plays suggest as the catalyst for the reunion of the couples, and the possibility of a happy future for the heroines, is the rigid moral husbands' surrender of their uncompromising ideals and unrealistic standards. The reconciliations of the couples are only tenuous if they rely on the reformation of the wives; if, as the play texts suggest, it is the husbands who have altered their world views, the reunions become far more stable, and more realistic (in the sense that reconciliation becomes possible).

Drawing on contemporary genetic theory, the character 'flaws' that the two heroines illustrate are presented as hereditary. In addition to a marked attention to detail in scenic detail, costume, and performance style, the inescapable influence of heredity on the behaviour of the characters was a common theme in naturalistic works that set them apart from realist works more concerned with the psychology of characters in the present moment. Through analysis of later Fitch plays including *The Truth*, Nicolini demonstrates that Fitch was indeed influenced by the naturalists, and that his plays were

among the first examples of naturalism in America (*Elements of Naturalism in Three Plays* by Clyde Fitch).

In *The Girl with the Green Eyes*, Jinny's jealousy, referred to by her as her 'horrid disposition,' is an inherited trait; her parents affirm that it is 'a fault that Jinny shares with us' (Fitch *The Girl with the Green Eyes* 122, 69). Similarly in *The Truth*, Becky responds to her father's admission that he 'always hated the plain truth' and 'liked to trim it up a little' with 'a nervous pathetic little laugh' and the realisation, '[I]ike me!' (Fitch, *The Truth* 189). Jinny and Becky's natures are determined by heredity; Jinny *can't* stop herself from becoming jealous any more than Becky can stop lying. But, Fitch's plays suggest, their husbands can learn tolerance.

'Oh, It's All My Horrid Disposition':

***The Girl with the Green Eyes* (1902)**

Fitch had the idea for *The Girl with the Green Eyes* as early as 1894, but it was with Clara Bloodgood in mind that he finally put pen to paper in 1902. While the socialite-turned-actress had successfully performed in supporting roles in both *The Climbers* (1901) and *The Way of the World* (1901), Fitch's new play thrust Bloodgood into the spotlight and set her on the path to stardom. The play premiered on Christmas Day at the Savoy in 1902, and stayed there for a very successful 108 performances. Fitch called it his best play to date⁵⁴ and the opinion was mirrored by a number of critics and an even greater number of theatregoers by the end of its run on Broadway.

⁵⁴ Letter to Robert Herrick, 1903: 'I go to Boston the end of *this* week for the first performance there of my *best* play, "The Girl with the Green Eyes" [...] it's really "the real thing." (Moses and Gerson 238)

Rather than ending with a wedding, *The Girl with the Green Eyes* begins with one. New York socialite Jinny Tillman has just married Jack Austin. While the bride and groom take their vows (off-stage), the audience learns that Jinny's brother Geoffrey has married in secret some years ago a young woman named Maggie who is now installed as a maid in the household. Maggie, having heard rumours of Geoffrey's engagement to Jinny's friend Ruth Chester, threatens to reveal their own marriage if he goes ahead. After the wedding party have emerged, Maggie confides in Austin and Geoffrey confirms what she has said. What he does not reveal is that he has already married Ruth. In the same scene, Ruth also confides in Austin. She doesn't reveal their marriage (even though she is unaware of why it must be kept a secret) but Austin gathers enough to intimate that she is the woman Geoffrey wishes to marry. Austin promises to help both parties by aiding Geoffrey in securing a divorce, and by keeping the secret even from his new wife. Unfortunately for everyone involved, Jinny has a naturally jealous, and therefore suspicious, disposition.

The second act is set in a gallery of the Italian Vatican museum, with the Apollo Belvedere centre stage (the nude statue strategically facing away from the audience). The couple are supposed to be enjoying their honeymoon, but Jinny, already suspicious of Ruth, becomes even more so upon her husband's interest when he learns that she is holidaying in Rome also. When Jinny encounters Austin comforting Ruth, she believes them to be having an affair, but settles somewhat when her husband reminds her of her jealous nature.

Letter to John Corbin, 1903: "'Green Eyes' had a big Boston success. [...] then it went to Providence where again the press were unanimous as to its being my best play!' (ibid 245).

In the third act, it becomes clear that Jinny's jealousy has deepened as a result of her husband's furtive actions. Austin refuses to offer her an explanation, demanding her trust, and warns her not to push the matter any further. When she finds a letter from Austin to Ruth that seems to imply a romantic relationship between the two, she wildly accuses them, and is ashamed to learn the truth. Jinny begs, 'forgive me,' but Austin replies 'never' and he leaves the house 'for good!' (Fitch, *The Girl with the Green Eyes* 95). At the end of the third act, distraught and still alone in the drawing room after a sleepless night, Jinny shuts herself in and turns on the gas jets. She is saved in the fourth, however, by the arrival of her husband, now desperate to forgive her and to ask her forgiveness of him in return.

The morning following the play's debut, the *New York Times* swiftly ranked *The Girl with the Green Eyes* 'very near the best Mr. Fitch has yet done,' praising the play for extending the scope of American drama: 'No play of American authorship thus far this season has shown such powers of observation or such sympathy with human emotions. None has been so moving and entertaining' ("Clyde Fitch's New Play: 'The Girl with the Green Eyes' is Pleasantly Received").

The majority of reviewers that first morning, however, were less than kind. As *The Sun* recalled three years later, '[t]he entire press, with a single exception, condemned the play and Mrs. Bloodgood's impersonation of the heroine' ("The Fecundity of Fitch"). Corbin summed up the reaction in a similar fashion: 'It was called stupid, shallow, insincere, even obscene. None of the plays of the season, not even the foreign adaptations and the dramatizations of un-dramatizable novels, has received so general a critical lambasting' ("Topics of the Drama: The Public and Literary Comedy").

The Sun, while admitting that the 'large audience [...] applauded the piece violently' declared the premise of the play 'too incredible to be accepted even in the

fictive land of H. G. Wells' ("Clyde Fitch Scores Again"). The critic placed part of the blame with the cast: '[t]o create even an illusion of credibility with such fabulous premises would require a company of the strongest calibre. The one we saw last night was unequal to the task' (ibid). In a later review the paper criticised the plot for its lack of 'vertebra' and suggested that, with the exception of minor child part Susie, no 'live' person was to be found in the play: '[t]he rest are marionettes jangled about by the experience of Mr. Fitch' ("Play Christmas Brought"). William Winter's initial review for the *New-York Tribune*, was unsurprisingly even more damning. He described the situations of the play as 'artificial and languid' and the chief characters as 'the usual tribe of social nonentities': 'society, as this playwright seems to see it, being compounded by vacuity and fribble' ("All About Green Eyes").

Corbin argued the initial cold reception of the play to be owing not only to members of the press, but to the ignorance of what he called 'the common run of theatregoers' ("Topics of the Drama; The Public and Literary Comedy"). With the same class-based prejudice that fed the eugenics movements, Corbin suggested the American lower and middle class patrons of the Savoy were incapable of thinking critically about the play for themselves and had 'probably found in the play just what they were prepared to find in it by the first-night reports' (ibid).

Following the publication of the initial reviews of the play, audience attendance dropped significantly. The lull, however, was short lived; by the play's fourth night, even Winter's *Tribune* had to concede that the play had 'caught hold of the skirts of public favor,' begrudgingly predicting that it would 'doubtless be dragged along for a prosperous run' ("Plays that Hold Over"). By the 14th of January, Fitch could rejoice: "'The Girl with the Green Eyes" had the biggest house in town last night of any theatre on the Frohman list – and to-night again – BIG! I'm sure your notice did a lot of good toward our success,

and I'm *glad* we've proved your word right' (Fitch, letter to Corbin, Moses and Gerson, 228). Fitch's remarks credited Corbin, at least in part, for the success of the play. Phelps later argued that it was the press who had 'saved' the play: 'For once, and the only time in his career, the critics were more enthusiastic than the audience. The first night this play fell flat [...] it had every indication of complete popular disapproval. But the critics refused to see it die' (66).

Where critics, and even Corbin, had long expressed their dismay with Fitch's apparent tendencies towards melodrama and the superficial, towards 'women's' drama and the sensational, here they found inklings of realism, a production they felt they could legitimately back as quality American drama. The press certainly didn't find the play without fault – the most fervent of critics felt some disappointment towards the final act – but the first half of *Green Eyes*, at least, was deemed worthy of their endorsement.

A member of the public wrote a letter thanking the editor of the *New York Times* for coming out in defence of Fitch's newest play 'in the face of most of your contemporaries' ("Mr. Clyde Fitch and the Green Eyed Girl"). This man, Theo. Brunner, defended the realism of Austin's character and the 'originality' and 'freshness' of the play (ibid). Brunner professed his amazement that Fitch 'can keep up in spite of the discouraging treatment of the press' (ibid). Corbin declared that while 'the power of the press was shown in the fact that at first the attendance was much smaller' than Fitch plays of less literary value, '[t]he weakness of the press has been shown in the fact that there has been steady advance in attendance, until large houses are now the rule' ("Topics of the Drama: Farewell to Duse").

Affirming the dramatic value of Fitch's latest work, Corbin reported that 'playgoers of high intelligence' had written to the editor in defence of *The Girl with the Green Eyes* ("Topics of the Drama: Farewell to the Duse"). Most notable among those to

champion the play was author and Professor of English Literature at Yale, William Lyon Phelps. In January 1903, Phelps gave a lecture to the Yale Club that positioned Fitch as the greatest American dramatist to date. Corbin reported that 'Prof. Phelps speaks of it as a performance of unusual literary and dramatic interest, and ranks it as near the top of Mr. Fitch's achievement' ("Topics of the Drama; Farewell to the Duse").

In March that same year, *The New York Times* reported that Professor of dramatic literature at Columbia, Brander Matthews, had 'joined the small band of those who hail "The Girl with the Green Eyes" as a milestone in the development of the American drama' ("Prof. Brander Matthews on "The Girl with the Green Eyes"). Like Phelps, Matthews declared the play to be 'the best thing Mr. Fitch has yet done' (ibid).

The critical response was in stark contrast to that of Fitch plays such as *Sapho*, where the reviewers had suggested the low intelligence of the patrons to account for the popularity of the apparently unworthy and debased drama. This new play, the press implied, was for those of higher intellect and breeding. Corbin continued to emphasise the intelligence and breeding of the audience in his published defences of the play⁵⁵ alongside the New York Times' publications of testimonies from respected scholars such as Phelps and Matthews. By 1904 there were reports of the Roosevelts' attending a showing of the play in Washington: 'Mrs Roosevelt and her guests followed the action of the play with evident appreciation' ("Roosevelts at the Theater").

The American critics agreed, almost universally, that the ending was the weak point of the play. The message was clear and recurring: the third act was a triumph, and

⁵⁵ Corbin in the *New York Times*: 'ran a hundred nights to audiences that were comfortably large and more than usually intelligent' ("Topics of the Drama: "Marta of the Lowlands" - "Old Heidelberg" - The Karl Heinrich of Mr. Mansfield and of John Feistel - "The Girl With the Green Eyes" on the Road - A Parthian Shot at Ibsen.").

the play should have ended there: 'at the close of the third act [...] no personal occasion could be important enough to tear [the audience] away from the theatre before they discovered how the four act drama ended. After the fourth act they wished they had not remained'; '[t]he lesson [...] ends with the third act. The fourth should not have been written'; [t]he third act is admirable from the beginning to end [...] The fourth act takes us no further, logically or morally. It does not end the play; it only cuts the story short' ("About Play Players and Playhouses"; "Prof. Brander Matthews on "The Girl with the Green Eyes"").

Matthews added that, nevertheless, 'from a man who can invent the splendid, moving, beautiful third act we have a right to expect a great deal more in the future' ("Prof. Brander Matthews on "The Girl with the Green Eyes""). American poet, Robert Adger Bowen, took issue with Matthews's remarks, arguing that 'Third acts [...] do not make a play, and Prof. Matthews is encouraging heresy when, from his influential position, he criticises on that basis' ("The Girl with the Green Eyes": To the Editor of the New York Times"). Fitch's ardent critics, in service to modern American drama, sought to proclaim the brilliance of his play while sweeping the final act under the rug.

Opponents of the play argued that the final scene undermined the dramatic integrity of the play, all for the sake of sentimentality. The scene, in which Jinny is rescued from her suicide attempt and begged to accept her husband's forgiveness, neither fit with the critics' vision for the future of American drama nor married with their ideological viewpoints: Jinny was at fault, and she must either be reformed believably (which was not possible), or be separated from her husband.

The final act is highly significant in that it enforced and solidified the transgressive message of the play: Jinny (as a genetically flawed woman) ought to be sympathised with and forgiven, while Austin (adhering to a morally rigid Victorian ethos) is found to be at

fault and forced to re-evaluate his ideological standpoint in a way that Fitch's harshest critics proved incapable of doing. At the opening of the final act Austin declares, 'I've thought it out through the night, and I think I understand things better. [...] you shall be as jealous as you like' (Fitch, *The Girl with the Green Eyes* 196). By the closing of the scene he is begging for Jinny's forgiveness and declaring love to be stronger than jealousy (ibid 199-200).

The message was liberal and progressive. Fitch's naturalistic narrative made it clear that Jinny's jealous disposition was entirely predetermined by her heritage, and therefore unavoidable⁵⁶. Significantly, the trait is present in both her parents. Early twentieth century views on inheritance suggested that if a trait was present in both parents, it would be present in their child. As Prime-Stevenson framed gay men as victims of genetics, so too did Fitch's play frame Jinny as a victim of hers. Early in the play, Jinny's parents emphasise the necessity of sympathetic understanding towards those with less than perfect genetic makeups: '[y]our father's and my troubles were never very big because we *shared* the curse, so we knew how to sympathize with each other!' (Ibid 125). Conflict in the play occurs not because of Jinny's jealousy, but because of Austin's lack of tolerance and understanding.

Austin emerges on to the stage in the first act as 'a typical New Yorker': 'thirty-two years old, good-looking, manly, self-poised, and somewhat phlegmatic in temperament' (ibid 30). As such, Austin initially has little tolerance for his wife's unexpected and seemingly erratic behavior:

⁵⁶ On more than one occasion in *The Girl with the Green Eyes* Jinny laments the inevitability of her disposition: 'Why can't I help myself?' (Fitch 164); 'I couldn't help it [...] no more than I could stop loving you could I stop or help being jealous!' (ibid 193). It is a point made also by her mother: 'It isn't a question of chance; you just can't help it sometimes' (ibid 70).

[*Standing over JINNY*]. I want you to be careful to-night. I want you to control yourself. I've been through a great deal to-day, and if you make me angry God knows what I mightn't say and *do!* (ibid 159, emphasis and capitalisation original).

If you say another word, I shall *hate* you! If you *won't* control *yourself*, I must make you, as well as keep my own sane balance. You have insulted my love for you to-night as you've never done before; you've struck at my own ideal of *you* (ibid 162, emphasis original).

In these moments of the play, Austin is overbearing and unreasonable, seeking to control his wife. His actions are a vestige of the passing century. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American women themselves were challenging patriarchal family traditions, gaining independence and autonomy through access to education and the workplace, as well as the right to divorce.

Jinny has failed to live up to Austin's expectations; the revelation of her concealed flaws has shattered the Gibson ideal suggested by her appearance and social status. Austin describes what he views as a betrayal: 'you've already robbed me of the woman I thought you were' (ibid 164). With such a high and uncompromising ideal of his wife, however, his disappointment was arguably inevitable. Jinny tells him in response: 'You *did* idealize me; I knew it when you married me, but I told you then I wasn't worth your loving me, didn't I? I never pretended to be worthy of you. I always knew I wasn't' (ibid 165). Jinny talks in terms of being unworthy, but it's clear that while she has been honest with him, Austin has idealised her.

The increasingly emotional performance of the heroine throughout the play emphasises the physical and mental strain of trying to live up to social expectations, to fit in a predetermined mould, to hide aspects of oneself and, ultimately, to assume an ill-fitting identity. When Jinny realises that she cannot be what her husband wants, and that he will not accept her as she is, she is driven to suicide. It was a narrative that resonated

with a social reality, not only of affluent white women, but perhaps more poignantly with Fitch, and with actress Clara Bloodgood who would go on to commit suicide herself.

The Sun sought to lay part of the blame for the apparent failure of the final scene with the actress: '[i]n climax she is not successful' ("Clyde Fitch scores again"). Bloodgood, the critic argued, 'lacks marked personal distinction, deftness in expressing moods, and her technical resources are taxed severely in any extended dramatic passage' ("Clyde Fitch Scores Again"). Many others, however, disagreed with the *Sun's* assessment of Bloodgood's capabilities; the *Saint Paul Globe* described Bloodgood's portrayal of 'the intensely jealous heroine' as 'exceedingly natural, unaffected and convincing' ("Fitch Accused of Vulgarity"). Bloodgood's performance, the daily paper declared, showed 'a distinct advance over her already considerable powers' (ibid). The reviewer applauded her ability to portray a jealous woman while sincerely retaining 'the sense of humor and the self-command of the fashionable world' (ibid).

For many it seems, Fitch and Bloodgood did succeed in making Jinny a sympathetic heroine: 'Mr. Fitch has made the possession of green eyes what it usually is in life, a weakness, and yet he has appealed so genuinely to our understanding that his heroine does not for an instant forfeit our good will' ("About Plays Players and Playhouses"). *Theatre Magazine* concurred; Bloodgood succeeded in a realistic and likeable portrayal of Jinny: 'Miss Clara Bloodgood possesses those qualities of refinement which appear in the well-bred woman, and her acting, if it is distinct enough to belong to a class is of the school of the natural' ("Plays and Players" 30). What Bloodgood lacked however, the critic argued, was 'versatility' (ibid). Bloodgood was critiqued in terms that are still familiar today: she could perform well as herself, but where a role deviated from her own personality she would fail.

Fitch strove to make Jinny lovable and desirable for all her apparent flaws. He described her as 'full of a certain feminine fascination that defies analysis' (Fitch, *The Girl with the Green Eyes* 9). Less flatteringly, Winter described her as having '[a] certain feline quality' ("All about Green Eyes"). When she first appears on stage, Jinny is described as 'an adorable little human being, pretty, high-strung, temperamental' (Fitch, *The Girl with the Green Eyes* 28). Her jealous disposition aside, Jinny bore the markers of the Gibsonesque ideal American girl, an identity suggested further by her fashionable costumes and social position.

Bloodgood was described in similar terms: "[s]he is a brainy, tactful and earnest little woman. She has charm to burn. Upon the stage the fact comes out with great emphasis that she is a "thoroughbred"" (Mawson 121). Implying the similarities between the actress and the roles she played, Winter described Bloodgood as having 'a distinct talent for depicting worldly women, capricious, impetuous, and not devoid of feeling' ("All about Green Eyes"). Both Jinny and Bloodgood, as fashionable, beautiful, charming young white middle-class New York women were apparently ideal American girls. As Marra suggests, for Bloodgood and Jinny, 'life seemed to mirror art, as Bloodgood once again ascended to a prominent position as model wife and hostess' following her marriage to William Laimbeer in May 1902 ("Clara Bloodgood (1870-1907)" N.Pag). As women who were also volatile and impulsive, however, both Bloodgood and Jinny had the makings of female neurasthenics.

For Jinny, whose jealousy is displayed in 'the smallest sharpening of the look in her eye,' whose metaphorically green eyes lend the play its name, her eyes become a visible marker of both her Gibsonesque charm, and her jealous constitution (Fitch, *Girl with the Green Eyes* 39). In *American Nervousness*, Beard argued that the unique desirability of the (often neurasthenic) American girl emanated in particular from her

emotionally expressive features, in particular her eyes. Such women, he argued, had been sent earlier into both school and society than their European counterparts, resulting in the rapid development of emotional and intellectual cerebral activity (*American Nervousness* 66). Their eyes conveyed emotion, he posited, because of the increased rate at which nerve-force travelled the fibres from their brains to their facial features: 'in the brain of the American girl thoughts travel by the express, in that of her European sister by accommodation' (ibid 73).

