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Dark Theatricality and the Victorian Novel

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by

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The Dissertation of Laala Al-Jaber is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

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DEDICATION

To my family, who cannot seem to remember what this dissertation is about, even though I remind them in great detail every other day.

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and in-the-moment is no small task. My family did that for me. If it were not for them, I would have measured the success of the last two years by tracking and assessing my dissertation progress. Nothing reminded me that I was a person outside of the pages that I wrote and rewrote like my nieces and nephews bursting into my room to choppily play my piano and destroy the Lego sets that they took weeks building. My family was my lifeline during this dissertation process, and this entire dissertation would not have been possible without them.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Dark Theatricality and the Victorian Novel

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

University of California San Diego, 2024

Professor Babak Rahimi, Chair

This dissertation contributes to scholarship on theatricality and the Victorian novel. Through its examination of Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*, William Makepeace

Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, this dissertation unpacks how the Victorian novel negotiates and shapes understandings of the theatre and theatricality. Focusing on melodrama, theatrical performances, the theatre, actors, and acting and paying particular attention to the bodies of Victorian actors, this dissertation argues that theatricality and the theatre serve as sources of profound cultural anxiety and imminent danger in the Victorian novel.

Nicholas Nickleby, *Vanity Fair*, and *Dorian Gray* are not just about theatre and theatricality; they are theatre. *Dorian Gray* is structured like a play about three theatrical and theatre-going Victorian men and the melodramatic actress who briefly comes in-between them. *Vanity Fair* is a puppet play about two women, one of whom is a brilliant actress. *Nicholas Nickleby* features the archetypes of Victorian stage melodrama, a handsome actor as its protagonist, and a touring troupe of eccentric actors. Published in the early, mid, and late Victorian period respectively, these novels capture what is terrifying and tantalizing about the theatre and theatricality.

Noting the symbiotic relationship between the Victorian theatre and the novel as well as historical and theoretical definitions of theatricality and performance, this dissertation contributes to Victorian studies and draws from scholarship on the Victorian theatre. Chapter 1 scrutinizes the exploited performing bodies of male child actors in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Chapter 2 analyzes how theatricality and the sexualized, animalized body of the Victorian actress in *Vanity Fair* are transgressive. Chapter 3 explores the threatening materiality of the theatre and the precariousness of theatrical performance in *Dorian Gray*. Through close readings of the seasoned performer in *Vanity Fair*, the tragic ingénue in *Dorian Gray*, and child actors in *Nicholas Nickleby*, this dissertation shows how Dickens, Thackeray, and Wilde frame

theatricality and the theatre as dangerous and threatening. This dissertation tethers representations of theatricality in the Victorian novel to broader contentious debates in Victorian culture about the theatre, acting, actors, prostitution, professionalization, the nature of identity, role-playing, sexuality, authenticity, and vice.

INTRODUCTION:
Tracing the Theatricality of the Victorian Novel

Darkness can be thrilling. It can seem like everything that is latent, without borders, without limitations, and the entire universe thrown in. It is full of scintillating potential for poet and playwright, musician and visual artist. The dark has always been able to entertain us, but by its nature it occupies an obscured landscape that hides as much as it gives away. In this context, the individual can seem transformed. Darkness provides the possibility of re-creating ourselves and all we experience, for better or worse; it can feel as though we have returned to some earlier, more fundamental self, or to one far beyond the limits of our imagination.

—Nina Edwards, *Darkness: A Cultural History*, 109

Every writer of fiction, though he may not adopt the dramatic form, writes in effect for the stage.

—Dickens qtd. in Joseph Litvak, *Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel*, 110

Project Overview

This dissertation contributes to the field of Victorian studies by focusing on representations of theatricality and performance in the Victorian novel. Why do some Victorian novels read like plays? Why do they make theatricality and performance essential to their identities as narratives? And why do they have an abundance of actors and theatrical characters? These are the questions that I initially began my dissertation with. However, as I continued to work on this dissertation, questions pertaining to why theatricality is entrenched in the Victorian novel became less compelling than those investigating how these novels are theatrical and how they examine the nuances of theatricality, the theatre, and performance. This dissertation aims to understand the narrative function and cultural and social implications of theatricality and the theatre in the Victorian novel.

This dissertation is entitled "Dark Theatricality and the Victorian Novel" because

darkness is alarming, mysterious, sexy, bold, evocative, transgressive, and suggestive. The dissertation title conveys how the Victorian novel and, to a larger extent, Victorian culture conceived of theatricality, the theatre, and performance. In *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century*, Wolfgang Schivelbusch argues that "In French, English and central European theatres it is true that as auditoriums gradually grew darker, the concentration of audiences increased. The darkness of the auditorium was a reliable indicator of the degree of illusionism" (208). The title "Dark Theatricality" is a nod to dark auditoriums and to the darkness associated with the profession of acting in the Victorian period. Many Victorians viewed actresses as prostitutes and the Licensing Act of 1737, which is discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, cast a dark cloud not only on the profession of acting, but also on non-patent theatres as legitimate forms of cultural production. To walk into a Victorian theatre was to walk into darkness and into the unknown. Associated with rampant sexuality on and off the stage, and subpar yet popular genres such as melodrama, unruly audiences, and troubling mimesis and materiality, the Victorian theatre was shrouded in darkness. However, darkness is also seductive and tempting. What one does in the dark is often playful, wild, freeing, and uninhibited. *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Dorian Gray* bring to light the darkness of theatricality and performance and they invite readers into narratives in which the theatre and theatricality are as arousing, rewarding, and entertaining as they are destructive, punishing, and troubling.

In "Theatricality and Performance in Victorian Literature and Culture," Beth Palmer points to scholarship on theatricality and performance in the Victorian novel:

> Scholars such as Joseph Litvak in *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (1992) and Emily Allen in *Theater Figures: The Production of*

the Nineteenth-Century British Novel (2003) have explored the attraction-repulsion paradigm; Crossley and Buckmaster, while acknowledging that both Dickens and Thackeray felt some ambivalence or anxiety towards the stage, emphasize reciprocity and interdependence between the genres (3).

This dissertation contributes to scholarship that investigates what Palmer calls the "the attraction-repulsion paradigm" (3). In *Vanity Fair* and *Dorian Gray* in particular and, to some extent, in *Nicholas Nickleby*, theatricality and performance and the figures who embody them—Mr. Squeers in *Nicholas Nickleby*, Becky in *Vanity Fair*, and Dorian in *Dorian Gray* are monstrous. As captivating as they are, their bodies, their acting, and their very nature is shown as dangerous. This dissertation focuses on that danger and unpacks what in particular these novelists identify as dangerous about theatricality and performance. Danger and what created a sense of danger for Victorians and what continues to create a sense of danger in societies today—sex, crime, immorality, fraud, shifting, multiple identities, and treachery[1]—indict theatricality and performance in the novels covered in this dissertation.

In *Theatricality and Performativity: Writings on Texture from Plato's Cave to Urban Activism*, Teemu Paavolainen addresses what is dangerous about theatricality:

> In its excessive or centrifugal mode, first, the danger of theatricality is seen to lie in its

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[1] These fears, which are in part tied to urbanization and industrialization in the Victorian period, were associated with the theatre. The theatre in the early nineteenth century was not perceived as a safe space, mirroring the lack of safety felt in overcrowded cities and factories. In "Introduction: The Victorians and Risk," Daniel Martin states:

> We see the Victorians as profoundly troubled and anxiety-ridden about secularization, global trade, and the accumulation of wealth. We see them as both overwhelmed and exhilarated by developments in the most emblematic instantiations of risk: urbanization, laissez-faire economics, transportation and communication networks, factory systems, and workhouses (48).

> orientation towards an *audience*, and hence its ability to 'parasitize' the body politic by way of mimetic contagion (the 'parasitic' here referencing J.L. Austin's famous exclusion of theatrical speech acts from his initial discussion of the performative). That this poses a threat, second, is because theatricality is deemed all *appearance* ("hollow or void" for Austin), corruptive of some alleged essence , be it of reality, authenticity, literature, or liveness—its empirical 'objecthood,' from Plato's Cave to Michael Fried's modernism, obstructing ideal comprehension and aesthetic absorption alike (18).

Because danger is exciting and marketable, *Nicholas Nickleby, Vanity Fair, and Dorian Gray* do not simply reiterate and amplify concerns about theatricality, they benefitted from it. The raunchy theatricality of Becky Sharp sold. The criminal theatricality of Mr Squeers sold. And the floundering theatricality of Sibyl and the deceptive theatricality of Dorian also sold. This is all to say that *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Vanity Fair,* and *Dorian Gray* are not cautionary tales against theatricality and performance, even though they often warn against them. They scrutinize and give ample space to theatricality and performance and, in so doing, to some extent, celebrate and consolidate both in their narratives. And they do so fully aware of the marketing appeal of theatricality and performance as well as the cultural appeal of invoking the theatre.

The theatre has a long history that is separate from theatricality. As many theatre scholars have shown me, antitheatricality is in part rooted in suspicions of the theatre as a physical space and site of cultural production. This dissertation views theatre and theatricality as interrelated terms. I identify representations of theatre as a part of a novel's theatricality. However, theatricality in the Victorian novel more broadly includes characters' respective

theatricality: Their acting, theatrical gestures, and melodramatic performances as well as their relationship to their audience and the stage. The theatricality of the Victorian novel also includes but is not limited to representations of melodrama, stage managers, playwrights, audience members, public and private theatrical performance, actors and actresses, the actor's body, theatrical illustrations, theatre metaphors, vocabulary, and analogies, theatrical illustrations, theatrical narration styles, and theatrical characters. While this dissertation is interested in the complexity of theatricality in the Victorian novel, it limits its areas of analysis to elements of theatricality that are found across all three novels.

The novels covered in this dissertation do not have one-dimensional representations of theatricality and performance nor do they passively repeat conservative Victorians' belief that theatricality and performance are inherently problematic; their representations of theatricality and performance are nuanced. Becky Sharp, as monstrous as her theatricality is, remains for much of the narrative a winner in the rat-race that is *Vanity Fair*, and she also pushes Amelia to let go of her faithless husband. Mr. Squeers, diabolical and menacing as his theatricality is, has a family that somewhat humanizes him. The actress Sibyl Vane is not a monster, but a victim who is surrounded by monsters, predators, and opportunists in the form of the theatrical Dorian, Mrs. Vane, and her Jewish stage-manager, Mr. Isaacs. The villainous theatricality of Mr. Squeers is juxtaposed by the more kindly yet equally complicated theatricality of Mr. Crummles. In *Vanity Fair*, the best people in society—and by best, I mean the most celebrated and not the most moral—are those who put on a show. In *Dorian Gray*, which is filled with theatrical actors, life demands theatricality and performance. Sibyl dies when she can no longer perform, as does Dorian. Every character in these novels engages in theatricality and performance not just for affect, but for self-preservation.

This dissertation argues that theatricality and performance are dark, dangerous, sensual, threatening, captivating, morbid, and menacing in the Victorian novel. The novels selected for analysis were chosen because they thoroughly examine the theatre and various pockets of theatricality that I am interested in: Acting, actors, the actor's body, melodrama, theatrical performance on and off the stage, public and private theatrical performances, and audiences. *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Dorian Gray* showcase that theatricality and performance are an observable, inescapable, and consequential part of life as well an essential component of the form and content of the Victorian novel. Theatricality and performance in these novels make life better and, paradoxically, worse. They also make life exciting, challenging, malleable, and, yes, dangerous: Becky has to juggle multiple identities and personas and her theatricality is treacherous and monstrous, but she is by far the most interesting and liberated character in *Vanity Fair*. Alternatively, in *Dorian Gray*, Sibyl gets typecast by Dorian and she suffers for it. Lastly, in *Nicholas Nickleby*, Nicholas is temporarily reinvigorated by the theatre, but it comes at a price that he is not willing to pay: He almost loses sight of his family because of it.

In the Victorian novels I cover, it is ironically not the novel that organizes these characters' lives, but the theatre and their relationship to it. This is not meant to be a blanket statement. Nicholas moves on from the Crummles theatre, but he leaves one theatrical world for another. His real life is just as theatrical, if not more theatrical, than anything he experiences in the Crummles theatre. In their novels, Dickens, Thackeray, and Wilde do not draw lines between theatricality on stage and theatricality in real life. When Sibyl Vane dies, she is Juliet. When Nicholas leaves the theatre, he abandons his role as the Crummles theatre Romeo and returns to a reality wherein he plays Hamlet for his uncle and love-struck Romeo

for Madeline Bray. When Becky is not in private theatricals or on stage, she is still acting, playing different, specialized roles for everyone she encounters. In the selected primary texts of this dissertation, the characters are seen reading novels—Dickens parodies a Silver Fork novel in *Nicholas Nickleby*. *Arabian Nights*, among other works of fiction, and novel-reading are referenced in *Vanity Fair*. And Dorian reads a Yellow Book that fundamentally changes him in *Dorian Gray*. However, when many of the characters across all of these novels need to make sense of their world and define their place in it, they refer not to the novel, but to the theatre, theatricality, and performance. This points to the importance of theatricality and performance in these characters' identity formations and their world-view. Part of my goal in this dissertation is to uncover the extent of theatricality and performance in these characters' lives.

The characters in *Nicholas Nickleby, Vanity Fair, and Dorian Gray* are theatrical characters. They regularly attend the theatre and talk about their world as if it is theatre. Some are stock characters from Victorian stage melodrama and some characters such as Mr. Crummles in *Nicholas Nickleby* see theatricality in everyday life. This is a sentiment shared in *Dorian Gray* wherein Lord Henry, Mrs. Vane, and Dorian imagine their respective realities as scenes from a play. One of the most notable observations in *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Dorian Gray* is that everybody, whether they are conscious of it or not, is acting. Promising actors who perform well, such as Becky and Nicholas, are rewarded with social success and narrative space in their respective novels: It is the actress Becky and not the devoted mother and housewife Amelia that achieves narrative supremacy followed by fifteen minutes of fame and a sharp fall from grace. Meanwhile, Sibyl, who becomes a mediocre actress and cannot perform well after she develops real feelings for Dorian off-stage, is

punished by the titular protagonist and kills herself back-stage. In its readings of the actor's body in N*icholas Nickleby,* Becky in *Vanity Fair,* and Sibyl in *Dorian Gray*, this dissertation showcases the life-and-death and risk-reward stakes of theatricality and performance in the Victorian novel.

That theatre, theatricality, and performance are used by Thackeray, Dickens, and Wilde to define their novels is not surprising considering that each novelist wrote for the stage. However, what is intriguing to me is the extent of theatricality and performance in these novels. The society of *Vanity Fair* is made into theatre by a Manager of the Performance who crafts an extended performance through narration and by a protagonist who quite literally cashes in on the social value of theatricality. The novel is also steeped in the language of theatricality: puppet theatre, acting, mimicry, masks, scenes, curtains, performers, charades, role-playing, and costumes. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, outside of the Crummles theatre, Kate and Mrs. Nickleby encounter theatrical characters. And in *Dorian Gray*, Dorian's life becomes increasingly melodramatic outside the theatre. Each of these novels' respective characters has an alter ego, which can be read as a stage name. Nicholas becomes Knuckleboy, a fighter in the Dotheboys Hall boarding school, and Mr. Johnson, a performer and playwright in the Crummles theatre. Sibyl is reduced to her on-stage performance of Juliet. Dorian is Prince Charming. And Rebecca in private theatricals and in real life becomes Lady Clytemnestra, a figure of Greek myth. Just as it is difficult to disentangle theatricality and performance from the Victorian novel, it is difficult to read these characters without considering them theatrical figures in novels that blur the distinction between their real life and stage life.

In "Victorian Theatrics: Response," Sharon Marcus, in her assessment of scholarship on Victorian theatre, states that "Victorians loved theater because they loved performers and

performance" (442). She also emphasizes that "theatricality and performativity were central to Victorian literature" (440). This dissertation does not question the love that Victorians had for theatricality or the theatre. Even as this dissertation argues that theatricality is threatening and dangerous in the Victorian novel, it avoids stating that these novels are anti-theatrical. This is due to the fact that for over 600 pages, Dickens and Thackeray in their respective novels display various hilarious, complicated, protracted, and layered depictions of theatricality and performance. Both novels' commitment to theatricality, especially in a serialized storytelling format in which plotlines, characters, and themes could have easily been abandoned, points to something more complicated and ambiguous than hate. The novels may appear to be anti-theatrical, but their passion about the subject matter, as evidenced by their consistent scrutiny of it, indicates a paradox: Their apparent anti-theatricality is colored by a proclivity for theatricality.

The Victorian Theatre

> In *The Antitheatrical Prejudice,* Jonas Barish examines the embattled status of theatre: The more analytical foes of the stage often themselves attribute its malign effects to its intrinsic nature—to the fact (the putative fact), that the habit of imitating others must necessarily bring out the worst in the actor himself, or that the plays lend themselves too readily to the mockery of those in authority, or that they present images of passions so vivid as to produce a fatal moral impact on their audiences…The fact that the disapproval of the theater is capable of persisting through so many transformations of culture, so many dislocations of time and place, suggests a permanent kernel of distrust waiting to be activated by the more superficial irritants (4).

Barish suggests that anti-theatre attitudes are both historically rooted and that they remain through "so many transformations of culture, so many dislocations of time and place" (4). The current complaints lodged against British theatre in part validates that claim. Tom Ambrose's 2023 online article in in *The Guardian* states in its lede: "UK theatre staff have been attacked, sexually harassed and abused by drunken audience members during performances, a new survey has revealed" (Ambrose). For much of the nineteenth century, Victorians made similar accusations about the Victorian theatre. Accusations of indecency, immorality, and unrest played a role in preventing the theatre from attaining cultural legitimacy and respectability.[2]

In *Theatricality as Medium*, Samuel Weber situates the theatre's negative connotations within Western thought:

> Theater is thus, from the very beginnings of what, for convenience, we continue to call "Western" thought, considered to be a place not just dissimulation and delusion, but, worse, self-dissimulation and self-delusion. It is a place of fixity and unfreedom, but also of fascination and desire. A prison, to be sure, but one that confines through assent and consensus rather than through constraint and oppression. Theater, in short, is that which challenges the "self" of self-presence and self-identity by reduplicating it in a seductive moment that never seems to come full circle (20).

Victorians were skeptical of the theatre for many of the reasons that Barish and Weber point to; they were also suspicious of acting and the "theatrical." In "The Nineteenth-Century

[2] The Victorian theatre's legitimacy is discussed throughout this dissertation.

Actors versus the Closet Critics of Shakespeare," Carol Jones Carlisle analyzes an article by Fanny Kemble, a Victorian actress and niece of actor John Philip Kemble:

> In her article, "On the Stage," she takes pains to distinguish between the "dramatic " and the "theatrical." The former she defines as the "passionate, emotional, humorous element" in human nature; the latter, which is the artificial reproduction of the dramatic, has no relation to it, she thinks, beyond its momentary excitement and gratification (602).

Numerous Victorian novelists, cultural critics, and even Victorian actors themselves criticized aspects of the theatre, such as the theatre audience, the shallowness of the stage, the materiality of the theatre, and the dispiriting nature of acting and performance. In *The Victorian Theatre 1792-1914*, George Rowell argues that English romantic poets were not advocates or contributors to the stage: "No doubt the conditions of that theatre were largely responsible for their scorn. The battleground of the nineteenth-century playhouse could only repel the sensitive writer, as it repelled the sensitive spectator" (32). Despite the discourse surrounding the Victorian theatre, it was incredibly popular with audiences. Melodramas and pantomimes resonated with audiences from different classes as did other forms of public entertainment such as music halls and circuses.

In his introduction to *Victorian Theatre: The Theatre in Its Time*, Russell Jackson writes:

> In the nineteenth century the British theatre was almost exclusively commercial and was central to popular culture and to what may be called the entertainment industry of an urban industrial society. Its purposes and effectiveness were argued over by critics

> and practitioners, and its ability to reach a newly created mass audience made it a prime target for social legislation (12).

The popularity of the Victorian theatre also affected print culture. In *Life on the Victorian Stage*: *Theatrical Gossip*, Nell Darby analyzes how the theatre became a source of news and public interest:

> This was the age of the provincial theatre and the local and national press eagerly covered not only regional productions, but the off-stage antics of those who acted in them. These lesser actors and actresses provided a constant stream of stories for the increasingly gossip-driven press – the London weekly newspaper *The Era*, established in 1838 by Frederick Bond, just a year after Victoria became queen, became renowned for its theatrical coverage, even being known as 'The Great Theatrical Journal'… (10).

The Victorian theatre was alternately marketable and divisive in a culture in which working-class and middle-class audiences had more time and disposable income on their hands. Embroiled in contentious debates about class, gender, acting, performance, censorship, and the sanctity of public spaces, among others, the Victorian theatre fought to gain cultural legitimacy and was only considered respectable by the late nineteenth century. The Victorian novel capitalized on the polarizing nature of the theatre, mirroring many widely-held Victorian beliefs about the theatre, theatricality, and performance, while also giving audiences an additional way of experiencing the theatre.

The Victorian actress, operating in a culture that denounced and incentivized theatricality, exuded a variety of vexed meanings in Victorian culture. These fraught meanings are reflected in the Victorian novel. Sibyl Vane in *Dorian Gray* is a powerful actress, but a chronically disempowered woman. Becky Sharp is an overpowering actress, but

she cannot sustain her theatricality. Both women are powerful enough to attract men beyond their station, but not powerful enough to keep them. Both women are liminal characters, even though their theatricality is glorified by the men in their novels. To live the life of an actress in *Vanity Fair* and *Dorian Gray* is to live as a precarious commodity for overeager men. It means living dangerously in dark, liminal spaces. Sibyl Vane lives and dies in the theatre. Becky's theatricality is a source of death and treachery. Depictions of the Victorian actress in *Vanity Fair* and *Dorian Gray* reinforced the misogyny of the time. In *Dorian Gray,* Sibyl Vane is beneath Dorian in more ways than one. She is a woman, a member of the working-class, and an actress. Lord Henry in *Dorian Gray* and Lord Steyne in *Vanity Fair* each have monologues that are sexist toward women and actresses in particular. Victorians loved actresses, both novels show, but they equally loved humiliating and demeaning them, as is the case in *Dorian Gray,* and sexualizing and humbling them, as is the case in *Vanity Fair.* Obscured by theatricality and performance, the reader only catches glimpses of who Becky and Sibyl really are. In both novels, the reader witnesses the spectacle of the actress, but cannot fully access the depth and reality of the women behind the spectacle.

Why Theatricality and Performance?

I am writing about theatricality and performance because the topic piqued my interest during a quarter in which I was taking graduate seminars on performativity, aesthetics, and Victorian pseudoscience. During that quarter, I wrote a paper on showmanship and performance in Robert Browning's poem, "Mr. Sludge, the Medium." I felt like I could take nothing at face-value and like theatricality and performance were an intricate, shifting, and demanding game of cat-and-mouse between the reader and the narrator. I had to be vigilant,

skeptical, and cognizant of the way in which theatricality and performance are not necessarily rooted in truth and truth-telling, but in spectacle, deception, and entertainment. I really enjoyed the slyness of the poem and its sense of irony and humor. The poem and the process of writing about it pointed me to the topic of my dissertation. I always knew I wanted to write about the Victorian novel. Analyzing "Mr. Sludge, the Medium" prepared me for exploring the intricacies of theatricality and performance in the works of Dickens, Thackeray and Wilde.

Beyond taking graduate seminars and rediscovering my love for the Victorian novel, I most likely pursued this topic because it is tied to my childhood. My mother wrote successful children's plays and television shows in Qatar. My uncle was a famous Arab comedian and television actor. I grew up around actors, television sets, and media personalities. I do not have a special connection to the theatre, at least not one that matches my attachment to novels, but I have a deep love and appreciation for my mother and uncle who introduced me to the theatre and performance. My personal life has shaped and seeped into this dissertation in other ways. Entire sections of this dissertation would not have been written had I not tapped into my childhood and cultural experiences. I wrote much of my *Nicholas Nickleby* chapter while fasting during Ramadan. My awareness of physical hunger helped me focus on *Nicholas Nickleby's* struggling performing bodies and what they stand to lose if they do not perform adequately. As for my *Vanity Fair* chapter, a key to unlocking a section of that chapter came from listening to one of my favorite Madonna songs, "Like a Prayer," on repeat. After noticing the frequency in which Becky drops down to her knees for men, I constantly returned to this song for a frame of reference on sexual innuendo and double-entendres.

Methodology and Scope

Before I delve more deeply into what this dissertation is about, it is important to reference what it excludes. My dissertation does not cover the theatricality of the Victorian public sphere. I am not looking at the theatricality of periodicals, the theatricality of public identity as it pertains to Dickens, Thackeray and Wilde, or the theatricality of their plays. I am also not interested in exploring the theatricality of all of Dickens's and Thackeray's novels. Though this is a dissertation about theatricality and performance, I am not drawing from performance theory or performativity scholarship. My research may be of interest to scholars working in theatre studies because it investigates Victorian understandings of theatricality, the theatre, and performance. However, this is a literature dissertation that situates itself within the subfield of Victorian studies that addresses the relationship between theatricality, theatre, and the Victorian novel.

This dissertation has two goals. The first involves analyzing how these novels invoke theatricality and performance, either through their form or content or both. The second involves outlining how these novels represent theatricality and performance as dangerous, dark, unpredictable, and unseemly. To ensure that the topic of this dissertation is not too broad, I have focused on specific areas of theatricality and performance within these novels: Melodrama, the theatre, acting, actors, role-playing, and the actor's body. Certain aspects of the novel's theatricality and performance are subsequently not covered. I do not, for example, cover the theatricality of the Manager of the Performance in *Vanity Fair*. I also do not assess the theatricality and performance of the novel's supporting cast, the novel's depictions of

dandies and costumes,[3] its theatre metaphors and vocabulary, or the ways in which it blurs the lines between the novel and the theatre as well as the theatre-going experience and the novel-reading experience. The works of Shakespeare, which are a recurring trope in both *Vanity Fair* and *Nicholas Nickleby,* are also not examined. In addition, I do not do a thorough investigation of the theatricality of illustrations in *Vanity Fair* and *Nicholas Nickleby.* If I were to examine every theatre metaphor or theatre-related word, theatrical figure, reference to the stage, theatrical illustration, and theatrical and social performance in *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Vanity Fair,* and *Dorian Gray*, this dissertation would offer an overly long typography of theatricality and performance in the Victorian novel. I have intentionally avoided such an approach. I have attempted to create an analysis of theatricality and performance in the Victorian novel without resorting to listing.

In addition, I am not analyzing all of the theatrical figures in these novels. Rather, I am focused on representations of actors. I view theatrical figures and actors somewhat differently. A theatrical figure, for me, is a character who exudes a certain kind of flamboyance, extroverted showmanship, or eccentricity. Theatrical characters are excessive, melodramatic, and over-the-top. By that metric, most if not all of the characters in *Nicholas Nickleby* qualify as theatrical. An actor, put simply, is someone who acts in front of an audience on or off the stage. I reserve that label for Nicholas, Becky, Sibyl, and Dorian. A theatrical character can be an actor and actors in these novels are almost always theatrical, but

[3] The figure of the dandy, as embodied by the gluttonous Jos Sedley, is parodied in *Vanity Fair*. In *Dorian Gray*, the figure of the dandy is represented by Dorian and depicted as art. In *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Manhood,* James Eli Adams states, "The dandy is a fundamentally theatrical being, abjectly dependent on the recognition of the audience he professes to disdain" (22).

there is a distinction. Lord Henry in *Dorian Gray* is both theatrical and an actor, as is Mr. Crummles in *Nicholas Nickleby*, but Kate Nickleby in *Nicholas Nickleby* and Amelia in *Vanity Fair* are theatrical figures as opposed to actresses. How actors are depicted, how they deploy their theatricality, what defines their theatricality, and what theatricality achieves in the novels of Dickens, Thackeray, and Wilde are this dissertation's main elements of study.

As a Victorianist, I am a huge proponent of close reading. I share an affinity with scholars such as Jane Gallop and Jessica Pressman who advocate for close reading. In "The Ethics of Reading: Close Encounters," Gallop discusses why she teaches close reading to students as well as what can be gained through the process of close reading: "Close reading can equip us to learn, to be open to learning, to keep on learning all our life" (11). I turned to literature and away from journalistic writing because I love close reading literature.[4] For me, close reading is liberating. It never gets old because it does not encourage stagnant writing or stagnant readings. Part of what I enjoy about writing about the Victorian novel is that it lends itself to a close reading approach. The typical Victorian novel, long, dense, and overpopulated with themes, characters, and plotlines, benefits from a close reading approach. There are, of course, risks with a close reading approach. The dissertation, as a genre, is not just about close reading. Part of learning how to write this dissertation has involved assessing when close reading is beneficial as a form of analysis and when it is irrelevant, taking up space that could

[4] I have a strong connection with close reading because I believe it is a democratizing force in literary studies. It is not as esoteric as theory or as flashy as interdisciplinary research, but it remains an inclusive part of scholarly work. As I implied earlier, I received an undergraduate degree in journalism. Had it not been for close reading, I do not know that I would be here today. Close reading is what I believe showed graduate admissions departments that I belong in a literature program. It probably convinced me of that as well.

be reserved for historical and cultural contextualization as well as situating the dissertation within the broader scholarly conversation that it contributes to.

Numerous scholars have studied the implications of theatricality and performance in the Victorian novel. In *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel*, David Kurnick analyzes the theatricality of novels by Thackeray, Henry James, and George Eliot, among others. Kurnick argues that "novels 'summon' theaters, that they 'invoke' spaces, and that they 'imagine' the creation or maintenance of forms of community" (24). He also argues that "these writers' failed theatrical projects became charged sites for their thinking about the efficacy of the artistic in general" (24). In *Theater Figures: The Production of the Nineteenth-Century British Novel*, Emily Allen maintains that "theater as historical fact and rhetorical figure held a productive place in nineteenth-century literature's imaginary domains" (28). According to Allen, the theatre held the stigma of prostitution:

> Antitheatrical tracts of the period were particularly distressed about the threat that theater posed to the nation's womanhood, especially given the theater's proximity to the public profession of prostitution. The novel picks up on this distress, fueling it and feeding off it (Allen 16).

In *Serious Play: The Cultural Form of the Nineteenth-Century Realist Novel*, J. Jeffrey Franklin argues that "Theatricality is play with identity, or that is one understanding of it suggested by a reading of Victorian texts. As such, theatricality haunts Victorian novels" (80). In addition, Franklin connects the theatre to the rise of the Victorian novel: "The pervasiveness of the figure of the theater in the late 1840s to 1860s has unique historical significance in relationship to events in the formal development and commercialization of the novel" (81).

In *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England*, Martin Meisel argues that the novel relied on picture and drama:

> In the nineteenth century, however, as in the eighteenth, picture and drama come into the novel in ways that go beyond a general analogy, and affect both style and structure, meaning the way in which the novel is organized and experienced…Within the genre of the novel, however, the material influence of picture and drama is no simple matter. If it were, neither *Little Dorrit* nor *Vanity Fair* would display (as they do) such a revulsion against the pictorial and the dramatic, a revulsion, in effect, against a part of their own substance and against familiar aspects of the very medium in which they are worked (52).

Palmer offers a useful summary of the symbiotic relationship between the Victorian novel and the theatre:

> Many of the best-known figures in Victorian culture worked across a number of networks which reached outside the field in which they are now best known (or most often pigeon holed). Edward Bulwer-Lytton wrote successful plays, including *The Lady of Lyons* (1838), amidst his hectic schedule as a novelist. Henry James's hunger for the theatrical success that *Guy Domville* (1895) would not bring him is well documented. Wilkie Collins wrote thirteen plays between 1850 and 1885 while producing his best-selling sensation novels. Charles Reade, too, flitted amongst the roles of novelist, playwright, and manager (he brought Ellen Terry out of retirement) while fellow sensation novelists Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Florence Marryat also fitted acting as well as writing for the stage into their busy fiction-writing careers. Bram Stoker, whose *Dracula* is examined in Leanne Page's article, famously worked

> as a secretary and manager for Sir Henry Irving[5] during his years at the Lyceum. For many popular novelists, producing a dramatic version of their fiction was a means of capturing some of the profits that would otherwise go straight to the pirated play versions that were always attendant on the publication of a successful novel – often even before its serialization had ended. Dickens was one among many irritated by this problem. Poets too turned to drama: Robert Browning, for example, had plays staged in the 1830s and the dramatic impetus of a volume like *Dramatis Personae* (1864) is fundamental to his work…Whilst twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship has often tried to categorize Victorian cultural producers into neat boxes (novelist, dramatist, journalist), the figures above, and many others, defy such attempts and ask us to consider the networked interconnections between their works amongst different genres (2-3).

In *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre,* Deborah Vlock suggests that Dickens's novels had an active, productive, and symbiotic relationship with the theatre:

> Hence, while Dickens borrowed from the theatre, he also contributed to it: virtually all of his novels were adapted for the stage as quickly as he turned them out—often, indeed, before the last installments were published. In this way many of his readers received multiple versions simultaneously: the novel itself as it came out in monthly numbers, and the staged adaptations which reduced characters and plots to conventional types, but lent specific sounds and shapes to Dickens' written text. This

[5] Sir Henry Irving was the first actor to be knighted. He was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1895.

affected the way that Victorians read not only Dickens, but generally speaking the fiction of their era, most of which drew in some way or other from the theatre, and much of which found its way on to the stage during its period of active circulation (10-11).

The Development of the Victorian Novel

In "Discourse in the Novel," Mikhail Bakhtin defines the novel "as a diversity of social speech types, sometimes even diversity of languages and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (205). Genre categories help conceptualize the long arc of the Victorian novel. The era began with the popularity of Newgate and Silver Fork Novels [6] in the 1820s and 1830s after which came domestic fiction[7] in the 1850s, sensation novels [8] in the 1860s and the realist novels of the likes of Henry James and Thomas Hardy in the late Victorian period. The novels of this dissertation operate in different genres. *Nicholas Nickleby* is a social novel. *Vanity Fair* is a work of satire. *Dorian Gray* is a fin-de-siecle novel. I do not see the plethora of Victorian novels that invoke theatricality in their form or content as constituting their own separate genre of Victorian fiction. Rather, I see theatricality as a stylistic choice, a recurring motif and subject in *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Dorian Gray*, one that enriches the genres in which these novels operate.

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[6] See Ellen Miller Casey's "'The Aristocracy and Upholstery:' The Silver Fork Novel" to learn more about the Silver Fork Novel as a genre and Thackeray's relationship to it, particularly as it pertains to *Vanity Fair*.
[7] See Monica Correa Fryckstedt's "Defining the Domestic Genre: English Women Novelists of the 1850s."
[8] As a genre, the sensation novel was indebted to the stage. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*, in addition to borrowing elements of stage melodrama, were successfully adapted for the stage.