According to Beard, beauty and the disease, often dubbed 'Americanitis', commonly went hand in hand owing to each being produced in women by the 'same climate peculiarities,' these being chiefly 'overcivilization' and education (ibid 66). While overcivilization and education, for women, was thought to lead to the weakness of the body and restlessness of the mind, both could manifest as covetable qualities. Nervous weakness of the body, as Beard implies, manifested in delicacy and grace: '[i]n the touch of the hand of the American woman there is a nicety and tenderness that the English woman destroys by the force of impact' (ibid 71). So too, Beard argued, did the American leisure class woman's avoidance of housework and 'generous living' add to her beauty by resulting in 'a moderate degree of embonpoint,' perfect, one assumes, when combined with the corsets of the day, for crafting the elusive Gibson girl S-shaped silhouette (ibid 66). The beauty of the lower class woman by comparison, Beard argued, had been destroyed by 'muscular toil' (ibid 67).

Both female beauty and neurasthenia, Beard suggested, were prevalent among what he termed the American 'comfortable classes' (ibid 65). Indeed, as Briggs affirms, neurasthenia, nervousness, and other so-called diseases that for women fell under the umbrella of 'hysteria,' were 'the provenance almost exclusively of Anglo-American, native-born whites, specifically, white women of a certain class' (246). Neurasthenia in

middle class white American women was ideologically and ironically both a harbinger of degeneration and race suicide, and a desirable marker of class and cultivation.

As a malady which supposedly led to gynecological and reproductive complications for white middle and upper class women who were already viewed as frail in contrast to 'strong, hardy, and prolifically fertile' women of colour and/or poor women, neurasthenia fed anxieties about transgressive women and the fate of the nation (ibid 247):

The neurasthenic narrative shared with racist eugenics a concern about white women's low birth rate and the fertility of non-white women. The neurasthenic paradigm drew from the same source, producing the same kind of endangered whiteness (ibid 250).

When Jinny's jealous nature has been exposed to Austin, she owns up to her own lack of strength: '[y]es, it's true; I'm small – I'm *small*! Oh, I'd like to be big, too! I want to be noble and strong, but I'm not – I'm as weak as water – only it's *boiling* water!' (Fitch, *Girl with the Green Eyes* 84, emphasis original). By the end of the third act Jinny's nervous hysteria has come to full fruition before the audience: '[Jinny] cries out again weakly, heartbrokenly [...] she sobs hysterically⁵⁷, wildly' (ibid 167). When the curtain opens on the final act the heroine is visibly 'worn and haggard, with hair disheveled' (ibid 191).

As a childless woman who not only chose to work, but chose also to continue her career after her (third) marriage, Bloodgood, according to sexologists, risked her ovaries and rejected her maternal duty. In a 1903 interview for the *Theatre Magazine*, following the success of *The Girl with the Green Eyes*, Bloodgood was questioned repeatedly on the potential conflict between her career as an actress and her duty as a wife: 'Are you so

⁵⁷ Jinny is described as 'hysterical' in the footnotes of the play in two other instances: 'her feelings begin to get the better of her and she speaks rapidly and hysterically'; '[a]lmost hysterical, she rises' (Fitch, *The Girl with the Green Eyes* 26, 53).

much in love with stage life, now that you are married again, as to wish to continue it?'; 'But if you travel [for work], that separates you from your home' (Mawson 120).

Beard's remarks on the subject of the relation of beauty to neurasthenia imply that female neurasthenics may not merely have been among the cast and characters of Fitch's play, but even more prominent among its New York theatre audiences:

It is not possible to go to an opera in any of our large cities without seeing more of the representatives of the highest type of female beauty than can be found in months of travel in any part of Europe (*American Nervousness* 65).

Describing Fitch's audience in this instance as the 'opera' type, Corbin's description of the women in the auditorium, drew a parallel between the woman on stage, and those in the stalls:

The women were more intelligent and well-bred than one commonly finds in the theatre. [...] the audience was of the kind one finds at the opera rather than the kind one finds in the theatre ("Topics of the Drama; The Public and Literary Comedy").

'Well-bred,' 'intelligent,' and potentially neurasthenic women, while in this instance offered as an endorsement of the quality of Fitch's drama, were increasingly becoming an issue of contention and a source for national anxiety. With an increase in the numbers of white middle-class female college graduates, and a decline in marriage and birth rates among this same demographic⁵⁸, intelligent, educated, and working women became the site of a national debate concerning the proper role of the white American woman and her duty to her nation. These socially disruptive 'New women,' Smith-Rosenberg argues were defined as 'physiologically "unnatural," the symptom of a diseased society' (245). Victorian physicians argued that women who diverted their energies from their reproductive organs to their brains risked neurasthenia, hysteria, sterility, and cancer

⁵⁸ 'From the 1870s through the 1920s, between 40 and 60 percent of women college graduates did not marry, at a time when only 10 percent of all American women did not' (Smith-Rosenberg 253).

(ibid 258). To pursue education or a career, as Bloodgood had done, was to do so at the expense of one's maternal duty and, therefore, to contribute to the decline of the nation.

'We Don't Love People Because They Are Perfect':

The Truth

If hostile feelings towards American women who forewent or compromised their wifely duties were bubbling beneath the discourse surrounding *The Girl with the Green Eyes*, they came boiling to the surface when *The Truth* (1906) premiered on the New York stage. Becky Warder, society matron and congenital liar of Fitch's new play was described in malevolent terms, despite Fitch's intention to stage a 'pretty, charming, volatile, young woman, sprightly, vivacious, lovable' (Fitch, *The Truth* 10). *Theatre Magazine* argued that 'the impression produced as to the wife is not one of amiability but of sickening perversion' (quoted in Marra "Clara Bloodgood (1870-1907)" N.Pag.).

The new play, which in structure and theme so resembled *The Girl with the Green Eyes*, premiered at the Criterion on the 7th of January 1907 with Bloodgood again taking the leading role. Following a string of disappointing reviews, it was withdrawn after only 34 shows. The *New York Times* declared that 'whatever its merits, [*The Truth*] will probably lack the quality necessary for a wide appeal' ("A Fine Study in Feminine Character"). W. B. Mack, writing for *The Sun*, argued 'it stands as a comedy' but 'woefully falls down as a drama' ("Mrs Bloodgood in 'The Truth'"). The road tour in America later that year was markedly more successful, drawing enthusiastic crowds, but it came to an abrupt halt on the 5th December 1907 when Bloodgood shot and killed herself in a Baltimore hotel room hours before she was due on stage.

Yet in London, performed only three months following the failed New York debut and with Marie Tempest taking the role of the English Becky, the play was a resounding success. It ran at the Comedy Theatre from the 4th April 1907 till the end of the season, being promptly revived for an extended run that lasted till the 5th of October that year (Wearing, 340; ““The Truth” Revived at the Comedy”). In total, it ran for 167 performances that year (Wearing 340). The play went on to become Fitch’s most internationally successful play, receiving critical acclaim in France, Germany, Italy, Russia, and Sweden.

The contrast between the positive reception of *The Truth* in countries such as France and Germany, and the disdain of his work from the American critical establishment, was a source of frustration for Fitch. Fitch wrote that it was ‘a disappointment to [him] that [he] had to go abroad to be praised for the best qualities worth having in one’s work’ (Moses and Gerson 363). He felt the issue to be a personal one:

[W]hen I go to Europe – where I am not known of or talked of in advance, and where my work must speak for itself – even in that most serious and critical of countries, Germany, it is the psychology, the truth, and the technique, which are praised (ibid).

Moses similarly recalled the contrast in the reception:

At home the papers praised his dexterity, his clever use of familiar detail, his feminism [...] They pigeonholed him without weighing his literary worth [...] But Italy, Germany, and France were more ready to place him high for such plays as “The Truth” (xi).

Both Moses and Fitch suggest critical preconceptions of Fitch to have marred critical impressions of the play. Indeed, as I have shown in previous chapters, critics in the US – and in the UK to a slightly lesser extent – perceived Fitch to be a sentimental and superficial man, and as a result expected him to produce sentimental and superficial drama. This, however, does not fully account for the level of animosity directed

specifically towards Becky and Bloodgood in New York, especially when contrasted to the positive reception of the same heroine in London.

The first half of the play takes place in the drawing room of Becky and Tom Warder. Becky's constant 'fibbing' lands her in trouble, particularly when rumours emerge of an affair between her and her friend's husband, Fred Lindon. Lindon, indeed, is romantically interested in Becky, she however, while obviously flirtatious with him, has been contriving to reunite him with his wife, Eve. Eve, believing Becky and her husband to be having an affair, shares her suspicions with Warder. At first he defends Becky, but as evidence of her lies begins to accumulate, his trust in her is shaken. At the climax of the second act he demands they separate, privately, if not publically, and leaves the house.

The final two acts take place in a less-than-hospitable and wholly depressing Baltimore flat belonging to Mrs Crespigny, and shared by Becky's father, Roland. Roland is a liar, and a gambler as well. He stresses that his inability to tell the truth led him to ruin. Attempting to save his daughter's marriage, and regain his own privacy, he sends Warder a letter saying that Becky is deathly ill. Warder rushes to Becky in her hour of need. At the last moment, however, Becky realises she cannot go through with her father's plan and reveals the truth of the situation. The couple reconcile before the fall of the final curtain.

In the New York production of *The Truth*, Bloodgood's performance of a hereditary liar intersected with accusations about the morality of her own life as a married actress. In these instances, issues of heredity, femininity, and national duty, overlapped, both drawing on and anticipating the rhetoric of the eugenics movements in the US. Summing up the general critical feeling toward the play in New York, *Theatre Magazine* wrote:

That [Fitch] is seen at his best in this play in so far as the study, both of character and manners, are concerned, is certain, but the play will always fail [in New York] because of the disagreeable nature of the woman. [...] In its final summing up, as a performance, it will always be unsatisfactory ("New Dramatic Books").

As with *The Girl with the Green Eyes*, certain critics in New York drew comparisons between Bloodgood and the role she performed. Not only did Fitch write the role *for* Bloodgood, they asserted, but he wrote it true to the actress herself: '[w]hen "The Truth" was first produced you were apt to hear it said that the case of Becky was one in point, that the untruthful Mrs. Warder was a character written expressly for the unhappy Mrs. Bloodgood' ("The Truth" Will Rise Again").

Bloodgood did in fact express a personal affinity with the role when she first read the script: '[w]here Fitch get his knowledge of human nature I don't know. He positively digs up old skeletons for me' (Moses and Gerson 321). Like Becky, and Jinny before her, Bloodgood, before becoming an actress, was a young and wealthy New York society matron, who began her stage career out of financial necessity when her second husband suffered financial losses and became terminally ill. By the time she was playing Becky, Bloodgood was married for the third time – this time to wealthy stock exchange broker William Laimbeer – and, as in previous years, was determined to continue in her profession.

Whether a woman could, or should, combine domesticity with an independent career was a particularly controversial issue in early twentieth century America. The acting profession, while a viable source of income for a woman wishing to pursue an independent career, suffered from lingering stigma of its association with prostitution in the nineteenth century, and the notoriously high rates of divorce among actors and actresses at the turn of the twentieth century (McArthur 70). Bloodgood's choice to continue her career was not particularly bold within the acting community: 34.8 percent

of working actresses were married – a remarkable statistic at a time when the vast majority of women who did enter the workforce would be ‘retired’ once married (ibid 68).

As a fashionable social figure, as well as a starlet, Bloodgood’s personal choices were subject to heightened scrutiny. All actresses, argues McArthur, while in many ways championing women’s independence, were still obliged to ‘pay lip service to the domestic ideal’; as interviews which focussed on everything from the interior of Bloodgood’s home to her involvement in ‘the practical details of housekeeping’ illustrate, Bloodgood was called upon to do so in a very public manner (ibid 72; “The Fascinating Mrs. Bloodgood”).

The *New York Times* suggested that Bloodgood failed in the role, not because she struggled to believably portray a liar, but because she portrayed one too convincingly:

No actress could entirely relieve the character of all its unpleasant quality, but a sort of juvenile and innocent lightness might have been attached to Becky’s continual prevarication which the more worldly type of woman could not possibly succeed in accomplishing (“From the Straight Road of Truth to the Crooked Path of Melodrama”).

As Marra suggests, the critic implied that Bloodgood, as a ‘Society Woman’ was far too ‘cultivated and artificial in a negative sense [...] to convince audiences of the [American] Girl’s underlying virtue’ (“Clara Bloodgood”). Indeed, the *New York Times* referred to ‘[t]he enormously evil potentiality’ of Becky’s character. (“From the Straight Road of Truth”). Without assurance of the heroine/actress’s naïve innocence, Becky became, for her detractors, a source of malevolent unease.

Publically, Bloodgood made efforts to distinguish herself from Becky, remarking in an interview: ‘[p]ersonally, I am so obviously honest by instinct that the deceitful woman was difficult to interpret’ (“Clara Bloodgood on “The Truth””). She did, however, speak of the role in fond terms, arguing that despite the opinions of male producers to

the contrary, women in America may, as Fitch intended, understand and empathise with the untruthful heroine:

[A]lthough the producers here did not believe that American women would ever sympathize with the woman who lies, there is a sisterhood, I suppose, among women that makes the imaginary in their natures a real issue of sympathy (ibid).

Bloodgood's words suggested, somewhat boldly, that American women would sympathise with Becky not in spite of her lying, but because of it. Indeed, the popularity and commercial success of the play on the road in the US suggests that American audiences were fonder of the heroine than New York critics and producers predicted they would be. Bloodgood affirmed the audience approval when writing to a friend: '[t]hey love Becky and they love the play' (Dearing 445).

Perhaps what Bloodgood's (female) audiences were able to sympathise with in the lying heroine was the very same thing that Marra identifies as 'chronic source of anxiety for American Girl aspirants': 'Impersonation of a perfectionist cultural ideal cannot be undertaken without lying; pretence and deception are inherent in the self-conscious attempt of a human being to become an inhuman idol' ("Clara Bloodgood"). Women such as Becky – 'charming women who lie' – implied Bloodgood, could be found in numbers among the American fashionable elite: '[h]aven't you seen people who become so inspired with the lies they tell that they look most beautiful when they tell them? [...] these charming little witches have certain magnetizing tricks, and one of them is to open their eyes very wide and look tremendously innocent' (ibid).

A significant number of critics referred in their reviews to lying being a common and exclusively 'feminine' trait.⁵⁹ A sense of unease about the prevaricating heroine

⁵⁹ *The Sun*: "'The Truth' treats another feminine foible, lying' ('The Fecundity of Fitch'); *Theatre Magazine*: 'feminine frailty of lying' ('New Dramatic Books'), 'a study in the obliquity of feminine character' (Mack, "Mrs Bloodgood in 'The Truth'"); *New York Times*, article titled "A Fine Study in Feminine Character: By Clyde Fitch, Author, and Clara Bloodgood, Actress".

pervaded the American response to the play: 'she pretends to be trying to bring them together. Is she pretending, or is she in earnest? The woman is a fool, and not the amiable liar the comedy demands' (*Theatre Magazine*, quoted in Marra "Clara Bloodgood" 30). The New York Times referred to '[t]he enormously evil potentiality of a quality in [Becky's] make-up,' declaring the whole thing to '[slip] into falsity and even a certain sleaziness' ("The Truth" Will Rise Again").

In addition to being a congenital liar, Becky, according to reporters, suffered from another 'feminine' flaw. As the *New York Times* put it, Becky was a 'woman who has been the cause célèbre of so many complications in and out of theatre – the married flirt' ("Clara Bloodgood on 'The Truth'"). Eve Lindon, the wife who suspects Becky of having an affair with her husband, describes Becky in similar terms: '[s]he's what the French call an "*allumeuse*" – leads them on till they lose their heads, then gets frightened and feels insulted!' (Fitch, *The Truth*, 7). Although innocent of the affair, Becky admits the enjoyment she gets from the attention of other men: 'I like men to like me, even though it really means nothing' (Fitch, *The Truth*).

Becky's remarks express an insecurity with herself that Bloodgood strove to emphasise by wearing her costumes and hair 'slightly askew' in the early scenes of the play (Dearing 446). Despite Becky's wavering self-confidence, in the first half of the play, Warder is incapable of comprehending that his wife may be anything less than perfect. Like Austin in *The Girl with the Green Eyes*, Warder is described in *The Truth* in heroic terms, as an ideal American: 'a strong and sensible, unsuspecting man, - no nerves

and no “temperament,” nothing subtle about him; he is straightforward and loveable’ (Fitch, *The Truth* 22).

As with Austin, his strength of constitution and moral character lend themselves to rigidity and intolerance, and a need for others to conform to his world view. This aspect of his personality is emphasised by the manner in which he addresses Mrs Lindon: ‘I’m sane and quiet and sure [...] and I see things in their true colors. You must be guided by me in this’ (ibid 90). Lindon is described as taking Mrs Lindon’s hand ‘almost cruelly’ and speaking ‘strongly, with the manner and voice of the man who is and means to remain master’ (ibid). Fitch’s stage directions imply that Warden is far from perfect himself.

The fatal consequence of Warden’s nature, of his inability to empathise with his wife, is suggested in Warden’s threat to Becky in Act II:

Now be careful, dearest. You’ve married a man who doesn’t understand a suspicious nature – who has every confidence in you [...] a confidence that couldn’t easily be disturbed; but once it was shaken [...] God knows if my confidence would ever come back (ibid 96-7).

The threat is realised at the end of the act when, having been offered proof of Becky’s lies, he demands they separate at once, ‘hardly hearing her’ as she attempts to assure him that she loves him and has been faithful (ibid 149).

Becky’s flirtation with Lindon, however, is far from one-sided. Fitch’s stage directions describe Lindon as ‘dapper, rather good-looking, though not particularly strong in character, and full of a certain personal charm (ibid 10). Frivolous and superficial, he ‘wears fashionable clothes’ and his ‘chief aim in life is to amuse himself’ (ibid). In the play, Warden suggests him to be something of a twentieth century rake: ‘I’ve heard him swear there’s no such thing as a decent woman if a man goes about it in the right way!’ (ibid 56).

Warder's remarks, and Fitch's intended representation of Becky as a naïve woman with good intentions, offer the potential to frame his heroine as a victim: of heredity, of the rigid expectations of her husband, and - like Jeanette and Marion in *The Moth and the Flame* – of the machinations of a charming rake. As things were in America, Becky on the stage produced the opposite effect. *The Sun* suggested that her '[delight] in her power over the husband [of her friend], who in fact falls in love with her,' positioned Becky as 'a true daughter of Eve' ("The Fecundity of Fitch"). In this analysis, the responsibility for any marital transgression lies with Becky, rather than Lindon.

As a flirtatious and potentially seductive American Girl, Becky takes on the role of sexual selector: married, but always potentially on the lookout for a better offer. The notion of female driven sexual selection, as Rensing explains, was championed by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the early twentieth century: '[Gilman's] vision of a feminist eugenics placed women as scientific experts in charge of engineering society's evolutionary progress, separated breeding from motherhood, and scrutinized the dysgenic behaviors and qualities of men' (113, 102).

As I discussed in the previous chapter, however, the idea that American girls might be choosing their mates with increased scrutiny and awareness was a source of anxiety for many men. Not only did the change in sexual dynamics put men in an uncomfortable position, but it begged the question: would such women, now so discerning in their choice of partner, be content once married, or would they continue to browse for better offers? (ibid). Both Becky as a married flirt, and Bloodgood as a married actress, threatened the progress of the American nation every bit as much as the divorcees and fallen women of Fitch's earlier plays.

As it was when *The Girl with the Green Eyes* was on stage in New York, the class of theatre patrons was also a topic of significance for critics. Franklin Fyles, writing as a

New York correspondent for the Richmond *Times Dispatch*, remarked on ‘the presence of extremely fashionable people,’ but informed his readers regretfully that ‘interspersed with the modishly garbed and nicely mannered ones were quite as many with contrasting aspects of commoners’ (“Clyde Fitch’s Puzzle”). Fyles attributed the presence of the fashionable set largely to Bloodgood herself as a social icon, while he credited William J. Kelly, ‘the stage idol of Harlem’s feminine population’ who played Warder for the presence of working class women. The latter, Fyles suggested, were ‘out of their customary place,’ away from the Harlem theatres where one pays a quarter of the price demanded in the centre of town (ibid).

Such remarks implied not only that while the New York elite ‘clapped their gloved hands at [Bloodgood’s] entrance, yet made no rude noise,’ the less restrained behaviour of working class women threatened to spoil the decorum of the auditorium, but also implied a division between the female classes in sexual terms; while the apparently asexual upper middle-class American girls were there to fawn over Bloodgood’s wardrobe, the lustful working class women were there to fawn over Kelly.

In London, critics encouraged audiences to see Fitch’s new play: ‘go to the Comedy Theatre and see Miss Marie Tempest in “The Truth,” the *Daily Mail* urged its readers, ‘[y]ou will never forget it’ (““The Truth” Mr Clyde Fitch’s Best Play”). Largely on merit of those first two acts, and aided significantly by the performance of Marie Tempest, it was proclaimed a triumph⁶⁰. The *Times* declared that ‘by hook or by crook,

⁶⁰*Illustrated London News*: ‘[Fitch] shows such neat artistry in the play’s first two acts, and he has helped that most accomplished of our younger comedienne, Miss Marie Tempest, to so great a personal triumph in the part of his lying heroine [...] that for once London playgoers are scarcely likely to reproach him overmuch’ (“Art Music and the Drama”). *The Daily Mail*: ‘It will have a considerable run for two reasons – first, because of the merits to which we have tried to do justice, and, secondly, on account of the magnificent acting of Miss Marie Tempest [...] the greatest triumph of her career’ (““The Truth.” Mr. Clyde Fitch’s Best Play”).

holds your attention from first to last; and a play that does that has fully justified its existence' ("Comedy Theatre" 8 April 1907). When it reopened at the Comedy following the season break, the *Illustrated London News* lauded *The Truth* as Fitch's 'first genuine London success,' and the 'best and truest comedy we have seen in London since [...] Jones's "Liars,"' correctly predicting a 'considerably prolonged' run of Fitch's play ("The Playhouses").

Both *Bloodgood* and *Tempest* strove to portray Becky in a realistic and 'natural' manner. *Tempest* described the 'pleasure [it gave her] to make *Becky* a warm, living, human being!' (Moses and Gerson 335). According to the *Times*, the English actress succeeded in her endeavour where *Bloodgood* had apparently failed: 'a very clever study of the lying wife, giving a perfect impression of reality – for there is no more "natural" actress on the stage than Miss *Tempest*' ("Comedy Theatre" 8 April 1907). *The Stage* proclaimed Becky an 'artistic triumph for Miss Marie *Tempest*' and others concurred with the assessment ("London Theatres. The Comedy")⁶¹.

Marie *Tempest* took a significant share of the credit for the play's success, and Fitch acknowledged his debt to her in dedicating the published play: '[t]o Marie *Tempest* with grateful admiration for her triumphant Becky' (Fitch, *Plays by Clyde Fitch*, Vol 4, 199). For the London production, Fitch re-worked *The Truth* with an English setting: New York became London, and Baltimore became Brighton. *Tempest* wrote to Fitch detailing other small changes to the production:

⁶¹ *Globe*: 'The piece is a triumph for the actress' ("Comedy Theatre. "The Truth"). *The Sketch*: 'presented brilliantly by Miss Marie *Tempest* [...] her work is vastly clever, and it may be doubtful whether we have any other actress who could realise so successfully the dramatist's ideas' (E.F.S., "The Stage from the Stalls"). *Era*: 'Miss *Tempest* has a wonderful power of moving her audience from laughter to tears in one moment [...] With acting such as it receives from Miss *Tempest* [...] *The Truth* has every chance of success' ("The Truth").

We have curtailed a little at the end of Act II, after *Tom's* exit, and are re-stage-managing the end of the piece to make *me* a little more sympathetic, and all my speeches are now directed to my husband (Moses and Gerson 335).

Tempest's interpretation of Becky appeared to have been effective. The *Times* argued that Tempest played the role 'with a gaiety and [...] *gaminerie* that charm you into forgiving the essential ugliness of the character' ("Comedy Theatre" 8 April 1907). The *Era* remarked similarly that Tempest's interpretation of the role garnered sympathy, rather than moral condemnation:

Her Becky Warder is so buoyant, so full of natural sweetness of disposition, that, by the time she is caught in a net of falsehoods of her own weaving [...] we have taken her so completely to our hearts that, as we watch the struggles of the poor little victim we long to help her escape from the consequences of her own folly ("The Truth").

With Tempest in the role, Becky was indeed received and interpreted more favourably by critics. In stark contrast to the remarks made by critics in New York, the *Illustrated London News* called Becky 'good-natured' and *The Stage* asserted that despite her propensity to prevaricate, she 'is a woman with a certain standard of honour' ("Art Music and the Drama", "London Theatres. The Comedy").

Fitch admitted in a private letter to Mrs. Corbin that, in the first three acts, Tempest 'does three times with the part what our *Clara* does,' but insisted he preferred Bloodgood in the final act. According to Bloodgood, what Fitch preferred in her interpretation of the ending was the seriousness and intensity of emotion:

Miss Tempest glides over the emotional conclusions of the play and the whole tendency of the performance is for comedy. Of course Mr. Fitch preferred the emotional ending, even if it is not possible for me to look well when I cry ("Clara Bloodgood on "The Truth").

Notably, where American critics had simply discussed Becky's lying as a vice, and therefore something which she may choose to overcome, English reporters were quick

to identify the trait as hereditary and Becky, therefore, as a 'victim'⁶². Furthermore, where the New York press had discussed Becky as a 'married flirt,' in London, critics were far more concerned with her fabrications alone: '[j]ust now the stage-world is full of lying women. There is a fashion in these matters, and for the moment the pretty lady who fibs is "in"' ("Comedy Theatre" 8 April 1907). The *Times* reviewer discussed 'sorts' of lying women, but did so in reference to the stage rather than society, and the tone of the article remained light; fibbing women posed far less of a social threat in London than their flirtatious counterparts did in New York. Becky was a liar, but for the majority of critics in London this itself did not amount to morally transgressive behaviour. Indeed, according to *The Graphic*, Becky was merely 'a pretty and fascinating "tarradiddler"' : one who tells trifling falsehoods ("The Theatres: "The Truth" and "Votes for Women"").

Despite the positive reception to the play in London, critics in the American capital remained resolute in their opinion about the play's faults: '[i]f changes have been made in the text, and if the play differs in any particular from what it was on its production in New York, the complete remedy of its defects has not been applied' ("New Dramatic Books"). What the British and American critics did seem to agree on was that the ending, like that of *The Girl with the Green Eyes*, was the weak point of the play. In London, while the *Times* likened the second half of the play favourably to Ibsen, on the whole, critics were in agreement that the second half of the play was dramatically weaker than the

⁶² *The Graphic*: 'She is a victim of heredity, and ought to undergo a cure, if vices of heredity can be cured' ("The Theatres: "The Truth" and "Votes for Women!"). *Era*: 'She is a victim of heredity' ("The Truth"). *The Stage*: 'Her questionable ability would appear to be hereditary, fostered and encouraged in youth and developed with practice' ("London Theatres. The Comedy"). *Globe*: 'her weakness is explained as hereditary' ("Comedy Theatre. "The Truth""). *Times*: 'Becky revealed herself as the helpless victim of heredity' ("Comedy Theatre" 8 April 1907). *Illustrated London News*: 'labour helplessly against a hereditary tendency towards fibbing' ("Art Music and the Drama").

first⁶³. The *Era* argued, however, that ‘the excellences of the play [...] far outbalance its defects’ and suggested that those ‘who criticise Mr. Fitch’s two latter acts should be prepared with a scenario, showing how the idea could have been better exploited’ (“The Truth”). According to *The Stage*, Fitch maintained that final two acts as ‘the logical development of his story’ (“London Theatres. The Comedy”).

Where London critics were willing to overlook what they saw as a minor issue in comparison to the strengths of the play as a whole, the *New York Times* insisted that the final two acts prohibited any ‘attempt at the expression of any underlying moral motive’ (“From the Straight Road of Truth”). Had the play finished with the second act, the imperfect wife would have been cast out of the marital home, effectively punished for her transgressions. The ‘underlying moral motive’ that the New York critic was searching for concerned the heroine alone: to restore order, Becky must either suffer these dramatic consequences of her actions, or somehow emerge from a believable process of reformation. Fitch refused to end the play with the former, and the latter, according to the laws of heredity, was impossible.

As with *The Girl with the Green Eyes*, *The Truth* ended with the reconciliation between the husband and wife. It was an ending that critics in the US would not accept without proof that the wife had changed. It didn’t make sense that the husband would accept and forgive his imperfect and flirtatious wife, and so they argued that the ending

⁶³ *The Stage*, for example, argued that the play was ‘concluded in a theatrically weak and ineffective manner’ (“London Theatres. The Comedy”). *The Graphic*: ‘the last two acts are melodramatic and farcial’ (“The Theatres: “The Truth” and “Votes for Women””). See also *Era* 13/4/07 “The Truth”, *Globe* 8/4/07 “Comedy Theatre. “The Truth”, *Daily Mail* 8/4/07 ““The Truth.” Mr. Clyde Fitch’s Best Play”, and *Illustrated London News* 13/4/07 “Art Music and the Drama”. Similarly, the *New York Times* argued that ‘the play must be said to logically end’ after the second act (“From the Straight Road of Truth”).

was one born out of sentimentality and Fitch's desire to force a happy ending even in the most illogical of situations: 'the theatrical means for effecting the reconciliation, and indeed the immediate willingness of the husband to forget and forgive, obviously arise out of the necessity for a happy curtain' ("From the Straight Road of Truth").

In London, the *Times* noted that the audience 'may have doubts as to any successful cure for congenital mendacity,' but suggested that it need not trouble anyone 'until Mr. Fitch writes a sequel'. ("Comedy Theatre" 8 April 1907). For critics in the US, the ambiguity concerning Becky's reformation was a larger source of anxiety and frustration. *Theatre Magazine* desired clarification: '[i]s she or is she not going to continue to lie?' (T. Miller 173). The *New York Times* argued that '[o]ne may reasonably doubt the permanency of the final reformation of Becky Warder,' going on to suggest that the happy ending may be short lived ("A Fine Study in Feminine Character").

Fitch once wrote to Robert Herrick complaining: '[m]y new play [...] has made a big success, although more than half of the people don't see underneath, nor realize what I mean by it' (Moses and Gerson 202). This was in 1901, and Fitch was referring to *The Way of the World*, but the issue is one that seems to have affected a number of his works. Critics on both sides of the Atlantic struggled to accept the ending of *The Truth* – the best that even his most ardent critics could offer in defence was to suggest the audience enjoy the rest of the play, and not let the implausibility of the final scene trouble them too much.

As the final line in *The Girl with the Green Eyes* declared love to be 'more powerful' than jealousy, the final line in *The Truth* encouraged love regardless of individual imperfections: '[w]e don't love people because they are perfect [...] We love them because they are themselves' (Fitch, *The Truth* 236-7). This argument ran contrary to eugenic discourse promoting the advancement of the (white American/British) race

through selective breeding. Such a message, in combination with the staging of a flirtatious and genetically 'flawed' heroine who has been 'passing' as the ideal American wife, proved unpalatable for American critics.

Marra draws a parallel between Becky's need to lie and Fitch's sexuality, 'since lying, the need to dissemble the need to "pass," historically has been the queer modus operandi' ("Clyde Fitch's Too Wilde Love" 45). If both homosexuality and compulsive lying are to be understood as hereditary – as they were by Fitch and many in his audiences – the parallels become even more pronounced.

Fitch's letters to Wilde suggest that he romanticised their early relationship: '[y]ou are my sight, and sound, and touch. Yr Love is the fragrance of a rose – the sky of a summer – the wing of an angel – the cymbal of a cherubim' (ibid 33). His enduring romanticism is further evidenced in his plays, not only in heterosexual unions, but, as Marra has shown, in plays such as *Beau Brummel*, where the Beau 'directs his most ardent passions toward a handsome relatively uncultured young man named Reginald' (ibid 35).

In an 1891 letter to DeWitt Miller, Fitch, like Prime-Stevenson, presents homosexuality as an affliction, but one that warrants compassion, describing the need to protect from exposure the men who have 'fought hard against their temptations and done all in their power to make up for their secret life' (ibid 38). He suggests homosexuality to be a 'God-given' or genetically ingrained trait:

I believe this temperament belongs to them, and they are answerable for it to God (who perhaps is *also* answerable to them) and not to the world who would condemn and damn them (ibid 38).

While he argues for the need for concealment – '[t]heir family, their *mothers*, should be remembered' – Fitch's words here suggest that society, 'the world,' has no justification in its condemnation of queer men (ibid). In both *The Girl with the Green Eyes* and *The Truth*, it is the world that needs to change, to become more tolerant and understanding.

Fitch's heroines get their happy endings because their husbands learn to do just this. Above all, Fitch makes a clear distinction between hereditary 'flaws' and individual morality, potentially offering a way to reconcile his own need to hide from the public – and his belief in love as a powerful and positive force.

Chapter Five

‘THERE ARE CERTAINLY SOME MEN WHO OUGHT TO BE HATED’:

SUFFRAGETTES, STUDIO GIRLS, AND MAN-HATERS

When Fitch staged *The House of Mirth* (1906) with Edith Wharton, and his later play *Girls* (1908), he was apparently more concerned with shining a spotlight on New York society – and, above all, entertaining his audiences – than touting women’s rights. Neither the playwright nor Wharton publically supported women’s suffrage, and both held what may be considered nostalgic views of women and domesticity. Despite this, both *The House of Mirth* and *Girls* put forth themes that resonated with the accelerating women’s suffrage movements in America and Britain.

Olin-Ammerntorp argues that, despite the tendency of feminist scholars to emphasise Wharton’s ‘insights into the [...] ways in which [...] social structures influenced and limited women’s lives’ in the early twentieth century, Wharton herself, while sympathetic toward women who found themselves the victims of society, accepted their fates as ‘the natural result of social Darwinism’ (237, 242). Although Wharton made a successful career for herself as a writer, Olin-Ammentorp’s analysis of Wharton’s personal views suggests she did not necessarily support the notion that other women should follow suit, either by educating themselves or pursuing a career (242). Wharton discussed ‘that ancient curriculum of house-keeping,’ regretting that it was so soon to be swept aside by the “monstrous regiment” of the emancipated:

young women taught by their elders to despise the kitchen and the linen room, and to substitute the acquiring of University degrees for the more complex art of civilized living ... I mourn more than ever the extinction of the household arts. Cold storage, deplorable as it is, has done less harm to the home than Higher Education (quoted in Olin-Ammentorp 237).

As I have illustrated in the previous chapters, Fitch consistently equated the happiness of his contemporary heroines with marital stability and the family home. Jinny and Becky return happily to the arms of their husbands at the end of *The Girl with the Green Eyes* and *The Truth*, and even his transgressive Fanny LeGrand revelled in the moments where she could pretend marriage and dote on her 'husband' Jean Gaussin in *Sapho*. But, while Wharton may have viewed women's emancipation and 'the household arts' as mutually exclusive, Fitch's heroines such as Marion in *The Moth and the Flame* – less bold and threatening to the social order than an Ibsen girl, but more reflective of the fin-de-siècle middle-class American woman than a stock melodrama heroine – appeared on stage as well-educated, socially minded individuals who remained devoted to their husbands and their homes whilst asserting their autonomy.

Kimmel argues that the male 'antifeminist response' to feminism in the early twentieth century 'relied on natural law and religious theories to demand women's return to the private sphere of hearth and home' ("Men's Responses to Feminism at the Turn of the Century" 262). New Women were frequently portrayed as unnatural 'mannish' women who sought to usurp men's roles and forgo their own 'natural' duty to marry and nurture children, or as sexually transgressive harlots who, if not properly restrained, threatened the institution of marriage and the sanctity of the home. As Showalter argues, 'the sexually independent New Woman criticized society's insistence on marriage as woman's only option for a fulfilling life' (*Sexual Anarchy* 38).

Despite such propaganda, heterosexual marriage and maternal duty remained common ideological standpoints to which the majority – though not all – of even the so-

called New Women ascribed. 'The dominant sexual discourse among New Women,' Showalter suggests, 'reproduced and intensified stereotypes of female sexlessness and purity [...] Taking to heart Darwinian arguments about women's self-sacrifice and belief in women's passionlessness, many New Women envisioned themselves as chaste yet maternal heralds of a higher race' (*Sexual Anarchy* 45). Ledger, too, suggests that New Women writers 'were usually [...] stalwart supporters of heterosexual marriage,' arguing that 'they had little or no conception of female sexual desire (let alone lesbian sexual desire), and often had a considerable investment in eugenic and other imperialist discourses' (*The New Woman* 6).

Writers such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman strove to reconcile the seemingly conflicting aims of progressive women to achieve economic independence from men, and to embrace 'their measureless racial importance as makers of men' ("Women and Economics"). Gilman argued against the notion that motherhood would interfere with a career:

In spite of her supposed segregation to maternal duties, the human female, the world over, works at extra-maternal duties for hours enough to provide her with an independent living, and then is denied independence on the ground that motherhood prevents her working! ("Women and Economics").

Similarly, she suggested that education and a career would not dissuade women from marriage, but that it would encourage more positive and productive unions between men and women:

The fear exhibited that women generally, once fully independent, will not marry, is proof of how well it has been known that only dependence forced them to marriage as it was. There will be needed neither bribe nor punishment to force women to true marriage with independence (ibid).

Feminist themes were prevalent in nineteenth century theatre. By the early twentieth century, Rachel Crothers further documented the evolving roles of women in American society in plays such as *A Man's World* (1909). Wilmer argues the play was one of several

of Crothers's to stage 'the new independent career women of the period,' and credits it with sparking 'a wave of suffragist dramas' in the US (154, 159).

As Wilmer argues, it became common for the American women's suffrage movement to use both play scripts and theatrical productions 'as vehicles to advance their cause' (154). Gilman's play *Something to Vote For*, published in *The Forerunner* in 1911, encouraged women to suffrage by showing the connections between the political and domestic spheres. The members of a Women's Club join the cause when they learn of the corruption that leads to the poor receiving impure milk and the death of a baby (Friedl 25). The women learn 'that, even in matters of housekeeping, women need the vote in order to control their own interests' (ibid).

Elizabeth Robins's *Votes for Women*, which played at the Court Theatre in London in 1907 is frequently credited as the first suffrage play, and that which prompted the formation of the Actresses' Franchise League⁶⁴. Its premier in New York in 1909, the year following Fitch's *Girls*, and opening on the same night as his play *The Bachelor*, suggests Friedl, 'was the first large-scale, professional theatrical event for woman suffrage' (34). In comparison to Robins's play, Dearinger argues *Girls* to offer a position on women's rights that was 'hardly progressive,' administering 'an affectionate dose of human behaviour rather than the harsher medicine of satire' (486). Significantly, though, *Girls*, while a far cry from overtly suffragist productions such as *Votes for Women*, drew a certain amount of attention as a play exploring the suffragette 'type,' and accordingly drew the attention of suffragettes:

In April 1908, the *New York Tribune* reported:

⁶⁴ The Actresses' Franchise League (AFL) was formed by actress and theatre professionals in England, working in close association with the Women Writers Suffrage League to further the cause of women's suffrage in England. The group produced suffrage plays that were made to be both read and performed.

The leaders of the “suffragette” movement have indorsed Mr. Fitch’s comical play about “Girls.” That should be sufficient indorsement for any piece. The girls are apparently very popular, and may remain at Daly’s as long as they choose (“The Stage”).

The House of Mirth did not enjoy anything like the popularity of *Girls*, but it demonstrates, through its serious dramatisation of the economic and social struggles of Lily Bart, the playwright’s sensitivity to the issues women faced in turn-of-the-century New York. In his original play *Girls*, produced two years after *The House of Mirth*, Fitch addresses similar issues faced by women in trying to secure financial independence and pursue a career in New York City. The three heroines of the play, who share a comically ill-furnished flat and struggle to secure stable careers, join together in a pact to swear off men. While the ending is one of convention – all three of the women renounce their vows and are engaged by the final close of the curtain – many of the issues ring true. Their sworn hatred of men comes across as ridiculous, but their complaints of workplace harassment and gender prejudice manage to come across as surprisingly rational amid the farce of this popular comedy.