I am writing a dissertation on the Victorian novel. It is not lost on me, however, that I began my dissertation by discussing the Victorian theatre, a choice I felt was important to signal one of the main areas of focus of this project. I would like to now draw attention to scholarship on the Victorian novel. In *The Novel and the Police*, D.A. Miller provides a Foucauldian reading of the Victorian novel. Miller states: "May we not pose the question of the novel—whose literary hegemony is achieved precisely in the nineteenth century—in the context of the age of discipline?" (18). As Miller states, the novel did achieve "literary hegemony" in the nineteenth century (18). The Victorian novel emerged as prominent, profitable, and enduring form of cultural production that was independent from the theatre. However, as many scholars have shown, the Victorian novel is indebted to the theatre and theatricality.

The Victorian novel gained new audiences thanks to massive changes in Victorian culture. In "From Few and Expensive to Many and Cheap: The British Book Market 1800-1890," Simon Eliot points to the introduction of the railway system and higher literacy rates as key reasons why the Victorians were reading more:

> Train travel was much smoother and better lit than coach travel, and this created a new environment in which reading and writing could be done comfortably—and not just on long journeys. Commuters needed newspapers and magazines that could be read in the space of their daily return journeys.
>
> Another influential change was the growth in literacy through the period. Roughly speaking, in 1800 in England and Wales (literacy rates in Scotland were a few percent higher in most decades) about 60 percent of males and 45 percent of females could

> read. By 1841, this had risen to 67 percent and 51 percent respectively…and by 1891, 94 percent and 93 percent (5).

The dates mentioned by Eliot are important for this dissertation because *Vanity Fair* was published serially by Bradbury and Evans in the late 1840s. *Dorian Gray* was published in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in its entirety as a novella in 1890 before Wilde incorporated his now famous preface to *Dorian Gray* and added new chapters that transitioned the novella into a novel that was published in 1891. *Nicholas Nickleby*, meanwhile, was published serially in monthly parts by Chapman and Hall. Dickens's second novel, *Oliver Twist*, had yet to end its serialized run in *Bentley's Miscellany*. Similarly, *Vanity Fair's* serialization overlapped with Thackeray's *The Book of Snobs*. All of the novelists mentioned in this dissertation wrote extensively for magazines and had other responsibilities as essayists, journalists, and editors. Wilde wrote essays and plays. Thackeray wrote for *Punch Magazine*. Dickens wrote for *Household Words* before leaving that periodical to launch *All the Year Round*. These novelists published their novels decades apart and worked for different publishers, but they wrote for audiences that were increasingly consuming literature and had more time for reading, leisure, and entertainment.[9] The reading public also had more time for the theatre and for novels that indulged in the theatre in form and content.

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[9] *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Dorian Gray* have radically different reception histories. *Nicholas Nickleby* was Dickens's third critically and commercially successful novel after *The Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist*. *Vanity Fair* was not Thackeray's first novel, but it changed the trajectory of his career and made him a noteworthy novelist and celebrity. As for Wilde, he is the only novelist in this dissertation to have had a successful career as a playwright. Unlike Dickens and Thackeray, Wilde was affected by the 1843 Theatres Act and novel censorship. *Dorian Gray* caused an uproar with critics and audiences. Parts of the novella version of *Dorian Gray* were censored by its editor and the novel was famously used against him in his trial for gross indecency. Wilde's 1890s play, *Salomé*, which was set to star Sarah Bernhardt, was banned from British theatres because it was French, included Biblical characters, and contained immoral and provocative themes.

Higher literacy rates helped the Victorian novel gain a broader audience, but the novel was also made more accessible through serialization. Though this dissertation is not about serialization, it is important to note that serialization, popularized by Dickens, lowered prices for literature consumers. Prior to the advent of serialization, novels were published in expensive volumes. Serialized monthly installments were cheaper to buy and some, such as Dickens's, sold thousands of copies.

Now that I have very briefly touched on why Victorians flocked to the theatre and the Victorian novel, I would like to take moment to reference scholarship on the Victorian novel that has shaped my thinking on how the Victorian novel orients itself. In *The Sense of an Audience: Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot at Mid-Century*, Janice Carlisle argues that the Victorian novelists were cognizant of their readers:

> The subtlety and self-consciousness with which narrative voice is handled in novels like *Vanity Fair* and *Adam Bede*, or the polyphonic freedoms exercised by Dickens in *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House* all stem from the novelist's desire to establish a bond between his narrator and his reader, presumably the first in a linked chain of morally forceful relations…The gesture toward the reader is, however, only one of the ways in which the novelist revealed his continuing allegiance to his audience; the various identities of the Victorian narrator, the analogies and roles and metaphors by which he was defined, are based on the novelist's response to his public and his hopes about his potential relation to it (26).

Dickens excelled at maintaining a relationship with his audience, both through his narration style in his novels and through his public image. Even Wilde, who was a subversive figure in the Victorian cultural scene, understood the necessity of maintaining his audience, as

evidenced by his public response to critics of *Dorian Gray*. In *Vanity Fair* in particular, Thackeray addresses and establishes a connection with his reader through his theatrical Manager of the Performance.

In *Charles Dickens and His Performing Selves: Dickens and the Public Readings*, Malcolm Andrews vividly describes the consumption of serialized fiction: "Serialized fiction was drip-feed imaginative nourishment—no danger of indigestion in bingeing on other worlds" (14). Andrews goes on to argue that serialization affected the reading experience of the Victorian novel:

> The serial issue of novels created communities of readers as well as complex and intimate forms of communion between author and public…Reading aloud to the family or to a group who might have banded together to subscribe to the new monthly instalment meant that the experience of fiction was a gregarious occasion as it was for others a private solitary entertainment (19).

Analyzing the dynamic between the Victorian novel and the theatre comes with certain asterisks. Even though *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Dorian Gray*, are novels about theatre than can also be read as theatre, novel-reading and attending the theatre are not synonymous and the audiences of both genres had different connotations in Victorian culture. The Victorian theatre audience was seen as wild and raucous, something to be tamed so that the theatre could live up to its potential. The Victorian novel-reading audience, though it faced its own critics, was seen as more selective than the theatre audience.[10]

[10] See Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Nonetheless, the theatre is a shared, communal, and public space, while the novel is typically read alone and in the safety of one's home. This does not mean that the process of reading a Victorian novel was a contemplative, uninterrupted process. In *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction*, Nicholas Dames analyzes representations of reading in *Vanity Fair*:

> The stress in Thackeray's descriptions of reading—and, we shall see, of any absorptive solitary act—is on what it misses, from what it is distracted, to what it is oblivious. It might be the text that is barely attended to, or the text might, although only temporarily, preclude attention to the world; but in either case, distraction is the pervasive mental state in Thackeray's frequent description of solitary consumption (78).

Catherine Robson has also shaped my thinking on the Victorian novel and Victorian childhood.[11] Her book, *Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman*, articulates why Victorian male authors, such as Dickens, Ruskin, and Carroll, depicted figures of little girls in their writings. She also analyzes what Victorian girlhood symbolized for these male authors. According to Robson, "…in this era of great population growth, the novel and relatively widespread spectacle of concentrated child labor began to engender concern in a ruling class newly attuned to the idea of childhood's especial claims" (58). Because child actors are exploited in *Nicholas Nickleby*, Robson's insights on Victorian childhood were always in the back of my mind when writing Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

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[11] For more on the Victorian novel, see Joseph W. Childers's *Novel Possibilities: Fiction and the Formation of Early Victorian Culture.*

Reading Theatricality and Performance: The Theatrical Sensibilities of Dickens, Thackeray, and Wilde

In "Theatrical Exchanges: Gendered Subjectivity and Identity Trials in the Dramatic Imagination," a chapter in *Victorian Literature*, David Amigoni addresses Dickens's theatricality before linking it to Wilde's:

> The [Dickens's] novels could never escape theatricality, and were 'returned' to it in Dickens's own massively popular public readings at the end of his career, in which he impersonated his own characters—most famously Nancy, as she is bludgeoned to death by Bill Sykes. It was here, in these acts of self-invention, that Dickens found himself implicitly sharing a sentiment articulated by Wilde in his autobiography *De Profundis*: "Most People are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation" (104).

Like Amigoni, Juliet McMaster notes the common ground between Dickens and Wilde. In "Mimesis as Subject in *Nicholas Nickleby,"* McMaster connects Dickens's conceptualization of art to Wilde's:

> It was a basic assumption with Dickens whenever he spoke *in propria persona* that his art was a mimetic art; and when his critics objected that this or that character or action was not true to life he would not take a position like Oscar Wilde's, and claim that precisely therein lay its art; he would rather ransack history, as he did in the case of Krook's spontaneous combustion, to prove that precedents for his art did exist in reality. But in his fiction itself he was much nearer to recognizing the Wildean

position that life imitates art. And though he would never have formulated such a position explicitly, in *Nicholas Nickleby* he dramatizes it fully and variously (628).

Dickens, Thackeray, and Wilde, despite their shared interest in theatricality and performance, did not always rate each other's work highly. Wilde, whose dislike for melodrama is discussed in Chapter 3, famously said this in reference to the death of little Nell, a child in Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*: "One must have a heart of stone to read the *death* of little Nell without laughing" (Wilde qtd. in Eaton). Meanwhile, Thackeray and Dickens had a professional rivalry.

Like Thackeray, Dickens wrote for the stage, but was not commercially or critically successful writing in that genre. Wilde's theatricality is more broadly rooted in his public persona, his popular 1890s plays and in his celebrity prior to *Dorian Gray*. As Michael Patrick Gillespie indicates in *Branding Oscar Wilde*, Wilde's ability to market himself played a huge role in the success of his North American lecture series in 1882. According to Gillespie, "Unlike Charles Dickens, Mathew Arnold, Harriet Martineau, and others who proceeded him, Wilde had almost no literary achievement to recommend him to the American public" (26-27). Wilde compensated for his lack of literary status, Gillespie argues, with the ability to secure attention: "His [Wilde's] notoriety came from the word-of-mouth publicity he had generated in London through his eccentric behavior and idiosyncratic observations, supplemented in a fashion by lampoons of his public persona in newspapers, magazines, and plays" (27). *Dorian Gray* is an important aspect of Wilde's theatricality, but it does not fully

capture the playwright's theatricality.[12] As for Thackeray, he became a celebrity after the publication of *Vanity Fair*. In *An Uneasy Victorian: Thackeray the Man*, Ann Monsarrat states, "As the fame of *Vanity Fair* spread through the country, the doors of some very great houses indeed were thrown open and its author beckoned inside" (176). While the novels covered in this dissertation are theatrical in style, subject, and character archetypes, their theatricality is heightened by novelists who cultivated and played into the theatricality of celebrity.

Before taking the biographical route and stating that Dickens, Thackeray, and Wilde wrote about theatricality and performance in their novels because they have a personal affinity for the theatre and or because they wrote for the theatre, take a moment to consider these snapshots of how their novels dispense with plotlines and characters associated with theatricality and performance: Dickens sends his theatrical family, the Crummleses, to a one-way trip to America and scatters his unmerry boys of Dotheboys Hall, another theatre of a more sinister kind, toward the end of the narrative. Nicholas, the novel's titular protagonist, never mentions to anyone that he worked as an actor and playwright in the Crummles theatre. Thackeray has his once prized actress, Becky Sharp, work a booth before dumping her puppet in a box and closing the lid. Wilde savagely kills off his actress while she is in her prime. Are Dickens, Thackeray, and Wilde reflecting the disposability and precarious status of Victorian actors or are they, in their fictional representations, making a larger point about how they feel about them and the theatre? Dickens, Thackeray, and Wilde wrote about theatricality with

[12] For more on Wilde's celebrity and the theatrical nature of celebrity, see Sharon Marcus's "Salomé!! Sarah Bernhardt, Oscar Wilde, and the Drama of Celebrity."

flourish, but as this dissertation shows, their novel's respective theatricality is marked by darkness, derision, discomfort, disillusion, desire, and danger, mirroring, enhancing, and complicating how Victorians perceived the theatre, theatricality, and performance.

Despite depicting theatricality and performance as dangerous in their respective novels, Dickens, Thackeray, and Wilde have different styles and approaches to theatricality. Through *Vanity Fair* and *Dorian Gray*, the reader is exposed to a theatricality that is deceitful, cynical, and ironic. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, wherein every character is theatrical in everyday life, the focus is less on using theatricality to out characters as hypocrites. Not all of Dickens's theatrical figures in *Nicholas Nickleby* are the liars, hypocrites, and pretenders of *Dorian Gray* and *Vanity Fair*. *Dorian Gray*'s characters are not the exaggerated, comedic, and over-the-top theatrical figures of *Nicholas Nickleby*. And *Dorian Gray*, as thoroughly as it considers theatricality, does not infuse theatricality with the comedic sensibility of *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Vanity Fair*. The characters in these novels each fulfill a particular archetype. Nicholas is the reluctant actor in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Sibyl is the tragic ingénue in *Dorian Gray*. And Becky is the consummate performer in *Vanity Fair*. The communal Crummles theatre shares very little with the foreboding theatre in *Dorian Gray*. And, as previously mentioned, theatricality in *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Vanity Fair* are sources of humor. In *Dorian Gray*, theatricality is hardly a laughing matter.

This dissertation argues that Wilde, Dickens, and Thackeray frame theatricality and performance as dangerous, a social, cultural, and existential threat that is in part legible on the body of actors. The body of the actor inflicts violence onto others—*Vanity Fair's* Becky and *Nicholas Nickleby's* titular protagonist are violent figures of the theatre—and has violence inflicted upon it in the name of theatricality and performance. Sibyl in *Dorian Gray* and the

boys of the Dotheboys Hall and Crummles theatre in *Nicholas Nickleby* have their bodies exploited in and for the theatre. This dissertation tackles how the Victorian novel positions theatricality and performance as culturally and socially dangerous, while also investigating how each novel thematizes theatricality. Acting is a threat in these novels not only because it dissolves distinct class barriers between the upper, lower and working-class, but because it challenges traditional Victorian gender roles.[13] Shamed by his wife's theatricality and deceit, Rawdon leaves British society for a foreign post. Meanwhile, Mr. Lillyvick in *Nicholas Nickleby* returns to his family after his actress wife runs off with another man. Like Rawdon and Mr. Lillyvick, Dorian has an identity crisis that is triggered by the actress, Sibyl Vane. The figure of the actress in *Vanity Fair*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, and *Dorian Gray* is a bad omen for male characters. As powerful as these actresses are, this dissertation argues that they remain liminal and fraught figures.

Defining Theatricality and Performance

In *Theatricality*, Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait point to the difficulty in defining theatricality:

> So, it is a mode of representation or a style of behavior characterized by histrionic actions, manners, and devices, and hence a practice; yet it is also an interpretative model for describing psychological identity, social ceremonies, communal festivities, and public spectacles, and hence a theoretical concept. It has even attained the status of both an aesthetic and a philosophical system. Thus, to some people, it is that which

[13] See Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

is quintessentially the theatre, while to others it is the theatre subsumed into the whole world. Apparently the concept is comprehensive of all meanings yet empty of all specific sense (1).

In "Theatricality," Sharon Aronofsky Weltman states:

Because 'theatricality' denotes knowingness about the medium's effect, it is also defined negatively: "the quality of being exaggerated and excessively dramatic." This is how Thomas Carlyle uses the term in its oldest recorded instance (which is Victorian): *The French Revolution* (1837) opposes theatricality to sincerity (913).

Like theatricality, performance is overloaded with meaning. Davis and Postlewait state:

Since antiquity, the critique of theatre has focused on both its tendency to excess and its emptiness, its surplus as well as its lack. In this critique, performance is characterized as illusionary, deceptive, exaggerated, artificial, or affected. The theatre, often associated with the acts and practices of role-playing, illusion, false appearance, masquerade, façade, and impersonation, has been condemned by various commentators, from Plato to Allan Bloom (4).

Making definitional boundaries even more difficult is that theatricality and performance are interrelated terms. As Shannon Jackson suggests in *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity*:

Terms such as performance or theatre are often used as metaphors for representation and, in other contexts, are invoked to ground the "real." While a history of Western thought associates performance with the figural, the allegorical, and the copy, a host of critical

theorists in the late twentieth century used performance examples to characterize the literal, the stable, or the naively authentic (37).

In *Performance*, Diana Taylor examines different definitions of performance by analyzing how Richard Schechner, Judith Butler and other notable performance scholars interpret performance. Taylor also explains how events off stage can be read as part of the performance of a theatrical production:

> We might say a theatrical production **IS** a performance, and limit ourselves to what happens onstage. But we might broaden the frame to include the audience—how do they dress, how much do they pay per ticket, what kind of neighborhood is the theatre located in, who has access to the theatre and who doesn't? (29).

According to Richard Schechner in *Performance Theory*, "Performances are make-believe, in play, for fun" (14). Schechner states:

> Performance is an inclusive term. Theater is only one node on a continuum that reaches from the ritualizations of animals (including humans) through performances in everyday life – greetings, displays of emotion, family scenes, professional roles, and so on – through to play, sports, theater, dance, ceremonies, rites, and performances of great magnitude (14).

In *Performed Imaginaries*, Schechner describes the potential of performance:

> Performance as distinct from performance studies (except in the dizzying circumstance where performance studies is studied as a performance) – and here I mean performance in its various realms, in social life, in the arts, in politics, in economics, in popular culture, and so on – realms that overlap each other, sometimes reinforcing sometimes subverting each other – performance marks identities, bends

> and remakes time, adorns and reshapes the body, tells stories, and provides people with the means to play with, rehearse, and remake the worlds they not merely inhabit but are always already in the habit of reconstructing (13).

In the anthology *Performativity and Performance* edited by Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Joseph Roach explains the differences in scope between theatricality and performance:

> The concept of performance engages "The Politics of Theater" through its implicit critique of the culturally coded meaning of the word *theater*. Derived from the Greek word for seeing and sight, *theater*, like *theory*, is a limiting term for a certain kind of spectatorial participation in a certain kind of event. *Performance*, by contrast, though it frequently makes reference to theatricality as the most fecund metaphor for the social dimensions of cultural production, embraces a much wider range of human behaviors (46).

Taking my cue from scholars such as Taylor, Schechner, and Roach, I see performance as much broader than theatricality and, as such, I only invoke performance in this dissertation to discuss the theatricality of actors, the performance of social roles by actors, theatrical performances, or the performance of death by actors. Because theatricality is still such a broad term, I have focused my analysis on specific aspects of each novel: What I call "transgressive theatricality" in *Vanity Fair*, melodrama and the performing bodies of actors in *Nicholas Nickleby*, and theatrical performance and representations of the theatre in *Dorian Gray*.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines theatricality as "the quality of belonging or relating to the theatre, or to the performance or writing of plays, opera, etc." As I mentioned earlier in this introduction, I see melodrama, the presence of an audience, stages,

acting, theatrical performance, actors and actresses, the actor's body, theatrical figures, words, and metaphors, and theatrical illustrations[14] as elements that showcase the Victorian novel's theatricality. The theatre in *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Dorian Gray* is part of each novel's theatricality, but it should not ne conflated with theatricality. When I mention Becky's theatricality in Chapter 2, I am specifically referring to her acting, skillset, and range as an actress, while also addressing her body, her penchant for melodrama and engaging her audience. In Chapters 3, I focus on the theatre as a physical space, while also reading the novel's representations of Sibyl, her death, theatrical performance, and *Dorian Gray's* references to Shakespeare.

At this juncture, it is important to restate that my dissertation contributes to Victorian studies and may be of interest to scholars working in theatre studies. This dissertation would be of less interest to scholars of performance studies, performance theory, or performativity. This dissertation focuses on theatricality, theatrical performance, and the theatre. It does not study performativity, negate the social and cultural aspects of performance, or attempt to eliminate the term "performance" from its scope. That would be misleading because in all of the novels noted in this dissertation, theatrical performances bleed into social performances. *Vanity Fair* in particular has a Manager of the Performance as a narrator and Becky's theatricality strengthens and at times undermines her ability to play the social roles of wife, mother, and conforming member of society. Rather than eliminating "performance" from the scope of this dissertation and thereby excluding social performance from my analysis, I have

[14] For a study of Victorian illustrations, see Catherine J. Golden's *Serials to Graphic Novels: The Evolution of the Victorian Illustrated Book*.

focused on the theatrical performances of actors represented in the novels I cover and, whenever possible or relevant, I have gestured to their social and cultural performances.

Chapter 1: Melodramatic, Performing Bodies and the Crummles Theatre in Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-1839)

Chapter 1 is about the endangered performing bodies of actors in Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*. The idea for this chapter came to me as I was rereading a scene in which Nicholas and his uncle-turned-adversary, Ralph Nickleby, meet for the first time. The way in which the battle-of-wills in the scene manifests itself as bodily animosity made me think of wrestling and how bodies are constantly put in opposition in *Nicholas Nickleby*. In analyzing the theatricality of *Nicholas Nickleby* through the lens of wrestling, stage melodrama, and the exploitation of actors' bodies, this chapter argues that the theatre in *Nicholas Nickleby* is rendered dangerous. Pointing to the ways in which actors' performing bodies are mechanized, threatened, territorialized, and commercialized for different forms of theatre, this chapter complicates readings of Mr. Crummles, *Nicholas Nickleby's* showman, whose seemingly non-threatening theatricality counters the cruel theatricality of the novel's villains.

Chapter 2: "Everybody was in Ecstasy:" Transgressive, Predatory Theatricality and Dangerous Defamiliarization in William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847-1848)

In *Performance: a critical introduction*, Marvin Carlson provides an overview of Nikolas Evreinoff's writings: "*The Theatre in Life* begins with a discussion of the widespread phenomenon of play, an activity humanity shares with the animal kingdom, then proceeds to a

concern with the specifically theatrical" (33).[15] This chapter examines what it means to be a theatrical animal in *Vanity Fair*, arguing that Thackeray uses the language of animalization to defamiliarize Becky, rendering her abnormal, frightening, and predatory. Becky's theatricality is rooted in the language of animalization and dehumanization. Constant imagery depicting the actress as a snake, spider, siren, temptress, and viper position Becky's theatricality as dangerous. Becky's theatricality is playful and intentional, covert and overt, inviting and unsettling. Sexual, amoral, rebellious, disarming, and laced with treachery, criminality, and vice, Becky's powerful theatricality, this chapter argues, is dangerous because it is transgressive. This chapter focuses on Victorian attitudes on the profession of acting, the actress as a sexualized figure, and Victorian gender and social roles and how they themselves are performances that are part of Becky's theatricality. In analyzing how Becky, the novel's main actress, is animalized, sexualized, criminalized, and made monstrous, this chapter situates Becky's theatricality as paradoxically predatory, threatening, and emancipatory.

Chapter 3: Theatricality Kills: Precarious Performance and the Perils of the Theatre in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891)

This chapter focuses on Sibyl's theatrical performances and what happens when her acting is less than immaculate. Every chapter of this dissertation examines the actor's body and the punishing nature of theatricality and performance in the Victorian novel. This chapter

[15] Human beings, like animals, have a capacity for theatricality. To be expressive, animated, playful, interactive, and attention-seeking in behavior is, for me, what constitutes being theatrical. Becky is a sinister theatrical animal in *Vanity Fair*. Becky's rabid, sexual, and unmitigated theatricality is animalized and defamiliarized. As an actress, she is depicted as both less than and more than human. See Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

is centered on the theatricality of Sibyl and Dorian, reading the roles they perform for each other. As is the case in *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Vanity Fair*, Sibyl's body, an actress's body, attains its meaning and value through its ability to perform. When Sibyl performs well as an actress, she is described as the feminine ideal. When she performs poorly, she is plunged back into the displeasing materiality of the theatre. This chapter investigates the life-and-death stakes of theatricality and performance in *Dorian Gray*. It also touches on the intertextuality of *Dorian Gray*, the role of Shakespeare in the Victorian period and in *Dorian Gray*, the performance of Sibyl's death, posing and melodrama, and mimesis and materiality in Sibyl's run-down theatre.

Back to the Theatre

As many scholars such as Nina Auerbach, Tracy C. Davis, Sara Hudston, Russell Jackson, Renata Kobetts Miller, and Sharon Aronofsky Weltman have shown me, the history of Victorian theatre is complicated. I am indebted to these scholars. This dissertation would not have been possible had I not been able to draw from their valuable scholarship to contextualize my insights into the Victorian novel's representations of theatricality and performance. I am particularly indebted to the work of John Glavin and Joseph Litvak. Glavin, whose work I cite in Chapter 1, covers theatricality and performance in Dickens's novels. Litvak's work, which I also cover in Chapter 1, analyzes theatricality in the works of Henry James, Dickens, and Charlotte Bronte, among others. Glavin and Litvak gave me a useful framework for approaching this project. Both scholars showed me that a project like this was possible and that theatricality, as sweeping as it is in the Victorian novel, can be written about with specificity. Whenever I felt like I was losing sight of the big picture or

getting too detailed in my close reading, I returned to Glavin and Litvak to examine how they approached handling such an expansive topic like theatricality in the Victorian novel.

I have had the opportunity to spend years thinking about misbehaving and fallen actresses, the violence and danger of theatricality, the trouble with theatre, the significance of the actor's body, the effects of melodrama, and the highs and lows of theatrical performance in the Victorian novel. I am immensely grateful for that opportunity. I have never been on stage. I have never given a theatrical performance. The closest I have ever come to performance is acting in campy home movies that will never see the light of day. This project has strengthened my affinity for theatricality and performance, given me permission to be in a theatrical frame of mind for the past couple of years, and made me more aware of my own theatricality. My hope for readers of this dissertation is that they find value in viewing the Victorian novel through the lens of theatricality and performance.

CHAPTER 1:
Melodramatic, Performing Bodies and the Crummles Theatre in Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-1839)

I wish I were anything rather than an actor.

> —William Macready, acclaimed Victorian actor and a friend of Dickens, qtd. in John Glavin's *After Dickens: Reading, Adaptation and Performance*, 103

In Victorian fiction, chiefly before 1860, the uneducated actor, the pretentious dramatist and the grasping manager were stock fictional types, a satirical tradition which lingered on in theatrical novelettes to the end of the century and beyond. It was a literary style born of the assumption, which was widespread among mid-century intellectuals, that the actor was inferior to the writer, just as the singer or musician was inferior to the composer. It was a distinction based upon the belief that the actor or musician was not of himself capable of artistic originality; he was simply the paid instrument of the artist's intentions. Unlike other arts, therefore, acting was ascribed no independent interpretive or educative merit.

> — Michael Baker, *The Rise of the Victorian Actor*, 32

The theatre in Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* is dangerous and writing about it elicits some degree of stage-fright: Dickens's third novel, dedicated to prominent Victorian actor William Macready, has a theatrical narration style, an array of theatrical side-characters, melodramatic encounters, archetypes of stage melodrama, and numerous references to Shakespeare. It also includes representations of the theatre, theatrical illustrations, the theatricality of wrestling, a cast of eclectic actors, and a plotline in which its central protagonist temporarily becomes an actor and playwright.[16] While the typography of the

[16] In his introduction to *Nicholas Nickleby*, Marc Ford notes the importance of the Crummles theatre in Dickens's development as a novelist:

> In many ways, the decision to embroil Nicholas directly in the production of populist theatre is one of the most significant moments, not only in the book, but in Dickens's entire career: the jubilant parody of the Crummles episodes coincides with his growing awareness of how the layered interconnectedness

novel's theatricality is vast, Dickens's personal life was equally expansive in its theatricality. Dickens wanted to be an actor.[17] His mistress, Nelly Ternan, was an actress.[18] During his career, he advocated for the theatre and entertainment for the working class in *Household Words*, worked on the 1857 play *The Frozen Deep*,[19] regularly attended the theatre as a child and as an adult, adapted his novels, including *Nicholas Nickleby*, into lucrative public readings in which he was a performer,[20] and integrated theatricality and performance into his popular novels. That said, *Nicholas Nickleby*, in its ambiguous depictions of the Crummles theatre and the melodramatic bodies of actors, deserves to be reading without the novelist's autobiography stealing the show.

Melodrama in Victorian Theatre and Melodramatic Villains in *Nicholas Nickleby*

In the early nineteenth century, the still-in-effect 1737 Licensing Act granted the right to perform spoken-word drama exclusively to two theatres, Drury Lane and Covent Garden. Music shielded melodrama from the purview of the licensing act.[21] In "Patent Wrongs and

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of melodrama may be adapted into the form of the novel, and used to represent the complex social relationships of contemporary society in a manner beyond the linear of the picaresque (xxvi).

[17] See Alexander Woollcott's "Charles Dickens, the Side-Tracked Actor."

[18] See Claire Tomalin's *The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens.*

[19] Dickens worked on *The Frozen Deep* with friend and novelist Wilkie Collins. See Sue Lonoff's "Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins." According to *The Dickens Theatrical Reader* edited by Edgar and Eleanor Johnson, Dickens wrote eight or nine plays. Several of those plays were written early in his career. Dickens did not find success as a playwright and he did not rate his early plays highly. For information on three plays that Dickens wrote early in his career, see P.D.A Harvey's "Charles Dickens as Playwright."

[20] See Malcolm Andrews's *Charles Dickens and his Performing Selves: Dickens and the Public Readings*.

[21] The 1737 Licensing Act was abolished in 1843. According to Ganzel, "By 1832, then, the monopoly had ceased to be a real factor in English dramatic development. Its formal abolition in 1843 was an anti-climax" (388). This is due to the fact that, as many scholars have pointed out, minor theatres relied on new genres and forms that bypassed the licensing act, and the patent theatres had to evolve and compromise to compete: "the Theatres Royal soon forgot their dedication to the literary drama and gave themselves wholeheartedly to the pursuit of the same audiences to which the minors catered. They played burlettas; they staged melodramas; they brought in circus and high-wire acts" (Ganzel 389).

Patent Theatres: Drama and the Law in the Early Nineteenth Century, " Dewey Ganzel identifies the relationship between stage melodrama and class:

> A new audience, the rapidly increasing middle class, was attending the theatre, and its taste was transforming the genre: it rejected classic tragedy and comedy for forms more immediately responsive to its vital interests. The new audience demanded—and the theatre found—a new form, melodrama, which combined the catastrophic situation of tragedy with the happy resolution of comedy. "Literary men" attacked the melodrama—hence the outbursts in the press against it; "serious" playwrights avoided it—it could be stolen so easily from the French (384).

Nicholas Nickleby begins with melodramatic tragedy: The death of Nicholas's father, the introduction of his villainous uncle, Ralph Nickleby, and Nicholas's separation from his mother and sister. The novel ends with the fractured family reunited, Nicholas happily married, and the uncle's demise through suicide. Melodrama on the stage and in literature indulges in excessive emotionality and over-the-top plotlines, producing a strong response within its readers or theatre audience. Nicholas is made into a robust figure of melodrama: [22] Depicted as a persecuted hero, Nicholas is vehemently hated by his miserly uncle and aggressively targeted by his enemies. In *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture*, Juliet John states:

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[22] Melodrama was not the only stage genre that influenced Dickens. In *The Dickens Pantomime,* Edwin M. Eigner suggests that pantomime is integral to the theatricality of Dickens's novels: "…its characters, its situations, and its structures were etched deeply into the essentially dramatic and theatrical nature of his creative imagination, so deeply that the dramatis personae of his novels, the movement of his plots, and even the meaning of his vision can all be understood in terms of pantomime conventions" (x).

> As melodrama was originally designed for those who could not read, nineteenth-century stage melodrama offered Dickens an inclusive, populist, indeed anti-intellectual aesthetics. Melodrama fulfils the infamous definition supplied by Oscar Wilde's Miss Prism: 'The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means' (26-27).

Melodramatic monologues and plotlines are readily embraced in *Nicholas Nickleby*. The villains pounce, grandstand, and speechify. The heroes retreat and advance accordingly, while also emoting and monologizing along the way. And the damsels-in-distress are helpless victims who need to be rescued by men. Beyond archetypes of melodrama and melodramatic monologues, how does *Nicholas Nickleby* conceptualize theatricality? How does it address the problems inherent in the theatre industry? How does *Nicholas Nickleby* depict the actor's performing body? How does it make manifest through the actor's body anxieties about the theatre, patriarchy, acting, and capitalism in Victorian culture? How does it explore the pressures on the performing body in sites of theatre? How does the theatre in *Nicholas Nickleby* endanger the performing bodies of actors and non-actors? In fleshing out the performing bodies of actors and non-actors in *Nicholas Nickleby,* this chapter contends that the Crummles theatre is not an innocent bystander in the commodification and exploitation of performing bodies, but an active participant whose participation is somewhat downplayed in readings of the novel.

In its reading of *Nicholas Nickleby,* this chapter also evaluates Vincent Crummles and his theatre. While Vincent Crummles is not a Dickensian villain in *Nicholas Nickleby*—those designations belong to Ralph, Mr. Squeers, and their accomplices—he is part of a patriarchal, capitalistic society that commodifies the performing body. If Ralph and Mr. Squeers are

villains in part because they commodify bodies—Ralph protects his financial interests by playing a role in the commodification of Kate and Madeline's bodies and Squeers has an entire school of bodies at his disposal—why are the performing bodies in the Crummles theatre not, at the very least, seen as a reflection of Mr. Crummles's ambiguity? Is he that effective in selling himself as a benevolent showman? In a novel in which the large-than-life villains terrorize and the self-righteous hero prevails, Mr. Crummles is not a villain per se, but he does parallel the villains, who are showmen in their own right, in ways that cannot be ignored. Meanwhile, the Crummles theatre in *Nicholas Nickleby* is an ambivalent site of frivolity, commercialization, and melodrama. This chapter argues that in *Nicholas Nickleby*, the performing, melodramatic bodies of actors and non-actors indict sites of theatre. The performing, melodramatic bodies speak in *Nicholas Nickleby*, and they collectively do not speak well on behalf of Mr. Squeers, Ralph, and Mr. Crummles, its figures of capitalism and patriarchy.

In *Charles Dickens and the Great Theatre of the World*, Simon Callow calls the Crummles sections of *Nicholas Nickleby* "Dickens's love letter to the profession" (81). Callow also states: "Nicholas finds a kindness, a warmth and an inclusiveness in the theatre that contrasts favourably with almost every other stratum of society he encounters" (81). In his reading of *Nicholas Nickleby*, Paul Schlicke echoes Callow's positive framing of the Crummleses:

> They have generosity and honesty which contrast boldly with the characteristics of the book's villains, and when they are compared to the characters whom Nicholas actually does espouse the players' virtues become the more evident. Both the Cheerybles and the Crummleses work in the world without being corrupted by it; both show kindness

> to Nicholas and give him employment. But, as every reader of the novel knows, the Cheerybles are empty ciphers, cloyingly sentimentalized and utterly unbelievable. The Crummleses, with their petty vanities, harmless jealousies, and uncritical indulgence in histrionic excess, have a complexity and depth of characterization altogether lacking in the Cheerybles (111).