‘Work-Girls Ain’t Engaged for their Beauty’:

***The House of Mirth* (1906)**

Fitch and Wharton’s stage adaptation of *The House of Mirth* (1906) was not unique in Fitch’s repertoire in its critique of the morals and standards of the New York social elite. Yet its serious tone, lack of comedic scenes - a prominent feature in even such serious Fitch satires such as *The Climbers* - and the tragic staging of the heroine’s suicide at the final curtain, stand in contrast to the ‘typical’ Fitch play and the playwright’s reluctance to stage the death of his heroines. The play proved unpopular with audiences

and critics alike. Not only did it make for somewhat bleak and dispiriting viewing, but its disagreeable characterisations of the New York “four hundred” were not well received by an audience among whom many of the group were seated. Like *The Girl with the Green Eyes* and *The Truth*, produced before and after *The House of Mirth* respectively, Fitch and Wharton’s play critiques the idealisation and objectification of leisure class women. Where Fitch and Wharton portrayed Lily Bart as a tragic victim of social Darwinism, New York critics read her as a fallen heroine, responsible for her own demise.

The history of the 1906 adaptation of *The House of Mirth* is a curious one in that, according to accounts, neither Fitch nor Wharton ever believed a successful play could be formed from the material of the novel. It was through the orchestrations of Fitch’s agent Elizabeth Marbury, who flattered each by suggesting that the other sought the collaboration, that the play came about (Loney 26, Dearing 406). Responding to an early review of the play, Fitch described his early reluctance to embark on the project: ‘I at first refused to “dramatize” the book, but the demands for a play from it was so persistent, and Mrs. W. herself wanted it done, so I agreed, with the understanding that it should be *staging the book* so far as was possible’ (Moses 323, emphasis original).

While Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, a novel telling the story of the beautiful but impoverished society girl, Lily Bart, was both popular with readers and the subject of much discussion⁶⁵, Fitch and Wharton’s play adaptation of the same name failed to make a favourable impression with audiences in New York. After the usual out-of-town previews, *The House of Mirth* premiered at the Savoy on the 22nd of October 1906, starring American actress Fay Davis as Lily Bart. Critics across the board declared the play

⁶⁵ On the third of June 1905, the New York Times wrote that “‘The House of Mirth,’ continues to excite more discussion, from instalment to instalment, than any other serial of the present hour’ (“Topics of the Week”).

a failure. The *New York Times* published a review titled "*The House of Mirth: A Doleful Play*," remarking that for once Lily's death scene was 'all that was wanted of her' and the *Evening World* concurred: 'It must have been a relief to [Lily], as well as the audience at the Savoy last night when she took that overdose of chloral at the end' (Darnton, "'The House of Mirth' Tumbles Down at the Savoy"). As an Idaho critic put it, *The House of Mirth* 'proved as big a failure as a play as it was a success as a book' ("The House of Mirth" A Failure").

Theatre Magazine argued that the play lacked drama, and the *New York Times* suggested it was 'unfinished,' and should have been properly rehearsed ("Savoy. *The House of Mirth*"; "Mrs. Wharton's Views on the Society Drama"). It could have been better, the reviewer suggested, had 'the best resources of theatre' been utilized (ibid). In writing the play, Fitch constructed the outline and sequence of events, and Wharton wrote the dialogue. The writers, however, struggled at times to find the perfect balance between dramatic action and fidelity to the novel. 'I feel sure you have realized the enormous disadvantage Mrs. Wharton and I laboured under,' wrote Fitch to Goodale, 'in trying to make a big stage version of her book. It would, of course have been easy to distort it! To steal the names and the characters, and make a big situation in their book environment, but this I absolutely refused to do, when the subject was broached to me' (Moses 323). After witnessing the finished product, the *Tribune* noted that Fitch, indeed, had 'departed, somewhat from the methods usually pursued in dramatizing a novel' by 'follow[ing] the book very closely' ("The House of Mirth"). The *Evening World* called it a 'scissors-and-paste arrangement' ("The House of Mirth" Tumbles Down").

It was perhaps with the failed dramatisation in mind that Fitch spoke of the perils of literary adaptation on the stage. When addressing academic audiences in the winter months following the failed opening of the *House of Mirth*, Fitch proclaimed: '[audiences]

demand literature in the theatre, at all cost, ignoring the fact that the first requisite of a *play* is that it be some form of *drama*' (Fitch, "The Play and the Public" xxiii). Indeed, very little stageable drama was to be found in the novel. Fitch described it as 'wholly psychological', and therein lay much of the complications of adapting it to suit a theatre audience (Moses 323).

Despite the frustrations and challenges inherent in trying to create this play against such considerable obstacles, both author and playwright found enjoyment in their frequent meetings to work on the play. Fitch described Wharton in fond terms to his close friend Robert Herrick: 'she is one of the most delightful intellectual women I've ever met' (Moses 305). Wharton remembered Fitch's visits during the writing of the play as laying 'the foundation of a real friendship [...] my husband and I both became much attached to the plump showily dressed little man, with olive complexion, and his beautiful Oriental eyes full of wit and understanding' (Dearinger 406). Such accounts strongly contradict press reports of the two being at odds with one another⁶⁶.

The play does not differ largely in plot from the novel. It begins with Lily Bart, struggling financially to maintain her image and lifestyle among the New York smart set, refusing to marry for money, but unable to marry for love. It ends with her suicide. Loney (1981), while not denying that the major themes and structure remain intact, describes the adaptation as 'a severe abridgement [that] does not place proper emphasis upon Lily's major decisions' (47). In his analysis of the play and its production history, Loney identifies two small differences in plot that he argues are significant enough to alter the audience's interpretation of the characters and their motives. The first, and less

⁶⁶ 'Rumors reached New York that Fitch and Wharton had argued in Detroit, and the *Times* even invented dialogue for their artistic "clash" [...] Fitch demanded that the *Times* "contradict absolutely" any tattle of a dispute' (Dearinger 413).

significant of the two, occurs when Lily has been tricked by Trennor, a married man, into meeting him alone at his house. In the novel, Selden merely witnesses her leaving, but says nothing to her of it. In the play, he arrives at the house in time to 'save' her from Trennor's unwanted advances (ibid 34).

The second change Loney terms 'fatal' to the production (ibid). In the play, Lily and Selden encounter each other in a final meeting in the millinery shop before Lily's suicide. Selden never learns of the sacrifices Lily has made in order to protect him – burning letters to protect his reputation rather than profiting from them – and Selden never becomes fully aware of the extent of Lily's love for him. Loney argues that the ending 'robs the play of the tragic dignity Lily's suicide has in the novel' (ibid) The final meeting between Lily and Selden, gives them a chance to vocalise their motivations and feelings towards one another, and emphasises their powerlessness in the face of society: 'I've been a victim of the world I tried to save you from. It has poisoned the best thing in my life – my love for you' (Fitch and Wharton 138).

Fitch, true to form, may have preferred Lily to have been saved from her attempt at suicide, but Wharton 'resisted' such demands (Loney 34). The decision, while obviously necessary to remain faithful to the novel, was a break in tradition for the dramatist. Fitch knew his audience, and on more than one occasion had posited that they would not stand for a tragic ending; *his* heroines always survived. In his lectures on "The Play and the Public" Fitch described occasions of people going to see a 'fine tragedy' only to complain after the performance that 'they hadn't been particularly *amused!*' (xvii). He could well be referring to the *House of Mirth*; the New York Times review for the tragic adaptation came with the subtitle: 'Comedy Lines Are Few In It' ("The House of Mirth: A Doleful Play"). A great play, Fitch argued, appealed 'to both the *mind* and the *heart*' (Ibid xxii). Fitch's most successful plays sought to move and entertain, even where they addressed

weighty social issues. The public, Fitch maintained, was 'absolutely intolerant of being bored' (ibid xxvi-xxvii). Loney argues that the failure of the play was to be expected, given the predisposition of the audience to expect comedy in the theatre (47).

Wharton later admitted that 'owing to [her] refusal to let the heroine survive [the play] was foredoomed to failure' (ibid 30). Coming round to Fitch's way of thinking, she doubted if any such play 'with a 'sad ending,' and a negative hero, could *ever* get a hearing from an American audience' (Lewis 172). After the failure in New York, Fitch remarked simply: 'I never kick against the public. They know what they want, and I don't blame them for not taking what they don't want' (Moses 325).

As I have illustrated in previous chapters, Fitch was notoriously against 'killing off' heroines at the end of his plays. As early as 1892, he insisted against the wishes of Augustis Pitou that his Violet Huntley would live in *A Modern Match*. Again, in *Bohemia* (1986), an adaptation of Henri Murger's *Scenes de le Vie de Boheme*, Fitch strayed from the source material to offer 'neither death nor penury': 'Mimi lives, and the uncle shares his fortune with the happy couple' (Dearing 152). The fact that this was his only staging of the suicide of a heroine – determined by the plot of Wharton's novel rather than the playwright's own wishes – suggests he was never fully committed to having his heroines pay the price for actions deemed transgressive by society. Fitch's brief departure from his tradition with *The House of Mirth*, however, demonstrates his willingness to stage the harsher realities of gender inequalities on stage. Additionally, his treatment of the source material indicates an awareness of, and sympathy with, both the objectification of leisure class women, and the problems women faced in trying to achieve economic independence.

Opinions at the time varied as to the exact cause of the almost spectacular failure of the play in New York, which seems to have resulted from a number of contributing

factors. Fitch himself offered that it lay with the theatregoers themselves, 'and the unpopularity of purely literary plays' ("Clyde Fitch Discusses *The House of Mirth*"). When *The House of Mirth* opened at the Detroit Opera House on the 12th September 1906, the initial notices from Goodale in The Detroit Free Press were somewhat hopeful ("Detroit Opera House – *The House of Mirth*"). The adaptation, Goodale suggested optimistically, had the makings of a play that would be well received by the public (ibid). The cast was 'good' and he was impressed with the acting talent of Fay Davis as Lily Bart, who performed her part 'with naturalness' and 'never loses sympathy with her audience' (ibid).

Loney attributes the frosty reception from New York crowds and critics, in part, to their failure to grasp the 'central theme of the play' (46). In Detroit, Goodale had described the play as a 'study in manners,' and a 'pitiless indictment of the morals and shady personal practices of [...] the Smart Set,' yet in New York the critics interpreted the play more as a pitiless indictment of the morals and shady practices of Lily Bart. Reading Lily as a woman whose death results from her own moral transgressions, *Theatre Magazine* called *The House of Mirth* 'a striking study [...] of an ambitious woman, without sufficient means, who imagines that luxury is the only thing in life worth striving for' ("Savoy. *The House of Mirth*"). The reviewer suggested that although the play did not offer a clear root cause for her downfall, '[t]he dissolution and ruin of a proud and attractive woman overreaching herself in her social ambition is certainly a worthy and practical subject for the stage' (ibid).

A critic for the Idaho *Coeur d'Alene* wondered if the New York society who 'watch the play from the "front" of the Savoy' saw 'society on the stage' ("The House of Mirth"

A Failure"). If a satire on the New York 'smart set' was acknowledged in the city⁶⁷, it was swiftly undermined with assertions that the play fell down because it failed to present a convincing portrayal of its audience: the *New York Times* called it 'a claptrap drama of unreality' ("Mrs Wharton's Views of the Society Drama"). Fitch assured any who may have been offended by the play's representation of society that it was not his intention for 'the ultra smart audience at the Savoy' to witness themselves upon the stage: 'How could they?' he demanded, when the characters were intended as 'individuals' rather than 'types' ("Mr. Clyde Fitch Says That It Is Impossible to Successfully Portray Society on the Stage"). 'Society,' Fitch declared in the interview, 'cannot be portrayed,' and the society on the Lyceum stage was no more than a mere 'simulation of the real article' (ibid). Fitch's remarks stand somewhat glaringly in contrast to his declared aim as a dramatist to capture contemporary American life, and his declaration that the only 'hope' for *The House of Mirth* as a play was 'to make it as *real* as possible' (Moses 323).

In constructing his contemporary heroines, and attempting to make *them* as 'real' as possible, Fitch often utilised naturalistic techniques, offering hereditary as well as psychological motivations for their actions. Wharton, according to Pizer, 'had been reading widely in social evolutionary theory of her day and [...] was applying much of its central belief about the insignificance of individual will in relation to social environment [...] to Lily Bart' ("The Naturalism of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*" 242). Offering a naturalistic reading of Wharton's novel, Pizer argues Lily to be the product of both heredity and environment (ibid 241). In the play, Wharton and Fitch emphasise the restrictive influence of Lily's environment, as well as her inability to adapt or function in any way other than she was born to:

⁶⁷ The *Tribune* asserted that the play was 'a picture of New York society in which that society is shown in no particularly favorable light' ("The House of Mirth").

You know how I grew up – with a brilliant marriage in view from the nursery. My mother wasn't rich enough to give me money, so she gave me expensive tastes, and now they've become my second nature (Fitch and Wharton 68).

Unlike the play, Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth* (1905) has received much critical attention over the past century, and its feminist themes have been well explored in detail by critics such as C. Wolff (1994), Fetterley (1977), and Showalter (1985). Olin-Ammenthorp argues for a reading of Lily less focussed on gender, and more concerned with social Darwinism and class relations:

Lily Bart represents not just herself, not even her sex, but the whole group of women and men destroyed by a grappling and vicious social system which they are intelligent enough to understand but too weak to change (241).

This reading may well align with Wharton's intentions, but a more transgressive reading does emerge from both the novel and the play. As Restuccia argues, the novel 'may be read as a social fable that indicts fashionable, fin-de-siècle New York society for producing human feminine ornaments that it has no qualms about crushing' (224). This reading, I argue, also applies to the play.

As a woman, with no significant source of her own income, Lily, like other young women born into the fading upper classes, is expected to marry for money in order to continue to be pretty and well dressed: 'we can't keep it up alone, we've got to go into partnership!' (ibid). Lily is constrained by a social upbringing that taught her only to fulfil a role she is unable to perform without the financial assistance of wealthy husband:

[A] woman is asked out as much for her clothes as herself. Her gowns are her background, her frame; they don't make success, but they're essential to it. Who wants a dingy woman? We're expected to be pretty and well dressed till we drop - and we can't keep it up alone, we've got to go into partnership! (Fitch and Wharton 67).

It is her gender, as much as her social class, that determines Lily's tragic fate in the play. Like many contemporary Fitch heroines⁶⁸, Lily and the other middle and upper class women in her New York social circle are idealised and objectified by the men in their lives. In a line that could just as easily come from a character in one of Fitch's earlier plays, Silverton remarks that he 'could never love a woman [he] could not idealize' (Fitch and Wharton 56). Like Fanny LeGrand, Lily is both aware of and frustrated by the way men see her. Drawing a parallel between her tableau costume – a '[w]hite dress of some sort of soft flexible material [...] Gold girdle with cameo clasp' – and the expensive dresses she dons on a daily basis, in the second act Lily reveals her increasing disdain for her decorative function in life: '[s]how myself? I do nothing but show myself!' (ibid 94). But while Fanny, at least for a time, uses her feminine appeal to her advantage, Lily refuses to do so although she feels trapped by the expectations of society. In the final act, set in the milliners shop in which Lily has come to work, she exclaims to Selden that he 'never knew' the 'real Lily Bart': 'I never knew her myself, till I came here. The Lily Bart you knew was a doll in borrowed finery' (ibid 136).

Both Baym and Showalter read the novel, in a general sense, as the story of 'a young girl who is deprived of the supports she had rightly or wrongly depended on to sustain her throughout life and is faced with the necessity of winning her own way in the world' (Baym, quoted in Showalter "The Death of the Lady (Novelist)" 137). When Lily attempts, and fails, to earn her own living, Rosedale asserts that she has 'queered' herself with people (Fitch and Wharton 127). Having 'ruined' her reputation, Lily is no longer welcome among her former friends, but neither does she fit into working class society. Though she is 'happier here, in this work-room, doing real work with [her] own hands'

⁶⁸ Jinny Austin in *The Girl with the Green Eyes*, Becky Warder in *The Truth*, and Fanny LeGrand in *Sapho*... see earlier chapters.

than she was among the leisure classes, she cannot manage the work well and finds 'no place for [herself] among real workers' (ibid 128).

At the beginning of the play, Lily laments that if only she 'were a man!', she would be able to 'live independently' instead of relying on her friends and potential suitors to support her financially in life (ibid 67). Her remarks, however, at this stage come across as naïve: 'if girl could live in a flat,' she laments, but of course women could and did live independently from men, in flats in particular (ibid). Gerty appeared on stage as a virtuous but also somewhat grim reminder of that fact. Even while Gerty kept friends such as Lily, she remained a pitiful outsider to those in the 'smart set'. What Lily is really saying when she infers that a girl cannot live in a flat, is that a lady in 'smart' society cannot live in a flat and still be considered a lady.

Fitch and Wharton's drama hit out at the hypocrisy and morals of the New York smart set, a social group that was to be found in number among the very audience of the play, and whose frosty response was, therefore, perhaps unsurprising. Its construction, and very short production history, is significant, however, in that it stands out as one of very few Fitch plays with a tragic ending. The spectacular failure of the play could well serve as a cautionary tale, vindicating Fitch and Frohman in their reluctance to stage a tragedy for the American audience.

In her exploration of the parallels between the novel of *The House of Mirth* and the theatre of the late nineteenth century, C. Wolff describes Lily to be 'perhaps the most difficult character to identify with a single stage stereotype' (75). On stage, and produced by Fitch, however, Lily shared much in common with his 'flawed' or transgressive heroines, particularly his American girls in *The Girl with the Green Eyes* and *The Truth*. Only her tragic ending marked her as significantly different in any way. In that, as C. Wolff

implies, Lily had far more in common with the kind of nineteenth century stock heroines that Fitch refused to stage:

It is not simply that Lily chooses to die. In nineteenth-century theatre, heroines *did* die. If they had been virtuous, they died tragically; if they were no more than fallen women, they died trivially. In either case death was a suitable ending, and Wharton's theatrical heroine had nowhere else to go (83).

While the poor experience of staging *The House of Mirth* did not deter Fitch from further critiquing the morals and gendered standards of the New York elite, future productions tackled such issues with the lighter and more comedic tone that his audience had come to expect.

"To Stick Together, as the Avowed Enemies of Men"

***Girls* (1908)**

While Lily's attempts to make her own way in the world ended in tragedy, the three heroines in Fitch's *Girls* (1908), following similar routes, came to happier ends, but only because they decided to marry. Likening *Girls* to Fitch's earlier plays *Glad of It* and *Her Sister* (1907), and later to *The Batchelor* (1909), Dearing argues that the comedy 'celebrates the working woman but not her emancipation' since by the closing scene Pam is 'a man's possession' (468, 486). The play was arguably more a farce than a serious satire on the social inequalities of men and women. The comedy of the play, however, made it far more successful in New York than *The House of Mirth* had been. And, like *The House of Mirth*, *Girls* showcased both the hardships of, and the necessity for, an independent working life for some American women.

The play was extremely popular in New York but its posthumous production in London was received as pitifully as *The House of Mirth* had been in New York. Finding the

play to be farcical and ridiculous in their views, critics could not identify the women Fitch portrayed as anything like 'real' women in British society. In New York, however, real-life and art converged: Amy Ricard, one of the three leading actresses in *Girls*, joined the suffrage movement, and all three leading ladies found themselves, their work lives, and their views on men under scrutiny in the press.

Unlike Lily in *The House of Mirth*, for Pam, Violet and Kate, a working life is no tragic consequence in itself; indeed, they have each chosen it. As New Women, they are free to seek out appropriate careers. Pam is a secretary and stenographer, Violet a stenographer and illustrator, and Kate a free-lance writer who seeks a career on the stage. While the three women are not chastised for pursuing careers – the play suggests a changing world in which women will and should become the norm in the workplace – they are admonished for their rejection of men. A sworn society of 'man-haters,' as Fitch's girls proclaim themselves, was no new concept in America. As early as 1834 a group of women in New York formed the Female Moral Reform Society, who aimed 'to convert New York's prostitutes to evangelical Protestantism and close forever the city's numerous brothels (Smith-Rosenberg 109). As Smith-Rosenberg suggests, their aims in practice meant 'to control men's sexual values and autonomy' and their rhetoric 'consistently betrayed an unmistakeable and deeply felt resentment toward a male-dominated society' (109).

The first and final acts of *Girls* take place in their shared studio flat in Manhattan. The 'hammering of the steam heat pipe' can be heard in the background and the three women decide sleeping arrangements; whose turn it is to take the divan, who will get the folding bed, and who will have to endure the Morris chair (Fitch, *Girls* 1;1). The suffragettes are intruded upon in the first act by the entrance of Edgar Holt, begging them to allow him to hide out in their room lest the husband of the woman across the hall (with

whom he was dining – innocently, he assures them) finds him in the building. Pam refuses, and he refuses to go back out into the hallway. Eventually, Pam places a wooden plank leading from their window (four flights up) to one across the way, and he departs in that manner.

The second act takes place in the office of a law firm where Pam and Violet are now working. Frank Loot, a senior clerk and self-confessed ‘woman hater’, complains about the presence of women in his workplace (ibid 2;2). Their employer, George Sprague, makes repeated advances towards Pam, leading her to hand in her notice. The firm’s youngest partner has thus far been absent during the two weeks of Pam and Kate’s employment, but with his arrival, they learn that he is the same Edgar Holt of the first act. Kate shows up too, fresh from theatre rehearsals, and reveals that she is engaged to her stage manager, much to the ire of Pam.

Pam and Edgar investigate a divorce case, Pam taking the side of the wife, and Edgar that of the husband. This culminates in an argument that causes Sprague to fire the women (having refused to take Pam’s earlier resignation seriously). Pam storms out of the building and Edgar reveals his feelings towards her: ‘[s]he is immense’ (ibid 2;37). By the end of the final act, Edgar convinces Pam to marry him, with the help of Kate and Violet – they each flirt with Edgar, pushing Pam to confess her own feelings – and Loot, proving to be a reformed woman-hater as much as Pam is a reformed man-hater, proposes to Violet.

Fitch steered away from stating whether or not any of them would continue to work, leaving it for the audience to make their own assumptions one way or another. Fitch stated that the play was not ‘about women’s rights or the masculine woman, but simply a little love story about three girls who rebelled against the lords of creation and were conquered by love’ (quoted in Dearing 464).

It was Fitch's fiftieth play and, in America, *Girls* surpassed critical expectations. Before its initial premier at the *Belasco* in Washington, the *Washington Herald* was curious to learn what 'feminine theatergoers will think' of the play, given that 'Mr. Fitch is reputed with having treated the feminine sex rather harshly' ("Satirises Bachelor Girl"). The reporter declared it a 'certainty [...] that the suffragettes who are clamoring for the right to vote, will find fault with the play' (ibid). Such concerns, however, proved unfounded. Two days later, following the premiere, the same paper declared *Girls* 'the comedy hit of the year,' describing the enthusiastic response from the full audience: '[s]eldom has a capacity audience seemed to enjoy so thoroughly every moment of a scintillating satire as that which gathered' ("Clyde Fitch's 'Girls' Proves Genuine Delight; Good Bills Everywhere").

When *Girls* opened in New York on the 24th of March 1908, it remained a hit with critics and audiences alike, running at Daly's for 225 nights⁶⁹ before continuing to other venues across the US. Even the *Tribune* had to admit the following morning that it was an 'exceedingly laughable farce' ("Another Farce at Daly's"). The paper's only qualm was with 'some of the vulgar lines' but the play's 'success was clearly apparent' (ibid). The *New York Times* took most of the action to be 'nonsense,' but described it as fast-paced and 'good laughing entertainment': '[t]he piece is light and airy, but is highly diverting, with no end of bright lines of the Fitchian variety and an adroit manipulation of up-to-date allusions which are made to fit the cause' ("Funny Fitch Farce"). It was a funny and entertaining play, they suggested, not to be taken too seriously, and sure to be enjoyed by its audience.

⁶⁹ Wearing records the number of performances as 64, but the *Tribune* reported on the 5th of September 1909 that *Girls* 'had a run of 225 nights here [in New York] last season' ("The Theatre Stage Affairs").

In London, critics were quicker to note the play's more serious themes but, in attempting to take it more seriously, were disappointed with the result. It opened at *The Prince of Wales* on the 10th of September 1913, 6 years after the New York opening, and 4 years after the playwright's death. While the audience, much to the confoundment of the critics, were much amused by the play on opening night, the press did not warm to the farcical elements, but rather found it tiring and artificial. The *Illustrated London News* called it the 'least considerable' of Fitch's plays: 'conventionally farcical, depending for its effect on artificial absurdity of situation rather than on humorous developments of idea and type' ("“Girls,” at the Prince of Wales's"). The *Globe* called it simply an 'ill-constructed and humourless farce' ("“Girls” at the Prince of Wales's").

While despairing over the state of American drama, and criticising American taste, a number of those same critics attributed what joy was to be found in the production to 'the American “smartness” of its dialogue, or, as the *Observer* more condescendingly put it, to 'the quaint American dialect' (*Illustrated London News*, "“Girls” at the Prince of Wales's"; "Girls"). The *Era* was somewhat kinder, arguing that it had at least 'the merit of being amusing and thoroughly well acted,' 'entertaining' situations, and a 'dialogue full of racy Americanisms' ("Girls"). But the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* was worst of all in its assessment: 'the sooner [Fitch's] work is forgotten the better it will be for the American drama' ("“Girls,” at the Prince of Wales's Theatre"). The reporter went into detail describing the precise type of boredom generated by *Girls*: 'the active boredom, when you have a physical pain in your inside and long to rise and throw the chairs at the stage' (ibid). He concluded: '[i]f America likes this sort of thing, then America is a strange place indeed' (ibid). *Girls* ran in London for only 9 performances.

On the whole, British critics were dismayed that Fitch had written such artificial characters, and that he had not troubled himself to portray New York society

accurately⁷⁰. The *Pall Mall Gazette* described the play as ‘a composition of a man who knew, or cared, very little about life’ (“The Prince of Wales’ Theatre”). Fitch, however, was very much concerned with putting America on the stage. The *Washington Post* quoted the playwright’s hope for *Girls* to be recognised as a ‘representative American play of to-day dealing with just the kind of girls one meets with in everyday life’ (quoted in Dearinger 464).

The ‘girls’ in Fitch’s play, implied the *Pall Mall Gazette*, were nothing like British New Women:

There is, of course, in real life the type of woman who deems herself able to be independent of masculine society, and especially masculine protection; but her intellectual position is a very different one from that of the heroines in “Girls,” which, indeed, is never much more than a transparent affectation (“The Prince of Wales’ Theatre”).

Violet and Kate show signs early on in the play that they are not fully committed to Pam’s mission, and Pam’s ‘anti-men’ attitude comes across as unreasonable (at least until her motivations are explained). The Honorary Secretary of the Actresses’ Franchise League, Adeline Bourne, reminded members to ‘[n]ever forget that Mrs. Pankhurst and Christabel and Emmeline Pethick Lawrence never said they were better than men. All they wanted [was] that they were as good as men in every way’ (quoted in Paxton ix).

British critics may have found Fitch’s characterisations to be absurd but, as Fitch intended, his girls were well recognised in New York. Following the long success of *Girls*, in September 1909 the *New York Tribune* published a first-hand account of a woman editor who worked and lived in New York titled, “The Studio Girl”. More telling of the implications of the article was its subtitle: “A Tragedy: By One of Them.” The writer, who

⁷⁰ *Illustrated London News*: ‘Mr. Fitch did not trouble to relate his characters to life in any way’ (““Girls,” at the Prince of Wales’s”).

Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News: ‘[a]s character they simply don’t exist’ (““Girls,” at the Prince of Wales’s Theatre”).

declared *Girls* a 'charming' and 'entertaining' play, warned impressionable girls against the realities of striking out on their own in a big city (ibid). Drawing on her own experience, she argued that while men may flourish under such conditions, women are not equipped with the necessary physical or mental strength. 'The woman in the Career,' she argued, 'is the best argument against it,' since 'such a pitiful few get on in their chosen fields' (ibid).

For those who took up what the writer termed 'studio life' – occupying the single room 'studio' apartments that were all many single women working in creative industries could afford – not only would they struggle to earn a living, but they would suffer bodily and socially: 'some of us went gaily and happily to broken health, to graves, to social doom! That is what the Studio Life did for them!' (ibid). A strenuous life might be said to harden men, but it could 'spoil' girls, the writer suggested, even causing them to become unnaturally unwomanly (ibid).

As Smith-Rosenberg argues, 'British and American physicians and scientists insisted that unmarried career women and political activists constituted an "intermediate sex"' (265). In *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), Krafft-Ebing included accounts of women who preferred 'masculine' work to 'feminine occupations' such as housework. This 'symptom' often went hand in hand with a masculine appearance and 'unnatural' desires towards other women.

Krafft-Ebing described what came to be termed 'mannish lesbians':

The female homosexual may chiefly be found in the haunts of boys. She is the rival in their play, preferring the rocking-horse, playing at soldiers, etc., to doll and other girlish occupations. The toilet is neglected, and rough boyish manners are affected. Love for art finds a substitute in the pursuits of the sciences. [...] The masculine soul, heaving in the female bosom, finds pleasure in the pursuit of manly sports, and in manifestations of courage and bravado (*Psychopathia Sexualis* 264).

The focus of bourgeois male professionals in the late nineteenth century, as Smith-Rosenberg suggests, had 'shifted the definition of female deviance from the New Woman's rejection of motherhood to their rejection of men' (265). The so-called New Woman/career girl and the suffragette were evidently persons of intrigue as well as social disorder in early twentieth century New York. Seeking to amuse its readership, and to delve into the psyches of women such as Pam, Kate, and Violet, the *New York Times* published an interview with the women who played them, provocatively titled: "Do Man-Haters Really Hate Men?". The interviewer noted the marital status of each of the three actresses – 'one married, one engaged, and one neither married nor engaged – nor desirous of being' – and quizzed each in turn on their feelings towards men. Laura Nelson Hall, who played Pam, the 'ringleader' of the group, assured her interviewer on the differences between Pam and herself:

I know all about the studio life of the bachelor girl, for I have lived it. [...] we had great times [...] Did we hate men; were we for female suffrage, &c.? Not exactly! [...] I think it is part of the man's business to 'go to the polls' and all that sort of thing (ibid).

Hall paints 'studio life' as non-threatening: a way for girls to have a bit of fun, while not necessarily getting caught up in the serious business of women's rights before getting married. While distancing herself from Pam's more progressive and militant views, Hall argued that Pam is no more threatening to the social order than herself: 'I don't believe there ever was a woman like Pam, who hated all men just on principle. But, you see, Pam didn't really hate them either – and that's just the joke Mr. Fitch brings out' (ibid).

Ruth Maycliffe, who played stenographer and illustrator Violet, assured the interviewer that she was 'only nineteen, and that's too young to be married' (ibid). Like Hall, Maycliffe asserted 'I'm not like the girl I pretend to be in this play,' but owned that she could be classed as a 'man hater': 'They're kind of silly, you know. [...] before I fall in

love with any man [...] he's just got to show me!' (ibid). Following Pam's lead, while branding herself a 'man hater,' Maycliffe too performs passivity, needing only to be convinced by the right man. The message was compounded by the interviewer's description of Maycliffe's 'ingénue voice' and her 'little turn of the eyes which, however much she may deny it, is not meant to drive men away' (ibid). The message put forth was clear: women want men, even when they proclaim they don't.

Amy Ricard, who played free-lance writer and aspiring actress Kate, gave perhaps the most pertinent response to the interviewer's questioning. She, like Hall, had experience of 'working on the stage and living as a bachelor girl' (ibid). Ricard suggested that while she didn't 'believe in man hating in general [...] there are certainly some men who ought to be hated,' and that there were indeed 'some girls who really hate men because they have had such disagreeable experiences with the men they have known' (ibid).

Addressing the specific challenges faced by actresses in the early twentieth century, Ricard put forth her views on marriage and the stage:

Marriage and acting are two things both so big that I don't think any woman could really do justice to both. Of course, when you come down to it, the only place for a woman is in a home of her own. [...] If she is an actress, it seems to me she must give up her art for married life ("Do Man Haters Really Hate Men").

Ricard added in her interview, somewhat pragmatically, that 'If she paints or writes [...] she is more fortunate, and may yet do some of her artistic work afterward, as well as before' (ibid). It is worth noting that two of the three girls in Fitch's play could paint or write and, by Ricard's assessment, could continue to work once married.

Actresses, as Wilmer illustrates, enjoyed 'greater social freedom than most other women' in addition to economic independence (155). At the turn of the twentieth century, however, actresses who chose to marry, and to continue their acting careers,

remained the subject of moral debate – as interrogations of actress Clara Bloodgood’s domestic life in the press illustrate. Press announcements of actresses forgoing the stage following engagements to wealthy bachelors were commonplace; before the premiere, the New York press reported that *Girls* would mark Ricard’s last appearance on stage, following her decision to end her career in anticipation of her marriage to poet and editor of the *Smart Set* magazine Charles Hanson Towne.

The well-to-do young socialite who turned to the stage following the financial ruin of her husband was becoming something of a cliché. Fitch made a joke of it when Kate lands a stage role in *Girls*: ‘[h]e said he’d circus the town with me as a young society lady whose money is tied up in the Knickerbocker Trust, and her husband was in Wall Street, so she’d gone on the stage to support the family’ (Fitch, *Girls*, 1;16). On the other hand, an actress who had married into financial security, could be construed as neglecting her husband and family. Ricard expressed the view herself that ‘you cannot be in love with one man and your art’ (“Do Man Haters Really Hate Men”). Despite such reports, Ricard, who later married actor Lester Lonergan, continued to appear on stage as the century progressed.

Following her initial appearance in *Girls*, Ricard became more vocal about her own developing views on women’s rights. In April 1908, with *Girls* still playing at Daly’s, the *New York Tribune* reported that Ricard had appeared to speak at the suffragette open air meeting in Madison square. Ricard argued that ‘woman suffrage was perfectly normal and not radical’ and, according to the reporter, was met with approving shouts by the audience of ‘five hundred men and a few women’ (“Holds Forth on Woman Suffrage”). By May 1908 papers were reporting that Ricard ‘has become a suffragette and joined the Progressive Woman Suffrage union of New York’ (“Gossip from Stageland”). It was not uncommon in America at this time for actresses to come out publically in their support

of the women's suffrage movement, or for the press to report any involvement. Ethel Barrymore, who shot to fame in Fitch's *Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines*, would make headlines herself in 1910 following her attendance at a suffragist meeting (Wilmer 155).

Ricard's suggestion that 'some men [...] ought to be hated,' is not particularly reflective of her character Kate, who argues lightly that if '[a]fter all, you must have men in the world, [...] we might as well make the best of a necessary evil' (Fitch, *Girls* 1;5). Her attitude is, however, somewhat akin to Pam's. While disappointed with the quality of comedy in the play, London critics were quick to recognise the source of Pam's animosity toward men. In the play, Pam recounts her past experiences with men: first, with the man who fled after promising to marry her, then the harassment she experienced from a string of unseemly employers: 'A good thing? That's what my employer took me for [...] one day he took me entirely too much for granted'; 'I haven't found one place yet, where some one didn't make my position so uncomfortable I had to get out' (ibid 1;12, 1;13).

It appalled London critics to witness the same behaviour from Pam's new boss, Sprague, in the second act of the play. *The Observer* noted the unpleasant working environment that Pam and Violet found themselves in: '[t]he senior partner flirts with her in an oily and offensive way' ("Girls"). The *Globe* offered that 'the vulgar attempts of the senior partner to make love to the more austere of the "girls" fully justified her outspoken criticisms of men,' and the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* critic concurred: "When you see Mr. Fitch's idea of the men who exist in New York, you understand the vow' ("Girls," at the Prince of Wales's Theatre"; "Girls" at the Prince of Wales's").

Sprague persists in his advances with Pam despite her constant objections. When she asks him to '[p]lease get out of my way,' so that she may position a ladder to get some files, he compliments her 'pretty little feet'; when she asks him again to '[p]lease go away, you make me nervous,' he holds the ladder, tells her she is 'young and

attractive,’ and suggests she ‘lose [her] head a little and enjoy [herself]’ (Fitch, *Girls* 2;10). After Sprague climbs the ladder in an attempt to reach her, Pam climbs to sit at the top: ‘I want you to understand, once and for all, I am engaged here for secretary, not for companion’ (ibid 2;11). The situation escalades, with Sprague blocking Pam’s descent, insisting she allow him to take her out ‘to some theatre tonight and then some quiet nice little place after for supper’ (ibid).

The *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* described Sprague’s behaviour in the scene as of ‘a manner which could only be explained by intoxication’ (““Girls,” at the Prince of Wales’s Theatre”). The reviewer may have been uncredulous about Sprague’s behaviour, but harassment was a serious issue for women entering the professional workforce. Ireland describes the situation that lead to the sensationalised 1872 New York case of Fanny Hyde who was accused of murdering her employer:

Watson, a married man with a wife and five children, enticed Hyde at age 15 into a sexual relationship as the price for her continued employment at his hairnet factory and forced her to maintain that relationship even after her marriage (101).

Hyde’s case was extreme, but not exceptional. As Deutsch attests, ‘workplace sexual harassment’ remained ‘part of daily life’ in American cities in 1908 (102).

In addition to workplace harassment, *Girls* raised the issues of low rates of pay and fewer job prospects for working women compared with men. Pam has trouble securing a position anywhere, despite her qualifications, because every advertisement she responds to ‘wanted a man’ (Fitch, *Girls* 1;10). ‘I am discouraged,’ she admits, ‘I’ve tried so hard and I have got to live’ (ibid 1;11). Even when she and Violet do find work, their wages are well below those of men in the same positions, despite Pam doing such a good job that the best criticism of Pam’s work that the woman hating clerk Loot can come up with is a petulant: ‘[s]he’s so damned orderly, we can’t find anything anymore’

(ibid 2;2). As Sprague jokes to Loot, “one thing ought to appeal to you, they’re so much cheaper than men’ (ibid 2;2).

Feminists, as Smith-Rosenberg argues, can either campaign for ‘equality’, or for ‘women’s rights’ (286). Pam, at least until the final act, vies for the latter. What is more, the women’s short-lived oath ‘to stick together forever, as the avowed enemies of men,’ and Pam’s entreaties for them to ‘[s]wear to have nothing whatever to do with men, to look down on them and despise them, and glory in living without their patronizing and belittling help,’ lack any political aim (1;39). As it was, a ‘suffragette’ banner hanging in the girls’ apartment, and Edgar’s goading description of Pam as ‘the rabid young man hater, the suffragette, from the studio’ are the only direct references to the suffrage movements. Nevertheless, the American press referred to Fitch’s girls repeatedly as ‘suffragettes’.

To be a bachelor girl and an advocate of the women’s rights movement were one and the same in New York City. The *Washington Herald* reported: ‘Mr Fitch says [*Girls*] deals with the germ of bachelor girl independence which ultimately leads to woman suffrage’ (“Satirises Bachelor Girl”). The *Daily Gate City* suggested that given ‘this age of suffragettes, it is worth while to see how Mr. Fitch lets his girls work out their own salvation along the line of least resistance’ (“The Shuberts Present “*Girls*”). While the play does leave room for the possibility that suffragettes may be justified in their cause – particularly through the suggestion that the women make a valuable contribution to the workforce, and through the social oppressions they face as women – that message is largely undermined by the farcical portrayal of Pam.

During the weeks prior to its premier, as *Girls* was being publicised to American audiences, Fitch was being hailed in the press as an American playwright, more prolific than Shakespeare (Dearinger 464). As aforementioned, *Girls* was Fitch’s fiftieth

contribution to American drama, but, as the *Washington Herald* noted, '[e]ven Shakespeare only wrote thirty-seven' ("Author of Fifty Plays"). Comparisons to Shakespeare seem somewhat audacious on the part of the American critical establishment, especially given their generally lukewarm, often frigid, response to Fitch's work. They were, however, felicitous in relation to *Girls*, which bore certain Shakespearean resemblances, and featured a passing reference to Sara Bernhardt's Hamlet. Fitch's self-proclaimed 'love story' shares much in common with Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, a comedy which has proved problematic and divisive among Feminist critics to date.