Both Callow and Schlicke [23] associate the Crummleses with kindness and suggest that there is a marked difference between the way Nicholas is treated by the Crummleses and how the villains of *Nicholas Nickleby* treat him. While this is a valid claim, the metric by which both scholars measure the Crummleses' kindness is not entirely convincing. The Crummleses do offer Nicholas employment, but is the bar really that low? Should the bar for harboring some semblance of kindness be determined by a juxtaposition with the morally bankrupt villains? Just because the lowly villains set the bar low does not mean that the Crummles clearing it should be celebrated or deemed as more significant than it is. The Crummles family offers theatrical employment to two unemployed boys not out of the kindness of their hearts, but because Nicholas and Smike meet the criteria for theatrical employment: They are young, willing, and desperate. While Mr. Crummles is not as corrupt as Ralph and Mr. Squeers—no

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[23] Dickens wrote an anti-piracy proclamation to warn playwrights against adapting *Nicholas Nickleby* for the stage, a topic he laments about again in *Nicholas Nickleby* when Nicholas sits next to a plagiarizing playwright in the audience of the Crummles theatre. Schlicke analyzes the proclamation, stating:

> In the spring of 1838, shortly before the first number of Nicholas Nickleby was issued, Dickens had his publishers, Chapman and Hall, circulate a public statement concerning his new work. The 'proclamation' denounced the 'dishonest dullards' who had turned his previous fiction to their own profit by 'wretched imitations', and served warning against further plagiarism. From the earliest days of Pickwick's fame an entire industry derivative of Dickens's creations had sprung up, marketing illustrations, plays, songs and endless varieties of merchandise, in addition to printed adaptations of the novels. The speed and persistence of this proliferation testify to Dickens's popular appeal: not only could he command a huge readership for work produced under the imprint of his own publishers, but inferior imitations by hands other than his own had enormous selling power as well (54).

one in the novel is—the showman is, as this chapter argues, problematic. Mr. Crummles is not a completely benign figure in *Nicholas Nickleby*: He is better than the worst and in *Nicholas Nickleby*, that is not saying much. This chapter is indebted to John Glavin's brilliant book, *After Dickens: Reading, Adaptation and Performance* in which he analyzes *Nicholas Nickleby* and its ambivalence about the theatre. Through analyzing the melodramatic, performing bodies in *Nicholas Nickleby,* this chapter places Mr. Crummles in the same conversation as Ralph and Mr. Squeers.[24] This chapter does so not to villainize his character, but to complicate readings of him and to tether his complex theatricality within the broader theatricality of *Nicholas Nickleby*.

Concerning the Victorian Body

In *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture*, Bruce Haley notes the uncertainty that fueled Victorians' anxieties about their bodies:

> Improved hygiene, diagnosis, and treatment in the past century have given people a certain emotional security even in the face of serious disease. Throughout much of the Victorian period, however, with both the causes and patterns of disease very much

[24] At no point in this chapter do I argue that Mr. Crummles is a villain. I acknowledge that he is a makeshift father figure to Nicholas and that he is a welcoming man. My reading simply seeks to take away some of the excessive sentimentality and one-dimensionality sometimes associated with his character without reducing the affection with which Dickens wrote about the theatre in *Nicholas Nickleby*. As Glavin states:

> Nothing should blind us to the attractive side Dickens found around the theaters. Despite its manifest tawdriness, silliness, and exploitation, the working theater inflicts no more harm than it needs to in order to survive. And the harm it finds it must inflict it gratuitously leavens by unstinting, indeed excessive, generosity (99).

I maintain that there is harm in the Crummles theatre. It is less evident and destructive than the harm caused by Ralph and Mr. Squeers, but it can be found in analyzing the Crummles theatre's commodification and exploitation of performing bodies.

> matters of speculation, it was difficult ever to feel comfortable about the state of one's health (11).

Dickens wrote *Nicholas Nickleby* at a time when the effects of industrialization were seen as a powerful existential threat to the Victorian body. According to Haley, "Whenever Parliament debated some labor-reform bill, Victorians were reminded that the Industrial Revolution had brought as an unwelcome by-product the proliferation of occupational diseases" (12). Dickens reflected Victorians' fears about their bodies by making the commodification and exploitation of endangered, sickly, and abused bodies a central theme in *Nicholas Nickleby*.[25]

The emphasis on the deteriorating Victorian body in *Nicholas Nickleby* is part of Dickens's broader writings on social justice, particularly in areas that relate to children. In *Charles Dickens: Social Reformer*, W. Walter Crotch examines the role that children played in Dickens's writing:

> Dickens's children were the poor, and they were forever tugging at the heart-strings of the mightiest pleader their cause has ever had. Their sufferings obsessed him, filled him with a consuming fire that would not let him rest night or day, and that burnt itself out only with his life. No task was too hard to be essayed for the poor. No artistic obligation was so precious that he would not put it lightly aside in their service. Even while he is writing *Nicholas Nickleby*, the novel charged with the great purpose of destroying the Yorkshire schools, he is puzzling to see if he cannot " strike a blow " in its pages for the sweated factory operatives (70).

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[25] Smike, a young, emaciated, and abused actor in Dotheboys Hall, dies towards the end of *Nicholas Nickleby*.

The neglected, abused bodies of children litter *Nicholas Nickleby's* Yorkshire boarding school for boys, Dotheboys Hall. In "*Nicholas Nickleby* and Educational Reform," Arthur A. Adrian states, "Though it has been pointed out that William Shaw, the prototype of Wackford Squeers, was un-justly made the victim in *Nicholas Nickleby* of an attack that should have been leveled at the whole tribe of pedagogues, the over-all picture of the Yorkshire schools was truly shocking" (237).

Nobody, regardless of their class, wealth, status, gender, and age, and no body in *Nicholas Nickleby* is exempt from theatricality and performance. This chapter argues that *Nicholas Nickleby* is preoccupied with the body and the theatre, the body in the theatre, the body as theatre, and the body in a theatrical society. *Nicholas Nickleby* frames nearly all of its central conflicts as theatre. This is not the cerebral, philosophical three-man play that is Wilde's *Dorian Gray* wherein men lackadaisically sit in rooms and metaphorically cut each other up with witty banter. This is theatre as it plays out through the violent clash of bodies. In *The One Vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel,* Alex Woloch states: "In fact, almost every nineteenth-century novel is informed by the problematics of character-space: both in terms of the particular elaboration of a "hero" or central protagonist and in the inflection of inevitable (and often numerous) secondary figures" (49). Dickens overpopulates his novels with characters, but in the instance of *Nicholas Nickleby*, the avalanche of secondary characters is depicted as a mass of performing bodies struggling to perform for and in front of patriarchal, capitalist figures. In sites of theatre, namely Dotheboys Hall and the Crummles theatre, Nicholas is just another performing body.

Bodies, Bodies, Bodies: [26] **The Theatre of Wrestling and Dotheboys Hall as Theatre**

Multiple battles-of-will in *Nicholas Nickleby* are staged like a wrestling match and presented as theatre. Dickens transforms these battles-of-will into theatre through his vivid descriptions of performing bodies and their physicality. *Nicholas Nickleby* is filled to the brim with body parts and performing bodies: Fighting bodies, performing bodies, decaying bodies, malnourished bodies, bodies in play, bodies in motion, and bodies in distress are constantly juxtaposed. In "The World of Wrestling" in *Mythologies,* Roland Barthes states:

> There are people who think that wrestling is an ignoble sport. Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle, and it is no more ignoble to attend a wrestled performance of Suffering than a performance of the sorrows of Arnolphe or Andromaque. Of course, there exists a false wrestling, in which the participants unnecessarily go to great lengths to make a show of a fair fight; this is of no interest. True wrestling, wrongly called amateur wrestling, is performed in second-rate halls, where the public spontaneously attunes itself to the spectacular nature of the contest, like the audience at a suburban cinema. Then these same people wax indignant because wrestling is a stage-managed sport (which ought, by the way, to mitigate its ignominy). The public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so; it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees (15).

Wrestlers perform in the ring, a stage on which the archetypes of good and evil clash in front of an invested audience. Wrestling has the visual spectacle of bodily violence as the climactic

[26] This section of the chapter borrows its title from a 2022 comedy-horror film, *Bodies, Bodies, Bodies*.

event of built-up conflict between two adversaries. The presence of performance, an audience, stage names, and dramatic stakes in a wrestling event signal that it is theatre. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, the melodramatic altercations between opposing archetypes—that of hero and villain—assume the theatricality of wrestling.[27]

Dickens presents Mr. Squeer's Dotheboys Hall as theatre. Mr. Squeers, the headmaster of the school, sells the Yorkshire boarding school as a utopia. Armed with the flair of an audacious showman, the too-good-to-be-true promises of a conman, and the sleight of hand of a magician, Mr. Squeers makes his pitch to desperate parents:

> 'Let me give you a card, sir, of an establishment where those six boys can be brought up in an enlightened, liberal, and moral manner, with no mistake at all about it, for twenty guineas a year each—twenty guineas, sir;—or I'd take all the boys together upon a average right through, and say a hundred pound a year for the lot' (Dickens 61).

Mr. Squeers uses the go-to tricks of a showman: He overpromises, misdirects, and under-delivers. The "enlightened, liberal, and moral manner," which Mr. Squeers mentions with no trace of sinister irony, is in fact an overcrowded, unhygienic space wherein boys are imprisoned, exploited for their labor, and punished arbitrarily (Dickens 61). Mr. Squeers does not even attempt to disguise the theatricality of his speech: He immediately ingratiates himself with his audience by providing a token that gives the illusion of transparency, in this case a

[27] I am using wrestling and Barthes's reading of wrestling as a conceptual tool for understanding the melodramatic, performing bodies in *Nicholas Nickleby*. I do not mean to suggest that wrestling of the late 1950s, the time in which Barthes's *Mythologies* was published, can be compared to wrestling in the Victorian period or the implicit wrestling in *Nicholas Nickleby*.

card; and he knows which talking points to hit when speaking to financially struggling parents. Mr. Squeers is an actor with a memorized monologue, and he delivers his lines with panache. He serves as Dotheboys Hall's flamboyant stage manager, showman, and lead actor. Not only does he have an expanding cast of boys to support his starring role in the theatre of the school, but he also absorbs Nicholas into his theatre. Mr. Crummles, who eventually takes Nicholas under his wing, also makes a reluctant actor out of the protagonist.

In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Nicholas's ongoing feuds are depicted as wrestling feuds, one in which his performing body is on the front lines. Nicholas puts hands on Mr. Squeers, his cruel employer at Dotheboys Hall, and, in London, he fights with Sir Mulberry Hawk, his sister's harasser. He also dukes it out verbally with his uncle, Ralph Nickleby, towards the end of the novel. Nicholas may not like the profession of acting, but Dickens paints him as a wrestling figure. And what is wrestling if not theatre articulated through the language and staging of the performing body? That wrestling is theatre that can frame a story and frame it well is perhaps why Dickens calls on it as a conceptual tool in a novel that deals explicitly with the performing body.

Nicholas is bestowed the name "'Knuckleboy'" while working at Dotheboys Hall (Dickens 107). The moniker "'Knuckleboy,'" given to Nicholas by the domineering matriarch of the Squeers family, calls attention to the ritualized violence that occurs on the performing body of the school's imprisoned actors (Dickens 107). In calling Nicholas "'Knuckleboy,'" Mrs. Squeers combines the threat of violence—knuckles evoke the possibility of punching, a skill that Nicholas is quite capable of—with the emasculation of boyhood. Dickens's nickname for his protagonist suggests that he is a miscast actor in the Dotheboys Hall theatre. In terms of build and age, Nicholas is a brawny teenager among the school's little boys. Mrs.

Squeers is a questionable source of ethics, which the narrative articulates by conflating her profit-driven cruelty with benign, maternal instinct, but she does aptly register Nicholas and his body as dangerous: "'I watched him when you [Mr. Squeers] were laying on to little Bolder this afternoon. He looked as black as thunder all the while, and one time started up as if he had more than got it in his mind to make a rush at you. *I* saw him, though he thought I didn't"' (Dickens 109). Here, Nicholas is depicted as a fighter in hibernation, one who is not following the script of Dotheboys Hall. Nicholas is a disobedient individual in an institution that would have him become part of a docile mass of bodies. A non-compliant actor in its bloody theatre—he refuses to bear witness to the school's violence or help maintain the easily dispelled illusion that the school is a place of knowledge and community—Nicholas runs off, but not before becoming a wrestler, and, by extension, a performer.

Unlike the small, underfed bodies of boys in Dotheboys Hall who cannot ward off Mr. Squeers's violence, Nicholas's body is depicted as a contender. The arrival of this young, self-righteous hero serves as an existential threat to the villainy and patriarchal authority of Mr. Squeers and Ralph. In having Nicholas single both men out and vice versa, Dickens sets up David-versus-Goliath match-ups with the following taglines and binaries: good versus evil, youth versus age, beauty versus ugliness, and the powerless versus the powerful. The build-ups between Ralph and Nicholas and Mr. Squeers and Nicholas promise a fight, and Dicken delivers on that promise of performance.

Every great wrestler needs to meet his match, and every great actor needs a formidable scene partner. Nicholas finds both in Ralph and Mr. Squeers. When Nicholas finally responds with violence against Mr. Squeers's tyranny, it reads like a scene straight out of a stage melodrama:

> ‘Wretch,' rejoined Nicholas, fiercely, 'touch him at your peril! I will not stand by and see it done; my blood is up, and I have the strength of ten such men as you. Look to yourself, for by Heaven I will not spare you, if you drive me on.'
>
> ‘Stand back,' cried Squeers, brandishing his weapon.
>
> ‘I have a long series of insults to avenge,’ said Nicholas, flushed with passion; ‘and my indignation is aggravated by the dastardly cruelties practised on helpless infancy in this foul den. Have a care; for if you do raise the devil within me, the consequences shall fall heavily upon your own head’ (Dickens 158).

Borrowing from the heightened emotionality and archetypes of Victorian stage melodrama, the fight scene is staged like a wrestling match between two performers, a showdown of strength and will in which the embodiment of good and evil are pitted against each other in a clash that has dramatic stakes: Nicholas is the underdog and newcomer who has a chip on his shoulder. Mr. Squeers is the seasoned veteran who has the advantage of home turf. Nicholas is the dissatisfied youth asserting his individuality and independence in an institution that demands conformity and subservience. Mr. Squeers is the troubled senior figure seeking to regain control in a place wherein his authority is deteriorating in real time. Nicholas has the advantage of physical size and the arrogance and entitlement of youth on his side. Mr. Squeers has years of life experience and cynicism in his favor. Nicholas has popular opinion on his side—the schoolboys back him—while Mr. Squeers has the backing of a patriarchal, bureaucratic society. Nicholas even has a ring and stage name. When he reacts to Mr. Squeers in their melodramatic exchange, he arguably does so not as Nicholas, an impoverished, fatherless youth, but as “‘Knuckleboy’” (Dickens 107). The reluctantly silent Nicholas is gone

and the unapologetic actor and brutish wrestler enters the stage, finally living up to his moniker. Nicholas transforms from an unwilling spectator of the Dotheboys Hall theatre to one of its main actors. His refusal to act in the role that Mr. Squeers cast him in only leads to another role that he is more comfortable with, that of antagonist in Mr. Squeers's life and momentary hero of Dotheboys Hall. Nicholas maintains his role as an antagonist in Mr. Squeers's life for much of the narrative, but he tries on numerous other roles for size: Romeo, Hamlet, and Mr. Johnson. While Nicholas does not want to be associated with acting, as evidenced by his ambivalence in the Crummles theatre, he is, whether he is conscious of it or not, an actor on the stage in everyday life.

The melodramatic scene between Mr. Squeers and Nicholas is punctuated by the physicality of the body. This is not a scene wherein the hero and villain hit their marks, partake in histrionics, and let the evocative, accusatory words speak for themselves. This is a physical fight in waiting wherein the words are a precursor to actual violence. The body speaks for itself and the narrative conclusion of Nicholas's and Mr. Squeers's philosophical and moral differences is not a battle of rhetoric, but a bodily clash of will. This is raw, unrehearsed theatre whose theatricality is realized through melodrama and the imagery of wrestling.

Patriarchy and its Actors

Patriarchal figures in *Nicholas Nickleby* are dangerous, self-interested, and amoral.[28]

[28] I am referring to Ralph and Mr. Squeers here. The Cheerybles and the Crummles are patriarchal figures in *Nicholas Nickleby* who do not align with this description.

Like Ralph, Nicholas's villainous uncle, Mr. Squeers makes a show of caring, but he neither cares, nor cares to maintain the show for long. The state of Mr. Squeers's body is a revealing source of information that counters the identity that he carefully stages in public:

> Mr Squeers's appearance was not prepossessing. He had but one eye, and the popular prejudice runs in favour of two. The eye he had was unquestionably useful, but decidedly not ornamental, being of a greenish grey, and in shape resembling the fanlight of a street door. The blank side of his face was much wrinkled and puckered up, which gave him a very sinister appearance, especially when he smiled, at which times his expression bordered closely on the villainous (Dickens 44).

In *Dickens and the Grotesque,* Michael Hollington analyzes Mr. Squeers through the aesthetic of the grotesque: "The smile or leer that is suggested in his name is characteristic of Dickens's grotesques, never more terrifying than when they are attempting to be affable" (77). The state of Mr. Squeers's grotesque body reflects his moral ugliness. The allusion to phrenology,[29] a popular Victorian pseudoscience which claimed that the physical body provided insight on a person's character, is not surprising. Dickens famously believed in spontaneous combustion. However, what is interesting is the way in which Mr. Squeers's body is staged. This is a deteriorating body, a weak, shriveled husk that tells a story. This is a body that has experienced pain and suffering. This is a body that carries trauma and lives on the precipice of death. Mr. Squeers's body can barely function yet it survives. Dickens showcases the

[29] In *Articulating Bodies: The Narrative Form of Disability and Illness in Victorian Fiction*, Kylee-Ann Hingston states, "The era's professionalization of medicine and its popularization of phrenology and physiology increasingly made the body a decipherable text, and medicine and literary studies often intersected as a result" (2).

endurance of Mr. Squeers's body, making it seem as though it is running on sheer will. The "he had but one eye, and the popular prejudice runs in favour of two" is a comedic line on its own, but it also conveys that Mr. Squeers literally and metaphorically has his blind spots (Dickens 44). His most obvious blind spot is his inability to take accountability for the systematic mistreatment and abuse at the school he runs. Mr. Squeers's body, with its failures, scars, and signs of decay, is struggling, mirroring the bodies of the boys he has exploited in the name of profit.

According to Woloch, "Dickens's panoply of eccentrics and grotesques brings minor characters to the center of his novels by *increasing* their distortion" (51). Mr. Squeers is not a minor character in *Nicholas Nickleby*, but his body's distortion is magnified when it is placed next to and in opposition of the protagonist's pristine body. Compare Mr. Squeers's ugly, weak, and elderly body with Nicholas's young, beautiful, and strong body. Nicholas's body, unlike Mr. Squeers's, is in peak physical condition and capable of inflicting and enduring violence. The fight between Nicholas and Mr. Squeers may appear uneven. Nicholas is the clear favorite based on age and sheer size, but Dickens makes Mr. Squeers's body formidable and not-so-easily defeated. Nicholas may be younger and faster, but Mr. Squeers's body has experienced more. Any winner-takes-all situation is not very interesting if the opponents are mismatched and the winner takes all unceremoniously. An immediate landslide victory does not tell a story. This would be a short Dickens novel if Nicholas's body, instantly recognizing a threat to its existence, wrestled Mr. Squeers to the ground on sight and defeated it for good. Instead, Dickens prolongs the spectacle, registering the performing, melodramatic body not just as an instrument of individual will, but as one that is empowered by social, legal, and

bureaucratic forces. In short, Nicholas wins the battle with Mr. Squeers, but the war is far from over.

Mr. Squeers's body is not just a performing body; it is a socially legitimized body that enacts patriarchal and capitalistic will callously because society permits it to do so. This is reflected in the dehumanizing way in which Mr. Squeers treats the bodies of his students. In addition to rationing food, Mr. Squeers regularly counts the boys' bodies like they are merchandise. Mr. Squeers's single, weak body is backed by several powerful bodies that prop up his body. Take the body of the public, which benefits from the out-of-sight, out-of-mind quality of having a distant school where orphaned, illegitimate boys are sent and never heard from again. Take the body of capitalism, which makes Ralph look the other way when his niece, who is one of the few people in his small, spiritually empty world that he has something closely resembling affection for, is assaulted. Take the body of bureaucracy and the law, which is patriarchal: It does actual harm to Madeline Bray's physical body by denying her access to legal information that empowers her. Without the knowledge that she stands to become an heiress, she is preyed upon by Arthur Gride, a predator who objectifies, sexualizes, and territorializes every inch of her young body. Consider how Arthur describes Madeline to Ralph:

> 'To a young and beautiful girl; fresh, lovely, bewitching, and not nineteen. Dark eyes-long eyelashes-ripe and ruddy lips that to look at is to long to kiss-beautiful clustering hair that one's fingers itch to play with-such a waist as might make a man clasp the air involuntarily, thinking of twining his arm about it…' (Dickens 579-580).

Nicholas acquires a slew of enemies who wish him bodily harm and struggles to maintain authority over a body that society seeks to commodify. Mr. Squeers wants Nicholas's body

for cheap labor. Ralph wants Nicholas's body to submit to patriarchal authority. Miss Fanny Squeers wants Nicholas's body for marriage. Mr. Crummles wants Nicholas's body for theatrical performance. Nicholas does not want to be like Ralph Nickleby, Mr. Crummles, and Mr. Squeers who choose to surrender themselves to the highest bidder. Throughout the novel, Nicholas learns that Ralph Nickleby will do anything for money; Mr. Crummles will do anything for an audience and more performers. And Mr. Squeers will do anything for more boys' bodies to profit from. The overpowered, overstuffed bodies of patriarchal, capitalist figures in *Nicholas Nickleby* are gluttonous, and they seek to eat their child, Nicholas.

In *The Communist Manifesto*,[30] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels state:

> Modern industry has converted the little workshop of the patriarchal master into the great factory of the industrial capitalist. Masses of laborers, crowded into the factory, are organized like soldiers…they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine, by the overseer, and, above all, by the individual bourgeois manufacturer himself (14).

In positioning the Crummles theatre and the Dotheboys Hall school theatre as factories filled with performing bodies, *Nicholas Nickleby* not only critiques the theatre, but capitalism and its patriarchal figures who mechanize children callously and systematically. The performing bodies in *Nicholas Nickleby* are made to perform labor while its patriarchal figures reap the benefits.

Ralph Nickleby cannot adequately function as his nephew's patriarchal figure. When Nicholas and Ralph meet for the first time it is represented not as a sentimental, wholesome

[30] *The Communist Manifesto* was published in 1848. *Nicholas Nickleby* began its serialization run in 1838.

family introduction, but as a cold, tactical, and formal battle-of-wills between soon-to-be enemies:

> 'How old is this boy, for God's sake?' inquired Ralph, wheeling back his chair, and surveying his nephew from head to foot with intense scorn.
>
> 'Nicholas is very nearly nineteen,' replied the widow.
>
> 'Nineteen, eh!' said Ralph, 'and what do you mean to do for your bread, sir?'
>
> 'Not to live upon my mother,' replied Nicholas, his heart swelling as he spoke.
>
> 'You'd have little enough to live upon, if you did,' retorted the uncle, eyeing him contemptuously.
>
> 'Whatever it be,' said Nicholas, flushed with anger, 'I shall not look to you to make it more' (Dickens 36-37).

The conflict between Nicholas and Ralph reads like a wrestling match and stage melodrama because of the way in which both characters immediately take each other in and revert to type in the scene. Nicholas, the hero in training, fights for his family's pride. Ralph, the primary villain and power player of the narrative, cruelly mocks the poverty of his powerless relations. The hero performs his role and so does the villain, and with their traits distilled and magnified, they tell a story with their bodies as much as their words. This is the main event of *Nicholas Nickleby*, the prized wrestling match and central melodrama that eclipses all others. It is not even forty pages into the novel, but Dickens has pitted these two, for better or worse, against each other. It would take more than six hundred pages before this clash between good

and evil is realized. However, Dickens showcases his understanding of showmanship by dropping this tantalizingly short exchange in the opening chapters of *Nicholas Nickleby*. The exchange is filled with the rancor of feuding wrestlers. The petty slights and reciprocal anger hint of so much more to come, yet Dickens practices the kind of self-restraint that Nicholas often struggles to exhibit. The meeting scene is both an unveiling of a main event and a forestalling of one. The stage is set for an altercation, and the reader is primed to wait for its arrival. Because this is a Dickens novel, the wait is long, but the eventual confrontation is peak melodrama.

Nicholas perceives his uncle as an interloper and enemy when they first meet, but Ralph, who inspects "his nephew from head to foot with intense scorn," sees his nephew as an opponent (Dickens 36). Ralph looking at his nephew from "head to foot" is a figure of speech, meaning that he takes all of him in. (This is a patronizing gesture made even more patronizing by the fact that Ralph is sitting down and not directly speaking to Nicholas at first). However, the gesture is also a very literal sizing up and accounting of Nicholas's body. As repeatedly shown throughout the narrative, Nicholas's body can do actual damage. Nicholas emanates power through the robustness of his body. This is juxtaposed with Ralph emanating power through his wealth and spiteful words: "'Husbands die every day, ma'am, and wives too'" (Dickens 36). The power dynamics of the scene in which Nicholas and Ralph meet convey the uncomfortable introduction of two performing bodies. In *Aesthetic Hysteria: The Great Neurosis in Victorian Melodrama and Contemporary Fiction*, Ankhi Mukherjee, citing Peter Brooks's *The Melodramatic Imagination*, notes that "The body in melodrama is charged with meaning and acts out the recognition of the repressed: mute signs augment the inability to verbally acknowledge and say it all" (29). This applies to Ralph and Nicholas whose bodies

are in a melodrama. The main tension in the scene in *Nicholas Nickleby* is spoken out loud not directly through words—very little is said between Nicholas and Ralph here—but visually through the bodies and the hostility they carry.

Nicholas and Ralph parallel each other throughout *Nicholas Nickleby*. They cannot live until one of them is vanquished. When Smike wonders why Nicholas, who he calls kind and good, has not been shown kindness, Nicholas responds solemnly yet theatrically: "'I have an enemy…He is rich, and not so easily punished as *your* old enemy, Mr Squeers. He is my uncle, but he is a villain, and has done me wrong'" (Dickens 359). Torn from his family, Nicholas is confiding in his only friend. The raw honesty, emotional intimacy, and vulnerability of the scene are, however, made humorous by the melodramatic manner in which Nicholas sums up his existence. How does a nineteen-year-old make an enemy and villain out of his uncle within the first few seconds of meeting him? Why does Nicholas use archetypes of melodrama to theatricalize his life when he himself seemingly rejects the theatre? Dickens makes his characters in *Nicholas Nickleby,* if not explicitly aware that they are characters in a novel, cognizant of the roles they perform in the melodrama of each other's lives. Nicholas sees Ralph as the villain of his story and Dickens confirms as much in the way that all roads lead back to finally confronting Ralph.

Why must Ralph occupy the primary villain role in *Nicholas Nickleby*? There are other formidable contenders. There is Mr. Squeers whose list of crimes against children is long and noteworthy. There is Sir Mulberry Hawk who sexually assaults Kate at a private party thrown in Ralph's home. There is also Arthur Gride who lusts after a young, impoverished Madeline Bray and attempts to entrap her into marriage. However, there is no one quite as fascinating and villainous as Ralph. This is not an argument based on Ralph's crimes, although he has

committed his fair share of unethical behavior in the name of capitalism. It is more a testament to the kind of theatre that elicits the most emotion from Nicholas. The novel features an ever-expanding list of villains. What makes Ralph different, what makes the fight between him and Nicholas such captivating theatre, is that it is rooted in family drama. The stakes are higher because the fight is personal. Mr. Squeers is a stranger to Nicholas. The theatre born from Nicholas's and Mr. Squeers's melodramatic interactions is entertaining spectacle, but it cannot and does not carry the emotional resonance of Nicholas and Ralph's altercations. The ongoing feud between Nicholas and Ralph is rooted in family history, capitalistic greed, and masculine anxiety.[31] In a novel in which actors pour their blood, sweat, and tears into performance, the battle between blood relatives is the central theatre of the narrative.

The death of Nicholas's father signals Nicholas's sudden ascent into the role of patriarch. This rite of passage is unceremoniously interrupted by Ralph's arrival. When Nicholas and Ralph meet, a boy is denied the opportunity to become the man of his family and both Nicholas and Ralph seethe and revolt at each other's presence. Melodrama demands winners and losers and heroes and villains. Nicholas and Ralph each seeks to break the other. Each has a point of a view fueled by righteous anger. Each has an assortment of shifting allies and enemies that they weaponize in their war with each other. This battle-of-wills, in addition to being a match-up between two performers, encapsulates the theatre of war. This is

[31] See Herbert Sussman's *Victorian Masculinities*: *Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art.*

a protracted war often fought through proxies. Neither Nicholas nor Ralph sees each other for large portions of the narrative, but they obsess over each other, even when they are miles apart. They cannot find peace until one of them concedes patriarchal authority. They are the villains in each other's narratives, the heroes of their own narratives, and the feuding wrestlers of *Nicholas Nickleby*.

Mr. Crummles and Mr. Squeers: A Tale of Two Showmen

As many scholars have pointed out, fairytales are a recurring motif in *Nicholas Nickleby*.[32] In *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, Bernard Bergonzi argues that "it is as a fairy-tale, the embodiment of a child-like vision of the world, that *Nicholas Nickleby* must ultimately be read. Nicholas and Kate remain children at heart, almost to the very end unwilling to take on the responsibilities of adult life" (86). In "Fairy-Tale Fantasy in *Nicholas Nickleby*," Richard Hannaford illustrates how the novel's villains are fairytale archetypes: "These villains are threatening ogres that typically must be overcome in fairy tales; Ralph is 'a dragon,' (li,676) Gride is 'a goblin,' (xlvii, 623) and Peg Sliderskew is 'half a witch'" (xi, 671) (Hannaford 252). Mr. Crummles, though not explicitly called so, is also a witch. Consider the way in which Dickens alludes to *Hansel and Gretel* in Nicholas's and Smike's road trip after they escape from Dotheboys Hall. In the German fairytale *Hansel and Gretel*, a brother and sister who are preyed upon by a cannibalistic witch must find inventive ways to

[32] In "The Faint Image of Eden: The Many Worlds of *Nicholas Nickleby*," Jerome Meckier states:

> The feeling that something more than a fairy tale is going on here is reenforced by the move from melodrama to Shakespearian tragedy. The origin of *Nickleby* may be Dickens' familiarity with the London equivalents of Vincent Crummles, but the ending just as surely stems from *Macbeth* and *Richard III*, plays the young Dickens saw at the Theatre Royal (145).

outsmart their villain and return home. Dickens alludes to this fairytale in his conception of Mr. Crummles and his fraught relationship with Nicholas. Like the hungry witch in the fairytale, Mr. Crummles is ravenous for bodies. However, unlike the treacherous witch who keeps the children in her home under false pretenses, Mr. Crummles entrances the naïve Nicholas into joining his theatre troupe not with a lie but with the truth: [33] "There's genteel comedy in your walk and manner, juvenile tragedy in your eye, and touch-and-go farce in your laugh,' said Mr Vincent Crummles. 'You'll do as well as if you had thought of nothing else but the lamps, from your birth downwards'" (277). Every part of Nicholas's body, from his eye to his walk and voice, is marked by and for the theatre.[34]

Smike and Nicholas mirror Hansel and Gretel in a plethora of ways. They too are exiled from their home and make their way in unfamiliar, dangerous surroundings. They too are family—by choice at this point in the narrative and by blood later on when it is revealed that they are cousins. They also have no one to turn to, so when a charming man promises them the world, they not only are willing, but eager to accept. Mr. Crummles is the ultimate showman and not unlike Mr. Squeers who sweeps in at the right time to collect the bodies of children, Mr. Crummles finds two weak bodies and recruits them for commercial use. When Mr. Crummles questions Nicholas about Smike, he measures the worth of Smike's body by its capacity for theatrical performance:

> 'Poor fellow!' said Nicholas, with a half smile, 'I wish it were a little more plump and less haggard.'

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[33] Mr. Crummles articulates an affinity for the theatre in Nicholas that the protagonist does not acknowledge.
[34] Note that one of the first things Ralph does when meeting Nicholas is assess his nephew's body.

> ‘Plump!’ exclaimed the manager, quite horrified, ‘you’d spoil it for ever.’
>
> ‘Do you think so?’
>
> ‘Think so, sir! Why, as he is now,’ said the manager, striking his knee emphatically; ‘without a pad upon his body, and hardly a touch of paint upon his face, he’d make such an actor for the starved business as was never seen in this country. Only let him be tolerably well up in the Apothecary in Romeo and Juliet with the slightest possible dab of red on the tip of his nose, and he’d be certain of three rounds the moment he put his head out of the practicable door in the front grooves O.P.” (Dickens 275).

Once again, Hansel and Gretel are alluded to. Nicholas is the one making strategic decisions like Gretel does in her narrative. And like Hansel, Smike is along for the ride. Dickens returns to the imagery of the body to draw attention to the difference between Nicholas and Mr. Crummles. Smike’s body is emaciated, bruised, and malnourished, having endured years of abuse and neglect by Mr. Squeers and his family. His body is a tragedy that implicates not only Mr. Squeers, but society as a whole. Mr. Crummles takes one look at Smike’s broken body and decides that instead of healing it like Nicholas wants to do, he must preserve it for the sake of the theatre. In *Hansel and Gretel,* the witch wants to fatten up the kids before she slaughters them for her supper. The inverse is true in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Mr. Crummles wants to keep Smike starved and weak. It is in the act of depriving Smike that Mr. Crummles gets fatter: Keeping Smike skinny not only makes Smike a better performer—he can take on a wider variety of roles—but it is also one less mouth to feed. Deliberately keeping Smike’s body in a consistently weakened state is also an effective strategy of control straight out of Mr. Squeers’s playbook. A weakened body cannot run away. A weakened body cannot rise up against oppression. A weakened body performs labor under inhumane conditions. A

weakened body does what it is told, no questions asked. Nicholas and Smike flee the theatre of Dotheboys Hall to an actual theatre that places similar demands on their respective bodies. Mr. Crummles, in his analysis of Smike's body, suggests that what the theatre needs is not talented performers, but simply more regulated bodies who can perform.

When Mr. Crummles tells Nicholas, "'you'd spoil it for ever,'" the "it" in question is Smike's body. Mr. Crummles dehumanizes Smike with his rhetoric (Dickens 275). The body, in its physicality, is made into an "it," a thing for Mr. Crummles to use and a resource for him to exploit. Mr. Crummles's casual cataloguing of Smike's body and the ways in which it can be repurposed and abused for theatrical performance is borderline cruel, suggesting that he, like Mr. Squeers, feels entitled to the bodies of boys. Mr. Crummles wants Smike's body to perform for him in front of an audience. This is not remarkably different from Mr. Squeers who also assesses the value of boys in terms of their ability to perform under pressure for prospective clients:

> 'Tell the gentleman,' said Squeers.
>
> '"Never,"' repeated Master Belling.
>
> 'Very good,' said Squeers; 'go on.'
>
> 'Never,' repeated Master Belling again.
>
> 'Very good indeed,' said Squeers. 'Yes.'
>
> 'P,' suggested Nicholas, good-naturedly.
>
> 'Perform – business!' said Master Belling. 'Never – perform – business!' (Dickens 51)

In *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance,* Jon McKenzie examines cultural performance, organizational performance, technological performance, and the expectation to perform in various settings. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Mr. Squeers thrusts a boy against his will on a figurative stage in the public sphere and coerces him into performing. This performance is about rehearsed repetition. The unwilling performer is fed his lines while the stage manager who disguises his scorn with sentimental pride threateningly watches for mistakes. The performers in *Nicholas Nickleby*, to borrow McKenzie's term, have to "Perform—or else" (McKenzie 23). The collection of bodies, which Mr. Squeers uses alternately for performance and labor, are threatened with violence. If they perform well on behalf of the Dotheboys Hall theatre, the boys' bodies are rewarded with the absence of violence and the occasional sustenance:

> Number one seized the mug ravenously, and had just drunk enough to make him wish for more, when Mr Squeers gave the signal for number two, who gave up at the same interesting moment to number three, and the process was repeated till the milk and water terminated with number five (Dickens 58).