'Shrew taming' plots were common fare in the early twentieth century and, indeed, in London the *Observer* referred to *Girls* as just another of 'these shrew taming tales' ("Girls"). Referencing the leading men from *Much Ado About Nothing* and *The Taming of the Shrew* respectively, the *Illustrated London News* dubbed Edgar 'a half-Benedick, half-Petruchio character,' a parallel that would have been all the more apparent given that Edgar was played in London by Sam Sothern, who was well known for taking leading roles in Shakespearean plays alongside actress Julia Marlowe⁷¹ ("Girls," at the Prince of Wales's").

Whether the comparison was a flattering one for Fitch's leading man was up for debate between the critics. The *Observer* suggested that while Sam Southern played the part attractively, Edgar was 'not really sympathetic' ("Girls"). The *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, however, argued that Edgar alone out of all the characters in *Girls*

⁷¹ Sam Sothern was the stage name of American actor Edward Hugh Sothern. Under the management of Charles Frohman, Sothern and Marlowe performed in *Much Ado About Nothing* as Beatrice and Benedick in 1904 and in *The Taming of the Shrew* as Katherine and Petruchio in 1905.

appeared to be a 'rationally behaved Gentleman' ("“Girls,” at the Prince of Wales’s Theatre”).

Edgar’s assertions that Pam ‘[n]eeds taming,’ and his scheme to make her realise she is mistaken in her feelings towards men, nods towards Shakespeare’s Petruchio, implying that, like Katherine, she is both out of control and wholly irrational. The *Washington Times* described the third act as ‘a brilliant satire on the inconsistency of woman’ (“Clyde Fitch’s “Girls Proves Genuine Delight”). As the *Washington Herald* proclaimed: ‘The development of the story shows how love knocks all such foolish notions [of women’s suffrage] out of the head of the average pretty girl’ (“Satirises Bachelor Girl”). Pam comes across as a woman ruled by emotion rather than logic – a poor candidate to take up the vote.

When Violet questions the ethics of taming Pam against her wishes, Edgar responds confidently: ‘[d]on’t you yourself think it would be rather nice to be in love with some first rate man who was crazy about you?’ (Fitch, *Girls* 2;20). In the end, this transpires to be the case. Although, in the first act, Pam assured her janitor that ‘if we don’t have men calling on us, it is because [...] we don’t want them, and [...] we don’t need them,’ by the third she finds herself ‘just an ordinary girl, after all, in love with the first man who wants [her]’ (ibid 3;25). ‘Little by little,’ the *Era* recounted, ‘Edgar teaches Pamela subjugation’ (“Girls”).

Again, the message implied is that all women want men, regardless of their assertions otherwise. Kate’s response to her theatre manager’s advances, recounted by her in the first act, enforces the theme: ‘[o]f course, I pretended to resent it, and said Don’t, and he kissed me’ (Fitch, *Girls* 1;28). She then gleefully announces her engagement to him. Her story reinforces the underlying message that women who refuse the

advances of men, or who decide to live independently from men, are either insincere or mistaken.

Such a narrative, especially in the context of a play in which all the women realise the error of their ways and decide to marry, leaves little space for the possibility of women living prosperously, either alone or co-habiting with other women on a long term basis. The decision to end the play in the way Fitch did was arguably a nod to convention – and a reluctance to incite controversy – rather than a reflection of Fitch's own views. This is especially poignant given his own decision to forgo marriage and also his close association with his friend and agent Elizabeth Marbury, who had been living openly in a same-sex relationship with Elsie De Wolf since 1892.

Fitch made a habit of concluding his plays with a happy ending, typically with the union or reunion of a male and female lead. In certain instances, his refusal to let controversial heroines die at the end of his plays made the plays themselves controversial, subverting stage expectations for 'fallen' women. But this raises a question about the extent to which the playwright's reliance on marriage, as the signifier for a truly 'happy' outcome for his heroines, undermines the more transgressive or empowering messages in his work. The question indeed remains at the end of *Girls*: in renouncing her hatred of men, and pursuing marriage, has Pam also renounced her independence? The majority of reporters certainly seemed to equate her decision to accept Edgar's proposal with a rejection of the tenets of women's suffrage.

Nevertheless, *Girls*, appearing on stage before the 'real' suffragette plays of the twentieth century, opened the floor for debate on the nature of suffragettes, bachelor women and career girls, and shed light on the daily oppression women faced in simply trying to earn a living. *Girls* did not go so far as to challenge the institution of marriage, but it did celebrate a changing social organisation in which women could have careers –

a pursuit for which his three heroines were not condemned in the context of the play. Indeed, Loot's remarks that a woman's 'correct business is matrimony and her proper typewriter the cradle' were intended as ludicrously as Pam's early sentiments towards men (Fitch *Girls* 2;23). *Girls* offered both the appeasing message that, in pursuing a career, women would not have to forgo marriage, and laid down a challenge to the status quo of male dominance in the workplace.

Chapter Six

'HIS MANHOOD WINS':

DIVISIONS AND DOUBLES OF AMERICAN MASCULINITY

As I have illustrated in the previous chapters, female leads tended to drive the action in Fitch's contemporary American plays. By comparison, only a small but significant number of Fitch's large body of plays were hero-driven. Where men in Fitch's plays took the lead, they did so primarily in historical romances whose heroes were all variations on the dandy: *Beau Brummel* (1890), *Frederick Lemaitre* (1890), *His Grace de Grammont* (1894) and *The Last of the Dandies* (1901). While these plays staged the dandy – an ambiguously gendered pose that threatened to dissolve boundaries – *The City* (1909) was unique among Fitch's repertoire in its interrogation of turn-of-the-century American masculinities within the explicit framework of 'business' America and the politicised city. Fitch broke with his own trend to stage what critics dubbed 'a man's play' ("Clyde Fitch's Last Play"). At the same time, his play queried the very notion of what it meant to be 'manly' in America and exposed the tenuousness of a hegemonic masculine identity.

Within the field of gender studies, it is now widely accepted that 'masculinity' does not exist in a universal and monolithic sense; rather, masculine identities are constructed within social and historical frameworks, intersecting with axes of class, race, age and sexuality, resulting in a wide and mutable 'matrix of masculinities' (Kimmel and Aronson xxiii). As Kimmel and Aronson assert:

we must speak of *masculinities*, and thus recognize the different definitions of masculinity and that we construct these definitions. By pluralizing the terms, we acknowledge that masculinity means different things to different groups of people at different times (ibid xxiv).

At the same time, asserts Kimmel, '[m]asculinities are constructed in a field of power' that includes both 'the power of men over women' and 'the power of some men over other men' ("Invisible Masculinity" 30). Thus, they rely on and reproduce discourses that reinforce gendered binaries privileging white heterosexual male forms of masculinity over "others". As Kimmel asserts: '[m]asculinities are constructed by racism, sexism, and homophobia' (ibid 30).

The 'generic man' of the nineteenth century was in fact 'a very specific construction' rooted in the ideology of 'self-creation in the [...] industrial capitalist marketplace' (ibid 31). As the *fin de siècle* approached, this definition was challenged and destabilised by rapid changes in society including: 'Rapid industrialization [...]; challenges by women to the separation of spheres; new waves of swarthy immigrants and black migrants to the cities, and the emergence of visible gay male subculture in the northern cities' (ibid 32).

Showalter asserts that by the *fin de siècle*, the 'sexual borderline between the masculine and the feminine represented the dangerous vanishing point of sexual difference' (*Sexual Anarchy* 8). Precisely because 'traditional gender definitions were challenged,' argues Kimmel, the 'rise of feminism in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States [...] prompted what we might call a crisis of masculinity' ("Men's Responses to Feminism at the Turn of the Century" 262).

There is a breadth of often conflicting scholarship dedicated to the analysis of *fin de siècle* gender and manliness. Historians often apply the term 'crisis' to discussions of

the period; others, however, contest the use of the term⁷². In his exploration of historical white masculinity, and its critical discourse, Pinar concludes that '[a]t the least [...] if not in actual crisis, white masculinity was in a deeply anxious transitional phase,' adding that it 'seems beyond dispute that the 1890s were a decade of profound tension in many important and interesting elements of American life' (323, 324).

In response, hegemonic masculinity reasserted itself in the discourse of social science:

If [masculinity] could not be achieved in the marketplace, it could be demonstrated by the displays of various gender-appropriate traits, attitudes, and behaviours [...] It was social science's task to enumerate those traits and attitudes, and then generalize them as the normal traits associated with adulthood, thus problematizing women and "other" men – men of color, gay men, non-native born immigrant men' (Kimmel, "Invisible Masculinity" 32).

Thus, white middle class American masculinity remained critically dependant on the continuation of a binary gender narrative.

As a constructed essential "other" to normative masculinity, gay men – termed 'inverts' by sexologists – were constructed as overly refined, and therefore effeminate. In a similar fashion, black men and immigrants were constructed as primitive; 'both effeminacy and primitivism,' asserts Kimmel, 'were indications of insufficient manhood' (*The History of Men* 32). As previously stated, Fitch's earlier plays dabbled with stagings of the civilised and effeminate dandy, a figure that simultaneously maintained and challenged the gendered status quo as a safely asexualised, but dangerously feminised, socially mobile man. Significantly, Lane describes the dandy as a character who 'seemed to anticipate and delight in the dissolution of its boundaries' (29).

Utilising the notion of 'doubles', *The City*, as I will argue, dramatised the conflict between hegemonic American masculinity and the primitive "other". The polarising

⁷² See Pinar, "The 'Crisis' of White Masculinity" (2001).

narrative is queried and destabilised as the play progresses, however; the male characters find that the boundaries of their identities become mutable and even interchangeable.

As a literary device, the double has a long history in fiction and was popular in use throughout the nineteenth century. The most obvious and notable examples are in gothic novels such as Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). As a device not associated specifically with the supernatural genre nor to novels, instances of doubleness occur also in nineteenth century plays including Ibsen's realist drama *Hedda Gabler*⁷³ (1891).

According to Herdman (1990), the fictional double may be either a duplication or an opposite of a character (1-2). What is significant in each case, argues Herdman, is that the two characters 'can be looked upon as differing aspects of a sundered whole' who thus reflect 'a division within the personality' of the primary character and articulate 'the experience of self-division' (ibid). In her recent exploration of the double in drama, Burkman (2015) argues further that doubles may be both 'interpersonal and [...] intrapsychic, sometimes at the same time' (20). In either case, argues Burkman, a similar or opposing character does not necessarily constitute a 'true double': 'With a true double, the boundaries between self and other are permeable' (2).

As Burkman illustrates, the 'concept of, or the term, doubling has been the object of interdisciplinary concern ever since Sigmund Freud and Otto Rank placed its origins in narcissistic disorder' (12). Both Herdman, and Burkman (2015), utilise psychological theories to negotiate the mechanics of the double in literature and drama. 'As with other formations of the uncanny in Freud's mystic cosmology,' asserts Burkman, 'the doubling

⁷³ For an analysis of the double in *Hedda Gabler* see Burkman, chapter 4, "*Hedda Gabler, Jules and Jim, and Taxi Driver*".

of the self does not pertain to a foreign entity; rather, it articulates something deeply familiar to the psyche that has merely become unfamiliar owing to repression':

The encounter with a double is the drama of the divided self. Perhaps part of the self is too brazen or too lazy or too evil to be claimed. The part that has been repressed, divided from the self, comes back as a double: division leads to addition (2,3).

While encounters with their doubles led to tragedy for both Ibsen's Hedda and Wilde's Dorian, in accordance with convention at the time, Burkman demonstrates that in later dramas, doubling may lead to renewed life rather than an inevitable death:

Over the years, the term has evolved to encompass many experiences with the other that involve not only how one's double may cause him to die but also how, if one deals with the double, one may die a more complete person. Or, alternatively, experiences with one's double may allow one to live as a more integrated self (153).

In *The City*, as I will show, George's encounter with his half-brother Hannock leads to this latter outcome. Hannock confronts George with the performative nature of his constructed masculine identity. Having reconciled the conflicting aspects of his identity by the end of the play, George emerges as an imperfect and socially transgressive American hero, simultaneously both moral degenerate and progressive idealist. Thus, even as Fitch's play utilises the concept of the double, placing American masculinity in conflict with the "other", this concept becomes destabilised and ultimately dissolves within the wider narrative.

'You, Here, To-Day, Are Twice the Man You Were Yesterday':

The City (1909)

With his final play, *The City* (1909), Fitch critiqued the concept of the American hero through his dramatic staging of the discovery of the relationship between up-and-

coming business man and aspiring politician, George Rand Jr., and his half-brother, the drug-addicted criminal, Hannock. *The City*, I argue, utilises the concept of the double to destabilise 'normative' (i.e. white, heterosexual, middle-class), as played (initially), by George, and 'non-normative' masculinities in America, the latter exemplified in the play by Hannock, 'a sot and a degenerate blackguard – a drug fiend and a moral criminal (Fitch, *The City* 478).

As shadows and shades of each other, neither pure or fully evil, neither self or other, half-brothers George and Hannock blur the boundaries, and trouble conventional definitions, of hero and villain, with morality and immorality, progression and degeneration. George's struggle with Hannock, as I demonstrate in this chapter, is representative of a more significant struggle with his own tenuous masculinity and the conflict between his desire to be a strong and honest American hero and the biologically inherited 'flaws' that threaten his ability to do so.

In terms of both its impact upon the opening night audience and its critical reception, *The City* (1909) was by far Fitch's most successful play in New York. *The City* opened in New York at the Lyric on the 21st of December 1909, only two months after the playwright's death. Fitch died suddenly aged 44, suffering from an infection after an emergency appendectomy, while travelling with his friend Eugene Gautier in France. At the time of Fitch's death, the script for *The City* was complete and casting was underway. Fitch had expressed a strong preference for American actor Tully Marshall to play the villainous Hannock. Following Fitch's death, Marshall couldn't help but accept the role⁷⁴.

⁷⁴ According to Moses and Gerson, Tully Marshall first refused the part of Hannock, but accepted it after Fitch's death when he was told how much the playwright had wanted him for the part (374).

Marshall assured the public that the production was every bit as Fitch intended: 'the play was absolutely completed when Fitch died. It was the most complete manuscript ever written by Fitch' ("Actor Tells Story"). Although Marshall was highly acclaimed for his performance in the role, he insisted that all credit lay with Fitch: 'An actor does not create a part. An author creates a part, and the actor must present it' (ibid). Walter Hampden played the hero, George Rand Jr., and playwright and producer John Emerson, having been 'closely associated with Mr. Fitch in the production of at least a dozen plays,' acted as stage director ("In the Spotlight"). Moses and Gerson add that 'those who were nearest Fitch were able to recall his ideas of production' and the 'entire company' worked untiringly to ensure that the production came out exactly as Fitch had intended it (385). Dearing, having analysed Hampden's annotated rehearsal script of the play, concurs that '*The City* reached the stage much as its playwright envisioned it' (505).

The opening night audience was 'unusually brilliant and fashionable' ("Fitch Drama Makes Women Faint"). At the final curtain, half wild with excitement' they 'roared [...] approval' (A.W. "The Drama"). According to the *New York Times*, there were also 'profound expressions of astonishment' from the audience in the more sensational moments of the play, and there was much cause. *The City* includes depictions of alcohol and drug abuse (including the injection of opioids), fraud and corruption, the revelation of an incestuous marriage, an off-stage death in the first act, an on-stage murder of a young woman in the second act, a fight between two men over a loaded gun, and what was, apparently, the first usage of the expletive 'God damn' on the American stage.

The Era reported that the audience was 'almost hysterical,' declaring that there were 'such scenes of excitement and commotion as are seldom witnessed in a theatre'

("The City"). Two women fainted and had to be removed from the auditorium ("Fitch Drama Makes Women Faint"). Moses and Gerson describe the scene:

hysteria moved that vast audience. Women were removed fainting, and men shouted as the curtain went up and down in response to repeated calls. It was an unprecedented night in the theatre (385-6).

Adding to the heightened emotion on opening night, was the knowledge of Fitch's recent death. It was now the turn of the critics and the public to dwell on 'sentimentalities' – though they had so often condemned Fitch for doing so – to talk of feeling his presence in the theatre that night, and to lament the bitter-sweet tragedy that Fitch was not there to see his own success, the pinnacle of an often arduous career. Even the *Tribune* joined the chorus, publishing a lengthy review of the 'powerful American play' that both celebrated Fitch and mourned his loss: 'In this drama Fitch had begun to find himself. But he found himself only to die. Were the gods jealous of what would otherwise have come?' (A.W. "The Drama"). The *Tribune*, of course, had been responsible for some of the most severe and unrelenting criticisms of Fitch's work (and Fitch himself) while he was alive. The change in tune, was precipitated by the fact that Fitch's most vocal opponent, William Winter, was no longer at the helm as dramatic editor.

Fitch, the press implied, had at last 'made it'; he had produced as strong play, worthy of representing American drama on the world stage, even if it never actually made it to the stage in the rest of the world. Where critics traditionally bemoaned Fitch's outdated use of melodrama, they now praised 'the melodramatic effect' of his sensational murder/gun-fight scene, proclaiming 'the skill of the melodramatist' ("Fitch Drama Makes Women Faint," "Climax of 'The City' has Terrific Power"). *The City* 'will compare, indeed, most favorably with the work of any English playwright,' the *New York Times* affirmed. The New York correspondent for the London *Era* reported '[i]t seems to be the general opinion that this is the "strongest" drama that Fitch ever wrote' ("The

City"). *The City* moved to the Hackett Theatre in the spring of 1910 and, all in all, it enjoyed a remarkably successful run of 190 performances in New York before embarking on a national tour.

The theme of the play, as the *Era* summarised, is 'the change effected by the conditions of city life in a family reared and educated in a small country town' ("The City"). *The City* tells the story of the Rand family. George Rand Sr. is a well-respected businessman in the small town of Middleburg. Exasperated by the limitations of country life, his wife and three grown children – George, Teresa, and Cecily – have the 'New York bee' in their bonnets, and urge him move the family to the city. Arguing that he'd rather be 'it in Middleburg – than nit in the City,' Rand Sr. refuses. Upon the entrance of Hannock into the Rand home, the audience, and the son George, learn that Hannock is blackmailing Rand Sr. He has letters that are proof of 'something' between him and Hannock's late mother, and knowledge of Rand Sr.'s apparently crooked business deals. What Hannock is unaware of, but Rand Sr. imparts to George in confidence, is that Hannock is in fact his illegitimate son, the result of an affair with a dressmaker, and the reason he had been paying regular instalments of money to her. George vows to protect the secret before Rand Sr. dies of a heart attack. At the climax of the first act, George exclaims that the family are now free to pursue life in the city.

The second act opens on the family now established in New York: George is doing well in business and has his sights on political office (and a woman named Eleanor); Hannock, still unaware of his parentage, has a position working as George's 'confidential secretary', and an eye on the youngest Rand daughter Cecily; Teresa believes her husband to be having an affair – society believes her to be having one also – and she wishes to divorce (Fitch, *The City* 516). Things go from bad to worse for the family, when George, about to fire his drug-addict half-brother for the sake of maintaining a

respectable image for his political career, learns that Hannock has married the young Cecily in secret that morning. To protect his sister, George is forced to reveal to his half-brother their shared parentage. Drama ensues as the drug-crazed Hannock refuses to accept the information, threatening to expose George's illegal business dealings should he stand in the way of him and Cecily. In the climactic moment, with George ready to reveal the truth of Hannock's birth to Cecily, Hannock draws a pistol, shooting and killing her on stage.

By the end of the play, George has turned Hannock over to the police and given up on a place in politics; Teresa and her husband decide, in light of all that has happened, to give their marriage another go, and Cecily, of course, is dead. In the denouement, Mrs Rand wishes they had remained in Middleburg after all, exclaiming, "Oh, what the City has done for the whole of us!" (ibid 627). Fitch, however, hammers home the message that the city itself is not to blame for bringing out what lay already in their natures:

Don't blame the City. It's not her fault! It's our own! What the City does is to bring out what's strongest in us. If at heart we're good, the good in us will win! If the bad is strongest, God help us! Don't blame the City! She gives the man his opportunity; it is up to him what he makes of it! (ibid 628)

Indeed, Cecily's murder aside, many significant moral transgressions in the play occur in small-town Middleburg, before the family's move to New York; it is in Middleburg that Rand Sr. had a secret affair, fathered a bastard child, conducted shady business deals, and passed on those same methods of business to both his sons. It was also in Middleburg that Hannock blackmailed his biological father until the stress led to a heart attack and untimely death. As T. Miller argues, *The City* distinguished itself from nineteenth century literature that had, for the large part, 'romanticized small-town living and demonized the big city,' offering 'a social message that contradicted the accepted wisdom that city life was corrupting' (175).