Mr. Squeers does not name the school children because he considers them merchandise and cargo that need to be moved to Dotheboys Hall. The boys' commodified, performing bodies have a price tag, an exact number that reflects their market value. The numbering system highlights Mr. Squeers's sociopathic efficiency at keeping bodies under control. Under duress, the malnourished bodies are conditioned to respond to Mr. Squeers's dehumanizing numerical placeholder names. In refusing to name the children, Mr. Squeers denies the boys their individuality and agency. They are just goods to him, goods that are only as good as how

they perform. These bodies must be kept alive to maintain the Dotheboys Hall theatre. In "Not Too Cheery: Dickens's Critique of Capital in *Nicholas Nickleby*," Timothy Gilmore draws from Georg Lukacs, Marx, Engels, and Timothy Bewes to frame his reading of the Dotheboys Hall schoolmaster: "Squeers may be read, then, as a kind of allegorical figure of the capitalist in general. His exploitation of his pupils mirrors that of the working classes by the capitalists and his school is a figure of the factory, replete with disciplinary regimens and whistles signaling changes in activity" (89).

Mr. Squeers's Dotheboys Hall is a dystopian, hellish nightmare that is punctuated by festering flesh:

> Pale and haggard faces, lank and bony figures, children with the countenances of old men, deformities with irons upon their limbs, boys of stunted growth, and others whose long meagre legs would hardly bear their stooping bodies, all crowded on the view together (Dickens 97).

The emaciated bodies in Dotheboys Hall are crying for help. In the absence of social justice, human compassion, and maternal and paternal affection, the bodies wither away in a protracted spectacle of pain and suffering yet this melodramatic tragedy never sees an audience. Nicholas bears witness in horror and "looked in dismay around!" but he is unable to enact change (Dickens 97). He is a single audience member, a single healthy body in a collection of domineering bodies that seek to claim him. The sanctity of the Victorian body is violated in Dotheboys Hall, brutally and thoroughly so. Dickens imagines the unclaimed, unwanted bodies as a faceless, endless mass, bodies confined together in a tableau of human misery. Death would be a merciful end, yet the bodies are kept alive to endure their own

decay for the purpose of theatre. This is depicted not just as inhumane, but as monstrous. The inertia of the bodies, their strange, peculiar ugliness, and their hollowness as they approximate life, but experience a slow death is striking. The bodies are broken and broken down, bone turning into dust in front of Nicholas. They are also reduced to the sum of their parts: Bones, limbs, legs, faces. Dickens focuses on each individual body part to convey not only Mr. Squeers's systematic abuse—no body part escapes his torture—but to further point to the boys' dehumanization. To Mr. Squeers, these are not boys, but expendable body parts. These are not whole bodies or the wholesome bodies of boys, but the fractured, leftover body parts of Dotheboys Hall. Like the Crummles theatre, Dotheboys Hall is a theatre that needs a constant influx of bodies to keep up its act. In the aforementioned scene, the discarded bodies of Dotheboys Hall continue to perform right down to the bitter end.

The mass of bodies in Dotheboys Hall is undisciplined, disorganized, and docile. It cannot act out its will. On the precipice of collapse, the bodies await their own destruction. As vulnerable and powerless as this mass is, it is still a mass that is identifiable by its form. Dotheboys Hall is populated by bodies and in *Nicholas Nickleby*, for better or worse, mostly worse, these bodies can perform. The sordid mass, in the aforementioned passage, lays dormant, performing the melodrama of death and the hubris of surrender. The mass is ready to die, yet even when it is figuratively on its last breath, its singled-out body parts demand to be seen in their individuality. In this abject misery, the imprisoned mass of bodies, which initially appear as a weak totality that receive no respite, briefly reclaim their agency as individual bodies. This does not mean that they are free. The bodies and body parts in Dotheboys Hall, as previously mentioned, remain commodities. However, Dickens complicates the performing body by pointing to its multiple roles. Here, the body is part of the

mass and apart from it. Here, the body is weak, but stubbornly awake. Here, the body is performing the crushing effects of amoral capitalism and the spectacular effects of melodramatic theatre. Here, the body is finite—small, discarded tangible, inconsequential—and infinite in its potential for performance. Here, the body is closed off from the outside world and opened-ended in meaning. Here, the body takes center stage, even as its marginalized, liminal status is reaffirmed.

In "Emotion and Gesture in *Nicholas Nickleby*," Angus Easson positions Nicholas as an audience member of Dotheboys Hall:

> If Squeers is an actor, however transparent, the boys have no such resort, though Nicholas is their audience, the reader's mediator, in this stage-world of school. Their bodies form a series of gestures, some of physical maiming, but more that is emotional, the "scowl of sullen dogged suffering," the "leaden eyes" of vicious-faced boys, and the tears of regret "even for the mercenary nurses" of the past (151-52), all things which strictly Nicholas cannot know at first sight, yet to which he is given access and reads aright (145).

This chapter agrees that Dotheboys Hall is a "stage-world of school" (Easson 145). However, this chapter considers the boys of Dotheboys Hall enslaved actors working under an exploitative leading showman and stage manager in the form of Mr. Squeers. Without the boys, Dotheboys Hall is an empty stage. Their performing bodies, through their presence, legitimize Dotheboys Hall as a school. The aesthetic of the bodies in Dotheboys Hall—the bodies are malnourished and suffering—incriminates the hall as a site of theatre. Dotheboys Hall performs its deceptive theatre for society. When no one but Nicholas is present, he gains a peak behind the curtain. And just like in *Vanity Fair*, what is behind the curtain reveals bare

monstrosity.[35] To witness theatre in its unfiltered form is a nightmare in *Nicholas Nickleby* [36] and *Vanity Fair*.

Child Actors in *Nicholas Nickleby*

Glavin examines the absence of originality in the Crummles theatre: "Everything in this theatre's infinitely regressive mimesis echoes or copies or approximates something previously staged or waiting in the wings" (Glavin 99). Dickens performs this cynical cycle of endless mimesis not just in the Crummles theatre, but through his depictions of mirrored bodies in *Nicholas Nickleby*: The bodies of the Crummles theatre's child actors are not abused or confined, but their bodies in size and gender mirror those found in Dotheboys Hall. And like the Yorkshire boarding schoolboys, their bodies carry no intrinsic value, but are commodities in a patriarchal, capitalistic society. Mr. Crummles's theatre always wants more: More profits, more bodies of performers, more audience members, and more novels to rip off for the stage. When is it enough? When does it stop? When are the figures of patriarchy and capitalism satiated? In *Nicholas Nickleby*, these figures are always on the lookout for more opportunities to make money.

Just like Mr. Squeers who, when first meeting Nicholas exercises his power and authority over the boys through surveillance, Mr. Crummles watches his boys and regulates their body for theatrical performance:

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[35] See Chapter 2 of this dissertation.
[36] Here, I am specifically referring to the theatre of Dotheboys Hall. The Crummles theatre does not inspire existential dread like Mr. Squeers's school does.

> The short boy had gained a great advantage over the tall boy, who was reduced to mortal strait, and both were overlooked by a large heavy man, perched against the corner of a table, who emphatically adjured them to strike a little more fire out of the swords, and they couldn't fail to bring the house down on the very first night (Dickens 271-272).

Mr. Crummles's large body looms over the bodies of the boys. His physical presence does not harbor the benevolence of a caretaker, but the calculating shrewdness of a capitalist and showman. He is there to instruct and control the boys' bodies. Out of all the scenes the boys could be performing, Dickens picks a scene of violence, returning to the theme of clashing bodies in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Mr. Crummles demands more violence from his performers.[37] He implicitly tells the children to "Perform—or else" (McKenzie 23). If they do not perform well, the boys risk losing their livelihood. Mr. Squeers promotes socially sanctioned violence in the private sphere. Here, Mr. Crummles promotes socially sanctioned theatrical violence in the public sphere. What makes Mr. Crummles's theatricality dangerous is that it allows him to conceal some of the more unsavory elements of his capitalistic impulses. Outwardly, he appears as a helpful, generous mentor to Nicholas. However, his obsession with staging performing bodies rivals Mr. Squeers's and, for that reason among others mentioned elsewhere in this chapter, he has traits in common with the novel's villains, even though he himself is not depicted as one.

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[37] I am not equating the stage violence that Mr. Crummles oversees with the actual violence that Mr. Squeers participates in. I merely find it interesting that both characters are placed in proximity to children, performing bodies, and violence.

Every child's body in *Nicholas Nickleby* is somehow trapped by capitalistic intention. Consider the Kenwigs family whose brood of children is defined by their bodies. The Kenwigs family has too many bodies of children to feed. These bodies only earn value when they perform for their mercurial, wealthy uncle. The children stand to inherit. The bodies must "Perform—or else" they will be removed from their uncle's will (McKenzie 23):

> 'Morleena Kenwigs,' cried her mother, at this crisis, much affected 'kiss your dear uncle!'
>
> The young lady did as she was requested, and the three other little girls were successively hoisted up to the collector's countenance, and subjected to the same process, which was afterwards repeated on them by the majority of those present (Dickens 171).

This scene parallels earlier scenes of coerced submission between authority figures and children. Mr. and Mrs. Squeers line up the Dotheboys Hall boys to gives them poison. In the Kenwigs scene, the bodies of little girls are put in formation, told how to act, and made to act accordingly. That they have to be "hoisted up" presents these little bodies as powerless; they are pawns in a game and hired actors in a performance (Dickens 171). Surrounded by the bodies of adults and their respective expectations, the girls are depicted as doll-like figures who must perform public displays of affection. The choreography of the bodies is a theatrical gesture, a reminder to the uncle that these small and helpless bodies need all the help they can get. The uncle is assaulted and disarmed by theatricality. He experiences a calculated illusion of domesticity and familial warmth and does not question its authenticity. It is important to note that after marrying an actress who emasculates him and runs away with another man, he

returns to this life-affirming performance of familial intimacy. The performance, as illusionary as it is, is life-affirming because his masculinity is reinforced by the girls vying for his attention. The performance of female submission reasserts his patriarchal position in the family.

In *Ready to Trample on All Human Law: Financial Capitalism in the Fiction of Charles Dickens,* Paul A. Jarvie states:

> The Kenwigs episode, in fact, functions as a parody of the more serious examples of the degradation of childhood by the financial system. Kate, Nicholas and Madeline are the major examples of this degradation, which involves both use and abuse—commodification and pain (23).

Jarvie also argues that "Mrs. Kenwigs orders Morleena 'Down upon your knees to your dear uncle,' can be read as a dark, if fleeting, parody of the real sexual danger children face in a commodified world" (24). The commodification of the bodies of children is further reflected in the Kenwigs family and their youngest son, a baby who they name after the wealthy uncle whose inheritance they are attempting to secure. Nicholas earns a job with the family after saving the body of their youngest son. The son is of no particular importance. It is his body and what it represents and performs that is important. This is proven when the Kenwigs believe that Mr. Lillyvick's marriage means that their family has no chance of inheriting: "'Let him die,' cried Mr Kenwigs, in the torrent of his wrath. 'Let him die. He has no expectations, no property to come into. We want no babies here,' said Mr Kenwigs recklessly. 'Take 'em away, take 'em away to the Fondling!'" (Dickens 444). The baby, which was once instrumental as a prized possession and commodity, no longer performs anything. Here, Mr. Kenwigs embraces melodramatic speech while lamenting the loss of the body's ability to

perform. Through the devastating speech which, in its heightened emotional zeal reveals the family's excessive theatricality, the pretense to domesticity is altogether abandoned. The performing bodies, performing no more, are just additional bodies that take up space in a family configuration that has been destabilized. The "'We want no babies here'" line hints that Mr. Kenwigs, like Mr. Squeers, believes that children have no value outside their performing body (Dickens 444). With no inheritance to claim, Mr. Kenwigs's children are presented as a surplus of bodies, bodies that need food, shelter, and resources that he can no longer provide. In Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, Little Father Time kills himself and his two young siblings. His suicide note matter-of-factly states: "'*Done because we are too menny*'" (345). The Kenwigs's bodies are too many and the family suffers for it. The bodies of the Kenwigs children assume strategic space and perform specifically designated roles in the family. The girls and their bodies connect Mr. Lillyvick to the domestic sphere and reassert his masculinity. The male baby plays into Mr. Lillyvick's narcissism and his hopes for a legacy. Once the children cannot perform, Mr. Kenwigs wants to give their bodies away.

Returning to the Scene of the Crime: The Theatre of Dotheboys Hall

Formerly reduced to the sum of their parts and as a means to an end in Dotheboys Hall, the boys are eventually unleashed from performing for Mr. Squeers's school. After Mr. Squeers is ruined, the boys incite a revolution. This revolution is portrayed as theatre:

> Their entrance, whether by premeditation or a simultaneous impulse, was the signal of revolt. While one detachment rushed to the door and locked it, and another mounted upon the desks and forms, the stoutest (and consequently the newest) boy seized the cane, and confronting Mrs Squeers with a stern countenance, snatched off her cap and

> beaver-bonnet, put it on his own head, armed himself with the wooden spoon, and bade her, on pain of death, go down upon her knees, and take a dose directly. Before that estimable lady could recover herself or offer the slightest retaliation, she was forced into a kneeling posture by a crowd of shouting tormentors, and compelled to swallow a spoonful of the odious mixture, rendered more than usually savoury by the immersion in the bowl of Master Wackford's head, whose ducking was entrusted to another rebel. The success of this first achievement prompted the malicious crowd, whose faces were clustered together in every variety of lank and half-starved ugliness, to further acts of outrage (Dickens 772).

The bodies of the boys are depicted alternately as a mass and a swarm.[38] Their bodies which were once used against them—Mr. Squeers threatened violence at every turn—are no longer oppressed, but animated in their theatricality. The chaotic, lively scene focuses on the body and body language. Prior to this scene of collective action, of unified bodies acting together to serve a common goal, the boys' bodies were numbered and institutionalized as part of a dehumanizing system. Here, the bodies simultaneously act as a group and assert their own individuality. Mrs. Squeers, who was instrumental in keeping the boys' bodies in line, is literally given a taste of her own medicine. It is a cathartic, comedic moment of poetic justice, one that is depicted in bodily terms. Her "kneeling posture" is both a humbling gesture and an evocative declaration of her newfound, pathetic sense of powerlessness (Dickens 772). She is not kneeling in church or praying to God, but to a pack of seething, maniacal, and immature

[38] For a study of swarm theory, see Page Dubois's *Democratic Swarms: Ancient Comedy and the Politics of the People.*

children. Her son's punishment is also described through bodily servitude. The head-ducking that her son receives mirrors the same kind of arbitrary, degrading punishment that the boys of Dotheboys Hall constantly endured. With his father gone, Wackford's body is no longer protected. In appearance and size, it looks like the other boys' bodies. His body is more nourished, but it is not significantly different from the sea of bodies that now surround him, suggesting that its power was always illusionary. This is the Squeers's unceremonious fall from grace. For a scene that is quite unceremonious and unserious in terms of its portrayal of unhinged behavior, it is made ceremonious through the melodrama of the body. The boys demand their pound of flesh and they will settle for nothing else. No longer tyrannical Gods among their imprisoned mortals, the Squeers family are humanized and their tangible bodies are marked.

Figure 1. The breaking up at Dotheboys Hall. Illustration by Hablot K. Browne also known as Phiz (Dickens 771).

The swiftness in which the bodies of the Squeers family are humanized and immediately dehumanized mirrors the former bureaucratic efficiency of Dotheboys Hall. Mr. Squeers has taught his students well. His students may not have learned anything of intellectual or practical value at his school, but they are fluent in the visual language of theatre and melodramatic spectacle as it plays out specifically through the body and violence. The scene in which the boys reclaim the school and torment their oppressors is highly theatrical, registering as camp, a hallmark of the Crummles theatre. In Figure 1, the bodies are on full display in exaggerated, theatrical postures. The illustration evokes a kinetic energy. These animated bodies are no longer hollow and underfed, but fed up, taking up space as a bloated, expansive mass. The theatricality of their bodies and the way in which the bodies are stacked on top of and pushing against each other creates a visual spectacle. No longer forced to perform for Dotheboys Hall, the boys choose their parts with glee and reckless abandon.

The Dotheboys Hall dismantling scene is both climactic and anti-climactic. It is climactic because it resolves a plotline and delivers on the promise of physical violence that is this narrative's Chekhov's gun. It is anti-climactic because the mass of bodies is dismantled almost immediately after this scene:

> Of these, some were found crying under hedges and in such places, frightened at the solitude. One had a dead bird in a little cage; he had wandered nearly twenty miles, and when his poor favourite died, lost courage, and lay down beside him. Another was discovered in a yard hard by the school, sleeping with a dog, who bit at those who came to remove him, and licked the sleeping child's pale face (Dickens 774).

Dickens demystifies the monstrosity of the mass by describing the frail physicality of the children after they leave Dotheboys Hall. The dismantling scene is further reinforced as

theatre after the fact. The boys, back to their weakened states, are no longer heroic, larger-than-life generals and soldiers fighting tyranny, but traumatized children who wander helplessly in a society that does not want them. The play-acting of the dismantling scene underscores the naivety of the boys. It also captures the deceptive nature of theatre. Despite the appearance of good vanquishing evil, nothing is actually achieved in the scene. The performance of justice is just that, a performance. The justice that is served is quick and meaningless. As Bergonzi states, "The overthrow of Dotheboys Hall is the oppressed child's vision of the tables finally being turned, rather than the genuine eradication of a social evil" (86). The players play their roles and leave and, in so doing, cede the only stage they know. The mass fades into oblivion, scattering like mice once the glutenous yet unfulfilling feast of retribution is over.

Mr. Crummles: Reconciling the Man and the Showman

To understand Mr. Crummles as a benevolent showman in *Nicholas Nickleby* without contextualizing him within the broader patriarchal, capitalistic forces attempting to break Nicholas would oversimplify his character. Mr. Crummles is a showman and a father to "the infant phenomenon" whose labor he exploits for fame and capital (Dickens 283). He is also a father figure to Nicholas who he exploits for the same reasons. Mr. Crummles helps Nicholas in his hour of need and gives him safe employment, which is more than Mr. Squeers and Ralph ever do. However, Mr. Crummles's kindness does not mean that he is separate from the cycles of trauma and abuse occurring in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Dickens reiterates the theme of the exploited body in *Nicholas Nickleby* by showing how Mr. Crummles is obsessed with the

commodification of his daughter's body. Consider the way in which his daughter's body is kept underdeveloped:

> It was; for the infant phenomenon, though of short stature, had a comparatively aged countenance, and had moreover been precisely the same age – not perhaps to the full extent of the memory of the oldest inhabitant, but certainly for five good years. But she had been kept up late every night, and put upon an unlimited allowance of gin-and-water from infancy, to prevent her growing tall, and perhaps this system of training had produced in the infant phenomenon these additional phenomena (Dickens 283).

In "Dickens and Acting Women," which is featured in *Dramatic Dickens*, Nina Auerbach argues "Both Smike and the Phenomenon join Dickens's host of damned and distorted souls who are exiled from the light of the sun" (83). Auerbach also states: "The Phenomenon becomes a type of the pathos and mutilation bad fathers and cruel authors inflict on all old children" (83). Mr. Crummles's daughter has no control over her body. She is kept perennially young, uncannily so, for the theatre. This is another reminder that Mr. Crummles and Mr. Squeers have the same capitalistic, patriarchal obsession with exerting control over the bodies of children. Mr. Crummles may not be poisoning his daughter, as Mr. Squeers does to his boys in Dotheboys Hall, but he is engaging in the same kind of regulatory, domineering, and tyrannical behavior over her body that keeps her weak and, perhaps more importantly, dependent. Ninetta Crummles's body is watched, controlled, and restricted. The "system of training" suggests a bureaucratic efficiency (Dickens 283). If Mr. Squeers has a factory of bodies that is collectively forced to comply, conform, and perform, Mr. Crummles has a

similar factory of performing bodies that is problematic, even if it is not demonstrably violent or criminal. The condition of the Phenomenon's body suggests that the Crummles theatre is not an artistic space for benign performance, but an opportunistic industry that demands the commodification and exploitation of innocent bodies.

The treatment of child actors was heavily debated in Victorian culture. In "The Victorian Child, c. 1837-1901," Marah Gubar states:

> As children became more visible on the stage, the question naturally arose: did such work constitute labor? Considerable controversy arose over this issue in the 1880s. Educational activists like Millicent Garrett Fawcett insisted that children under ten should be banned from full-time theatre work as they had been from factories and workshops. Theatre people and other artists, including Carroll and the poet Ernest Dowson, strongly disagreed. Acting was not a labor but an art, they maintained, and children benefited from and enjoyed doing it (5).

In *Nicholas Nickleby,* acting is child labor, an exploitative practice that denies children their agency. Mr. Crummles not only maintains a monopoly over his daughter's body, but he also secures a lifetime of profit at its expense. The Phenomenon's body is engineered to be underdeveloped and that horrifying form of patriarchal and capitalistic abuse is not only sanctioned by society, but celebrated: Her underdeveloped body literally has an audience and a stage in *Nicholas Nickleby.* People pay to witness the uncanny quality of a performer who looks like a child and has the talent of an adult. As is the case with Dotheboys Hall, the spectacle, showmanship, and the theatre of it all conceal a sinister capitalistic scheme to control performing bodies. In revealing that the Phenomenon and her body are meticulously controlled, Dickens dispels the notion that Mr. Crummles is solely a doting father and a

compassionate showman. Like the Kenwigs's daughters, the Phenomenon and her body are contorted for performance. And like the Dotheboys Hall boys, the Phenomenon has no choice but to step up and take the concoction that stifles her body. This is a body that is not her own. Rather, it belongs to her father who, in a conflict of interest so glaring that it becomes a plot point, is her parent, employer, stage manager, and costar. The infantilization and subjugation of the Phenomenon's body convey her commodification in the theatre industry. That she continues to be called "the infant phenomenon" off-stage hints that she is her father's pride and joy not because of natural parental affection, but because she is his prized performer and star attraction (Dickens 283). Mr. Squeers's boys are numbers. The Phenomenon is not Ninetta, a beloved daughter, but a marketing gimmick who, like Sybil in *Dorian Gray*, tragically earns her value and the love of others through her capacity for performance.

Every body that Mr. Crummles comes in contact with is presented as a potential asset: "'He is admirable,' replied the lady. 'An acquisition, indeed'" (Dickens 281). This scene of detached professional assessment is made by Mrs. Crummles in reference to Nicholas, the latest addition to the theatre troupe. Smike's body, The Phenomenon's body, and Nicholas's body are assets to Mr. Crummles. Like Mr. Squeers, Mr. Crummles continues to acquire performing bodies for his theatre:

> 'The seventh addition, Johnson,' returned Mr Crummles, solemnly. 'I thought such a child as the Phenomenon must have been a closer; but it seems we are to have another…'
>
> 'I congratulate you,' said Nicholas, 'and I hope this may prove a phenomenon too.'
>
> 'Why, it's pretty sure to be something uncommon, I suppose,' rejoined Mr Crummles. 'The talent of the other three is principally in combat and serious pantomime. I should

> like this one to have a turn for juvenile tragedy; I understand they want something of that sort in America very much. However, we must take it as it comes. Perhaps it may have a genius for the tight-rope. It may have any sort of genius, in short, if it takes after its mother, Johnson, for she is an universal genius; but, whatever its genius is, that genius shall be developed' (Dickens 594).

Mr. Crummles does not necessarily want more children, but more bodies for his theatre.[39] This scene expands on his strategy of acquisition. Here, he is not a sentimental father revealing that he will soon have a new addition to his large, happy family, but a stage manager gleefully rejoicing in the imminent arrival of a new performer for his theatre. Male bodies in *Nicholas Nickleby* are ravaged by patriarchal and capitalistic forces and constantly threatened with physical violence. The bodies of women are equally commodified in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Mr. Crummles treats his wife's body as a means to an end. Mr. Crummles calls his wife "a very remarkable woman" because she is pregnant (Dickens 594). The industrialization of Mrs. Crummles's body—her body is a factory for more performers—hints that Mr. Crummles loves his wife in part because of how well her body performs. Mr. Crummles's

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[39] In "Image and Reality: The Actress and Society," Christopher Kent argues that from 1830 to around 1850, "The profession was still dominated by theatrical families and it offered little to attract the outsider by way of economic, social, or artistic opportunities" (95). He also states:

> Such families were economic units, maximizing their opportunities and resources and giving mutual support against a society which regarded them as suspiciously as it did the other "rogues and vagabonds," with whom the law had until very recently classified them. Indeed, the very Bohemianism of this way of life was the chief attraction to those outsiders who came within its orbit. This was the world unforgettably caricatured by Thackeray and Dickens in the Snevellici and Crummles families…" (96).

desire to have a child performer in every genre reminds the reader that the theatre incentivizes him to be a father.

Dickens emphasizes the performing body in the Crummles theatre. Consider the melodramatic, humorous[40] scene in which a fellow actor who is jealous of Nicholas's success invites the protagonist on stage to pull his nose:

> 'Object of my scorn and hatred!' said Mr Lenville, 'I hold ye in contempt.'
>
> Nicholas laughed in very unexpected enjoyment of this performance; and the ladies, by way of encouragement, laughed louder than before; whereat Mr Lenville assumed his bitterest smile, and expressed his opinion that they were 'minions'.
>
> 'But they shall not protect ye!' said the tragedian, taking an upward look at Nicholas, beginning at his boots and ending at the crown of his head, and then a downward one, beginning at the crown of his head, and ending at his boots—which two looks, as everybody knows, express defiance on the stage. 'They shall not protect ye—boy!' (Dickens 363).

Once again, a body part takes center stage in *Nicholas Nickleby.* However, this time the body part in question, the nose, is used for farce and humor.[41] The scene is an example of the rampant melodrama of the Crummles theatre.[42] As is typical in the hyper-violent world of

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[40] In *The Dickens Theatre: A Reassessment of the Novels*, Robert Garis links Dickens's theatricality to humor: Anyone who opens one of Dickens's novels, then, is prepared to enter a 'theatre' and to co-operate with the 'theatrical mode' because he knows that he is going to find 'humorous' writing soon and he knows, without consciously defining it as such, that humorous writing is theatrical in nature (40).

[41] For an analysis of humor in *Nicholas Nickleby*, see Malcolm Andrews's *Dickensian Laughter: Essays on Dickens and Humor*.

[42] See Carol Hanbery MacKay's "The Melodramatic Impulse in *Nicholas Nickleby*."

Nicholas Nickleby, a fight between two bodies is promised. However, the bodies here, as evidenced by the tragedian's awareness of an audience, are putting on a show. The overwrought, accusatory language, the body staged and exaggerated for maximum affect, the presence of a raucous, responsive audience who inform the action taking place, and the physical comedy are a loud, boisterous, and entertaining spectacle that reflect the performance philosophy of the Crummles theatre: Less is not more. Only more is more, which is why when Mr. Crummles asks Nicholas to randomly insert bathtubs into a written piece, the emphasis is not on creating a cohesive play, but on putting on an unforgettable show: "'It'll look very well in the bills in separate lines—Real pump!—Splendid tubs!—Great attraction! '" (Dickens 278). The-all-in-good-fun, lively shenanigans of the Crummles theatre are what the traumatized Nicholas needs after experiencing a horrifying theatre that relentlessly performs decay and despair.

A Farwell to the Crummles Theatre

In his public goodbye with Nicholas, Mr. Crummles's theatricality is on full display:

> In fact, Mr Crummles, who could never lose any opportunity for professional display, had turned out for the express purpose of taking a public farewell of Nicholas; and to render it the more imposing, he was now, to that young gentleman's most profound annoyance, inflicting upon him a rapid succession of stage embraces, which, as everybody knows, are performed by the embracer's laying his or her chin on the shoulder of the object of affection, and looking over it. This Mr Crummles did in the highest style of melodrama, pouring forth at the same time all the most dismal forms of farewell he could think of, out of the stock pieces (Dickens 381).

This is a self-indulgent, narcissistic performance on Mr. Crummles's part, a melodramatic flourish of emotion that turns the everyday into a stage. This is less about giving Nicholas a proper sendoff and more about proving his skill as a performer off the stage. This goodbye could have been private and intimate. That Mr. Crummles chooses a public farewell conveys that he is a performer, a showman above all else. Neither spontaneous nor organic, this display of emotion is contrived and orchestrated with an audience in mind. The scene implies that Mr. Crummles's theatricality is just as flamboyant and excessive off the stage as it is on the stage. This is not an act for Mr. Crummles—he is melodramatic in everyday life— but it comes across as such, nonetheless. Like Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, *Nicholas Nickleby* shines a spotlight on characters like Mr. Crummles who instinctively understand that life is a show, a series of different performances given over and over again to various audience members. These characters know how to work an audience, promote themselves, and play emotional beats as needed; they can also turn the everyday into spectacle and stage their bodies for performance. Unlike in *Vanity Fair* and *Dorian Gray* in which theatricality and performance are markers of deception, Crummles's theatricality does not necessarily cast doubt on his interiority or his authenticity. As Easson states, "There is for most people a necessary gap between immediate feelings and behavior, which involve degrees of control and will, none of it therefore pejorative; Crummles is as bad an actor in life as on the stage, yet his heart is good" (143).

Dickens juxtaposes the liveliness and quasi-comradery of the Crummles theatre with the bleak state of affairs in London wherein a powerless Kate is harassed at the theatre. In addition, Nicholas hastily leaves the Crummles theatre with the following melodramatic lament uttered to Mr. Crummles: "'Here, take my hand, and with it my hearty thanks.—Oh!

that I should have been fooling here!'" (Dickens 380). Is the Crummles theatre a paradise in *Nicholas Nickleby*, one that enables Nicholas to escape the hell of London and Yorkshire or is it a purgatory that prevents him from fighting his enemies and eventually finding happiness in the real world? Is Nicholas a fool for agreeing to work at the theatre or is he a fool for leaving the safety of the theatre too soon? [43] How exactly has Nicholas been fooling around? Has he been fooling around with the troupe's actresses? Has the theatre fooled him or has he been fooling himself into thinking he could ignore confronting his enemies? In the Crummles theatre, Nicholas engages in foolish activity and resents himself and the theatre for it. The theatre, as evidenced by Nicholas's "very unexpected enjoyment of this performance" with Mr. Lenville, threatens him with a good time (Dickens 363). The real world, meanwhile, threatens him with actual violence. The theatre of Dotheboys Hall and the Crummles theatre each threaten Nicholas—the former with violence and oppression, the latter with a foolishness that distracts him from a punishing reality in London. Nicholas is surrounded by the prospect of actual death in Dotheboys Hall. Through working in the Crummles theatre, Nicholas joins the land of the living, but he is still just another cog in a dysfunctional machine, a commodified body that performs for a different showman and patriarchal figure, Mr. Crummles.

In Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel, Joseph Litvak examines the Crummles's departure for America:

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[43] As soon as Nicholas leaves the sanctuary of the Crummles theatre, he has a physical altercation in London with Sir Mulberry Hawk, his sister's harasser.

> It is as though, well before the narrative dispatches Crummles and company to America, it had already set up a sort of internal colony within which to contain them. That the account of Nicholas's experiences as a member of the troupe merely constitutes a more or less discrete textual interlude is of course attributable to the novel's loose, episodic structure. But generic or formal considerations alone cannot explain the persistent effect of a rigorous separation between the theatricality of Crummles and his players, on the one hand, and the main interest of the novel—the violent persecutory relations between Nicholas and Ralph Nickleby—on the other. What makes this separation so peculiar, moreover, is that it is hard to tell whether the "utopia" of the theatrical world is thereby being protected from the more extensive, conspicuously *dys*topian realm presided over by Ralph, or vice versa (112-113).

The Crummleses do not interact with the rest of the cast of *Nicholas Nickleby*. The Crummles theatre has its stage and Ralph and Mr. Squeers have theirs in London and Yorkshire respectively. Dickens creates several theatres in *Nicholas Nickleby,* each with their own theatrical characters. Set miles away from the central conflicts in London and Yorkshire, the Crummles theatre is comedic in nature: The Dotheboys Hall theatre, meanwhile, is tragic. Both theatres are steeped in melodrama and are under the management of melodramatic showmen.

Just like Dickens ejects the boys from Dotheboys Hall, he sends the Crummles company to America. While this suggests that *Nicholas Nickleby* does away with its forms of theatre, the theatricality of the novel is not confined to Dotheboys Hall and the Crummles theatre. Nicholas plays Romeo to Madeline Bray in real life shortly after he assumes the role

in the Crummles theatre.[44] He never plays the role of Hamlet in the Crummles theatre, but he plays it in real life with his uncle. Ralph Nickleby, meanwhile, does not set foot on a stage, but he is a figure of melodrama in *Nicholas Nickleby*.[45] Though Dickens partitions his characters, he does not compartmentalize his novel's theatricality. Every character in *Nicholas Nickleby*, whether they are in Ralph's world or the Crummles's world, is theatrical.

The melodramatic bodies of actors in *Nicholas Nickleby* suffer immensely under patriarchy and capitalism. Mr. Squeers and Mr. Crummles, each in their own way, commodify bodies and expect them to perform. The expectations set on the performing bodies of male child actors in *Nicholas Nickleby* interrogate and incriminate the novel's sites of theatre and its figures of capitalism and patriarchy. Mr. Crummles's theatre is not as ruthless, explicit, or damaging in its claiming of the performing body. However, Mr. Crummles participates in the commodification of bodies, a charge that is attributable to *Nicholas Nickleby's* villains. This puts into question Mr. Crummles's seemingly benevolent theatricality. The swath of melodramatic, performing bodies in *Nicholas Nickleby* expose the dangers of the theatre.

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[44] The irony of Nicholas never acting on stage again after leaving the Crummles theatre is that he is a wonderful melodramatic performer in everyday life. He was a melodramatic actor prior to joining the Crummles theatre and remains one after he leaves and begins pursuing Madeline Bray.

[45] Litvak does an insightful reading of Ralph's theatricality on pp. 113 of *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel*.

CHAPTER 2:
"Everybody was in Ecstasy:" [46] Transgressive, Predatory Theatricality and Dangerous Defamiliarization in William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847-1848)

> *All these things filled me with impossible ambitions, producing sometimes an exaltation of feeling positively painful. This was the sort of Fool's Paradise I dwelt in when I went to 'Have my voice tried' at the Canterbury – such sublime imaginings, such sordid realities.*
>
> — Victorian actress and singer Emily Soldene qtd. in Helen Batten's *The Improbable Adventures of Miss Emily Soldene*, 32

> *Humbug—acting? Hang it, she's the nicest little woman in England*.
>
> — George Osborne commenting on Becky Sharp to William Dobbin in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, 277

In William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Becky's theatricality has bared teeth and is out for blood.[47] With her increasingly transgressive theatricality,[48] Rebecca [49] Sharp,

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[46] See pp. 507 and the "A Charade is Acted" chapter of *Vanity Fair*.

[47] Although Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published over a decade after *Vanity Fair's* release, the novel feels Darwinian in its framing of Becky's aggressive approach to ensuring social mobility through theatricality and performance.

[48] I use the term "transgressive theatricality" to suggest that Becky's vice-ridden theatricality is a source of destabilization, subversion, and defiant liberation in *Vanity Fair*. In *Transgressive Theatricality, Romanticism, and Mary Wollstonecraft*, Lisa Plummer Crafton connects the term "transgressive theatricality" to the famous eighteenth century actress, Sarah Siddons, and to Mary Wollstonecraft's writings:

> Siddons functions to alert us to the many roles played by Wollstonecraft in her lifetime, her conscious representation of theater and performance throughout all her texts, and despite her apparent anti-theatricality regarding mandated gender performance, her belief in the transgressive potential of consciously performative self-fashioning (132).

[49] The Online Etymology Dictionary traces the name " Rebecca" to the "biblical wife of Isaac, mother of Jacob and Esau, from Late Latin *Rebecca,* from Greek *Rhebekka,* from Hebrew *Ribhqeh*, literally "connection (compare *ribhqah* "team," from Semitic base r-b-q "to tie, couple, join" (compare Arabic *rabaqa* "he tied fast)."" Devoid of virtue, familial devotion, and religious faith, Thackeray's Becky is a wife, Christian, and mother in name only. And she performs those roles only when it benefits her socially. Unlike the Biblical Rebecca, the role of Thackeray's Becky in *Vanity Fair* is to disrupt, unravel, tear apart, and destroy. Becky's religious name is an example of Thackerayan irony.

the scenery-chewing actress in Thackeray's satirical novel, is presented as a mask-wearing, role-playing fraud and an existential threat that cannot be masked. In a novel that is preoccupied with fraught boundaries—the military advancement of Napoleon and the impressive social success of an English actress with French roots are juxtaposed and depicted as existential threats—theatricality is rampant. What makes theatricality transgressive, threatening, and dangerous in *Vanity Fair*? What are the opportunities of boundless, unrepentant theatricality? How is theatricality weaponized in everyday life? How is theatricality gendered? Is there a relationship between theatricality and morality? *Vanity Fair* poses these questions by introducing a polarizing actress whose theatricality is tantalizing, treacherous, and tyrannical. If Becky Sharp is a danger to society, it is because she is an ambitious, lower-class woman who is ravenous for social success. If she is wicked, monstrous, and animalistic, it is because she is a talented actress who wields theatricality as her most potent and destructive weapon in social warfare. In crafting Becky, Thackeray frames theatricality as an unsettling character flaw and a desirable asset. Additionally, through Becky, Thackeray paradoxically situates theatricality as a source of pleasure and entertainment and a cause of cultural and social destruction.

Chapter 1 of this dissertation explores the precarious status of performing bodies under different forms of theatre, namely the school, the family, and the Crummles theatre. The performing, melodramatic bodies in *Nicholas Nickleby* are endangered by theatricality and performance, even as Dickens positions the Crummles theatre as a benevolent home for stray bodies that have been displaced. Whereas Chapter 1 showcases the violence endured by the threatened bodies of male child actors, Chapter 2 focuses on the actress's body and her transgressive theatricality as the sites of danger. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Nicholas's theatricality

is expressed as shameful. Nicholas leaves the Crummles theatre and does not mention his stint as a working actor to anyone. In *Vanity Fair*, feminized theatricality is established as shameless. This chapter delves into the sexualized body of the Victorian actress, arguing that Becky's theatricality is violent, predatory, and transgressive because she destabilizes Victorian gender roles as well as ideas about female sexuality and identity. In packing a profound existential threat in the petite body of Becky Sharp, Thackeray imagines the Victorian actress as a predatory prowler and a figure of amassed power, volatile metamorphosis, and widespread devastation.

Vice and the Enticing Foreword of *Vanity Fair*

Theatricality and performance in *Vanity Fair* are transgressive in part because they are constantly rendered synonymous with various forms of vice that challenge Victorian cultural values. In *Vice and the Victorians,* Mike Huggins argues that "For the Victorians, vice was a major obsession, a key point of tension and an important cultural continuity" (12). Huggins notes that when Queen Victoria came to power in June 1837, she issued a Proclamation against Vice:

> Queen Victoria's Proclamation's specific examples of vice were largely linked to three dominant themes: sexual immorality, gambling and the drinking of alcohol. It contrasted vice with 'proper' Sunday behavior and thus provided support for the Sunday Observance movement. 'Playing on the Lord's day at dice, cards or any game whatever, either in public or private houses' was blasphemous and to be discouraged. 'All public gaming houses and places, and lewd and other disorderly houses' were to be suppressed. The selling of 'wine, beer or other liquors or receiving or permitting guests' at taverns or other public houses during 'the time of divine service' was also

> mentioned. The Proclamation also linked vice explicitly with 'dissolute, immoral and disorderly conduct.' Such activities were clearly offences against good order and Christianity, hinting vaguely at sexual misbehavior (17).

Vanity Fair in its first page tethers theatricality and performance to the types of vice that Queen Victoria warned against in her Proclamation. In Vanity Fair, where the performance of the Becky and Amelia puppet play takes place, "There is a great quantity of eating and drinking, making love and jilting, laughing and the contrary, smoking, cheating, fighting, dancing, and fiddling" (Thackeray xxxvii). There is no such thing as self-restraint in Vanity Fair. The body is not repressed and temptation is not fought against. *Vanity Fair*, whose name Thackeray derived from John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*,[50] is where the body comes alive in primal, self-destructive, and hedonistic delights. Vanity Fair is a free-for-all wherein sexuality, desire, gluttony, and alcohol are permissible. The sensory excess and sensual physicality of the novel's foreword suggests that *Vanity Fair* welcomes various kinds of seduction and its orgy-esque imagery set up theatricality and performance as socially destructive. Christoph Lindner, using Bakhtin's conceptualization of the carnivalesque, argues that "In effect, Thackeray's foreword to *Vanity Fair* asks us to understand society in the novel as carnivalesque performance, spectacle, and exhibition" (568). The reader becomes an immediate sinner and voyeur through reading Thackeray's carnal foreword, one who

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[50] In *William Makepeace Thackeray*, Richard Salmon argues: "Thackeray tacitly disavows the transcendent moral perspective implied within Bunyan's allegory, reducing the status of his persona to that of a 'quack' amongst 'other quacks'" (50).

continues their descent into debauchery by following the sinful exhibitionist Becky Sharp, a woman whose fall from grace is as sharp as she is and as her last name aptly suggests.

Vanity Fair immediately deepens the connection between vice and theatricality and performance that it establishes in its scintillating foreword; it does so by having its characters visit Vauxhall Gardens early in the novel. Amelia and her future husband, George Osborne, attend Vauxhall with the unattached Becky, William Dobbin, and Jos Sedley, Amelia's brother. Behind the merriment of the activities at Vauxhall is an illicit sexuality that theatricality and performance sanction and embolden. The scenes in Vauxhall share the rambunctiousness of the foreword:

> The fiddlers, in cocked-hats, who played ravishing melodies under the gilded cockle-shell in the midst of the Gardens; the singers, both of comic and sentimental ballads, who charmed the ears there; the country dances, formed by bouncing cockneys and cockneyesses, and executed amidst jumping, thumping, and laughter (Thackeray 50).[51]

There is a staggering bodily looseness and rhythm to the atmosphere in Vauxhall, a vibrant, robust, and tempting liveliness that is reinforced by the plethora of movements and musical sounds.[52] Class distinctions briefly disappear in the scene and the lower-class and the middle class co-exist. The lower-class Becky disappears with the middle-class Jos and the attendees of Vauxhall mix with the working-class musicians. The public performances in Vauxhall

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[51] Perhaps one of the biggest indicators that sex is in the air in the Vauxhall scenes is this passage here in which four words that include "cock" are used in close proximity to words like "ravishing," "thumping," and "jumping" (Thackeray 50).

[52] This chapter does not cover the theatricality of music in *Vanity Fair*. For an analysis on the role of music and opera in *Vanity Fair* and how they inform Amelia and Becky's characters, see Joe K. Law's "The Prima Donnas of *Vanity Fair*."

allow proximity between men and women. Couples can disappear for dalliances and reappear when the performances are over. Not only do theatricality and performance permit lax social behavior between men and women in *Vanity Fair,* but they also provide the perfect cover. The bustle of activity—the performers, the attendees, the laughter, and the dancing—distracts from the immorality, sexuality, and covert desires of the protagonists.

Located in London, Vauxhall was a popular recreational space in the early-to-mid nineteenth century. In "Vauxhall Revisited: The Afterlife of a London Pleasure Garden, 1770–1859," Jonathan Conlin describes the allure of people-watching in Vauxhall:

> Throughout its history, Vauxhall's main appeal lay in its "autovoyeurism:" the practice of seeing others and being seen by them, the opposite of "panopticism." Although autovoyeurism could be enjoyed in many other public spaces in London and elsewhere, under the cover of shopping, artistic and musical exhibitions, or divine service, for example, Vauxhall was different. Here autovoyeurism was the central activity, indulged in consciously and deliberately by men and women of different generations and social classes. It was closely associated with role play and illusion (719).

Thackeray's characters in *Vanity Fair* capitalize on the acceptability of people-watching in Vauxhall. The main characters are not watching the performances, but are instead preoccupied with each other. More than that, Becky, Amelia, Dobbin, and George are invested in sustaining the roles they play and perform for each other.[53] After listing the

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[53] In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, the lines "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players" were famously spoken in a monologue that continues to fascinate literary, performance, and

various attractions at Vauxhall, the Manager of the Performer states, "Captain William Dobbin did not take the slightest notice" (51). Instead of joining in the revelry, the besotted Dobbin carries Amelia's cashmere shawl, foreshadowing his lifelong, self-appointed role as her devoted, underappreciated servant, while also revealing his unreciprocated romantic affection. The Vauxhall scenes are laced with irony and role-playing: George maintains his role as an earnest suitor, a role that he eventually abandons when he briefly ends his betrothal to Amelia and later entertains the possibility of an affair with Becky, his wife's friend. Meanwhile, Becky performs the role of a pining, innocent woman to entrap Jos into marriage. These roles do not last. Becky's villainy becomes more transparent over time. Even Dobbin, who is blindly loyal and a decent man among self-indulgent, amoral men, eventually loses interest in performing the role of Amelia's ally, friend, and servant. The Vauxhall scenes showcase the wide gap and discrepancy between who these characters are and who they pretend to be in public. The masks sometimes falter, the roles change over time, but what remains persistent is the notion that *Vanity Fair's* characters, for better or worse, are lifelong performers in a show that is not always of their choosing or in their control. *Vanity Fair's* characters live and die on stage and though they are terrible performers [54]— they often underestimate their audiences, misinterpret their roles, flub their lines, overplay their hand, and miss their queues—they are the performers that Vanity Fair [55] deserves. In the Vauxhall scenes of *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray underscores the transgressive, bawdy environment in which

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theatre scholars (Act II, Scene VII, lines 146-147 from the Folger Shakespeare). *Vanity Fair* cosigns Shakespeare's theatre metaphor and its worldview.

[54] I call these characters "terrible" to convey that they are both bad performers and amoral people. Becky is an exceptional performer, but a terrible person.

[55] Vanity Fair is the amoral setting of Becky and Amelia's puppet play; it functions as a microcosm for the novel's vapid, hollow, and vicious society.

theatricality and performance thrive, revealing the selfish, amoral pursuits of his characters.

Sex is in the air in the Vauxhall scenes in *Vanity Fair*. It is, after all, "where the most delightful and intimate conversation took place" (Thackeray 52). How intimate the conversation is in a nighttime setting that offers privacy, seclusion, distractions, music, and alcohol to loosen the mind, lips, and body is not expressed in great detail, but it serves as a subtle reminder of *Vanity Fair's* behind the curtain and in front of the curtain dichotomy. This central dichotomy first makes an appearance in the novel's foreword. Just like the characters have different personas, masks, and roles that they adopt in front of the curtain, *Vanity Fair* has an in front of the curtain façade, where cultural boundaries are tested, but not crossed and scandal is hinted at, sometimes quite strongly, but not sensationally exposed, or even confirmed. In a sense, while the characters of *Vanity Fair* alternately role-play and perform, the novel outlines its own relationship with truth-telling by negotiating just how much it can push the envelope by giving readers intermittent peaks behind a curtain that it carefully manages.[56]

In *Performing the Victorian: John Ruskin and Identity in Theater, Science, and Education,* Sharon Aronofsky Weltman argues that John Ruskin, a prominent Victorian cultural critic, was a theatre enthusiast who was troubled by the theatre:

> His pleasure in these theatrical events carries with it a continually suppressed and expressed anxiety—and excitement—that the reality they portray is somehow more

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[56] For an example of how Thackeray achieves this, see my reading of Figure 2 in "Becky's Commodification and the Sexuality of the Victorian Actress" and how I read Thackeray's siren imagery in the "Animalization and Defamiliarization: The Actress as Both Less than and More than Human" section of this chapter.

> real than the world outside, and that the shape-shifting and role playing on stage is a truer representation of identity than the core or "genuine self" (in Mathew Arnold's phrase from his poem "The Buried Life" (19).

Vanity Fair suggests in its characterization of Becky Sharp that identity can be staged not once or twice by accident or circumstance, but over and over again in a single lifetime by sheer determination and choice, leading to multiple, shifting, and overlapping selves and identities whose realness and truthfulness are fluid and questionable. The staging of identity, for many Victorians, was dangerous and antithetical to Victorian values. Walter E. Houghton's *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* explains Victorian ideals:

> Although everyone at times pretends to be better than he is, even to himself, the Victorians were more given to this type of deception than we are. They lived in a period of much higher standards of conduct—too high for human nature. As men were required to support Christianity by church attendance and active charity, and to accept the moral ideals of earnestness, enthusiasm, and sexual purity, the gap between profession and practice, or between profession and the genuine character, widened to an unusual extent (322).

Thackeray satirizes the church-going, sexually pure, and earnest Victorian by publicizing his characters' performances and the multiple roles they play to gain standing in society. The hypocritical characters of *Vanity Fair* are more likely to attend the theatre and public entertainment than church. They are more likely to feign emotions in performance than sincerely experience them. And they are more than likely to weaponize theatricality and performance for financial and social gain than have any of the moral ideals that Houghton documents. Theatricality and performance make everyone an adept liar and hypocrite in

Vanity Fair. And no one in *Vanity Fair* lies with as much finesse and flourish as its sexualized, hypocritical actress, Becky Sharp.

The Scandal of Victorian Theatre and *Vanity Fair's* Private Theatrical Scenes

As a public space littered with the stigmatized bodies of the working-class on and off-stage and the suspected bodies of prostitutes, the Victorian theatre had a lingering image problem. The perception of the Victorian theatre as an unruly public space, much of it steeped in class prejudice, the sexist stereotyping of actresses as prostitutes, and the contempt of mass audiences undermined its ability to be seen as respectable. The Victorian theatre was, for some Victorians and cultural critics, an overcrowded cesspool that did not offer anything of substance. In "The Victorian Theatre as a Home from Home," Hugh Maguire argues that "The pursuit of an elusive 'respectability' encouraged the change of fortune" of the Victorian theatre (107). Maguire states:

> Shifts in staging methods and type of play presented encouraged the revival of fortune. Architecture and decoration played a part, too. The comfort of auditoriums was enhanced. Circulation spaces and lobbies, once the resort of prostitutes, were transformed into locales, which suggested an air of a respectable home. Intimate in scale and 'tastefully' decorated, such spaces were integral to the experience of theatre. They acted as a sensory preamble to the performance (107).

Though the domestication of its space helped sanitize the theatre's image, the scandalous reputation of the Victorian theatre remained a powerful deterrent in keeping respectable

people outside of its sullied doors.[57] Private theatricals gained popularity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century at a time when the theatre and attending it were still far from respectable. In *British Literary Salons of the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, Susanne Schmid discusses Mary Berry's *Fashionable Friends*, a play that "was originally written and performed in the fashionable context of private theatricals, significantly social endeavors, which gave women a role the major patent theaters around 1800 failed to provide" (40). Schmid suggests that private performances "…enabled women to explore the world of the theater while suffering fewer attacks on their reputation" (40). According to Schmid, private theatricals were both private and potentially public:

> They could be exclusive but were not necessarily as private as the label denotes. They often occurred beyond the immediate circle of the family, included friends and neighbors, and, as the reviews some of them received in print publications like *The Times* or *The Morning Post* document, could be brought to the attention of the public (Schmid 40-41).

In *Vanity Fair*, private theatricals are very much public and no less scandalous than what some Victorians would expect to find in the Victorian theatre. *Vanity Fair* suggests that they may even be more scandalous because private theatricals are intimate. Public performances in *Vanity Fair* are sites of vice that threaten class and gender barriers and norms of propriety.

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[57] The theatre, as a public space, was not perceived as safe in the early nineteenth century. It was a place associated with prostitution and public disobedience. In "Riot, Subversion, and Discontent in New Victorian Theatre Scholarship," Tracy C. Davis outlines the significance of the 1809 Old Price Riots, stating:

> The riots were a protest at the monopoly theatres' lost moral (educative) balance between being institutions of entertainment as well as cauldrons of national identity formation during the reign of George III. This was the last English theatre riot of the nineteenth century, but one which signaled a range of anxieties that gradually transformed theatre in the course of the century (308).

See also Marc Baer's *Theatre and Disorder in Late Georgian London*.

Private theatricals in the novel, such as the game of charades that Becky participates in at a lavish, exclusive party, are equally threatening. Becky's first attempt at playing the challenging role of Lady Clytemnestra, a figure of Greek myth, is a spectacular success in part because it is a public spectacle: "The darkness and the scene frightened people. Rebecca performed the part so well, and with such ghastly truth, that the spectators were all dumb, until, with a burst, all the lamps of the hall blazed out again, when everybody began to shout applause" (Thackeray 502). This charades scene is Becky's debut, one that sets her up as the preeminent actress of the British upper-class. However, like most things in *Vanity Fair*, the scene is marked by irony. Becky's success suggests that she is now embraced by the elite, but in fact, she is there as the night's entertainment to be objectified and aestheticized by men who harbor lascivious intentions towards her. Years have passed since Becky's play-acting for drunken artists, but she is still a tawdry actress. The stage is bigger, the stakes are higher, and the setting is grander, but beneath it all lies the same vulgar voyeurism that underpins *Vanity Fair*. Becky is acting for her supper, and even though her audience is wealthier and have higher-class positions, they display the same rowdy behavior that characterize Becky's previous audiences. There is no respectable theatre in *Vanity Fair*. The private theatrical scenes in *Vanity Fair* reinforces the notion that it is not the public or private setting that determines the theatre's respectability, but the nature of theatre itself and the visceral primitiveness it brings out in audiences that assures that it goes without. Becky is not a respectable woman and her acting and the reactions it elicits are anything but respectable.

In *Victorian Theatricals*: *From menageries to melodrama*, Sara Hudston describes religious efforts to affect the public perception of private theatricals:

> As the nineteenth century began, the new evangelical movement lost no time in condemning the stage and was keen to press home what the critic and scholar Marilyn Butler calls 'the link between upper-class immorality and its rage for private theatricals' (Hudston 18).

The private theatrical scenes in which Becky plays Lady Clytemnestra—the charades are held at Lord Steyne's home—never scandalize. They never reveal too much, as is the narrator's admitted preference, but the subtext is clear: Private theatricals are potently sexual. The heightened suspense of the darkness, the anticipation of the drama to come, and the rawness and vitality of Becky's performance lead to a sexually charged atmosphere. What happens when "all is dark" is not elaborated on, just like Becky's affairs are not explicitly stated, but the darkness, which creates a terrifying partition and sense of eroticism between the audience members, is suggestive of conduct unbecoming (502). Among the audience who experience the frightening darkness of Becky's performance circulates desire and arousal. The audience is bound together in the darkness, waiting, wondering, and dreading what comes next. In a state of uncertainty, Becky's private theatrical audience are hyper-aware of their surroundings. Fear is thrilling and dangerous; it jolts the senses and the body in particular. Becky's audience is frightened, but they are also, as indicated by the crush of bodies that meet Becky after her performance is over, sexually aroused by her and the performance that she gives them.

In "The Triumph of Clytemnestra: The Charades in *Vanity Fair*," Maria Dibattista analyzes what charades reveal and what they allude to:

> Charades, then, are never totally gratuitous forms of entertainment. They constitute a mode of verbal double-dealing that involves and often implicates the actors or

> spectators—sometimes both—in the social or psychological reality dramatized. Charades are dumb shows "to catch the conscience of the king" by playing out a deliberately concealed evil, an ignored social danger, or an obscure external menace or private horror. The incriminating potential of charades is emphasized by the disguises and roles adopted by the concealing-revealing performers who enact them. Thus Thackeray identifies the characters in the first series of charades—Colonel Crawley as Agamemnon, Becky as Clytemnestra—but their social identity dissolves, although not completely, into the drama they enact without being technically guilty. Characters thus assume roles in a play whose meaning is made transparent *through* them but is not necessarily made transparent *to* them. Their assigned roles are charged with a characteristic Thackerayan innuendo and equivocation; to repeat the judgment of Colonel Crawley, these performers, if not guilty, are as bad as guilty. And the same may be said of those in complicity with them—the audience of the charades (829).

Like Lady Clytemnestra, a figure of Greek myth who kills her husband,[58] Becky indirectly kills her first husband, Rawdon. He is enraged by her suspected infidelity and dies separated from his wife while serving in a foreign post. Becky is culpable in the scarring of her elderly benefactor and presumed lover, Lord Steyne. And she allegedly plays a role in killing Jos in order to claim his life insurance policy. Theatricality in *Vanity Fair* is not merely sexual. Like *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Dorian Gray*, *Vanity Fair* positions theatricality as dangerous in part because it has a violent nature. Playing the role of Lady Clytemnestra is Becky's rehearsal for

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[58] See A.H. Sommerstein's "Again Klytaimestra's Weapon."

her future role in *Vanity Fair*. Becky revisits the role of Lady Clytemnestra in real life when she allegedly plays a role in Jos's death.[59] At playing the role of dangerous woman and murderous wife, Becky is a natural. In the charades scene, however, Becky is defamiliarized. Becky is depicted as a woman possessed, giving a performance so riveting, spellbinding, and powerful that it is described as harboring "such ghastly truth" (Thackeray 502). Her awe-inspiring theatricality, which makes her simultaneously monstrous and beautiful in the charades scenes, unnerves and emboldens, frightens and overwhelms, titillates and dissipates "like an apparition" (502). Becky's performance is a revelation that slips into a nightmare and vice versa.

Becky's appearance as a ghostly figure further positions her as a liminal character: She is both the sublime and the erotic, the summoner of Lady Clytemnestra and the summoned—she is a coveted guest at Lord Steyne's private theatrical and the central entertainment. The charades scenes center Becky as a sexual figure in *Vanity Fair*: "There was a ball after the dramatic entertainments, and everybody pressed round Becky as the great point of attraction of the evening" (Thackeray 507). The image of "everybody pressed round Becky" is quite evocative, hinting that she is an in-demand commodity (Thackeray 507). Why must the guests press around Becky like bodies in heat? At first, the adulation and mass attention suggest that she has transcended into a figure worthy of reverence. This is another example of Thackerayan irony. Becky's social success and fame, brought on by her affinity for theatricality and performance, make her untouchable—she reaches a status that protects her

[59] See the illustration entitled "Becky's Second Appearance in the Character of Clytemnestra" on pp. 678 of *Vanity Fair*.

from many of her critics and scandals. However, at the zenith of that fame, she is very much tangible and touchable, a sexualized body that can be pressed against presumably for pleasure.

Becky's Commodification and the Sexuality of the Victorian Actress

Figure 2. Becky entertains her father's friends (Thackeray 15).

Victorian women were expected to express their sexuality within the confines of marriage, never publicly, vocally, or passionately. Victorian actresses posed a danger to the expectations imposed on Victorian women, both because their work was commonly associated with prostitution and because they were seen as sexual beings on stage. In *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture*, Tracy C. Davis states:

> Logistic evidence shows that identifications of the lower theatrical ranks as prostitutes were erroneous. Open prostitution for any type of female performer was out of the question, as theatrical and prostitution districts were one and the same and recognition by a manager meant instant dismissal without a recommendation (78).

Davis suggests "Considering actresses and prostitutes as parallel rather than convergent professions is a useful strategy for dealing with the morass of prejudice and soft evidence" (Davis 81). She also outlines the overlaps between acting and prostitution:

> Both acting and prostitution are erroneous 'professions.' They feature none of the self-regulatory controls, educational qualifications, or social status of 'The Professions.' Nevertheless, no other occupations could be so financially rewarding for single, independent Victorian women of outgoing character, fine build, and attractive features. The only job qualifications for prostitution were being of the female gender and being willing enough to give sexual services for cash. Talent, ability, training, and even beauty were dispensable. The stage was usually more demanding: good looks were a definite asset and training in speech, dance, or music was usually necessary for steady work, though the wages of a completely unskilled, unattractive but able supernumerary could keep body and soul together (84).

Thackeray's fictional representation of the Victorian actress has the loftier accomplishments that, using Davis's criteria, make her an ideal candidate for the stage—in addition to being a gifted actress and singer with impressive stage presence, Becky is beautiful, bilingual, and eloquent. However, Becky's theatricality is constantly conflated with and problematically reduced to prostitution. Thackeray tethers the Victorian actress's work to her body and

prostitution. Throughout the novel, Becky is on her knees and back in positions that demonstrate the physicality and sexuality of her theatrical performances. In Figure 2, for example, Becky is slightly reclining while performing with dolls that entertain her father's unsavory friends. She is not completely on her back. A pornographic illustration like that would not have been fit to print in the Victorian novel. Other forms of cultural production, however, could and did use the figure of the actress for Victorian pornographic content. Davis's *The Actress in Victorian Pornography* analyzes how images of Victorian actresses were incorporated into printed erotic books, illustrated weekly serials, and photographs. Drawn by Thackeray, the illustration in Figure 2 is perhaps both a satirical reference to Victorian actresses in pornographic print culture and a diluted, less provocative contribution to that culture.[60] Thackeray makes the illustration illicit enough by making Becky, who at this point in the narrative is a teenager, comfortably lean back and appear sexually available. Mirroring the manner in which Becky entices men with coded words and actions, Thackeray teases the reader with a suggestive illustration that signals Becky's burgeoning sexuality. Are the men impressed by her mimicry of Miss Pinkerton? Are they fascinated by Becky's humor and talent? Becky's mimicry, as the narrator suggests, "formed the delight of Newman Street, Gerard Street, and the artists' quarter," but they are delightful not simply because they are innocuously entertaining (Thackeray 14). Figure 2 conveys that theatrical performance is a weak pretense for intimacy and sexual desire. Becky is outnumbered in the scene four-to-one. And though one of the men is her father, Becky is depicted as a sexual figure. The men in the

[60] Davis argues that "These periodicals were definitely entertainment for men" (305). Through his illustration, Thackeray reduces Becky to tawdry entertainment, making the reading public complicit in the commodification and fetishization of Becky Sharp.

illustration are intently watching Becky's dolls, but they are also inspecting Becky herself. She is the doll they came to see. The mimicry act is simply the warm-up for the real act and main show: The objectification, commodification, and sexualization of Becky Sharp. This is not coincidently the same extended act that the reader is invited to witness through reading *Vanity Fair*.

The sexualized female body meeting the welcoming, fervent male gaze is a recurring theme in *Vanity Fair.* Becky, however, is not a victim, but an aggressor. She controls the male gaze that she subjects herself to. Becky is smiling, leering, and appreciative as the older men tower over her in Figure 2. These men become Becky's dolls, her first collection of men that she lures with theatricality. Becky's collection of docile male dolls that willingly and blindly submit themselves to her authority grows as she becomes a better actress.[61] George, Rawdon, Jos, and Lord Steyne are part of her rotating doll collection that she plays with, discards, and returns to whenever it is convenient for her. The men in Becky's life are play-things that, like the dolls that are physically in her hands when she performs in Figure 2, she twists to her will and uses for social gain, not unlike the way the Manager of the Performance exploits the Becky doll. In becoming a doll—she performs for the pleasure of men who are not-so-secretly coveting her body—Becky transforms men into the precise object that they reduce her to. [62]

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[61] Throughout *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray associates Becky with the figure of Napoleon. Becky's theatricality is tyrannical, threatening, and terrorizing. Napoleon has an army of men to fight his battles and Becky has her army of loyal men that she weaponizes openly in social warfare. She has Lord Steyne paying for son's education and her expenses. She manipulates Jos into thinking she harbors affection for him. And she uses Rawdon to pass as respectable.

[62] Everyone is a doll in *Vanity Fair* and each puppet has a puppet-master. George is at the mercy of his father. Jos, Lord Steyne, and Rawdon are at Becky's service. Dobbin is Amelia's tattered doll who remains by her side no matter how many times she overlooks his love and loyalty. And Miss Crawley has a family of puppets who sycophantically follow her orders so that they may secure her massive fortune. Becky is herself a doll, one who has her own puppet-master, the ever-present Manager of the Performance.

Becky is literally beneath the men in Figure 2. This is a blatant sexual position, but it is also an ironic staging of power and dominance. Becky is smarter and more cunning than these wayward, drunken men. She, metaphorically speaking, is above them in terms of intelligence, but she plays with dolls and lets herself be a doll for their entertainment. The scene reinforces the seediness and transactional nature of theatricality and performance in *Vanity Fair*. Becky's sexualized body and her singular [63] femininity and theatricality in a male-dominated space is evocatively interlaced with dolls, objects that are to-this-day one of the most iconic symbols of girlhood.

Prior to earning critical and commercial success with *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray was a satirist whose work appeared in *Punch Magazine*. [64] His work did not shy away from social criticism, yet he, like all Victorian writers, had to be mindful of censorship.[65] In *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England*, Steven Marcus showcases the role that censorship had in shaping the techniques of Victorian novelists:

> There is no doubt that the Victorian conventions of censorship had a severely limiting effect on the range of the novel. Having accepted censorship on explicit sexual statements, however, the Victorian novelists had to find less direct means of

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[63] I play with the various meanings of "singular" here. I am alluding to the fact that Becky is a single girl in a room with four men. She is single as in she is the only girl in the room and single as in unmarried. She is also singular because she is exceptional. Becky is an exceptional actress and an uncommon woman. Unlike Amelia, Becky defies gender and social norms.

[64] Frank Palmeri argues that "In *Vanity Fair*, whose serial publication overlapped for two months with that of *Snobs of England*, and which shares the names of some characters with the earlier work, Thackeray still assumes the role of serious lay preacher, the satiric moralist whose representation of society does not spare conventional pieties" (768). See also John W. Dodds's "Thackeray as a Satirist Previous to *Vanity Fair*."

[65] Wilde's *Dorian Gray* was censored prior to its publication. See Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

> communicating the sexual component in the situations they described; and any one at all familiar with the fiction of the period knows that these means were very much in use (113).

Thackeray does not redact in *Vanity Fair* as much as he redirects through language. In formulating Becky's plural, contradictory, and complex roles as an in-demand actress, Thackeray employs innuendo, subtext, double-entendres, metaphors, and relentless sexual imagery. What cannot be said openly in *Vanity Fair* is repeatedly signaled and implied. There are numerous sex scenes in *Vanity Fair* in which the eroticism is a whispered voice whose cadence is regulated by Thackeray's use of language. Though Thackeray could not openly reference sex, he could point to Becky's lascivious dialogue, her slinky behavior with men, and contort her body into sexual positions. Even Becky's last name is a code for sex and sexuality. In naming his heroine Becky Sharp, Thackeray highlights her torrid sexuality. Becky's last name does not merely inform the reader that she is clever, tenacious, and resourceful, but that she is capable of penetrating the upper-class society that poverty and class have denied her access to. If Amelia's last name suggests submission and frigidity [66]—the sedateness implied in Sedley does not exactly scream sexual pleasure—Becky's last name evokes sexuality by promising pleasure. Becky's last name, as penetrative as it sounds,

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[66] Amelia's frigidity is not explicit. However, there are enough signs that, unlike Becky, she is not tapped into her sexuality. Amelia's amorous husband, George, is bored of her during their honeymoon and pursues an affair with Becky soon after. Amelia rejects romantic entanglements after her husband's death and remains a widow until she marries Dobbin, her platonic friend, over a decade later. Amelia maintains her widow status because she is devoted to her husband's memory, but the ease with which she does so—she is never tempted to remarry and becomes quite overcome with anxiety when men declare a romantic interest in her—hint that she is not necessarily interested in sex. This is juxtaposed with Becky whose sexuality is vibrant and flagrant from the time she is a titled pupil and teenager in Miss Pinkerton's academy.

intentionally places her and the theatricality she weaponizes as sexual. The eroticism and phallic-centric nature of her last name also inverts and complicates Victorian gender dynamics. Becky is the one who penetrates and the one who leads. In her marriage to Rawdon, Becky is the strategic thinker and leader. In her relationship with Jos, Becky is the aggressor. And in her relationship with Lord Steyne, she exerts almost tyrannical power, despite the fact that he is a wealthy gentleman and she is not in rank or behavior a lady.

Theatricality is addictive and seductive in *Vanity Fair* and the reader cannot help but wait for the climax. Becky's theatricality is an exercise in delayed forms of sexual gratification. The actress's flirtatious, innuendo-driven conversations are performances that bring pleasure to Becky and her male audience: They serve as the night's entertainment, while also masking and promising illicit sexual pleasure. At one of her late-night house parties, for example, Becky flashes her sexualized theatricality through rhetoric rather than exposing parts of her body. And this strategy is just as successful in securing male attention:

> 'What *can* you want with a shepherd's dog?' the lively little Southdown continued.
>
> 'I mean a *moral* shepherd's dog,' said Becky, laughing, and looking up at Lord Steyne.
>
> 'What the devil's that?' said his lordship.
>
> 'A dog to keep the wolves off me,' Rebecca continued. 'A companion.'
>
> 'Dear little innocent lamb, you want one,' said the marquis; and his jaw thrust out, and he began to grin hideously, his little eyes leering towards Rebecca (Thackeray 368).