Offering a biographical interpretation of the play, Marra positions George as an outlet for Fitch to ‘wrestle more openly with his worst fears and purge some of his shame and guilt’ associated with his sexuality (“Clyde Fitch’s Too Wilde Love” 47). As Marra suggests, it is possible, with hindsight and knowledge of the playwright’s life, to identify Fitch’s ‘own reckoning with his New York-based career and the battles he fought with his Wildean desires’ in [George’s] declamation to the city in the final act (ibid 48):

A man goes to the gates of the City and knocks! [...] And she comes to her gates and takes him in, and she stands him in the middle of her market place [...] and there she strips him naked of all his disguises – and all his hypocrisies – and she paints his ambition on her fences, and lights up her skyscrapers with it! – what *he wants to be and what he thinks he is!* – and then she says to him, ‘Make good if you can, or to Hell with you!’ And what is in him comes out to clothe his nakedness, and to the City he can’t lie! I *know* because I *tried!* (Fitch *The City* 628–9).

Dearinger, too, suggests that the speech held personal significance for the playwright, given that the imagery – ‘ambition’ and ‘lights’ – is suggestive of Broadway and ‘the playwright’s own ambitions and disappointments in the city’ (517). The *New York Times* described it as a moment in which the ‘moralist had precedence over dramatist’ (“Climax of ‘The City’ Has Terrific Power”).

Fitch originally intended *The City* as another comedy – to be titled *The Snobs* – but by the time he had finished writing, it was clear that it had evolved into something different. He wrote to Lucile Watson, who played George’s sister Teresa, to inform her how the change would affect her role:

It is a *very human*, though somewhat spoiled, woman. A serious role, with only the comedy of human nature in it. It will *require acting*, fine acting, and some emotional acting, and force, and *pathos*. It is *not* the comedy part I first proposed (Moses and Gerson 377).

The mere fact that it was not Watson, but Hamilton and Marshall, that took centre stage, was perhaps enough to suggest a departure from the playwright’s earlier contemporary American dramas. Actor and writer John Emerson declared that if *The City* ‘had not borne

[Fitch's] name, no one would have believed that it was his': '[f]or the first time one of his plays was notable not for its delicate delineation of women, but for the strength of its men' ("In Memory of Clyde Fitch").

The City's depictions of American manhood, politics and corruption – not to mention its shocking on-stage enactments of drug abuse, murder, and profanity – afforded Fitch's friends and critics alike the opportunity to champion his final play as his final determination to stage a 'masculine' drama. As Moses and Gerson recount:

"The City" was to be a challenge to those who had persisted in saying that Fitch was a strictly "feminine" dramatist. It was to be the proof that he could be strong and forceful, fearless and almost Greek in theme (385).

Whether or not Fitch actually declared such a thing (and he may well have), the *Sun* reported it to be the case, and the strength and 'power' of the play was a point the press dwelled upon⁷⁵ ("Clyde Fitch's Last Play").

While praising *The City*, many critics distanced it from the large body of Fitch's previous work. The *New York Times* declared triumphantly that finally Fitch had crafted a play 'free from those artificialities which the playwright so often introduced merely for their momentary effect' ("Climax of 'The City' has Terrific Power"). *The Tribune* described Fitch's entire career as 'merely in the way of apprenticeship and preparation' for *The City* (A.W. "The Drama"). Fitch had done what critics had asked of him all along. As the *Sun* assured its readers: 'Mr. Fitch's last play is surely a "man's play."' ("Clyde Fitch's Last

⁷⁵ Shirley Olympius, *Los Angeles Herald*: 'He has told his sordid story in a powerful manner' ("The City" Brutal with Morbidity"). *New York Times*: 'it contains the strongest scene in any of his plays [...] which for sheer power, intensity, and cumulative effect had seldom been excelled,' 'notable not for its delicate delineation of women, but for the strength of its men' ("Climax of 'The City' has Terrific Power," "In Memory of Clyde Fitch"). *The Sun*: 'by far and away the most powerful' Fitch play ("Clyde Fitch's Last Play"). A.W., *New-York Tribune*: 'the power of the playwright,' 'the power of the acting,' 'a play of great power,' 'If ever there were a powerful American play, firm and deft in construction, daring in plan, bold, frank, convincing, worthy to stand with much of the best work of the modern dramatists of the Old World, this is that play' ("The Drama").

Play"). Thus, while they championed this play, they simultaneously dismissed the rest of his prolific dramatic output.

In their praise of *The City*, the press implied that it was the play's inherent masculinity, and thus its polarity to Fitch's former work, that made it a worthy American drama. *The City*, however, in many other respects is not so distinguishable from Fitch's earlier plays. The shocking impact of the second act, with its revelation of incest and its on-stage murder of a young girl, upon a turn-of-the-twentieth-century audience should not be underestimated. Controversial material and melodramatic scenes were by no means new fare for the author of *Sappho* and *The Girl with the Green Eyes*.

Furthermore, with its exploration of the effects of heredity and social Darwinism versus individual will upon its hero, *The City* in fact bears much resemblance to the likes of *The Truth* and even *The House of Mirth*. Even George's psychological progression in the play – from a seemingly 'ideal' man, to a fraud in danger of being exposed, to a man consoled with himself and his flaws, accepted by the woman he loves – in many ways mirrors the progression of both Becky Warder and Jinny Austin.

As Dearinger and Schwartz illustrate, the press itself was 'virile' in its praise of *The City* (Dearinger 518, Schwartz "No Red Blood" 154). The *Tribune*, with Winter no longer at the helm as dramatic editor, dwelled on the masculine strength of the drama:

It seems tame to say merely that the play is strong, for in its strongest scene it is tremendous. The play is strong as a raging bull, an elephant in passion, a hungry tiger; strong as man the animal is strong, not with the strength of man in the balanced exercise of his faculties, capabilities and powers' ("The City," by Clyde Fitch).

Significantly, the 'strength' that the reviewer identifies in the play is equated with that of animals, rather than civilisation. What the critics were ready to appreciate and respond to in Fitch's latest American drama was not another depiction of the refined and reserved Victorian gentleman – arguably a fading vestige of the passing nineteenth century – but

a physically stronger American man, more in touch with his baser instincts, even if it was to his own detriment. Indeed, their effusive response to the drug-crazed and murderous Hannock, came with a sense of awe as well as revulsion, and Tully Marshall's performance elicited the highest praise from critics. The *New York Times* credited much of the success of the production to Tully's 'remarkable show of nerve-racking emotion and intensity' ("Climax of 'The City' has Terrific Power"). Hannock's primitive and transgressive masculinity was safely contained within the narrative that framed and punished him as a criminal.

Critics were less favourable in their reviews of Walter Hampden in the role of George. As Smith attests, while there seemed to be endless praise for Tully Marshall's performance, Walter Hampden's notices were mixed at best (88). Notably, Acton Davies wrote that it was the 'one blot upon a very fine all-round performance' (ibid). According to the *New York Times*, he was simply 'out of place' among the rest of the cast ("Climax of 'The City' has Terrific Power').

Even in the early stages of the play's conception, however, there had been complaints about Hampden's performance. Edward Simonds, a representative of the Fitch estate, called for Hampden to be replaced (Smith 89). Hampden, however, refused to give up his role against both the wishes of Simonds and the 'objections' of the Shuberts (ibid, Dearing 522). The actor also refused to alter his performance at the Shuberts' request (ibid). The egotistical and corrupt hero was arguably a difficult part to play with any sympathy, and the *Morning Sun* said as much⁷⁶. Hannock succeeded, in the eyes of

⁷⁶ The *Morning Sun* called it 'one of the most difficult parts imaginable. For two acts his attitude must forfeit every particle of sympathy. He must suggest the shallow, the vain, the egotistic and the heartless. All this he does' (Quotes in Smith 88).

the critics, in playing the role of the villain, but George failed to convince as an American hero.

George is the conflicted hero of the play. Raised in the country as the son of a successful small-town banker, he professes to stand for integrity, strength, and stability; the ideal man to champion and effect reform in New York politics. George emerges onto the stage as 'a handsome, clean-cut young American,' desperate to go to New York in the belief that 'politics in the City are crying for just such new, clean men as me' (Fitch *The City* 462, 474). Indeed, Roosevelt was championing progressive social, political and business reforms and holding corrupt public servants to account:

We must demand the highest order of integrity and ability in our public men who are to grapple with these new problems. We must hold to a rigid accountability those public servants who show unfaithfulness to the interests of the nation or inability to rise to the high level of the new demands upon our strength and our resources (Roosevelt 10).

George is perceived by others in the play, initially, as having 'political vitality and straightforward vigor,' and as a man who has selflessly given 'his time and his strength and his money to the public good' (Fitch *The City* 514). He embodies the 'Roosevelt' ideal to the extent that, by the second act, he has earned himself the nickname 'Teddy Jr.' (ibid 512, 515). As Schwartz suggests, the reference would not have gone over the heads of those in the audience: '[a]udiences of 1909 immediately knew that "Teddy" could only refer to Theodore Roosevelt, a proponent of vigorous exercise whose character was readily identifiable as manly' ("No Red Blood" 153).

Standing in contrast to George is Hannock, a known criminal, fraudster and drug user. As the play progresses, it becomes apparent that George and Hannock are more alike than George would like to admit. George's political ambitions are driven by greed and self-ambition rather than altruism. What is more, like Hannock, George is guilty of shady business practices: he unlawfully appropriates his business partner's funds to use

in 'crooked' deals, he covers up his misdeed with bribes, and he deceives those around him about his actions. His 'ends justifies the means' approach is emphasised when Teresa informs him that she intends to divorce her husband – a man who George initially objected to on the grounds of his 'fast' reputation (Fitch, *The City* 557, 500). As the scandal of a divorce could threaten his election campaign, George encourages his sister to promise to remain with her husband, and to remain faithful to him, until his position in office had been secured, assuring her that she can always go back on her word and divorce him afterwards.

As half-brothers, and within the narrative frame of heredity, Hannock and George have inherited their negative qualities from their father. Hannock emphasises their shared genetics: 'Still, even I am your own blood!' (ibid 590, emphasis original). Rand Sr.'s 'crooked' business practices are revealed to the audience, and to George, before his death in act one; he warns George that while his business deals would not warrant investigation in small-town Middleburg, the same could not be said of them in a big city: 'Here, no! I've always kept to the right side of the line, but I've kept very close, and the line may be drawn differently here' (ibid 475). Alone with Rand Sr., Hannock spells out the business transgressions of his father, gleaned from time spent in his employment at the bank, in explicit terms:

You were the *big thing*, and I watched and studied your methods to make 'em mine! [...] I guess you realize just as plain as I do those very methods in New York, that have been raising hell with the insurance companies and all sorts of corporations, aren't a patch on some of your deals I know of! [...] if I had to go to prison, I'd stand a good chance of passing you in the yard some day – wearing the same old stripes yourself (Fitch, *The City* 479-80, emphasis original).

Despite his transgressions, Rand Sr. remains a respected business man at the time of his death. Hannock – the result of Rand Sr.'s affair, and thus the physical embodiment of his greatest moral transgression – constitutes a haunting and pervasive presence that

threatens to expose the constructed nature of Rand Sr.'s integrity. Rand Sr.'s thinly veiled corrupt practices, his subsequent downfall, and the pervasive and haunting presence of Hannock, foreshadow the fate that awaits George. Indeed, George later wonders 'if this is what they call the sins of the fathers?' (ibid 588).

After moving to New York in the wake of their father's death, George tries initially, but half-heartedly, to atone for his father's misdeeds by giving Hannock a position in his firm: 'I've tried to treat you as I would a – brother who was unlucky – somebody I was glad to give a hand to' (ibid 556). In practice, however, George is no kinder towards Hannock than his father was. As soon as Hannock becomes an obstacle in his political career, George contrives to send Hannock away. Most significantly, he does not reveal the truth of Hannock's birth until Hannock's marriage to Cecily forces him to do so.

At the same time, the 'criminal' Hannock appears earnest in his desire to enjoy a place in the Rand family, even as he is unaware that he already has claim to one. Cast aside first by Rand Sr., and then by George, Hannock's desperation – and his desperate acts – may well have been avoided if George and his father had been truthful. Believing that George only included him in the business out of fear, Hannock turned to Cecily for acceptance: 'I was afraid – any fool in my place could see how I've really stood in this family. The only friend I had in the house, or who ever came to it, was she!' (ibid 574). In this moment, Hannock is more pitiful than evil.

Hannock's marriage to Cecily – as well as his determination to play a role in George's political career - may be read as an attempt to situate himself among the Rand family, almost attempting to assume the role of George himself. As the two half-brothers fight over their sister, they become involved in a semi-incestuous version of a romantic triangle; Cecily is situated 'between' the two men as a conduit for their forbidden expressions of familial love and hate for one another. In this instance the young heroine

is absolutely reduced to the object described in Sedwick's model of analysis. This, and indeed her staged death, would seem remarkable and uncharacteristic for a Fitch heroine, but, having this largely symbolic role, she has little in common with Fitch's leading heroines.

In the city, and under Hannock's watch, George has continued his father's shady business practices, conveniently suppressing knowledge of their illegality. Indeed, George represses anything that conflicts with his stringent moral code and thus threatens to destabilise his masculine 'Teddy Jr.' self-image. George later explains his self-delusion:

I didn't realize what I was doing! [...] I accepted cheating for business diplomacy. I explained lying as the commercial code! I looked on stealing as legitimate borrowing! [...] I've been a business "crook," in a big way (Fitch, *The City* 633).

As the *New York Times* recognised, Fitch 'introduced a psychological phase in which he shows that [George], although dishonest at heart, does not know it' ("Fitch Drama Makes Women Faint").

While George is initially unaware of his own transgressions, Hannock has been taking note, and actively taking part: 'I've watched you, tempted you, and helped you go on with [our father's] methods!' (Fitch, *The City*, 592). As it did with Rand Sr., Hannock's presence makes George uneasy, not only because he has the potential to expose him as a fraud and ruin his career, but also because he has the potential to make George face up to the shadier sides of his own identity. As Hannock tells George, looking him 'squarely in the face,' he knows him 'better than he knows himself' (ibid 555).

When Hannock confronts George, forcing him to 'hear the truth about himself', George is forced to confront the sham of his own integrity:

You think George Rand stands for honesty, and the square deal in the business world! Well, he does, but it's a lie! And if he wasn't paying up to the hilt [...] everybody in this country would know what we, on the inside do! (ibid 596).

As the *Sun* asserted, through Hannock, George's 'eyes are opened' ("Clyde Fitch's Last Play").

As George struggles to comprehend what Hannock is telling him, Hannock too struggles to accept that he cannot and will not share in George's political successes, and neither will he enjoy a legitimate place in the Rand family as the husband of George's sister. As Kimmel asserts, men's 'power over other men concerns the distribution of [...] rewards' ("Invisible Masculinity" 30). As a known criminal of ambiguous parentage, he is prohibited from enjoying the rewards reserved for apparently 'legitimate' American men such as George. The hypocrisy of the situation – George being no better than Hannock except by profit of his legitimate birth – exposes the pretence and injustice of the social order.

Under the mental strain, and the influences of morphine, Hannock visibly deteriorates. The stage directions indicate Hannock's increased nervousness, a result of his opiate addiction, as well as the strain of the situation: 'He sits in a chair, mumbling to himself incoherently every other minute, working his hands, his mouth and his chin wet with saliva' (Fitch, *The City* 581). By the end of the scene, Hannock appears almost monstrous, his 'degeneracy' now visible on the surface:

His mind deranged, rises unevenly; he is loud, partly incoherent, and his face is twitching and distorted, his hands clutching and clenching, his whole body wracked and trembling, but still strong, with a nervous madman's strength (ibid 582).

The *Tribune* described Marshall's performance as 'terrifying in effect' (A.W "The Drama").

The *Sun* concurred: 'It fairly reeked with crazy nerves clearly held in control by the most terrific effort and when the final outburst came it was almost more than one could bear' ("Clyde Fitch's Last Play"). The *Era* 'shuddered at the picture' Marshall and Fitch created ("The City").

The second act culminates in the most dramatic scene of the play. Hannock, aiming either for George or Cicely herself⁷⁷, shoots and kills Cicely on stage in what the *Tribune* referred to as a 'gorilla-like rage' (A.W "The Drama"). In the wake of the incident, the police have been called, and George, now with the gun in his possession, holds Hannock in the room where they await police arrival. George is faced with a decision. If he turns Hannock over to the police, unharmed, Hannock will be arrested and charged for Cecily's murder but also promises to expose George for the criminal he is, ruining his reputation, his career, and his engagement to Eleanor in the process:

Go on, bring me to trial and lose everything you've banked on for a career! Lose your business standing, lose your best friends, lose the woman you want, and raise the rottenest scandal for your family, for your mother to bear, and your little sister's memory to go foul under! Do it all, and be damned to you!! (Fitch, *The City*, 604).

if, instead, George hands the gun over to Hannock, he will kill himself, sparing either of them the hardship of exposure or criminal proceedings:

Think a minute – if I'm out of the way? There's no real scandal – your father's old story – our father's old story – isn't even known by your mother. I shot Cecily, and killed myself [...] Any story you want to make up (ibid 601).

Thus, George has the opportunity to physically destroy the body of his half-brother, and to metaphorically destroy – or at least contain – his own dark self, thereby reaffirming and reasserting the boundaries of his masculinity.

Overcome with temptation, George places the gun on the floor, within reach of Hannock, and walks away. At the last second, however, and with 'a terrific revulsion of feeling' he 'seizes the pistol and throws it through the big glass window' (ibid 605). By refusing to kill Hannock, who is by this time 'crouching and drivelling on the floor,' or

⁷⁷ As Dearing asserts: 'The script and the first production of the play left it unclear whether Hannock intends to kill Cecily to protect her from the horror of the truth, or if in attempting to kill George, he accidentally destroys the only person who loves him' (513-4).

allowing Hannock to self-murder, George accepts the potential consequences (ibid). As Marra asserts, by 'confronting his illegitimate brother writhing before him, the spectre of his shadow self, [...] he resolves to undergo total exposure' ("Clyde Fitch's Too Wilde Love" 47). George declares that it is his '*only chance to show I can be on the level! That I can be straight*, when it's plain what *is* the right thing to do!' (Fitch, *The City*, 605-6, emphasis original).

In the margins of his script, Hampden wrote a single line: 'His manhood wins' (Dearing 516). The critics, too, viewed George's triumph of self as a masculine triumph, describing him as 'ready to start life anew with a real man's courage' (A.W. "The Drama"). Certainly, Fitch afforded George a hero's ending, with the virtuous Eleanor by his side, prize and signifier of his manhood.

However, if Hannock indeed represents George's 'shadow self,' - the physical embodiment of those conflicting parts of his identity that he has heretofore repressed – then the significance of this moment is not that George asserts moral or masculine superiority over Hannock, but rather that he concedes to their similarities. By ensuring Hannock lives, George takes ownership of his own misdeeds and the shadowy world of his own self. As Burkman argues, the drama of the double 'may end in death, but it may also end in a new lease of life. It may be one of expanding the self, of a person finding what is lost, of his seeking to be whole' (3). In embracing, rather than hiding or denying, the apparently contradictory aspects of his identity, George is able to move forward in a positive way; he is now, in Eleanor's estimation, 'twice the man' he was (Fitch, *The City*, 635).

Most significantly, *The City* troubles the very notion of masculine 'doubles', and gendered binaries, since George's 'triumph' at the end of the play is rooted not in the reaffirmation of the boundaries of his masculine identity, but in a more transgressive

acceptance of their dissolution. Like the heroines of Fitch's female-led dramas, *The Girl with the Green Eyes* and *The Truth*, George takes ownership of his flaws rather than expunging them, implying, once again, that while heredity plays an undeniable role in shaping the individual, it does not determine their worth or morality.