Becky is boldly making love to men right in front of her oblivious husband. This is a theatrical performance steeped in sexual innuendo, one that begins with Becky telling her husband that she needs a shepherd's dog. While her husband is literally gambling away their finances, Becky is figuratively gambling, risking the limited and precarious social currency

she has by pursuing men with her theatricality. Becky demonstrates her showmanship by enticing her male audience. Her husband is not her intended audience. He is simply the vehicle and pretense for starting the conversation. Becky throws her intended audience a bone, doing so by initiating a tantalizing conversation that is about dogs. In this scene, the men are Becky's dogs and they pick up the scent of their master: She promises them a treat in the form of a pleasurable conversation, and they follow her and the sexual trail of the conversation like dogs in heat. The dog imagery that Thackeray deploys is compelling because it demonstrates the dog-eat-dog mentality of *Vanity Fair*, wherein Becky, for a particular time at least, is top dog; it also expands the animalization and defamiliarization rhetoric that Thackeray associates with Becky and her theatricality. It is ironic that Becky, who is described as inhuman and inhumane at various points in the narrative, uses a dog metaphor to explain her need for protection: Becky is the dog with the biggest bite in *Vanity Fair* and with her theatricality, she expertly marks Lord Steyne as her latest territory.

Becky's saucy conversation is about attracting the biggest dog in the room. Southdown is a puppy when compared to Lord Steyne. Becky understands this, so she coyly responds to Southdown, but ever the show-woman, she directs her response to Lord Steyne. The scene reaches its climax with Lord Steyne sexually satisfied. Lord Steyne's leering eyes, thrusting jaw, and ugly grin combined with the image of Becky looking up at him suggests that a sexual exchange has taken place. The scene, like nearly every scene in which theatricality and performance manifest themselves in *Vanity Fair*, is transactional. Becky makes it known that she is sexually available and Lord Steyne responds enthusiastically and efficiently. Metaphorically, the two have sex like animals: quickly, unsentimentally, and in

public. The allusion to a physical consummation between Lord Steyne and Becky hints that Becky's banter with men is foreplay.

Becky is a wolf in sheep's clothing yet Lord Steyne calls her "'little innocent lamb'" arguably because he knows that Becky is playing with him. Lord Steyne seemingly wants to be played with by a woman who is fascinatingly baiting him by positioning herself as both hunter and hunted (Thackeray 368). The scene is a high-stakes cat-and-mouse game and Lord Steyne is enjoying not only being toyed with, but the play that Becky is orchestrating for his benefit. That he finds sexual gratification after teasingly calling Becky "'little innocent lamb'" suggests that he is in on the act (Thackeray 368). Becky allows Lord Steyne to be the big, predatory wolf to her fragile lamb. Her performance of female submission makes Lord Steyne feel like a man, culminating in a "jaw thrust" that ends their sexual encounter and role-playing (Thackeray 368). In drawing the reader's attention to lambs, dogs, and wolves, Thackeray underscores the scene with primal sexuality. If Thackeray set the party scene the middle of the day, it would perhaps seem less insidious, erotic, and transgressive. However, this is a conversation that takes place "very late one night" (Thackeray 367). Just in case the sexually coded and loaded conversation is not apparent enough, it occurs late at night when men and women have sex.

There are no women present to give the night-time gathering a sense of legitimacy and propriety, but the presence of men is a familiar stage for Becky. This is Becky's late-night after-show and the disproportionate male-to-female ratio, as it does in Figure 2, once again serves as the narrator's confession of Becky's sins. Becky's theatricality is not all talk and no action. In Figure 2, she puts her body into her theatrical performance. In the late-night party, she applies pressure and provides men with release through innuendo. There is an element of

danger and suspense to this seduction. It is taboo not only because it is between two married people, but because it is happening in public. Thackeray creates a scene crackling with exhibitionism and lust. Lord Steyne could be caught, metaphorically speaking, with his pants down while Becky edges and ultimately finishes him off. The reader, primed to be a voyeur from the opening pages of *Vanity Fair,* is made to watch the erotic scene between Becky and Lord Steyne and consider the way in which theatricality and performance are once again framed as transgressive and transactional.

Numerous scenes in *Vanity Fair* feature Becky in sexually provocative positions that conflate theatricality with prostitution. Why is Becky frequently on her knees for men who are not her husband? There are several significant scenes in which Becky is all-too-comfortable falling to her knees in the name of theatricality and performance. That she does so regularly hints that falling to her knees is a staged response that is part of her eclectic acting repertoire and range, a manipulative theatrical strategy that has been workshopped and rehearsed to garner a particular reaction from her male audience members. For example, when the actress's elderly employer proposes marriage to her, Becky summons melodramatic speech and actions that climax with her falling to her knees:

> 'Oh, sir! it would be the pride of my life to go back to Queen's Crawley, and take care of the children, and of you as formerly, when you said you were pleased with the services of your little Rebecca. When I think what you have just offered me, my heart

> fills with gratitude—indeed it does. I can't be your wife; sir; let me—let me be your daughter' (Thackeray 145). [67]

Depicted in Figure 3, the proposal catches Becky off-guard and forces her to veer off-script; it threatens to disrupt the actress's ongoing performance with Sir Pitt's sister with whom she resides. And it challenges her established role as a humble, unassuming servant who is indebted to the Crawley family. Who can Becky be in this moment? She certainly cannot be herself. If she reveals too much and surrenders the information that she is married to Sir Pitt's younger son, Rawdon, she exposes herself as a schemer. If she says nothing at all and rejects this advantageous proposal, she risks the goodwill she has earned with Sir Pitt and his family. In making Becky sweat under the spotlight, Thackeray tests the strength of her theatricality. Will she break character? Does she understand what kind of theatrical performance the proposal scene requires from her? Can her acting remain undetected? Can she put on a persuasive performance? Becky's melodramatic monologue to Sir Pitt is both a masterclass in improvisational acting and a showcase of Thackeray's understanding of situational, dramatic, and verbal irony. The proposal scene is one of the most theatrical scenes in the novel—it includes a melodramatic speech from an anguished heroine, the hyperbolic language and shocking plot twists of melodrama, overcome audience members, an actress fighting to secure the best role she has ever had, and an illustration that is equally theatrical. Though the situation is delicate—this is a make-or-break live performance for Becky—Thackeray's humorous ironizing undercuts the suspense of the scene's theatricality and performance:

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[67] Becky flirts with all the Crawley men. She could have been her husband's stepmother. And had she set her attention on the engaged eldest son, she could have been her husband's sister-in-law.

Becky displays a sense of decorum and tact in the proposal scene when she and the incorrigible Sir Pitt have none. She professes that "'it would be the pride of my life to go back to Queen's Crawley'" when in fact the place bores her to the point where, earlier in the novel, she writes a withering letter about it to Amelia (Thackeray 145). She claims to have a desire to "'take care of the children'" when in reality children under her care are habitually neglected. She leaves the Crawley daughters, for example, to their own devices and her own child to fend for himself while she does the same. (Thackeray 145). She also references her grateful heart, but her callousness and treacherous nature indicate that she is heartless. The only factually true statement uttered by Becky is the following line: "'I can't be your wife, sir'" (Thackeray 145). This is a legally valid utterance, a moment of truth in a theatrical performance that is comical in its irony: Sir Pitt is trying to make an honest woman out of a pathologically dishonest woman; he is unknowingly proposing to his daughter-in-law. And he is on his knees like a naïve, hopelessly in love young man when, in reality, he is a selfish and contemptable aging patriarch.

Figure 3. Sir Pitt proposes to Becky (Thackeray 143).

The sight of a baronet on his knees before a glorified servant is ironic. At the same time, the scene is tinged with sexuality. Thackeray knows how to write a scene brimming with sexual subtext in which men and women are fully clothed, but their sexuality flagrantly exposed. Though the proposal scene does not reach the sexual heights of Becky's nighttime party or her performance of Lady Clytemnestra, it is charged with sexuality. Becky and Sir Pitt are alone and when he proposes, he does not offer emphatic declarations of love, but a short, matter-of-fact statement of one-sided sexual desire: "'I tell you I *want* you." (Thackeray 143). Thackeray italicizes the word "want" to convey physical yearning. Want is precisely the feeling that Becky triggers in men. Becky does not receive promises of ardent love and lifelong devotion. Those sincere dedications are reserved for Amelia who maintains the loyal love of an honest man who waits over a decade for her. Instead, Becky receives the wavering

sexual fascination of several morally undesirable men who deposit their sexual energies on her:

> 'Say yes, Becky,' Sir Pitt continued. 'I'm an old man, but a good'n. I'm good for twenty years. I'll make you happy, zee if I don't. You shall do what you like; spend what you like; and 'av it all your own way. I'll make you a zettlement. I'll do everything reglar. Look year!' and the old man fell down on his knees and leered at her like a satyr (Thackeray 143).

Note the transactional language embedded in Sir Pitt's proposal. He, by his own admission, wants Becky and is willing to make concessions that do not coincide with his character to secure her hand in marriage. Miserly by nature, Sir Pitt promises Becky happiness and financial freedom and frivolity. This is not a potential arrangement based on romantic love, but a marriage of convenience wherein sex and money are negotiated and exchanged for Becky's services. Even when she is given a legitimate marriage proposal, Becky is inadvertently described as a prostitute. Sir Pitt wants what he cannot have. Becky is too young for him; she is from a lower class. She works for his sister. (And though he does not know it yet, she is married to his son.) Still, Sir Pitt feels entitled to Becky because he can pay for her as if she is, at best, property, and, at worst, a prostitute. Thackeray further figures Becky as a prostitute by having her declare to Sir Pitt, "'…you were pleased with the services of your little Rebecca'" (Thackeray 145).

The tacit sexuality of the proposal scene explodes when Sir Pitt falls down on his knees, alluding to oral sex. Thackeray strengthens the allusion to oral sex when he describes Sir Pitt as a "satyr" (Thackeray 143). He does not end Sir Pitt's proposal with a solemn vow of love, but with a provocative, telling image of sexual deviance. A figure of Greek myth, the

satyr is associated with sexuality activity. In "Sexy Beast: The *Barberini Faun* as an Object of Desire," Amanda Herring states:

> While in the Archaic and Classical periods the satyrs were fairly consistently represented as pleasure-seeking, ithyphallic, donkey-human hybrids, in the Hellenistic period their depictions became more varied, and sculptors had begun exploring other aspects of the creatures' personalities (36).

The satyr simile conveys Sir Pitt's brutishness and his crass sexual posing for Becky. In making Sir Pitt drop to his knees and leer at Becky "like a satyr," Thackeray articulates the baronet's overcompensation (Thackeray 143). Sir Pitt is not a young man nor a particularly athletic one. The show of male virility is ironic. Sir Pitt could never keep up with Becky sexually. That he leers at Becky suggests that he, like Lord Steyne who ogles her at a party, views her as a sexual object.

While Victorian stage melodramas used heroes and damsels-in-distress as archetypes, Thackeray's melodramatic proposal scene subverts that tradition. Through Becky, Thackeray inverses the female damsel-in-distress and the masculine hero archetype: Sir Pitt appears like a knight-in-shining-armor to rescue his damsel-in-distress from the clutches of his domineering sister who he believes would cast Becky aside. However, he ironically is the one in need of rescuing, telling Becky that Queen's Crawley does not function properly without her. Becky must play the role of the damsel to Sir Pitt. The role of damsel-in-distress does not come naturally for Becky. Unlike Amelia who is the narrative's damsel-in-distress and is constantly waiting for men to save her, Becky regularly saves herself through theatricality and performance. Becky is both woman enough to attract men and man enough to make her own

way in the world. Sir Pitt, however, needs Becky to feel like a man. He also needs Becky to be the woman in his home and in his bed:

> 'I say agin, I want you,' Sir Pitt said, thumping the table. I can't git on without you. I didn't see what it was till you went away. The house all goes wrong. It's not the same place. All my accounts has got muddled agin. You *must* come back. Do come back. Dear Becky, do come' (Thackeray 143).

The disorientation and disorder at Queen's Crawley are not simply rooted in the absence of a matriarch; they are the product of pent-up sexual frustration. In his declaration to Becky, Sir Pitt thumps the table in a sign of redirected sexual aggression. He also repeats the word "come" three times in a row, while affectionately noting Becky's name. The double meaning and repetition of the word "come" hints that Sir Pitt is not only imploring Becky to return to Queen's Crawley, but that he is begging for a sexual release that only she can provide. The borderline delirium in which he reiterates that she should come conveys the extent of his sexual frustration. Unable to physically make love to Becky—they are unmarried and he is too old—Sir Pitt performs to completion through words. The sexual politics of the proposal scene are explored in Sir Pitt's slippage from a lovesick suitor to a shrewd employer. Before he proposes marriage, Sir Pitt informs Becky:

> 'You've said so these three months, Becky,' replied Sir Pitt. 'and still you go hanging on to my sister, who'll fling you off like an old shoe, when she's wore you out. I tell you I *want* you. I'm going back to the Vuneral. Will you come back. Yes or no?' (Thackeray 143).

This is both an ultimatum from an employer to his employee and a confession of taboo desire. The shoe simile suggests that Sir Pitt considers Becky a disposable object with a limited shelf;

it also ties Becky to the material world, suggesting that she, like a shoe, can easily slip out of fashion, which she does eventually when she becomes a pariah later in the novel. Sir Pitt's harsh shoe simile is a reminder of Becky's precarious social status. The jarringly unromantic, crude simile aligns with Sir Pitt's vulgarity and that of the woman he is speaking to. The whiplash of the scene—Sir Pitt threatens, woos, begs, insults, praises and makes love to Becky—points to his desperation to have her by any means necessary.

Sir Pitt's desperate plea to Becky is cloaked in the language of prostitution. His unflattering shoe simile is exacerbated when he mentions that Miss Crawley is capable of wearing Becky out. Prostitutes who have a high body count can be described as worn down and or worn out. Sir Pitt is a hypocrite who is guilty of wearing Becky out in his anxious, melodramatic proposal. Through his prostitution-evoking rhetoric, Sir Pitt metaphorically debases Becky. His offer to do the gentlemanly thing straight after—he proposes marriage—suggests that he has had his fill of Becky and is all-too-willing to pay the price for it. Sir Pitt mixes business with pleasure in his proposal to Becky, joining the list of men in *Vanity Fair* who develop a taste for Becky and cannot get enough.

After Becky carefully rejects Sir Pitt's proposal, she mirrors him by dropping down to her knees:

> Saying which, Rebecca went down on *her* knees in a most tragical way, and taking Sir Pitt's horny black hand between her own two (which were very pretty and white, and as soft as satin), looked up in his face with an expression of exquisite pathos and confidence, when—when the door opened, and Miss Crawley sailed in (Thackeray 145).

As previously stated, Becky goes down on her knees repeatedly in *Vanity Fair*. The sexual position is often used by Becky for bargaining power. She begs for consideration, compassion, and mercy from men by going down on her knees. Here, Becky goes down on her knees to humble herself in front of Sir Pitt. She has just rejected a man above her station. To balance the scales and redistribute power, Becky makes it so that she is beneath him. While she cannot reciprocate his affection or fulfill his wishes, she can close out the scene with a strong parallel—he proposed by going down on his knees—that provides symmetry and closure to Sir Pitt by mirroring his body. Letting him down easy involves going down on him. When Sir Pitt falls to his knees, it is a marriage proposal that is depicted as a sex act. When Becky goes down on her knees, the allusion to sex is still present—Thackeray draws the reader's attention to Sir Pitt's horny hand—but she does not return the favor, so-to-speak, but opts for a false, theatrical gesture of female humility.

The connection between Becky's theatricality and sexuality is further suggested in the actress's tumultuous relationship with George, Amelia's wayward husband:

> She had often called him a horrid dissipated wretch, and threatened to tell Emmy of his wicked ways and naughty extravagant habits. She brought his cigar and lighted it for him; she knew the effect of that manoeuvre, having practised it in former days upon Rawdon Crawley (Thackeray 234).

Becky resents George, but she enjoys teasing him with a phallic symbol that arouses him. When she lights George's cigar, the figurative smoke in the air—-the intimacy, sensuality, and sexual tension arising from the seductive act itself—speaks to a level of socially unsanctioned desire that is transgressive and dangerous because both George and Becky are married to other people. The flirty cigar scene is a metaphor for unfulfilled sexual desire.

Married to the sexually unadventurous Amelia, George finds sexual pleasure in innuendo with Becky while on his honeymoon, no less. The cunning actress knows what to do with a cigar and the contemporary reader knows what a cigar represents. Thanks to psychoanalysis, cigars are not just cigars, despite Freud's claim that "Sometimes a good cigar is just a good cigar" (Freud qtd. in Meltzer 215). In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud states: "All elongated objects, sticks, tree-trunks, and umbrellas (on account of the stretching-up which might be compared to an erection! all elongated and sharp weapons, knives, daggers, and pikes, are intended to represent the male member" (233). Even if one agrees with Freud's claim that a cigar is occasionally devoid of deeper meaning, that is not the case in the honeymoon scene. The sexual nature of Becky's theatricality conveys that the cigar is a prop in her sexual performance for George. Subsequently, the cigar itself represents male anatomy. George's cigar in Becky's skilled hand produces an effect on him because it is brimming with sexual subtext. This is George's honeymoon, a time in which he is both sexually active and socially permitted to explore his sexuality. That he is drawn to Becky, a woman who is unavailable and forbidden to him, indicates his sexual dissatisfaction with Amelia . Becky is consistently the woman that the men of *Vanity Fair* turn to for sexual satisfaction and favors. While Becky is *Vanity Fair's* most impressive actress, she is also its most in-demand sexual fantasy.

The audacious public foreplay that is the cigar scene indicates Becky's comfort with her own sexuality. Becky does not wait for George to woo her. Like she does with all her male suitors, Becky inverses gender roles. She pursues George, putting on a theatrical performance that is both sexual and sexy. Throughout *Vanity Fair*, Becky, on her back, knees, and with her hands, emphasizes her bold sexuality and intertwines it with her theatricality. When she is lighting George's cigar, for example, she does not come across as a naïve

heroine, but as a vixen who knows what men want. As Peter J. Capuano states in "At the Hands of Becky Sharp: (In)Visible Manipulation and *Vanity Fair*," "George comes to dislike Amelia's passive (and perhaps asexual) nature most at exactly those moments when it is juxtaposed with Becky's sexually-charged hands" (176). Becky appears as a woman fully in charge of her sexual agency. Amelia may be too sheltered to understand the significance and implications of lighting a man's cigar, but Becky knows—she has been around men all her life. In lighting the cigar, Becky issues a sexually laced invitation, one that George follows up on later in the novel. That the Manager of the Performance calls this a maneuver that Becky has practiced on Rawdon suggests that lighting a cigar is a seduction strategy that she has rehearsed and incorporated into her theatricality.

In "The Seductiveness of Female Duplicity in *Vanity Fair*," Lisa Jadwin argues that "Becky spends years perfecting her technique, learning to deploy double-discourse in two primary ways: as a trap and as a weapon. Her "trap" mode is a carefully choreographed confidence game designed to evoke and exploit a dupe's predictable reaction" (665). George is Becky's mark in the cigar scene, responding uncritically to her move. The rehearsed gesture would be a trap if Becky were genuinely interested in ensnaring him. Instead, with George, Becky plays with her food, testing her ability to perform and prey on a new mark. George is not much of a challenge. After Becky lights his cigar, he seeks her out, unaware that this is a game for Becky, one in which he is not big game nor a prize, but fresh meat for her insatiable, predatory theatricality. In latching Becky to a phallic symbol that leaves very little to the imagination, Thackeray suggests that Becky is uninhibited and transgressive in her theatricality.

Acting as Social Currency and Social Disruption

Becky escapes Sir Pitt's awkward, ill-timed marriage proposal by doing what she does best: Acting her way out of trouble. (Acting, ironically, is the precise practice that often gets her into trouble.) When Becky is accused of cheating on her husband, she delivers a tour-de-force performance for Sir Pitt that also has her falling to her knees:

> 'His [Rawdon's] suspicions were excited,—the dreadful scene took place between my lord and my cruel, cruel Rawdon,—and, oh, my God, what will happen next? Pitt, dear Pitt! pity me, and reconcile us!' And as she spoke she flung herself down on her knees, and bursting into tears, seized hold of Pitt's hand, which she kissed passionately (Thackeray 540).

Prior to this display of melodrama, Becky tells her brother-in-law that she entertained Lord Steyne's attention to secure Sir Pitt a peerage and gain her husband a stable occupation. The confession stops short of admitting a quid pro quo relationship, but it further hints that Becky is a loose actress in a transactional relationship with a patron. In her melodramatic speech to Sir Pitt, the son of the deceased baronet whose marriage proposal she rejects earlier in the novel, Becky sets the scene as if she is a playwright. She contextualizes the scene, introduces the players, defines the stakes, and makes Sir Pitt an instrumental part of the action. In calling real events "'the dreadful scene,'" Becky positions her life as a play, one that Sir Pitt is bearing witness to. An engaging play needs a combination of strong archetypes and conflict. Becky provides both by portraying "'my cruel, cruel Rawdon'" as a villain and casting herself in the role of wronged, persecuted woman (Thackeray 540). Like she does for Lord Steyne and the former Sir Pitt, Becky also casts herself in the role of damsel-in-distress. Becky's theatrical performance is a call to action. Sir Pitt is not a passive audience member to this

family melodrama. Rather, Becky pulls him into the action and asks him to join the play as her knight-in-shining-armor. Becky appeals to Sir Pitt's vanity by making him a central character in her play.

After her speech, Becky relies on one of her signature show-stopping moves: she falls to her knees. The scene of manufactured female hysteria ends with Becky on her knees like a common prostitute. Beginning with an insistence of innocence and ending with Becky in a physical position that makes her look guiltier than ever, the ironic scene reaffirms that Becky cannot separate her theatricality and sexuality. On her knees, Becky kisses Sir Pitt's hand passionately. The sensuality, erotic energy, and overfamiliarity between the married Sir Pitt and Becky are highly inappropriate. Lady Jane, Sir Pitt's wife, finds Becky in this compromising position that in turn further puts into question Becky's innocence. This female intrusion and unwelcome disruption of transgressive desire is both a callback to an earlier scene and a case of history repeating itself: Miss Crawley walked in on Becky on her knees with Sir Pitt. Lady Jane, like Amelia and Miss Crawley before her, walks in on Becky while she is entrapping a mesmerized man with her sexual, transgressive theatricality. Becky, in addition to playing the roles of damsel-in-distress and the wronged woman, is often the other woman in *Vanity Fair*.

Figure 4. Becky implores Sir Pitt to save her marriage (Thackeray 541).

Becky's theatricality is socially disruptive, breaking up families, marriages, and homes. Soon after her arrival at Queen's Crawley, Sir Pitt's estate, Becky has family members locked into battle and ready to go to war for her. The men and women in Queen's Crawley are under her thrall:

> 'Miss B., they are all infatyated about that young woman,' Firkin replied. 'Sir Pitt wouldn't have let her go, but he daredn't refuse Miss Crawley anything. Mrs. Bute at the Rectory jist as bad—never happy out of her sight. The Capting quite wild about her. Mr. Crawley mortial jealous. Since Miss C. was took ill, she won't have nobody near her but Miss Sharp, I can't tell for where nor for why; and I think somethink has bewidged everybody' (Thackeray 131).

The competition for Becky pits father against son and favorite nephew against doting aunt. Becky exposes the family dysfunction brimming beneath the surface of Queen's Crawley. All it takes for this family of rank to come undone is a lowly actress. That Becky has "bewidged everybody" conveys that she is a brilliant actress, a fickle charmer, a dangerous witch, and a terrifying temptress (Thackeray 131). Under the influence of Becky's intoxicating theatricality and performance, the Crawleys are driven mad and transformed into her docile audience members. Becky's situation in Queen's Crawley becomes untenable because everyone in the family, like most men in *Vanity Fair*, wants a piece of her. More than that, they all want her for themselves. Miss Crawley's fortune, which drives the Crawleys to perform the roles of dutiful, sycophantic family members in order to secure her inheritance, can in theory be divided. As the aforementioned passage and its desperate, pathetic and jealous infighting suggests, Becky cannot be fairly divided among the Crawleys. The intense rivalry for Becky reenacts, parallels, and sublimates the Crawleys' competition for Miss Crawley's inheritance. Fighting for the attention of a beautiful woman is a tale as old as time. Fighting over an inheritance of an elderly woman who has yet to die is bad form. Eagerly anticipating the death of a family member, desiring a lower-class governess, and two brothers and a father fighting for the same woman are examples of transgressive behavior in *Vanity Fair*.

Just in case the reader is as enamored by Becky as most of the credulous men in *Vanity Fair* are, the Manager of the Performance constantly signals that Becky is in a scene, performing for her livelihood, and spewing lies in the process. This is evident in her short-lived, almost courtship with Jos, Amelia's gluttonous, wealthy brother who works for the East

India Company.[68] Becky announces herself as an actress with Jos in the way she takes in the scene, immediately interprets Jos's character, and calibrates a performance based on what he is most susceptible to: "'He's very handsome,' whispered Rebecca to Amelia, rather loud" (Thackeray 19). The theatricality in the scene is declarative and explicit. In calling the obese, flamboyantly dressed Jos handsome, Becky is completely disingenuous, but as an actress, it is her job to sell the performance to her audience and Jos is a willing, albeit slow audience member. When her feigned feelings for Jos and vocalized interest in India are not enough to secure an engagement, Becky uses a tried-and-true method for gaining attention, which worked previously for her when she threw an English dictionary out of a carriage: She reaches for a prop. If throwing the English dictionary distances Becky from English society, this prop brings her quite literally into the fold. Like a spider webbing her prey, Becky entangles Jos with a green silk purse:

> Mr. Joseph Sedley, of the East India Company's service, was actually seated *tête-à-tête* with a young lady, looking at her with a most killing expression; his arms stretched out before her in an imploring attitude, and his hands bound in a web of green silk, which she was unwinding (Thackeray 36).

The predatory nature of Becky's theatricality is visualized. It is not Jos, the Victorian gentleman, who pursues courtship with an innocent, domesticated female, but an assertive, dominant actress who serves as the initiator and aggressor. The scene is permeated with irony:

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[68] For a reading of Thackeray's conceptualization of snobs and masculinity, see Joseph Litvak's "Kiss Me, Stupid: Sophistication, Sexuality, and *Vanity Fair*."

Jos, who is woefully inexperienced with women, is comfortable in close proximity with Becky, a woman who is an experienced flirt. Further contributing to the scene's irony is the fact that the physically large Jos and the diminutive Becky are so mismatched in their physiques, yet it is the petite Becky who holds the power and leads the scene. Becky is literally and figuratively holding the purse strings, binding a naïve, stunned, and stupefied Jos who is at her mercy and in her thrall: "The skein of silk was just wound round the card; but Mr. Jos had never spoken" (Thackeray 37). This scene, shown in Figure 5, foreshadows the skewed power dynamics of their relationship. Through her theatricality, Becky overpowers Jos and emasculates him. The manufactured intimacy, familiarity, and sensuality of the green silk purse scene is subversive. Here, Becky turns a socially acceptable pastime for Victorian women into a sexually charged encounter of coded and anticipated desire, proving that in the hands of a practiced, shrewd actress, the most banal prop can be used to lure a gullible audience member.

Figure 5. Mr Joseph Entangled (Thackeray 35).

The Understudy Becomes the Lead: Becky Takes the Stage

If *Vanity Fair* is a series of scenes, one that Thackeray ends with "our play is played out," Becky is its scene-stealer and leading lady (Thackeray 680). Becky becomes a scene-stealer in the early pages of the narrative by unceremoniously hurling an English dictionary, a gift reluctantly given to her by Miss Pinkerton's academy, out of a carriage. In immediately throwing away the dictionary, she brands herself a rebel. It is an audacious move, a power play, and she succeeds in not only distinguishing herself from the repressed, docile Amelia, but in gaining herself an audience. Her behavior not only shocks Amelia, but the reader. In the carriage scene, Amelia does not hold her own, chastising her then friend with a sense of resignation that foreshadows all their scenes to come: Becky steals the show from Amelia in society, becoming a renowned celebrity; she steals Amelia's husband with her seductive theatricality; and she steals the narrative from Amelia simply by being a more interesting,

melodramatic character. Amelia needs Becky to prop her up in the narrative. As the narrator constantly reminds the reader, Amelia does not have the face or personality to captivate the masses. Meanwhile, Becky, at least initially, needs the middle-class credentials of Amelia to prop her up in society.

Theatricality asks the reader to consider the power dynamics at play in every scene. Had that dictionary not been dramatically and abruptly thrown out of the carriage, Becky's presence in the scene would have been miniscule. Refusing to be relegated to the background—Miss Pinkerton mentions Becky briefly in a post-script in a letter praising Amelia to the Sedleys—Becky asserts her place in the narrative with theatricality. Throwing the dictionary is a declaration of war against English supremacy—Becky has French blood. It is also an act of rebellion against the poor treatment she receives in the academy and a personal attack on Miss Pinkerton in particular because she values the dictionary, its author, and the act of gifting dictionaries to students who are about to leave her institution. Most importantly, throwing away the dictionary is a declaration of presence, a reckless actress using a prop in a theatrical gesture that allows her to gain narrative territory from Amelia.[69]

Amelia does not have the authority, acting prowess, or stage presence to command a scene. Amelia's earnestness and sentimentality are shown early in *Vanity Fair*:

> Finally came the parting with Miss Amelia, over which picture I intend to throw a veil. But after a scene in which one person was in earnest and the other a perfect performer—

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[69] Amelia is English. Becky is English and French—her mother is a French opera dancer. The way in which Thackeray sets up the opposition between Becky and Amelia and their animosity as they fight for narrative space, social standing, and George further reinforces that Becky is a Napoleonic figure in *Vanity Fair*: She is powerful, territorial, takes what she wants, and always comes back for more against all odds.

> after the tenderest caresses, the most pathetic tears, the smelling-bottle, and some of the very best feelings of the heart, had been called into requisition—Rebecca and Amelia parted, the former vowing to love her friend for ever and ever and ever (Thackeray 60).

Amelia's sentimentality, empathy, and earnestness are what make her human. However, in the kill-or-be-killed world of *Vanity Fair*, emotional fragility and hypersensitivity are weaknesses that can be exploited. Here, Amelia is easy, exposed prey for Becky. The actress does not even have to put on a killer act as much as she has to mirror Amelia's devastation. To Amelia, this encounter is real and excruciatingly painful. To Becky, it is just another scene wherein she has to perform in order to move on to all the other scenes and roles that constitute her life. The melodramatic goodbye crystalizes Amelia and Becky's differences. Becky is an actor in everyday life, one who has an almost sociopathic lack of empathy. Amelia cannot act nor can she recognize the acting of others, and she feels too much. Amelia is far too fatally human in front of her monstrous friend and occasional adversary. The collision of Amelia's naïve earnestness and Becky's duplicitous performance ironizes the scene. This is not, as time would show, a goodbye between two friends. Amelia is wasting real tears on a dubious friendship that is an extended act. She only knows to be herself in the goodbye scene, while Becky knows that she has to be who and what Amelia wants her to be.

In "'An Insuperable Repugnance to Hearing Vice Called by Its Proper Name:' Englishness, Gender, and the Performed Identities of Rebecca and Amelia in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*," Kit Dobson argues:

> Performing naturalized identities and having them misrecognized as genuine is thus a key component to social acceptance in *Vanity Fair*; when the identities of Rebecca and

> Amelia are recognized as performed, they are pushed towards other preset scripts of normativity so that they can be again construed as properly "English" women (20-21).

Thackeray frequently reasserts the binary between Becky and Amelia. He constantly conveys that Becky is a street smart, beautiful, treacherous exhibitionist who is part French, while Amelia is plain, mostly honest, and an uninteresting, masochistic English woman. This binary is complicated by Dobson's reading of *Vanity Fair*. Dobson argues that in *Vanity Fair* both women's identities are performed: "That Rebecca and Amelia's identities are both performed, and that these performances are rendered problematic in the text suggests that the two characters cannot be placed in simple opposition" (1). The performed identities do not need to be authentic. In Becky's case, they most often are not, but as Dobson argues and as shown elsewhere in this chapter, performed identities in *Vanity Fair* do have to look and feel authentic. On the point of naturalized performance, Dobson gives Amelia the kind of praise and recognition that the Manager of the Performance rarely bestows on her: "While Rebecca's identity is often viewed explicitly as a performance, Amelia's "appropriately" feminine and English identity, consciously or not, remains a naturalized performance—it is simply performed with far greater success" (2).

The Feminization of Theatricality in *Vanity Fair*

In "'The Masquerade of Existence:' Thackeray's Theatricality," Alison Byerly states:

> Thackeray forces the reader to recognize that theatricality is a particularly tempting mode of behavior for women, who are judged to an even greater extent than men by their compliance with social convention. The disjunction between an individual woman's desires and the role she must play in society teaches women that any relation

between self and behavior is arbitrary. But she must be very skilled at dissimulation, because simplicity and sincerity are among the most highly prized female virtues: if she is caught in the act, and her theatricality is recognized, she will be punished for doing what she was trained to do.

In depicting feminine theatricality as the result of social conditioning, Thackeray countered a longstanding tradition of seeing theatricality as somehow natural to women. Theatricality represents a kind of false show that is historically associated with femininity. While any form of theatricality was suspect, nothing was more dangerous than a woman who could act. In Thackeray's fiction, actresses are indeed very dangerous, but they do not act alone. They are products of and participants in a social world where the accepted –indeed, the required – mode of behavior is theatrical. (Byerly 273-274).

The society featured in *Vanity Fair* is a not a merit-based society, but a society that rewards theatricality and performance. Those who act and perform well, like Becky, are rewarded with social status and financial rewards as long as they do not reveal that they are performing. One of the central elements of Becky's effective theatricality is that she molds each performance to her specific audience member, playing the role of whoever they want her to be. [70] No two performances are alike, although she does have a range of go-to theatrical strategies that are discussed elsewhere in this chapter.[71] Becky has to sell her theatricality and performance. She

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[70] For a sociological reading of *Vanity Fair*, see Leila S. May's "The Sociology of Thackeray's 'Howling Wilderness:' Selfishness, Secrecy and Performance in *Vanity Fair."*

[71] The response to Becky's theatricality, like Becky's theatricality, is gendered. Becky's capacity for theatricality and performance is much more effective with men than women. Men believe in Becky's performances because Becky presents herself as a sexual fantasy that they can chase after. With moral women

has to make it look real or suffer the consequences.[72] In *Vanity Fair,* Thackeray not only articulates the impulse for theatricality and performance, but also emphasizes its importance for self-preservation in society. If the show must go on, the cast of players need to learn their roles. The hypocritical Crawleys must be affectionate to Miss Crawley if they want to claim her inheritance. Lady Jane is obligated to initially suppress her anxieties about Becky because the actress is her sister-in-law. Dobbin has to pretend that he does not harbor romantic feelings for Amelia because any vocal declaration would risk his friendship with George and Amelia. Like puppets on a string, *Vanity Fair's* characters perform their roles. As Byerly suggests, "In Thackeray's fiction, actresses are indeed very dangerous, but they do not act alone" (Byerly 273). Becky is part of a society in which role-playing, acting, and performance among men and women generates social currency. However, Becky's spectacular theatricality stands apart in *Vanity Fair* because, unlike other characters who resent their assigned roles, Becky joyfully lives multiple lifetimes in the span of the novel, playing roles that she chooses. For other characters, Becky plays the role of melancholy orphan, impoverished governess, wrongly accused wife, persecuted mother, and vivacious vixen. Acting enables Becky's class and social mobility, satiates her playfulness and dark humor, and showcases her talent as a performer.

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like Lady Jane and Amelia, sexual performances are ineffective because of the absence of sexual desire. Becky cannot connect with and entrap these women through theatricality and performance because she has nothing to offer them and because she is incapable of adhering to the strict gender roles that they respect and follow. Becky's worst performance in the novel is arguably the role of mother. She fails at both the social dimensions of the role—she is a cruel and neglectful mother to her son—and the theatrical performance of that role in front of Lady Jane.

[72] Becky's theatricality is not in infallible. The actress, using the stage name Madame Rebecque in 1830 Strasburg, is jeered off stage when she cannot perform well, mirroring her forced departure from English society when she overstretches the limits of her theatricality. See pp. 638 of *Vanity Fair*.

The open embrace of theatricality, particularly by women, is depicted as socially dangerous in *Vanity Fair:*[73]

> Pitt Crawley declared her [Becky's] behavior was monstrously indecorous, reprobated in strong terms the habit of play-acting and fancy-dressing, as highly unbecoming a British female; and after the charades were over, took his brother Rawdon severely to task for appearing himself, and allowing his wife to join in such improper exhibitions (Thackeray 518).

Here, acting is rendered "monstrously indecorous" because of its capacity for transformation (Thackeray 518). The word "unbecoming" has a double meaning. It implies that acting is both inappropriate and that it leads to the unraveling of the British female (Thackeray 518). Embedded in Sir Pitt's criticism of the charades in which Becky participates is the suggestion that women should not be given the opportunity to undergo metamorphosis through "playing-acting" and "fancy-dressing" (Thackeray 518). Whenever a charge is made against Becky, it is useful to consider what Amelia would do. In this particular case, Amelia would never engage in role-play. She has three central roles in *Vanity Fair*: mother, daughter, and wife. She does not attempt or aspire to be anything else. Amelia endures for her family and remains a fixture of the domestic sphere. Meanwhile, the theatrical, role-playing Becky chooses not to commit to her husband and child. It is not merely that theatricality takes Becky away from the domestic sphere; it is that it gives her the framework for imagining a life outside of socially

[73] Through the rigid institutions of school, family, and marriage, Amelia is molded into an ideal Victorian woman and is punished for it. Becky unmakes and challenges what it means to be a Victorian woman through a liberating, transgressive theatricality and is also punished for it.

defined roles. Acting is subversive in *Vanity Fair* because it facilitates the embrace of multiple roles and identities. Becky is not just one person and she certainly is not just a wife to Rawdon. Consider some of the previously-mentioned roles that Becky plays throughout the narrative: She performs the role of the sad, little orphan to the Sedleys, the role of impoverished governess to the Crawleys, and the role of caregiver to Miss Crawley. A monstrous woman, if one follows Sir Pitt's reasoning, is one who dares to defy established conventions by trying on new identities. Sir Pitt's horror at Becky's play-acting hints of his anti-theatrical bias, misogyny, conservatism, and his belief that theatricality is immoral, dangerous and transgressive. This passionate monologue against theatricality is ironic: Sir Pitt falls for Becky's play-acting when, after her alleged affair with Lord Steyne is revealed to Rawdon, she comes to him and successfully plays the role of wrongly accused woman. Becky's theatricality for a time is so convincing that it inadvertently makes her male sycophants and defenders play the role of the unsuspecting fool.

Animalization and Defamiliarization: The Actress as Both Less than and More than Human

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan states, "Women are human beings, not stuffed dolls, not animals" (65). In *Vanity Fair*, Becky is depicted as a doll and animal. The language of animalization that is woven into *Vanity Fair* dehumanizes Becky and contributes to her defamiliarization. Miss Pinkerton, for example, seeks "to remove this rebel, this monster, this serpent, this firebrand" from her institution (Thackeray 16). Becky is considered a threat to every institution she enters: She bastardizes Miss Pinkerton's academy for girls by being a force of insubordination and dissent; she contaminates the sanctity of the Sedley and Crawley homes by being an indiscriminate flirt; and she threatens the institution of marriage

by seemingly refusing to remain loyal to her husband. Becky is also declared "a dangerous bird" (Thackeray 14). This speaks to Becky's flighty nature. She is never in one place too long and never in a dire situation that she cannot maneuver out of with theatricality.

In *Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth Century Players and Sexual Ideology*, Kristina Straub states: "LIKE REPRESENTATIONS of actors, the actress's figure proves to be a site of ideological contradiction in the emergence of dominant notions of gender and sexuality in the eighteenth century" (89). Actresses posed a challenge because they could not be neatly categorized: "As women whose profession is undeniably public, actresses resisted the assumption that feminine sexuality was the private (and passive) opposite of masculinity" (Straub 89). Nineteenth-century actresses also challenged attitudes on gender and sexuality. In *Vanity Fair*, Becky is a woman with a man's sexual appetites, a woman in command of men, the man of her house, and a masculinized woman in a patriarchal society. While Becky's theatricality is feminized—one only has to notice how her theatricality accentuates her body and vice versa to understand how—she herself is masculinized.[74] She, for example, maintains authority in her marriage. Not only does she manage the finances, but she also emasculates and overshadows her husband with her theatricality: "He was Colonel Crawley no more. He was Mrs. Crawley's husband" (Thackeray 370).

Thackeray subverts traditional gender roles in Becky's marriage. Rawdon becomes the caretaker and mother figure to his own son, while Becky, the family's primary breadwinner, pursues her own interests in the public sphere. After Becky's rise in society,

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[74] While I agree with scholars who deem Becky's theatricality feminized, I argue that she herself transgresses the male-female binary.

Rawdon becomes "a very watchful and exemplary domestic character. He left off his clubs and billiards. He never left home. He took Becky out to drive: he went laboriously with her to all her parties" (Thackeray 518). Thackeray depicts Becky as Rawdon's wayward, distracted husband and Rawdon as Becky's loyal, overlooked wife. This radical inversion of traditional gender roles leads to tragedy and melodrama: Little Rawdon suffers from neglect. Rawdon dies abroad, separated from his wife and son by a foreign post. Becky destroys a family unit that she, according to Victorian values that situate women in the home, is responsible for nurturing.

In her introduction to her book, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England*, Mary Lyndon Shanley notes the importance of family in defining British society:

> As the image of the family seated around the dinner table suggests, everyone in the Victorian family was thought to have his or her special place in the family circle as well as in the larger society. Husband and wife occupied "separate spheres," and each had distinct, but complementary, functions to perform (5).

In *Vanity Fair*, Becky's son informs his aunt-through-marriage, Lady Jane, that he likes dining in Queen's Crawley because he has a seat at the family dinner table: "'I like to dine here,' said Rawdon Minor…'I dine in the kitchen when I am at home,'… 'or else with Briggs'" (Thackeray 438). Becky's Englishness is put further into question because she does not prioritize the family dinner table or her husband and son. If Rawdon is not gambling, he is serving a stint in debtors' prison. Becky spends her nights entertaining Lord Steyne. Their forgotten son is, for large periods of time, with unpaid servants. Becky's disastrous family unit dissolves in large part due to Becky's transgressive theatricality, but also because Becky is too masculine, amoral, and liberated to be the Angel of the House. In the opening pages of

Vanity Fair, Becky tells Amelia: "'I'm no angel.' And, to say the truth, she certainly was not" (Thackeray 12). Becky does not bother with the socially designated and gendered role of Angel of the House because it does not suit her or align with her interests. In "No Angels in the House: The Victorian Myth and the Paget Women," Jeanne M. Peterson describes the Angel of the House as obedient and self-sacrificing: "She was an acquiescent, passive, unintellectual creature, whose life revolved entirely around social engagements, domestic management, and religion" (678). Amelia is *Vanity Fair's* Angel of the House. She mourns, sacrifices, cries, frets, emotes, and stagnates in the domestic sphere.[75] Becky, in declaring herself to be no angel, absolves herself of the responsibility of adhering to a role that has the strong potential of taming her individuality, limiting her options, and restricting her freedom and mobility. Becky is a free spirit,[76] and she cannot surrender herself to a role that is tediously confining.

Thackeray makes female agency and theatricality monstrous, using the language of animalization to dehumanize and defamiliarize their most notable proponent, Becky. The actress is the serpent that can entice men, the rebel that can incite revolution, the firebrand that can provoke action, and the monster that can wreak havoc. Becky is an existential crisis—the French upstart that threatens English homes, sensibilities, marriages, and class lines. That this existential crisis is paralleled with the Napoleonic wars reinforces the idea that Becky is a fraught symbol of unwanted change.

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[75] In *Enacting Englishness in the Victorian Period: Colonialism and the Politics of Performance,* Angelia Poon argues that "The performance of the middle-class English woman in domestic terms was played out in a range of Victorian texts including conduct literature for women and domestic novels" (22).

[76] See the "A Vagabond Chapter" on pp. 629 of *Vanity Fair*.

Lord Steyne, Sir Pitt, and Dobbin each take turns questioning, undermining, and shaming Becky's theatricality.[77] Lord Steyne equates Becky's theatricality with lying: "'What an accomplished little devil it is.' thought he. 'What a splendid actress and manager! …She beats all the women I have ever seen in the course of all my well-spent life…She is unsurpassable in lies[78]'" (Thackeray 515). As Lord Steyne's inner-monologue indicates, Becky's acting mesmerizes and estranges, reveals and obfuscates, horrifies and excites. According to the lust-warped mind of Lord Steyne, a woman who acts is treacherous, but remains a woman worth knowing and admiring. In calling Becky a devil, Lord Steyne absolves himself of sin. He is engaging in, at the very least, a flirtation with Becky, but because Becky is a devil, the blame rests solely on her. If Becky is indeed a devil, why does Lord Steyne worship at her altar? Lord Steyne hardly believes in devil-worship, but he is undeniably attracted to his beguiling devil. A man of status in *Vanity Fair* like Lord Steyne cannot concede that he can be tricked and outsmarted by a lower-class woman. In order for Lord Steyne to save face, Becky has to lose hers. She is transformed into a devilish actress with an appeal so tempting that no rational man can resist. Everyone acts in *Vanity Fair,* but Becky's feminized theatricality is made monstrous.

In an opera-house in Brussels, Dobbin contributes to the actress's animalization by comparing Becky to a snake: "'She writhes and twists about like a snake. All the time she was here, didn't you see, George, how she was acting at the general over the way?'" (Thackeray 277). This is both a biblical reference to treachery, entrapment, and temptation as well as

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[77] Becky is a woman who is passed around in *Vanity Fair*. The gossip that she inspires from the likes of Lord Steyne, Dobbin, and George mirrors and alludes to her body being passed around as a commodity.
[78] Becky tricks Lord Steyne into giving her money and she lies to him about how the money is used.

foreshadowing for a sudden fall from grace: George dies in the Battle of Waterloo not long after this conversation, but not before being struck by Becky's venom and pursuing the idea of having an affair with her. The writhing and twisting of a snake bring to mind a gyrating, sexualized body. Dobbin frames Becky's body as a site of transgressive desire, male anxiety, and monstrosity. The snake imagery possibly has an-altogether different meaning. In "The Serpent as a Symbol of Life and Immortality," J.P. de Souza points out: "The association of the serpent with life is not, as we have seen at the very outset of this paper, confined to India but is common to the myths and legends of many nations" (105). De Souza links this to the serpent's ability to regenerate:

> The commonest explanation is based on the primitive belief that the snake rejuvenates itself by the periodic renewal of its skin. Thus "the serpent was believed to have no fear of old age" or to be immortal because it annually sloughs off its skin, apparently renewing its life (105).

The snake imagery that Thackeray repeatedly associates with Becky suggests that she regularly evolves by shedding roles. While this is a life-affirming, transformative process for Becky, it is threatening and dangerous for those around her: Becky is a man-eater and a destroyer of lives in *Vanity Fair,* one who leaves a trail of bodies in her wake. Like a snake, Becky does indeed constantly reinvent herself, but she is a harbinger of death and destruction, an actress who wantonly snakes her way into the lives of men and women.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination,* Susan Gubar and Sandra M. Gilbert describe the features of the female monster and her graphic appearance in male texts:

> "A woman in the shape of a monster," Adrienne Rich observes in "Planetarium," "a monster in the shape of a woman / the skies are full of them." Because the skies *are* full of them, even if we focus only on those female monsters who are directly related to Thackeray's serpentine siren, we will find that such monsters have long inhabited male texts. Emblems of filthy materiality, committed only to their own private ends, these women are accidents of nature, deformities meant to repel, but in their very freakishness they possess unhealthy energies, powerful and dangerous arts (Gubar and Gilbert 69-70).

Becky has the "powerful and dangerous arts" that Gubar and Gilbert assign to female monsters (70). Becky regularly subdues, overpowers, and entrances men: "Her words were oracles to him [Rawdon], her smallest actions marked by an infallible grace and wisdom" (Thackeray 154). Like Amelia who romanticizes her partner, Rawdon initially sees Becky as a sanctified figure. This does not bode well for Rawdon: He loses his identity and eventually his life due to Becky's monstrous theatricality. Flawed, aimless, and impressionable, Rawdon does not stand a chance against an imposing figure of female myth and her trickery:

> In describing this siren, singing and smiling, coaxing and cajoling, the author, with modest pride, asks his readers all round, has he once forgotten the laws of politeness, and showed the monster's hideous tail above water? No! Those who like may peep down under waves that are pretty transparent, and see it writhing and twirling, diabolically hideous and slimy, flapping amongst bones, or curling round corpses; but above the water line, I ask, has not everything been proper, agreeable, and decorous, and has any the most squeamish immoralist in Vanity Fair a right to cry fie? (Thackeray 629-630).

In *Ruskin's Mythic Queen: Gender Subversion in Victorian Culture*, Weltman argues that "The Victorians' fascination with metamorphosis, blurred boundaries, conflated polarities, and hybrid monsters illuminates their suppressed fascination with sexual intercourse, the consummate symbol of blurred boundaries and union of opposites" (4). A monster's power as a force of existential dread is strengthened by its placement in the shadows; a monster waits patiently for the hunt; its arrival is a terrifying surprise and its exit, as all horror movie sequels attest to, is never permanent.[79] Revealing a monster too soon or showing too much of its physical body normalizes its presence and neutralizes its capacity to evoke danger and create suspense.[80] A monster is most effective when it terrifies from afar, troubling the psyche before terrorizing the body. As it nears the end of its sprawling narrative, Thackeray sprawls Becky's body out for the reader. Teased for long enough, the monster of *Vanity Fair* comes out to play and its play is anything but playful: *Vanity Fair's* siren is a sadistic, feral, predatory, sexual, and wrathful tormentor. Becky's body ravishes and ravages in equal measure.

The siren imagery does not hold back, offering insight into the devastating and colossal scale of Becky's monstrosity. The siren's thrashing body is ugly to behold, treacherous to the senses, and destructive to its surroundings. The fleshiness and flashiness of the siren as it is surrounded by the carnage it has caused signals its insatiable sexuality, criminality, immorality, and its penchant for violence. The "curling round corpses" is a reference to the snake imagery associated with Becky, indicating that she coils around her

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[79] Becky is noticeably absent in certain sections of *Vanity Fair*, but she remains a source of existential dread.
[80] This is why horror movies have an unofficial rule that is common knowledge among filmmakers and fans: "Don't show the monster."

victims and goes in for the kill (Thackeray 630). The graphic way in which the siren collects and curls around bodies also alludes to Becky's primal sexuality, suggesting that she is promiscuous. The actress is a depraved creature in *Vanity Fair*, and she degrades everything around her.

In her important work, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, Nancy Armstrong analyzes the siren in *Vanity Fair*:

> As the classical figure for misdirected desire is rewritten for a Victorian audience, we should note, it loses its aesthetic features and takes on those of a savage. No matter how closely Becky may resemble the people of polite society, that resemblance is at best superficial. Her sexual behavior reveals her origins in another class (204).

An imposition on the natural world, the siren carries on desecrating undetected by living a dual existence. Above the water line, which for Becky is in front of the curtain, the siren is warm, benevolent, and welcoming. Below the surface or behind the curtain, rather, Becky is cold, cruel, and struggling. The stark duality of the siren points to the difference between the falseness of Becky's polished public self and the harrowing honesty of her wild private self. Becky's false public self is propped up and made possible by her theatricality.

While the manner in which the siren thrives below the water is reproachable, nightmarish, and dystopian, it helps create the dichotomy of not only two Beckys—the presentable married woman who appears in public during the day and the sexual actress who emerges at night—but of two novels. There is the *Vanity Fair* that exists in front of the curtain as a conventional narrative that does not scandalize Victorian readers. And there is the *Vanity Fair* that is transgressive. Keenly aware of his readership, Thackeray touts his ability to be suggestive without causing offense: "…the author, with modest pride, asks his readers all

round, has he once forgotten the laws of politeness, and showed the monster's hideous tail above water? No!" (Thackeray 629). Thackeray empowers his readers to make informed interpretative choices. He constantly reminds readers, through ironic scenes and evocative narration, that there is more going on beneath the surface. Whether the reader chooses to embrace the bleak, seedy darkness behind the curtain or below the water or accept the radiance and positivity in front of the curtain and above the water line is up to them: "Those who like may peep down under waves that are pretty transparent" (Thackeray 629-630). In addition, this is not an either-or-choice. Thackeray's layered conceptualization of Becky and her theatricality require readers to understand her as an actress who transgresses the boundaries between angel and devil, man and woman, woman and myth, and human and animal.

Becky's theatricality is transgressive because it is a liberating force, one that is not rooted in anything in particular; it has no allegiance to family. It knows no loyalties to country. It is not bound by religion, and it has no moral ideology to define its parameters. Becky and the theatricality she proudly displays are agents of chaos in *Vanity Fair*. In the theatrical society depicted in *Vanity Fair*, the social roles that characters play are suffocating. Amelia is the dutiful daughter, even after she becomes a widow and mother. George is the disappointing son who dies before he can reconcile with his father, and Dobbin is the consolation prize, even after George's death. Becky, despite her class position and perilous financial situation, is ironically more free than her middle-class acquaintances and upper-class critics. Theatricality liberates Becky from the burden of confining, lifelong social roles that are, in some cases, life sentences for *Vanity Fair's* characters. Becky's theatricality is transgressive because it is emancipatory and it is dangerous for that reason. At the same time,

the actress's transgressive theatricality is subversive, promoting whole lies as plain truth, identity as plural, social roles as optional, gender roles as fluid, and class lines as surmountable. Becky's theatricality is also transgressive because it is flagrantly sexual and deadly. With her dominant, sexual theatricality, Becky moves in society like a predator determined to survive, picking up the scent of roles that are useful and abandoning those that are not. Becky is constantly becoming in *Vanity Fair* and theatricality and performance become her.

CHAPTER 3:
Theatricality Kills: Precarious Performance and the Perils of the Theatre in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891)

The whole house had applauded my arrival on the stage for a few seconds, and as I bent my head in acknowledgment I said within myself, "Yes—yes—you shall see. I'm going to give you my very blood—my life itself—my soul.

— French actress Sarah Bernhardt recalling performing in an English theatre, *My Double Life: The Memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt,* 232

How different an actress is! Harry! why didn't you tell me that the only thing worth loving is an actress?

— Dorian speaking about the actress Sibyl Vane to Lord Henry, *Dorian Gray*, 47

Theatricality and the theatre in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are tenacious, morbid, and threatening. In addition to invoking the language of the theatre—actors, cultural critics, plays, scenes, audience members, playwrights, and performances frame the novel—*Dorian Gray* claims the theatre through its structure as a three-man play.[81] The novel's characters pose and monologize; they sit in rooms, philosophizing to their heart's discontent and they dramatize their lives, presenting themselves and others as romantic, tragic figures of Greek and Shakespearean tragedy. Depicted as characters in a play, *Dorian Gray's* characters fulfil a particular dramatic function and archetype. Dorian is the brooding protagonist, the elusive muse, and the corruptible and corrupted art. Basil Hallward is the anguished artist desperate to preserve the inspiration for his art. Sibyl[82] Vane is the doomed

[81] The novel begins as a three-man play and ends as a one-man show with Dorian in front of his painting.

[82] The Online Etymology Dictionary notes that "Sibyl" is a "woman supposed to possess powers of prophecy, female soothsayer." Sibyl's name, which has roots in Greek culture, is ironic in *Dorian Gray*. All of Sibyl's prophecies about her future, which she articulates to her mother and brother, never materialize.

love interest, the damsel-in-distress, and the beautiful actress yearning for romantic recognition. And Lord Henry Wotton is the worldly cultural critic and actor who waxes poetic about a plethora of social, cultural, philosophical, and literary issues to any audience who is prepared to listen. In short, Lord Henry Wotton commentates and acts, while everyone around him acts for his pleasure. *Dorian Gray's* strong archetypes, its embrace of melodrama and theatrical characters, its dialogue-heavy nature, and its finite number of characters suggest that the novel is structured like a play. The tragic Sibyl Vane subplot set in a run-down theatre, the characters' trips to the theatre, and their various on-stage and off-stage performances create a novel that, like *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Vanity Fair*, exposes the troubling nature of theatricality, the theatre, and performance. Like its characters who often hate what they love,[83] *Dorian Gray* rejoices in and recoils from theatricality, the theatre, and performance. What makes theatricality, the theatre, and performance threatening, dangerous, deceptive, and revolting in *Dorian Gray*? This chapter explores the depressing materiality of the theatre, the precariousness of acting and the duplicity of performance and the theatre in *Dorian Gray*. In so doing, this chapter argues that in *Dorian Gray* theatricality kills and characters perform to their deaths.

Dorian Gray begins with an ominous, prophetic statement by Basil that underpins the fatalistic worldview of the narrative, a worldview that is expressed to Lord Henry in part through the language of the theatre:

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[83] Dorian resents his painting, but remains enamored with how it changes over time; Basil loves his painting of Dorian, but hates what it reveals about himself; Sibyl eventually hates her former love, the theatre; and Dorian's love for Sibyl quickly turns into hate.

> There is a fatality about all physical and intellectual distinction, the sort of fatality that seems to dog through history the faltering steps of kings. It is better not to be different from one's fellows. The ugly and the stupid have the best of it in this world. They can sit at their ease and gape at the play. If they know nothing of victory, they are at least spared the knowledge of defeat. They live as we all should live, undisturbed, indifferent, and without disquiet. They neither bring ruin upon others, nor ever receive it from alien hands. Your rank and wealth, Harry; my brains, such as they are—my art, whatever it may be worth; Dorian Gray's good looks—we shall all suffer for what the gods have given us, suffer terribly (Wilde 7-8).

As Basil predicts, he and Dorian ultimately suffer immensely for their distinctions.[84] Basil is killed by Dorian, the art he feverishly worships. Dorian's beauty, meanwhile, leads to his ruin. Basil's morose monologue about the perilousness of distinction and the comforts of conformity are not out of place in a fin de siècle novel. Literature written at the end of the nineteenth century was hardly known for its optimism. As Victoria Margree and Bryony Randall point out in "Fin de siècle Gothic," "The term 'fin de siècle' signifies themes of cultural decline" (217). Death, decay, destruction, devastation, and degradation are the hallmarks of the culture represented in *Dorian Gray*. Dorian's painting degrades incrementally over time and Sibyl's theatre is falling apart. At the same time, Dorian and Sibyl are both savagely subsumed and consumed by different forms of cultural production—the former by Basil's painting and the latter by the theatre. Sibyl in particular faces a brutal

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[84] In a case of life imitating art, Basil's monologue prophesizes Wilde's personal suffering. In 1895, Wilde faced three gross indecency trials. *Dorian Gray* and its homoerotic undertones were used to help prove his guilt.

double degradation: First, she publicly degrades herself in a poor on-stage performance. Second, she endures a private and more harrowing humiliation when Dorian degrades her in his monologue about her acting.

The theatre analogy that Basil uses to describe the difference between men of intellectual and physical distinction and the ignorant mass is part of the novel's larger consideration of the theatre and its place in Victorian culture. Basil frames himself, Dorian, and Lord Henry as creators of culture. Dorian is the aesthetic. Basil is the artist, and Lord Henry provides the wealth and status. The "'ugly and the stupid'" are the mass who are unburdened by distinction and contentedly "'sit at their ease and gape at the play'" (Wilde 7-8). In his analogy, Basil portrays the play as a simple form of cultural production for simple-minded people, a place of complacency wherein passive spectators are enthralled, the mystique and complexity of high-art is absent, and the pursuit of rational thought is abandoned. In using the words "gape" and "sit," Basil suggests that to attend a play is to bear witness without bearing judgment and to be entertained without being changed (Wilde 8). The theatre analogy brings into focus Victorian views of theatre audiences. In *Victorian Actress in the Novel and on the Stage*, Renata Kobetts Miller cites George Gissing's strong dismissal of theatre audiences:

> The acted drama is essentially a popular entertainment; author and player live alike upon the applause of crowds. When the drama flourished in England, it was by virtue of popular interests, for in those days the paying public was the intellectual public. . . Nowadays, the paying public are the unintelligent multitude. The people who make a manager's fortune represent a class intellectually beneath the groundlings of Shakespeare's time. . . When Johnson, or when Lamb, sat in the pit, they had no such

> fellow playgoers about them as now crush together at the unopened doors, but a majority of men who with us would merit the style of gentle. Our democratic populace, rich and poor, did not exist. What class of readers made the vogue of the Waverley Novels? Those books were never popular, as the word is now understood; price alone proves that. Nor was Sheridan popular in this sense. The spiritual mates of those who now pay for a stall at Drury Lane or the Adelphi sat then in stalls of another kind – cobbler's or huckster's – and recked not of dramatic literature.
>
> Our thronging multitude, with leisure and money undreamt of by their predecessors, must somehow find amusement after a profitable business; and so it comes about that the literary ideal of the stage-play is supplanted on the stage itself by the very practical notions of a popular impresario. Hence the sundering of theatre and literature (21-22).

Miller also notes the differences in how the audiences of the Victorian novel and the theatre were perceived:

> Amid the panoply of feelings about why the theatre falls short of fiction – the audience is more demanding, the audience is less discriminating, the audience is more immediate, the audience is distanced from the writer by the manager – most novelists writing in the *Pall Mall Gazette* agreed that the theatre's 'democratic' audience was less exclusive than the novel-reading public (22).

In *Dorian Gray,* Wilde aligns himself with Victorian novelists who criticized the theatre audience. In both Basil's theatre analogy and the rowdy theatre in which Sibyl works, the audience is uneducated and uncritical. *Dorian Gray* depicts the theatre audience in Sibyl's theatre as troublesome and disruptive. Dorian tells Lord Henry: "'Women went out about with oranges and ginger-beer, and there was a terrible consumption of nuts going on'" (Wilde 45).

Like *Vanity Fair, Dorian Gray* associates the theatre and theatricality with lewd behavior, criminality, and violence.

Given that most characters in *Dorian Gray* understand their world through theatre and see themselves as participants in theatre, it is significant that Basil invokes an analogy that references a play and a docile audience. After all, in *Dorian Gray*, everyone is an audience member. Dorian is Lord Henry's audience member. Dorian is Sibyl and his painting's audience member. And Sibyl and James Vane are their mother's audience members. Even Sibyl, who is an actress and has a theatre audience of her own, becomes an audience member in Dorian's play. Dorian tells Lord Henry that Sibyl "'regarded me merely as a person in a play. She knows nothing of life'" (Wilde 48). In conveying that he is perceived as a person in a play, Dorian suggests that he is an actor in Sibyl's life. Dorian and Sibyl never stop being persons in a play to and for each other. Concealing and obscuring, theatricality and performance serve as sources of abstraction in *Dorian Gray*. Breaking the abstraction of theatricality and performance requires breaking character, which proves to be fatal for both Sibyl and Dorian.

Theatricality, the Theatre, and Desire

No relationship starts off healthy or on equal footing in *Dorian Gray*. Basil worships his young muse, Dorian, who, in turn, worships Lord Henry and Sibyl.[85] Like *Vanity Fair* in which Becky Sharp dominates people with a theatricality that inspires worship from her

[85] Dorian's worship of Sibyl does not last. Her worship of him, however, remains an essential part of her short arc in the novel.

followers, *Dorian Gray* captures the seductive nature of theatricality and performance. While Sibyl is Dorian's first close encounter with an actress, it is not his first encounter with an actor. In *Dorian Gray*, Sibyl and Mrs. Vane are actresses by profession, Dorian is an actor in everyday life by necessity, and Lord Henry is an actor by choice. The language that Lord Henry uses to trigger Dorian's metamorphosis from a young, gullible boy to a transgressive, cynical man who depends on his appearance to conceal his moral bankruptcy is grounded in theatricality and performance. Lord Henry informs Dorian in their very first meeting of the allure of influencing people: '"Because to influence a person is to give him one's own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts or burn with his natural passions. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of some one else's music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him"" (Wilde 19). Lord Henry argues that he can become a faint, but detectable trace in someone else's music.[86] This is not a generic example of his reach, but one that specifically applies to Dorian who plays the piano. Lord Henry also conveys that the art of influencing enables him to become an actor in someone else's story. This statement foreshadows Lord Henry's role in the dissolution of Dorian's relationship with Sibyl. The word "actor" sets up the notion that the central characters in *Dorian Gray* are in various stages of performance (Wilde 19). Lord Henry acts as a friend to Dorian because he derives pleasure from influencing others; Sibyl acts on stage because it tentatively ensures her self-preservation. And Dorian acts as an infallible, unimpeachable Victorian gentleman because that persona conveniently conceals his moral decline.

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[86] Note that in *Vanity Fair* music plays a part of Becky's theatricality. She sings to her enthralled male audience members, particularly Lord Steyne and Jos Sedley. Thackeray also frames Becky as a siren.

Like *Vanity Fair,* which connects theatricality with transgressive, taboo desire, *Dorian Gray* hints of a sudden sexual awakening in Dorian when he meets the theatrical Lord Henry. While sitting for Basil's painting, Dorian is entranced by Lord Henry's "low, musical voice" (Wilde 19). Lord Henry's whispered tone and its melodic nature are seductive. The tenor of his voice inspires intimacy between two men—Basil is present in the room, but Lord Henry's words are aimed at Dorian, who is horrified and aroused by Lord Henry's rhetoric: [87]

> For nearly ten minutes he stood there, motionless, with parted lips and eyes strangely bright. He was dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him. Yet they seemed to him to have come really from himself. The few words that Basil's friend had said to him—words spoken by chance, no doubt, and with wilful paradox in them—had touched some secret chord that had never been touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses (Wilde 20).

Dorian appears disoriented, flushed, flustered, and sexually excited. His body responds to and yields to Lord Henry's provocative words. Lord Henry's performance stimulates Dorian's mind and body, signaling not only the presence of homosexual desire that can only be whispered about—Basil does not hear what Lord Henry is slowly and methodically pouring into Dorian's ear[88]—but a desire that is vocalized in part through theatricality and

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[87] In *Vanity Fair*, Becky in the charades scene is shown, like Lord Henry, to be capable of putting on a seductive act that is both alarming and arousing. Like Becky, the amoral Lord Henry is capable of surreptitiously seducing one person while in the close proximity of another.

[88] In *Oscar Wilde and Greek Culture*, Iain Ross states that "Platonic insemination and procreation has been identified in *Dorian Gray* by critics as diverse as Richard Ellmann, Paul Cartledge, Linda Dowling and Camille Paglia, Dowling identifying Robert Ross as the spiritual inseminator of not only Wilde but also Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves" (210). Lord Henry's "low, musical voice" in his clandestine conversation with Dorian indicate a rhythm, a slow, relaxed love-making scene between two men (Wilde 19). Notice that this scene of love-making between two men is naturalized through the presence of Nature in Basil's studio. The dubious love between Sibyl and Dorian is denaturalized and rendered ugly in the man-made theatre: The theatre is

performance. In his graphic description of Lord Henry's words touching Dorian and creating "vibrating and throbbing sensations to curious pulses," Wilde suggests that his protagonist has experienced illicit sexual pleasure (Wilde 20).

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick connects secrecy in *Dorian Gray* to the male body:

> To delineate and dramatize a space of *the secret* also emerges as the project of Lord Henry's manifesto, an address whose performative aim is after all less persuasion than seduction. Like Basil, Lord Henry constructs *the secret* in terms that depends on (unnamable) prohibitions attached specifically to the beautiful male body (137).[89]

It is not merely the yearning for the male body that incentivizes and necessities secrecy in *Dorian Gray*. Secrecy in and of itself is transgressive and ominous, lending itself to the "'exquisite poison in the air'" that Dorian recognizes in his exploration of London (Wilde 44). Secrecy eroticizes and criminalizes in *Dorian Gray*; it is taboo, dark, hidden, burdensome, and intimate, that which dwells, haunts, binds, and territorializes.[90] Picture the dirty, little secrets of *Dorian Gray*: Basil and his desire to keep both Dorian and his painting of the protagonist secrets that only he can access. Dorian has his share of secrets: his secretive

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described as ugly, the handsome Dorian uses ugly words with Sibyl, and their romanticized relationship meets an ugly end.

[89] Sedgwick states that Greek culture influenced Victorians' thinking about the male body and what it signifies: "Synecdochically represented as it tended to be by statues of nude young men, the Victorian cult of Greece gently, unpointedly, and unexclusively positioned male flesh and muscle as the indicative instances of "the" body, of a body whose surfaces, features, and abilities might be the subject or object of unphobic enjoyment" (136). Unlike the Christian tradition, Sedgwick argues, which focused on the female body and its repression, Greek culture prioritized the male body and its enjoyment (136).

[90] This dissertation is entitled "Dark Theatricality and the Victorian Novel." In *Dorian Gray*, Dorian hides his painting in the dark, keeps his relationship with Sibyl and other men in the dark, visits an opium den in the dark, and keeps his dark thoughts to himself. The novel begins with a daytime scene in Basil's studio but it is a thematically dark novel that increasingly retreats into darkness.

reading of a yellow book, his increasingly secretive life after fully embracing Lord Henry's teachings, and his secret communions with his painting, and the painting itself which is kept hidden from view. Even Sibyl and Dorian's relationship is a secret. Despite Sibyl's family and Dorian's friends' awareness of the relationship, Dorian sees Sibyl perform at night where, as visible as she is, their relationship remains shrouded in darkness.[91] In *Dorian Gray*, there is also the sensuality of sharing secrets. Lord Henry and Dorian share secret conversations and Dorian blackmails a former friend into doing his bidding by threatening to expose his secret. Characters in *Dorian Gray* keep damaging secrets about themselves and each other. The fear of exposure, of being caught and found out, only increases the heightened sense of foreboding and eroticism in *Dorian Gray*.