Chapter Seven

‘THE PUBLIC IS THE TRUE CENSOR, AND THE FINAL CRITIC’:

CONCLUSION

Clyde Fitch disappeared from both critical and public notice in the years following his death, despite his prolific output, his commitment to staging significant, naturalistic plays of American life, and his demonstrable popularity with audiences during his lifetime. Thus, his name does not enjoy the same level of recognition as contemporaries such as Oscar Wilde. In recent years, a small number of critics, influenced by the historicising work undertaken in queer theory, have begun to investigate the gendered biases in theatre criticism that privileged theatrical realism – specifically, realism positioned as an opponent to the feminised stage – and thus disadvantaged Fitch’s work.

In this thesis, I have discussed the mechanics behind the critical opposition to Fitch’s work in his home country, contrasting the reception also to that of his work in the UK. Even more so, given that his productions have been regarded critically and dismissively as ‘women’s’ plays, I explored the ways in which his plays engaged with those women of the audience, and with social discourse concerning gendered issues such as divorce, pre-marital sex, constructions of a feminine ideal, the emergence of women in the workforce, suffrage, and conceptions of *fin de siècle* masculinity.

The ten plays explored in this thesis are representative of the work undertaken by Fitch to stage turn-of-the-century American life as he saw it. I chose them not because they were his most successful or popular plays (although *The Girl with the Green Eyes*, *The Climbers*, *The Truth*, and *The City* were among those most highly regarded), but

because they staged or engaged with the specific gendered social issues listed above. This is not to say, however, that the remaining plays in Fitch's repertoire do not share similar themes or are of any less critical significance.

Almost all 62 of Fitch's diverse body of plays fit into the category of 'romance', and he did not deny – but, rather, defended – his use of melodrama. Audiences enjoyed the spectacle of Fitch's plays – the lavishly designed sets, the dresses and jewels worn by his starlets. Nevertheless, as I have established in this thesis, Fitch tackled critical social issues, staged conflicted and morally ambiguous heroines and heroes, and grappled with themes to be found in the naturalist (and therefore critically acclaimed) work of Ibsen and Strindberg. Further analysis of Fitch's wide body of work is required to extend understanding of the ways in which his seemingly safe dramas transgressed gendered codes of behaviour.

Of the plays explored in this thesis, many proved popular and were long running in New York: *The Moth and the Flame* ran for 125 performances, *The Climbers* for 200, *The Girl with the Green Eyes* for 108, *Girls* for 225, and *The City* for 190. *The Truth* eventually proved popular with women of the audience also, on both sides of the Atlantic, despite poor reviews and its first, brief run in New York.

The popularity of these plays suggests that they resonated with his vast audiences, albeit some more than others. Aside from the vituperative, and sometimes silly, published critical reviews, what few first-hand accounts I have been able to find of Fitch's plays as they were originally staged, have been largely from his friends – Moses, Gerson, Phelps, Bell, Marbury – or his starring actresses – Langtry, Bloodgood – and these, admittedly, are not unbiased. Even so, these coupled with testaments of full houses, high levels of applause, long runs in the capital cities and profitable road tours for a number (though not all) of Fitch's plays, attests to their popularity with audiences

who were, according to theatre historians, composed primarily of women.

With the notable exception of *The City*, these plays were led by women while, as critics so often complained, the 'leading' men fell flat. Audiences both in the US and the UK responded positively to actresses and heroines such as Nethersole's Fanny LeGrand, and Clara Bloodgood and Marie Tempest's Becky Warder, even as critics such as William Winter spoke out against their apparent immorality.

I have found, in my examination of these plays, and their production histories, that they connected with women of the audience through stagings of transgressive heroines with whom they could identify. Fitch did not patronise the women of his audiences by giving them romantic heroes to swoon over. Likewise, the critical assertion that women went to see his plays purely to admire the fashions is ridiculous, given the efforts of Fitch and his actresses to stage emotive, conflicted, and psychologically layered heroines. Rather, as actress Clara Bloodgood attested, women responded to Fitch's heroines because they could empathise with them, because they saw something of their own troubles in those played out on stage.

Fitch's characters extended the range of melodramatic 'types'; they defied theatrical conventions. His 'flawed' women specifically challenged prevailing ideals of femininity and womanhood. Fitch's fallen women refused to fall. His adventuress, Violet Huntley, did not die at the end of *A Modern Match*; the heroines of *Gossip* and *The Climbers* offered rational arguments for divorce; in *The Moth and the Flame* Marion Walton ensured her own fiancé wedded the young mother of his illegitimate child; and the heroine of *Sappho* walked off into the sunset, albeit with a tear in her eye. They all got their happy ending. Such transgressive bodies blurred definitions of respectable and disreputable. Rather than following theatrical convention and punishing the liars, flirts, suffragettes, and fallen women of his plays, Fitch encouraged the sympathies of his

audiences and insisted on their ultimate happiness (apart from the one over-rule – by Edith Wharton), even though these were criticised by the press⁷⁸.

Lily Bart, not being of Fitch's own creation, was the exception. While she was not framed explicitly as a fallen woman, male critics read her demise as the result of her own transgressions and the play was one of Fitch's few commercial flops. In this instance, Fitch's creative freedom was restricted by the source material and by Wharton herself. As a result, he was not fully committed to the staging. Significantly, this plot strategy – a punitive death of a heroine – was not an avenue that he explored again in his work. Fitch clearly preferred to advocate for his transgressive heroines, championing those who had been marginalised within the gendered hierarchy of turn-of-the-century American society.

Despite the constricting gendered hierarchies of *fin de siècle* British and American society, Fitch's heroines exhibited individuality and agency that transcended their subjection to men. Marion Walton's storyline in *The Moth and the Flame* eclipsed that of the two men who vied for her affection – in the context of the play, if not in the press – and so too did those of Blanche Sterling, Fanny LeGrand, Jinny Austin, and Becky Warder. Unlike many of the male supporting cast – including their eventual partners – they exhibited agency and drive, and they were more than trophies to be won. They were progressive transgressives, society girls, social climbers, New Women, American girls, seductresses, and suffragettes all in their own rights.

⁷⁸ *New York Times*: 'Mr Fitch, of course, is above the superstition that art demands a tragic ending' ("Left Handed Weddings"). The *New York Times*: 'winding up with a happy ending at any price' ("The Truth" Will Rise Again After Some Seven Years").

Nonetheless, as I have argued, happy endings in Fitch's plays are synonymous with romantic unions. Fitch's most outspoken heroine Pam, in *Girls*, argued that she could do without men altogether, but ended up with one anyway, of her own accord and happy with her decision. The feminist themes in *Girls* are tempered by the conventional ending, but in plays such as *Sapho*, *The Girl with the Green Eyes*, and *The Truth*, the (re)unions of the leading ladies with their lovers/husbands promote an encompassing message of tolerance and acceptance. Thus, women traditionally viewed as promiscuous and therefore a threat to the institutions of marriage and mothering were celebrated in Fitch's plays. Fundamentally, these productions contradicted prevailing American and British ideologies of the time that were rooted in the firm belief that national prosperity could only be secured through the marriage and propagation of white, middle and upper class men and women of 'good breeding'.

While his leading ladies did indeed lead, Fitch's 'heroes' for the most part were weak, corrupt or conflicted. Images of masculine immorality and degeneracy abounded in Fitch's plays. Fletcher philandered, and even physically struck a woman, in *The Moth and the Flame*; Sterling drank, stole and deceived those around him in *The Climbers*; Becky Warder's ill-bred father drank, lied, and gambled in *The Truth*; most shockingly, Hannock abused drugs, blackmailed and murdered a symbolically 'innocent' young woman in *The City*.

Tellingly, male characters – with the notable exception of George Rand Jr. in *The City* – were not always afforded the same mercy or absolution within the narratives of Fitch's plays as their female counterparts. *The Moth and the Flame* and *The Climbers* both staged the suicides of corrupt businessmen facing public disgrace. In contrast, with a happy resolution on the horizon, Austin saved Jinny from her own suicide attempt in *The Girl with the Green Eyes*. As my thesis has pointed out, where Fitch advocated for the

marginalised (within the admittedly limited frame of white middle-class American society), he vilified those who abused power and privilege. In *The City*, even while he afforded his masculine hero a heroic ending, he laid bare the constructed moral images of the self-made men of the Gilded Age along with the so-called progressive men of Roosevelt's era.

Developing American characters within paradigms of realism/naturalism, Fitch utilised theories of heredity: Violet Huntley was an adventuress because of her own ambiguous ancestry; Jinny Austin was jealous because her parents were jealous; Becky Warder lied because her father was a liar; and finally, George Rand Jr. fell victim to corruption because his father was corrupt. Thus, my thesis has argued, character flaws, in many of Fitch's plays, may be read symbolically as markers of degeneration, whose narratives also paralleled and commented upon social narratives of class and sexuality.

A Modern Match ended rather poorly for Violet, but it did inspire the sympathies of its audiences in the final scene, leaving room for questions of the controversial heroine's culpability. *The Girl with the Green Eyes* and *The Truth* went further still, suggesting that husbands should accept the inherited, and therefore involuntary, weaknesses of their wives rather than holding them to extreme standards and gendered ideals. Finally, in *The City*, Fitch dramatised the essential conflict between heredity and free will that underpinned his earlier social dramas. George Rand Jr.'s conflict with his half-brother was resolved when he accepted the parts of himself that he had kept hidden from the world.

Where Fitch excelled was in his naturalistic portrayals of womanhood. The influence of naturalism is evident, not only in seemingly 'sordid' plays such as *Sapho*, which depicts the seduction of an American by a courtesan in Paris, but also in plays such

as *The Girl with the Green Eyes* and *The Truth*, that focus on the arguably more mundane troubles of contemporary middle-class New York life.

Sapho stands out amongst the larger body of Fitch's work; it is far from the 'sentimental' drawing-room dramas that were his hallmark. The themes shared across Fitch's plays become more apparent, as I have discussed, when considering them within the context of the naturalist movement – as dramas which employed melodramatic techniques to engage and capture the audience, and to negotiate the influence of scientific theory and heredity on the lives of individuals. Fitch's repertoires of melodramatic naturalism, as I have contended, staged a radical intervention in the critical narrative that applauded the one mode over and above the other.

While heredity was an inescapable governing force in the lives of Fitch's protagonists, it did not determine their fates. I have made the case that in Fitch's divorce plays, for example, difficult questions were asked that may have resonated with the playwright himself: what if your nature and your heart compel you to act in ways that society would not approve of?

Central to the narrative of each play was the message – seemingly in conflict with laws of heredity – that individual will and strength of character is of greater importance than genetic or social circumstance. Thus, as I have stated, instead of offering pessimistic visions of decadence and inevitable social decay (and the tragic endings that critics have located as the more logical conclusions of Fitch's narratives), Fitch's plays navigated the implications of heredity while emphasising the individualism of his protagonists.

Despite the popularity of his plays, Fitch felt – and others have since concurred – that critics in his home country were biased against his work, viewing it as superficial, and that this was a result of preconceptions about Fitch personally. As Sehat (2008) and Saxon (2013) further attest, there was a wider bias in American theatre criticism against what

were deemed feminised dramas. The male critical establishment could not and would not endorse Fitch's work. The gendered bias against 'women's plays' is made especially evident when comparing the negative critical responses to Fitch's work in general with the resoundingly positive response to *The City*, one of Fitch's very few 'masculine' plays.

While these were both significant factors in Fitch's troubled history with his American critics, I have found that the critical response to any individual play is highly complex. A number of factors affected critical response, including the venue, the reputation of the actress, performance choices, the composition of the audience, the perceived morality of the play, whether the play and its protagonist conformed to expected dramatic conventions, and how far the conclusion of the play challenged or reaffirmed prevailing gender ideals. Although, certainly, many of these factors are attributable to the conservative attitude of Fitch's male critics.

In criticisms of Fitch's work, pejorative commentaries based on gender intersected frequently with those based on class. As the contrasting critical responses to *Sapho* and *The Girl with the Green Eyes* illustrate, critics were far more likely to condone a play that garnered the praise of the fashionable New York elite, and to condemn a play that piqued the interest of the general populace.

The perceived impact of a play's immorality on young women in the audience also influenced critical response. While this is most evident in the ambiguous morality of *Sapho*, it played a significant role in the critical dismissal of *The Truth* in New York where much of the criticism was aimed at the flirtatious heroine. In both instances, the leading actresses of the plays argued that their portrayals of the heroines would resonate with the women of the audience. Yet critics interpreted them as sexually promiscuous and therefore fundamentally immoral.

In both *Sapho* and *The Truth*, as in others, the actresses played a significant part in the success or failure of the play, not only through her performance on stage, but also via her reputation away from the stage. The press demanded that actresses prove their commitment to traditional feminine roles, fearful of the social impact of the economic and social freedoms that they gained as successful actresses. This coincided with actresses' performances in roles that themselves implied a challenge to traditional gendered conventions. The *New York Times* questioned the actresses who played the three suffragist heroines in *Girls* about their own views on men and marriage. Following her role as Becky, a woman whose innate jealousy threatens her marriage, *Theatre Magazine* questioned Bloodgood repeatedly on her ability to maintain her own domestic married life.

Where apparently 'worldly' actresses such as Lillie Langtree, Olga Nethersole, and Clara Bloodgood played alluringly flirtatious women, they had the potential to spark wide appeal or incite furore. The critical response to Clara Bloodgood's performances in particular illustrates this point. Critics approved of her early debut in *The Climbers* as well as her starring role in *The Girl with the Green Eyes*, but when she performed as Becky in *The Truth* they complained that she was not believable in the role, that she was incapable of making the lying heroine seem sincere. In contrast, an esteemed and seemingly wholesome actress, such as Mrs Kendal or Marie Tempest, might lend a more genuine and sympathetic air to such a role, or fail to be taken seriously altogether.

Fitch, however, was happy with Bloodgood's performance, as were a great many of the women who went to see *The Truth* on its tour of the U.S. The critics did not believe her reformation at the end of the play, but they had missed the point; hereditary weakness within the framework of Fitch's narratives are intrinsic to the individual and therefore cannot be 'cured'. Fitch's heroines cannot change what is determined by their

genetics, but they can strive to be good people, and (where they have them) their husbands can learn to accept their flaws.

Complaints about the final acts of Fitch's plays were common from critics in both the US and the UK, as in *The Climbers*, *The Girl with the Green Eyes* and *The Truth*. Critics complained of forced and unrealistic romantic reunions, seemingly contrived for the sake of appeasing the audience. This criticism of Fitch's work has persisted⁷⁹. What I have found, however, is that complaints about the (lack of) 'realism' in the final acts in Fitch's plays are attributable to critical 'misreadings' of his heroines and their narratives. American critics, as I have shown, overlooked or dismissed the heroines that were central to the action of the plays. Instead, this predominantly male and ultimately masculine press, turned their attention to the structurally and thematically less significant storylines of the men. In other instances, critics re-cast sympathetic heroines such as Fanny LeGrand and Becky Warder – who were appreciated by the women of the audience – as inherently evil women. In the case of *The Girl with the Green Eyes* and *The Truth*, complaints about the endings stemmed from a conservatively moral opposition to the message implied by a husband's acceptance of a transgressive wife.

While the majority of critics failed to grasp the thematic significance of Fitch's heroines, or to appreciate either his skill as a dramatist or the subtle depths of his characterisations on stage, there were a minority of critics who spoke out more favourably and who defended those scenes they felt had been unfairly represented in the press. More significant positive critical insights into Fitch's plays tended to come from across the Atlantic, though sometimes with only faint praise. Scottish critic William

⁷⁹ Clum (2012) asserts that 'Fitch's heroines always win the day in denouements that are seldom convincing. Perhaps that is why William Lyon Phelps observed that Fitch could not write a good last act – he had to give his audience a happy ending even if narrative logic demanded a darker conclusion' (126).

Archer, who denounced *Gossip* as frivolous American twaddle, defended those very scenes in *The Climbers* that others overlooked. Notably, though perhaps unsurprisingly, Fitch's productions in London often fared best with the critics who were writing for publications that were aimed at women – *Hearth and Home*, and the 'ladies page' of the *Illustrated London News*. When women critics wrote reviews, such as in Florence Fenwick Miller's review of *Sapho*, the difference in tone is compelling. Miller's remark that 'the male critics are men, and no man can appreciate the circumstances' particularly stood out in my examination of the criticism throughout this thesis ("Ladies' Page").

Critics in London, on the whole, were less disposed to interrogate Fitch himself, as critics in New York, and particularly Willaim Winter, had done. The popularity of a production in the US, however, did not typically guarantee greater or even equivalent popularity in the UK, and productions tended to run for shorter durations in London than in Fitch's home country. So, while critical reception may have been, overall, more positive, commercially, Fitch was perhaps not so popular across the Atlantic.

Criticisms of Fitch's work were, more often than not, conflated with criticisms of American drama (and America) in general. If they were biased in the UK, it was far less to do with Fitch's personal reputation and more to do with his nationality. Thus, his most popular production in London – and the only play that outran its New York premiere – was *The Truth*, which Fitch adapted to suit a British cast, re-setting it in London rather than New York.

As a playwright and a personality, Fitch has enjoyed a small resurgence in recent years, largely owing to his position as a key figure in the field of queer theatre studies. Studies of Fitch have focussed on biographical readings of his plays, as well as the influence of his affair with Wilde on his career (Dearing 2016, Marra 2002). Moreover, Sehat argues that the critical discourse surrounding Fitch's plays may provide useful

insights into the gendered biases in theatre criticism at the turn of the century. His plays themselves, however, are equally worthy of analysis, despite even recent claims to the contrary⁸⁰. Fitch's plays bore enormous aesthetic value and, to be fully appreciated today, they would need to be staged as he intended them: with elaborate costumes and meticulously crafted realistic stage sets. In spite of this, the play scripts themselves have much to offer in the field of theatre studies.

Significantly, Fitch's plays *The City*, *The Truth*, *The House of Mirth*, and most recently *The Climbers* have all been revived by the Metropolitan Playhouse in New York (a venue that specialises in reviving 'forgotten' but historically significant American plays). The historical value of Fitch's work is indeed profoundly important; his plays, as I have shown, interrogated gendered social discourses of the *fin de siècle* and have led to a more developed understanding of the operations of theatre audiences during the period.

As a dramatist, Fitch was an experimentalist. His plays drew from a wide range of influences, new and old, from writers both in his home country and across the Atlantic. Critics have struggled to define Fitch in terms of genre, locating him most frequently – and uncomfortably – as a 'transitional' figure in the progression from melodrama to realism in American theatre. Fitch, however, did not view melodrama and realism as opposing and contradictory forms, but explored the ways in which they could complement each other. That Fitch's plays 'muddy' the genres of realism, melodrama, and naturalism, illustrates the tenuous nature of the dramatic modes themselves.

Though his critics refused to accept it, Fitch's plays, while they amused and entertained the masses, also navigated substantial social problems of *fin de siècle*. He

⁸⁰ As noted in the introduction to this thesis, Clum (2012), while acknowledging that 'Fitch is important to the theatre historian,' asserts that 'it is difficult for the critics to write about plays that are so thin. There is nothing much to analyse here' (115).

staged dandies and new women, examined social fears of degeneration, and explored the deterministic consequences implied by the scientific theories of heredity and Darwinism. Fitch's plays also embraced possible futurities associated with the coming of a new century. While Fitch utilised conventional methods, marrying them with the 'new', he looked to the possibilities of a more liberal America.

Instead of reifying pessimistic visions of decadence and inevitable social decay, Fitch's plays, as I have shown, navigated Darwinian theories and models of heredity while emphasising the individualism of his protagonists. He found a balance in his work, successfully staging emotive and meaningful depictions of American life that were hopeful and seemingly 'safe' even while they exposed the hypocrisy of governing middle-class white men. His message was ultimately progressive: a society that is unified in spite of individual differences, rather than divided by them, may overcome its limitations along with its prejudices. Most significantly, what Fitch demonstrated was that the marginal could be marketable. He succeeded in staging transgressive configurations of the stage heroine that the women of his audiences appreciated and applauded. They were, after all, his true censors and final critics.

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