The desire for more pleasure, sexual and otherwise, leads Dorian to the theatre, where he meets Sibyl Vane, an actress who the protagonist fetishes and eventually abandons. Dorian's foray into the theatre which employs Sibyl is directly attributed to Lord Henry. Dorian informs Lord Henry of how he came to visit the theatre in which Sibyl works:

> After all, it never would have happened if I had not met you. You filled me with a wild desire to know everything about life. For days after I met you, something seemed to throb in my veins. As I lounged in the park, or strolled down Piccadilly, I used to look at every one who passed me and wonder, with a mad curiosity, what sort of lives they led. Some of them fascinated me. Others filled me with terror. There was an exquisite poison in the air. I had a passion for sensations.... Well, one evening about

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[91] After Sibyl's death, Dorian benefits from his secretive relationship with Sibyl. He is not implicated in her death because he never gives Sibyl his last name.

> seven o'clock, I determined to go out in search of some adventure. I felt that this grey, monstrous London of ours, with its myriads of people, its sordid sinners, and its splendid sins, as you once phrased it, must have something in store for me. I fancied a thousand things. The mere danger gave me a sense of delight (Wilde 44).

Once again, Wilde points to Dorian's throbbing body. Like the bodies that Becky seduces with her theatricality in *Vanity Fair*, Dorian's body needs release. Lord Henry's monologue in chapter two of the novel rouses Dorian and the protagonist, once sheltered in Basil's idyllic studio in the daytime, recklessly seeks out nighttime pleasure in the public sphere. The ferociousness of London—the people that Dorian passes by, the poison he claims is in the air, and the sin and danger that grant the imagery a sense of urgency, mirror Dorian's agitated, alert state in which he is not only being led by Lord Henry, but led astray by his own body and its demand for sexual satisfaction. Lord Henry turns Dorian into a thrill seeker and a creature of the night. Dorian's newfound rebellious streak is not merely an early sign of his metamorphosis, but of how quickly he succumbs to Lord Henry's seduction. Dorian is drawn to the seductive power of male and female performers, a trope also found in *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Vanity Fair*.

In *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece*, Iain Ross traces the influence of Greek culture on Wilde and his writings. Ross states:

> Dorian is the erastês (lover) of Harry, Harry the erômenos (beloved). In classical Athens the convention was that the erastês should be a grown man, the erômenos an adolescent or ephebic boy, the elder paradoxically the slave of the younger (Symposium, 183a–b). But Dorian is Henry's slave (210).

Dorian meets Sibyl while he is, by his own admission, in a whirlwind search for gratification after his sensual encounter with Lord Henry. Dorian redirects his taboo desire for Lord Henry to the next beautiful woman he meets, falling for a woman on the stage shortly after he is wooed by Lord Henry, an actor in everyday life. When Lord Henry meets the protagonist for the first time, he intimately whispers sweet nothings into Dorian's ear. After Dorian mentions Sibyl and his interest in her, Lord Henry again whispers into Dorian's ear in order to cast doubt in his protegee's mind about the actress. Lord Henry is Dorian's stage manager, guiding Dorian through multiples stages of life. In his relationship with Sibyl, Dorian is simply recreating and simultaneously reversing the dynamic he has with Lord Henry. With Sibyl, Dorian is in the power position: She yields to him, playing the submissive role that Dorian plays in his relationship with Lord Henry.

With Lord Henry, Dorian actively listens and quickly internalizes. He is, at least in the early chapters of the narrative, Lord Henry's captive audience member:

> He felt that the eyes of Dorian Gray were fixed on him, and the consciousness that amongst his audience there was one whose temperament he wished to fascinate, seemed to give his wit keenness and to lend colour to his imagination. He was brilliant, fantastic, irresponsible. He charmed his listeners out of themselves, and they followed his pipe, laughing. Dorian Gray never took his gaze off him, but sat like one under a spell, smiles chasing each other over his lips, and wonder growing grave in his darkening eyes (Wilde 39).

In his relationship with Lord Henry, Dorian is not only a willing, eager, and devoted audience member, but he is also a feminized figure: Lord Henry and Dorian are more than once each other's dates to the theatre. Lord Henry spends more time with Dorian than he does his wife.

He serves as Dorian's friend, teacher, philosopher, advisor, and cultural critic, instructing Dorian on how to behave, or rather, misbehave. Moreover, Lord Henry has more than a dozen photos of Dorian, a telling indicator of intimacy made even more pointed because it is revealed to the reader in a conversation between Dorian and Lord Henry's wife. In the above passage, Dorian reveals himself, bearing his fascination and desire. Not yet well-versed in the art of wearing masks and performance, he fixes his gaze on Lord Henry. The scene is fraught with the sexual tension of two men who cannot keep their eyes off each other. Lord Henry performs for the audience in the gathering, but it is really Dorian he is seeking out. Dorian is the one he wants. Everyone else is just a background character in the scene. That Dorian "sat like one under a spell" and has "darkening eyes" while listening to Lord Henry speak conveys the romantic and sexual overtones of their relationship and the desire surging between them (Wilde 39). Dorian later confesses to Lord Henry: "'You filled me with a wild desire to know everything about life'" (Wilde 44). In admitting to harboring a lust for knowledge, Dorian inadvertently admits to possessing an insatiable lust for Lord Henry.

The Promise and Perils of the Theatre in *Dorian Gray*

The theatre in *Dorian Gray* is where, as representations of the theatre in *Vanity Fair* and *Nicholas Nickleby* also attest to, transformation and reinvention are rendered possible. Dorian enters the theatre with boyish optimism and emerges a cynic. In attending a working-class theatre frequented by what Wilde calls "the common, uneducated audience," Dorian, an upper-class Victorian gentleman, enters a world that is altogether unknown to him (Wilde 72). The theatre is a rite of passage for Dorian. Through the theatre, he becomes engaged, has his first of many scandals, and descends into a life of decadence. After Sibyl's death, Dorian

confirms to Basil that he has changed: "'I was a schoolboy when you knew me. I am a man now. I have new passions, new thoughts, new ideas'" (Wilde 92). This stunning statement, made shortly after Dorian's boyishness is immortalized in Basil's painting, suggests that Dorian's exposure to Lord Henry's insights, the theatre, and his relationship with Sibyl Vane have changed him. This change is not for the better, at least not morally. Sibyl's death and how he treats her in their last meeting in particular usher in Dorian's monstrosity. Sibyl connects Dorian, whether he is conscious of it or not, to his humanity. After Sibyl's death, Dorian embraces hedonism.

The theatre paradoxically strengthens and weakens relationships in *Dorian Gray*. It solidifies the friendship between Dorian and Lord Henry—they attend the theatre together while Basil is busy with work; it brings Dorian and Sibyl together before tearing them apart, and it creates hostility between James Vane and his mother and sister, both of whom are actresses. Dorian falls in love with Sibyl because she is an actress and he immediately rejects her when she cannot perform to his exacting standards. The dangerous heights of theatricality and performance are made explicit in both characters' respective falls from grace. Sibyl's abrupt fall from grace is directly tied to the theatre. Dorian falls in love at first sight with one of Shakespeare's heroines. He describes Sibyl to Lord Henry with a sense of ecstasy and reverence:

> But Juliet! Harry, imagine a girl, hardly seventeen years of age, with a little flower-like face, a small Greek head with plaited coils of dark-brown hair, eyes that were

> violet wells of passion, lips that were like the petals of a rose. She was the loveliest thing I had ever seen in my life (Wilde 46).[92]

In using the imagery of flowers to describe Sibyl's face and lips, Wilde alludes to her disposability and decay. Flowers are temporary; heightening their beauty is the notion that they will wither away imminently. Sibyl's arc in *Dorian Gray* mirrors that sense of glorified, fragile beauty followed by rapid deterioration, an arc that is paralleled by Dorian's similar decline. As a young actress, Sibyl only has a few years to establish herself, a fact made apparent by the looming presence of her mother, an aging actress. Sibyl never blooms, dying before she reaches womanhood and her potential as an actress. Like Dorian, she remains forever young. Both their deaths are connected to and cannot be disentangled from the art that defines them. Sibyl dies in her dressing-room after relinquishing the theatre and acting. Dorian dies after destroying his painting.

Dorian's fall from grace is facilitated and accelerated by the theatre. Throughout the novel, Dorian goes from respectably posing for a painting to reading a provocative French novel,[93] regularly attending the theatre, and scandalously visiting the wrong side of London.

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[92] There is an element of mirroring to Dorian and Sibyl's physical appearance. Both characters are young and idealized because of their Greek beauty. Lord Henry, for example, aligns Dorian with Greek aesthetics and mythology, calling the protagonist "'a young Adonis'" (Wilde 7).

[93] Dorian is captivated by a yellow book given to him by Lord Henry. In the late Victorian period, yellow books were transgressive, sensationalistic French novels that were covered by yellow wrapping paper. This provocative genre of literature gave *The Yellow Book*, a prominent 1890s periodical that explored decadence, its aesthetic and name. According to Linda K. Hughes, "The Yellow Book, that most defining of 1890s periodicals, has often been approached in terms of a historical divide: B.T. and A.T., before and after the trial of Oscar Wilde" (849). After his trial and imprisonment, Wilde's ideas on decadence, which are explored in *Dorian Gray* and which this chapter only briefly touches on, the periodical struggled to regain its standing. For an overview of the ideas that shaped the decadence movement, see Russell M. Goldfarb's "Late Victorian Decadence."

Basil tells his muse early in the narrative: ""Don't go to the theatre to-night, Dorian,'" (Wilde 29). Dorian should have listened. Dorian enters the theatre and, metaphorically speaking, never comes back out. A part of his innocence dies in the theatre. In experiencing the displeasure of the theatre's materiality and recoiling from its melodramatic heroine, Dorian becomes a cultural critic. And his first order of business as a cultural critic is to destroy the actress Sibyl Vane.

Posing and Melodrama in *Dorian Gray*

Like a villain in a stage melodrama, Lord Henry loves exposition. In flamboyantly theatrical speech after speech, Lord Henry lays out his approach to life to Dorian. Lord Henry is all show, but he does not withhold the tell: He announces his intentions and makes no secret of his desire to influence Dorian. Lord Henry is the narrative's agent of chaos. He is a dubious friend, a married man in name only, and a contrarian for sport. He systematically bastardizes, ironizes, patronizes, and condemns traditional Victorian values, offering an enticing alternative in the form of aesthetic pleasure and unapologetic decadence.[94] When he does so, Basil and the supporting characters repeatedly dismiss his audacious statements by placing him in the realm of performance. Basil, for example, tells Lord Henry: "'Your cynicism is simply a pose'" (Wilde 8). The word "pose" foreshadows the eventual closeness of Lord Henry and Dorian, who is seen posing for Basil's painting in the second chapter of the novel. And it marks Lord Henry, who is always on the hunt for aesthetic pleasure, with a misleading

[94] For a reading of the ethics of *Dorian Gray,* see Dominic Manganiello's "Ethics and Aesthetics in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*."

affect. Posing suggests that he is the subject of a painting, the model for a sculpture, or an actor on the stage. Lord Henry is none of these things, but he stands in proximity to muses and actors who pose. A frequent guest at dinner parties wherein he delights in sharing his cynical worldview, Lord Henry and his posing in public ironically endear him to the Victorian society he eviscerates in speech.

The repetition of the word "pose" in *Dorian Gray* signals Wilde's affinity for camp, theatricality, and performance.[95] In *Acting Wilde: Victorian Sexuality, Theatre, and Oscar Wilde,* Kerry Powell analyzes the importance of posing for Wilde:

> Posing had become supremely important in Wilde's evolving thought; and although particular poses would be artistic and self-developing to varying degrees, "still to have a pose at all is something…a formal recognition of the importance of treating life from a definite and reasoned standpoint" (36).

How can one pose without becoming a poser? To pose is a theatrical gesture that creates an affect. To be a poser is to lie. *Dorian Gray's* characters pose for art and in everyday life, but they also become posers over time. Lord Henry, Mrs. Vane, and Dorian are all characters who pose and are posers. In her monologue about the theatre, which is discussed later in this chapter, Sibyl recognizes that the theatre is an empty, deceptive gesture and seeks a life outside of acting and posing.

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[95] The word "posing" played a role in Wilde's gross indecency trials. In *The Modern Art of Influence and the Spectacle of Oscar Wilde,* S. I. Salamensky states: "The violent, irascible John Sholto Douglas, Marquess of Queensberry, had left Wilde a scribbled, misspelled note at a club addressing him as "posing Sodomite," which he would in court amend to "'posing as a sodomite,'" with Queensberry's son" (134).

In "Oscar Wilde's Poetic Injustice in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," Neil Hultgren explores Wilde's contempt for melodrama:

> He [Wilde] would later review another of Fenn's novels, *A Bag of Diamonds,* and, though he praises some of its exciting moments, alleges that the novel "belongs to the Drury Lane School of Fiction and is a sort of fireside melodrama for the family circle." These statements critique the surfeit of incidents found in the fiction and the melodramatic theatre of the late Victorian period, while they also relate melodrama to chaos and incoherence (48-49).

Despite Wilde's disdain for the fast pacing and excessive plotting of melodrama, Hultgren suggests that Wilde added more melodrama to the 1891 version of the novel. The 1891 version features the addition of the melodramatic James Vane and Dorian visiting an opium den (Hultgren 49). Of course, *Dorian Gray* does not narratively disintegrate with the inclusion of melodrama. Adding more melodrama to the novel's content contributes to the theatricality of *Dorian Gray*. At the same time, melodrama complicates the form of *Dorian Gray*. The melodramatic death of Sibyl signals the death of the intellectual insularity of the three-man play. Post Sibyl's death, *Dorian Gray* is unhinged Victorian stage melodrama: Accidental killing, murder in cold blood, blackmail, conspiracies, cover-ups and criminal intent litter the narrative. The sanctity of aesthetics and of posing in broad daylight in Basil's studio are displaced by nighttime melodrama and the criminality of the city. Once Dorian's life becomes increasingly melodramatic, which is ushered in by the tragic spectacle of Sibyl's death, he refuses to pose: ""I can never sit to you again, Basil. It is impossible!' he exclaimed, starting back" (Wilde 93). Dorian's manic anxiety about Sibyl's death and its effects on his painting

brings an end to the novel's picturesque posing. Sibyl's death forces Dorian into acting and action.[96]

The Tragic Staging of Sibyl Vane

Sibyl Vane is an anomaly and a liminal figure in *Dorian Gray.* She remains a stranger to Lord Henry and Basil and estranged from the overall plot. She even remains a stranger to Dorian because he refuses to see her as anything other than an actress. By narrative design, Sibyl is out of place. In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Sedgwick argues that "the lurid dissipations of the characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are presented in heterosexual terms when detailed at all, even though (biographical hindsight aside) the triangular relationship of Basil, Dorian, and Lord Henry makes sense only in homosexual terms" (203). Sibyl's exclusion from the society of the novel, subsequently, is not merely a reflection of her class standing, but her gender. In *Sappho is Burning*, Page duBois states that "part of what is most monolithic and rigorous about Plato's work is its exclusion of women (81).[97] A bystander in the Platonic love of *Dorian Gray,* part of Sibyl's function in the novel is to send Dorian back to the waiting male arms of Lord Henry. After Sibyl's death, Dorian and Henry cruelly commiserate together and male-bonding aggressively resumes. Sibyl receives a double rejection in *Dorian Gray.* She is rejected by Dorian because she loses her ability to act and because she is a woman.

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[96] Dorian hides his painting and becomes an actor in everyday life, hiding who he really is and who he is becoming.
[97] For a reading of Plato's views on women, see Hans Kelsen's "Platonic Love."

Sibyl is a working-class actress in a narrative concerned with the leisurely lives of upper-class gentlemen and a woman hopelessly in love with a man who only loves himself. Sibyl never gets top billing in *Dorian Gray* because the narrative is structured like a three-man play. Essentially, Wilde lets his three male protagonists talk it out. The verbose nature of the narrative—Lord Henry's protracted commentary, Basil's speechifying about the nature of art, and Dorian's existential monologues—initially ease the reader into a sense of complacency. Much is at stake in these protracted conversations. Underscoring these esoteric, aesthetic, and philosophical discussions is a battle for Dorian's soul. However, Dorian, Basil, and Lord Henry use their indoor voices to discuss their worldviews; their interactions, as scathing, worldly, and wounding as they are, remain quite civil, evoking a let's-do-this-again-tomorrow quality. The reader maintains the sense that this play could go on at a leisurely pace, with Dorian at the center of the action as the central protagonist and Lord Henry and Basil on opposing sides of him. Basil, Lord Henry, and Dorian are depicted as Victorian gentlemen in a genteel play. As Tamaki Horiè puts it, "In *Dorian Gray*, members of high society are given witty epigrammatic dialogue, as in a comedy of manners" (51). Sibyl, whose class excludes her from the novel's high society, does not participate in the genteel play. Still, Sibyl is dangerous. Sibyl threatens the male intimacy and leisurely pacing of the early chapters of *Dorian Gray*. She and her theatricality threaten to take Dorian, an upper-class gentleman, away from his insulated, frivolous world that is filled with wealthy, titled men and women who fawn over him. She threatens to remove Dorian from the idealized space of Basil's studio and place him in the bleak materiality of the theatre. And she threatens the cohesion of the three-man play by distracting Dorian from Basil and Lord Henry, the two men vying for his attention. In her short stint in the narrative, Sibyl becomes an existential threat

because her theatricality, as is the case in *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Vanity Fair*, violates class boundaries. Infatuated with Sibyl's acting, Dorian willingly forsakes class differences by proposing marriage. The marriage never occurs, but Sibyl irrevocably alters Dorian's psyche and trajectory. In life, Sibyl is Dorian's obsession, conquest, and damsel-in-distress. In death, she is his ghost and nightmare. Like *Vanity Fair* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Dorian Gray* warns its readers to remain vigilant of actors and actresses. *Vanity Fair* and *Dorian Gray* in particular share a similar refrain about actors: They just might seduce you and leave you for dead.[98]

Shakespeare in Victorian Culture and in *Dorian Gray*

In *The Victorian Cult of Shakespeare: Bardology in the Nineteenth Century,* Charles LaPorte argues that "for many Victorians, Shakespeare presented a supplement to—or even a substitute for—the Bible: a secular and English "Bible of Humanity" or a "Bible of Genius"" (103). In his introduction to *Shakespeare and the Victorians*, Adrian Poole conveys the cultural importance of Shakespeare for Victorians:

Shakespeare sometimes seemed the Victorians' utterance, a language for expressing themselves and their world. If not a god, Shakespeare was the most powerful of ghosts, and ghosts tend to inhabit at least as much as they inspire and liberate" (2). *Dorian*

[98] I am specifically referencing Becky in *Vanity Fair* and Dorian in *Dorian Gray*. Dorian seduces both Basil and Sibyl and leaves them for dead. He actually kills Basil and has help disposing the body. In his bruising monologue to Sibyl, which is discussed later in this chapter, he makes it clear that Sibyl is nothing and that she is nothing to him. Dorian does not explicitly state it, but he subtly lets Sibyl know that she might as well kill herself. The power of suggestion and influence are strong in *Dorian Gray*. Lord Henry puts ideas in Dorian's head and it is enough to make the young man unravel. When he ends his engagement to Sibyl, Dorian similarly pushes Sibyl to the edge by making her suicidal.

Gray's Sibyl Vane plotline draws heavily from Shakespeare's plays, but Wilde's fascination with Shakespeare transcends and precedes his only novel. In "Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray and Shakespeare's Sonnets,*" Horst Breuer notes that Wilde's "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." influenced *Dorian Gray*: "The latter piece (published in 1889) is especially close to the novel. It includes a picture, allusions to 'Platonic'love and homosexual infatuation, and a theatrical context which is refashioned in the Sibyl Vane plot of *Dorian Gray*" (59). In "Negative Eroticism: Lyrical Performativity and the Sexual Subject in Oscar Wilde's "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," Dustin Friedman illustrates the links between *Dorian Gray* and "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.:"

> "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." presents a reading of Shakespeare's sonnets that purports to reveal the identity of Mr. W. H., the famous "Onlie Begetter of These Insuing Sonnets" mentioned in Shakespeare's dedication. Mr. W. H. is identified as a young actor named Willie Hughes, a member of Shakespeare's troupe who became the object of his erotic longing and the inspiration for his dramatic art. Rather than presenting this theory in the form of a literary-critical essay, however, Wilde embeds this interpretation within a narrative frame that recounts the origin and circulation of this theory of the sonnets among three men: the unnamed narrator of the story, his friend Erskine, and Erskine's deceased friend Cyril Graham,[99] the supposed originator of the so-called Willie Hughes theory of the sonnets (599).

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[99] Cyril Graham was an actual Victorian who yielded influence in the 1860s and 1870s. In "The Incomparable and Ingenious History of Mr Cyril Graham, now for the First Time Here Fully Set Forth: A Study in Green (Park)," Geoff

Wilde invoked Shakespeare during his first trial in order to defend *Dorian Gray*. Breuer recounts Wilde's testimony:

> When questioned about the homoeroticism of the novel during his first trial, he told the court: "The whole idea was borrowed from Shakespeare, I regret to say — yes, from Shakespeare's sonnets." This is no mere defense. The Sonnets are indeed a major source of Wilde's novelistic theme and plot. *Dorian Gray* is, after all, a story about the fateful wish' that "beauty's rose might never die" (Sonnet 1.2), and the dichotomy of individual decay and poetic permanence, the conflict between "wasteful Time" (Sonnet 15.11) and "that eternity promised by our ever-living poet" (dedication) are the burden of Shakespeare's sequence (Breuer 60).

In deflecting to Shakespeare, a figure whose literary and cultural authority as many scholars have shown was sacred to Victorians, Wilde attempted to legitimize *Dorian Gray*. Wilde's use of Shakespeare as a defense strategy would have perhaps been more palatable and persuasive for Victorians if he had cited Shakespeare's plays as inspiration for *Dorian Gray*. The blame-it-on-Shakespeare defense was a smart move—Shakespeare was a national icon to the Victorians—but it relied on the wrong genre. LaPorte suggests that Shakespeare's sonnets problematized Victorians' Shakespeare fanaticism.[100] LaPorte states:

Dibb depicts Graham as a prominent Middle East traveler who with "strong linkages to the higher echelons of the Church of England and the British political establishment" (59).

[100] For more on Wilde and his interpretation of Shakespeare's sonnets, see Anthony Holden's "Oscar Wilde and Shakespeare's Sonnets."

> Surely the greatest textual challenge to pious Victorian attitudes to Shakespeare's work must come from the sonnets. Frequently profane, vindictive, bawdy, and crammed with phallic puns, this group of poems seems almost designed to repel Victorian religious interpretation (LaPorte 80).

Shakespeare's sonnets are not the only nods to the Bard in *Dorian Gray*. The theatre in *Dorian Gray* serves as a source of foreshadowing, initiating and mirroring the tragedy that takes place off-stage. Wilde foreshadows the end of Sibyl and Dorian's whirlwind romance by paralleling their catastrophic love with Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet.* The relationship between Dorian and Sibyl is bookended by Shakespeare's tragedy. Dorian falls in love with Sibyl when she is performing the role of Juliet and falls out of love with her when she is assuming the same role. Sibyl is Dorian's Juliet, but Dorian is not her Romeo. Sibyl and Dorian's deaths may parallel the demise of Romeo and Juliet—Sibyl dies by ingesting poison and Dorian dies by a knife wound after destroying his painting—but they die decades apart, as disconnected in death as they are in life. Sibyl performs the role of Juliet in real life and on stage, but Dorian does not give her the courtesy of remaining her Romeo.[101] Sibyl's on-stage Romeo is ugly and miscast. Dorian, Sibyl's off-stage Romeo, is equally reprehensible and miscast. The theatre in *Dorian Gray* sets the scene and the scene reaches its climax off-stage in the characters' real lives. Sibyl dies a helpless Juliet longing for her beloved Romeo. Dorian dies alone with his Juliet long gone.

Wilde initially depicts Sibyl and Dorian as star-crossed lovers. Young, beautiful, and

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[101] Dorian begins the novel as Sibyl's steadfast Romeo, but Wilde transforms him into an indiscriminate, faithless, and promiscuous Lothario figure throughout the narrative.

with their whole lives ahead of them, Sibyl and Dorian mirror Romeo and Juliet: They come from different worlds, meet in secret to reaffirm their forbidden love, and are threatened by forces beyond their control. And yet, *Dorian Gray* is not a love story. Dorian and Sibyl are not really Romeo and Juliet either. They merely act out those roles for each other. Dorian is a character that Sibyl creates in her own mind, a delusion that keeps her misplaced faith in him alive. Sibyl tells her brother that Dorian is her "'Prince Charming, my wonderful lover, my god of graces'" (Wilde 59). Sibyl's highly romanticized naming of Dorian—she shrouds him in the language of fairytales—highlights her naivety and youth. She depicts Dorian as a romantic hero and savior yet she bases this interpretation solely on his appearance. From Sibyl's position as an impoverished actress with limited prospects, Dorian is a prince because of what he represents: beauty, privilege, wealth. The irony of the title—the morally corrupt Dorian is hardly a catch or a prince—is reinforced by an additional irony: Sibyl calls her suitor Prince Charming as a term of endearment not because he earns it, but because he never volunteers his last name to her. This telling detail reinforces the power, class, and gender dynamics of their relationship. Dorian knows Sibyl's full name. He admires her work, has physical access to her, and is privy to details about her personal life. Meanwhile, Sibyl knows Dorian only as Prince Charming, an imagined, romanticized figure who is so dream-like, he only visits her fleetingly at night.

Sibyl and Dorian cannot see past one another's performances. Sibyl does not question the veneer and artifice behind Prince Charming and Dorian refuses to look beyond Sibyl's dazzling on-stage performances. Who is Sibyl Vane? This is a question of little to no significance for Dorian. The novel's protagonist is not in love with Sibyl, but is enamored with her acting. Like Sibyl who views Dorian as a hero in her narrative, Dorian sees Sibyl as

the heroine in his. When asked by Lord Henry when Sibyl Vane is herself, Dorian states, "'Never…She is all the great heroines of the world in one. She is more than an individual"' (Wilde 49). Dorian conflates Sibyl with every heroine she plays on stage. Eclipsed in the realm of performance, Sibyl is something to be contemplated and appreciated, an aesthetic object that exudes beauty in the same manner that Dorian does for those around him. Dorian imagines Sibyl in her multiplicity as various complex Shakespearean heroines. He boasts that "'Lips that Shakespeare taught to speak have whispered their secret in my ear. I have had the arms of Rosalind around me, and kissed Juliet on the mouth"' (Wilde 66). In only picturing Sibyl as iconic female heroines, Dorian fails to understand or recognize the basic trappings of her reality. The off-stage Sibyl is riddled with debt and surrounded by an overbearing mother and an opportunistic stage manager. Sibyl's reality is based decidedly on her class position. Dorian commends Sibyl's performances, but ignores the performer, thereby dismissing the real class connotations behind why she has to perform in the first place. In pairing Juliet and Prince Charming, two figures from different genres, Wilde not only reinforces the performance aspect of Sibyl and Dorian's relationship, but reiterates that these two are a mismatched, odd couple who are destined to fail.

The mystique of Sibyl's theatricality is extinguished after she falls in love with Dorian. In her last on-stage performance as Juliet, Sibyl fails at embodiment: "She looked charming as she came out in the moonlight. That could not be denied. But the staginess of her acting was unbearable, and grew worse as she went on. Her gestures became absurdly artificial. She over-emphasized everything that she had to say" (Wilde 71). The narrator's description of Sibyl's performance as exaggerated, contrived, unnerving, and excruciatingly painful to watch indicates that Dorian is seeing her for the first time not as a heroine and

artist, but as an actress unraveling before him.[102] That Dorian immediately, callously, and unceremoniously breaks up with Sibyl, citing her failed performance as Juliet and its absence of vibrancy and realism, conveys that his primary interest in her is based on her ability to perform. He confirms this outright, telling Sibyl: ""Without your art you are nothing. I would have made you famous, splendid, magnificent. The world would have worshipped you, and you would have borne my name'" (Wilde 74-75). In Dorian's melodramatic lament to Sibyl, marriage, security, status, love, and devotion, all things that Sibyl has been denied in life, are tantalizingly put on the table and cruelly taken away. Sibyl experiences Dorian's critique of her acting with a sense of panic and incredulity. She tells Dorian, ""You are not serious, Dorian?' she murmured. 'You are acting'" (Wilde 75). Recall that Lord Henry's provocative statements are met with similar disbelief. Here, Dorian's transformation into Lord Henry is realized. In this scene, Dorian and Sibyl are naked in front of each other for the first time. Gone are the scenery, sets, personas, masks, and performed identities. Sibyl looks her God in the face and is aghast by what she sees. And Dorian looks his worshipper in the eye and calls her unworthy. This brutal break-up scene is brimming with allusion and subtext. It does not merely show a lover rejecting his object of desire, but Romeo breaking up with Juliet, a God rejecting his worshipper, a stage manager firing his actress, an actor rejecting his scene-partner, Prince Charming losing his charm, a cultural critic eviscerating his subject, and Narcissus forsaking Echo.[103] This is the narrative's point of no return and it notably occurs in

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[102] In "Poisoned by a book: the lethal aura of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," Peter Raby states, "Wilde ensures that Sibyl failure in performance carries weight by quoting at some length from Shakespeare's text, so making her failure more poignant when set against the beauty and power of the language" (164).
[103] For an examination of the narcissus myth, see Kenneth Knoespel's *Narcissus and the Invention of Personal History*.

the theatre greenroom wherein Dorian and Sibyl's relationship first begins. Dorian, Sibyl's God and savior—at one point, Sibyl even calls him her God of graces—punishes her arbitrarily for putting on a single poor performance by cutting off her wings. He rejects Sibyl's love and mocks her devotion. Dorian is a cruel, sadistic, and vengeful God to Sibyl. The punishment clearly does not fit the crime. Yet it is clear that for Dorian a horrific crime against his artistic tastes was committed. Closely following this abstract, non-violent crime is Lord Henry's description of an actual crime scene. Sibyl kills herself in an act of submission and masochistic penance. This is a riveting final performance, a ritual performed for a God that is remorseless, uncaring, and undeserving.

Dorian's fall from grace in Basil's garden invokes Christian imagery. In "Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as Secular Scripture," Virginia Brackett argues that "Wilde incorporates a large number of Christian and classical symbols and imagery to inform Dorian Gray's search for meaning in life through secularism, a practice that focuses not on God, but rather on the present life to promote physical, moral and intellectual development" (43). Dorian's painting essentially makes him immortal and Dorian wields God-like influence on Sibyl and various men in the novel. All Dorian has to do to find his God is to look in the mirror. God is a man of theatre in *Dorian Gray*, and he is not a particularly good man. In addition to being wrathful, Dorian is a petty and patronizing God. Dorian viciously dresses down Sibyl because she cannot dress up for him anymore. In his ruthless take-down of Sibyl, Dorian, who prior to this scene speaks about Sibyl as if she is an angel sent down from heaven—he passionately praises her acting to Lord Henry and emphatically calls her

"'sacred!'"—throws the actress back into the materiality of the theatre that he once considered beneath her (Wilde 47). After a failed performance, he views her as a generic actress, calling her "'A third-rate actress with a pretty face'" (Wilde 75). The angel is made into flesh and blood. This Sibyl is no longer ethereal, but tangible and no longer infallible, but flawed, defective, and corrupted. Thrown back into the materiality of the theatre, she is humanized, given form, and judged by it. For Dorian, Sibyl is now not separated from, but a part of the aesthetically sickening materiality of the theatre. This Sibyl, who is now a failed actress, fits right into a theatre that is more interested in the material world than in the transcendence of performance.

In *Private Theatricals: The Lives of the Victorians,* Nina Auerbach calls acting in *Dorian Gray* "the activity of the damned" (10). According to Auerbach, the theatre in *Dorian Gray* is dangerous and intrusive:

> *The Picture of Dorian Gray* represents actors as damned because they are too powerful. The naïve genius Sibyl Vane commits her most efficacious suicide when she relinquishes her many selves by falling in love and into sincerity, while Dorian becomes darkly powerful by splitting himself into a hellish "sincere" portrait and an unsullied self-impersonation. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* damns performers because they are servants, acting out our damned need to be what others demand. Both imagine a theatre insidiously extending itself into society and then into the dearest privacy of the mind, invalidating lives that look like models of authenticity (10).

Sibyl is the novel's sacrificial lamb who is slaughtered at the altar of Dorian. Her death serves Dorian's character development and pushes *his* plot forward. The tragic character spends her time sequestered in the theatre idolizing a false God in Dorian. She is not just damned by acting, as Auerbach suggests *Dorian Gray's* characters are, but by Dorian. The titular protagonist is neither a merciful nor a benevolent God. He tests his worshippers and punishes at will and whim. He ruins men, including Basil, throughout the novel. Dorian also ruins Sibyl, who remains one of his most loyal and maligned worshippers. Sibyl's performances are a test that she must pass. Dorian, Sibyl's egotistical, temperamental God, does not tell her the rules of this test or what is at stake. And when she fails, she is not given the compassion that a lover would give their partner or the opportunity to redeem herself in a second performance, but receives the righteous judgment that a detached, unscrupulous God gives his subjects. After her artless performance, Sibyl loses a lover, but she, more importantly, loses a God. Denied God's unconditional love, Sibyl slaughters herself in an act that combines the melodrama of performance with the horrific elements of religious sacrifice. Dorian tells Basil that Sibyl's "'death has all the pathetic uselessness of martyrdom, all its wasted beauty'" (Wilde 91). The ritual of death fails to appease Sibyl's God. Dorian cruelly rejects Sibyl's theatricality and performance in her lifetime and after her death.

The Performance of Death by Suicide in *Dorian Gray*

In committing suicide, Sibyl joins a long line of nineteenth century fictional women who endure the same fate. In "Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century," Margaret Higonnet argues that female suicide is geared toward love:

> For our fictions of women, suicidal disintegration far more often has to do with their sexual and amorous relationships. Traditionally, myths of female suicide have focused on two themes: defeated love and chastity. The insistent representation of women—rather than men—who commit suicide for love complements the familiar assumption that woman lives for love, man for himself (108).

Sibyl's suicide is triggered by a failed performance that produces a failed love. The young, chaste[104] Sibyl kills herself in part because she has been rejected by her love and she does so in service of a man who loves only himself.[105] The actress kills herself for a narcissist, a stranger, and a false God.

The dress-rooming, as the liminal space in which Sibyl commits suicide, is a fitting end for the actress: It poignantly articulates the tragedy of the actress's transitional nature: She is a young girl who lingers on the precipice of adulthood, but dies before entering that stage in her life; she is a talented actress, but scrapes by in a tattered theatre; and she yearns to be loved by a prince, but finds herself manipulated by a fiend. Almost everything in Sibyl's life is ironic, transitional, and transactional: The theatre's stage manager exploits Sibyl's beauty and talent for monetary gain. Mrs. Vane, like Dorian, roots her affection and love for Sibyl in the actress's capacity for performance: ""I am only happy, Sibyl, when I see you act.

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[104] The original manuscript of *Dorian Gray* contained the word "mistress." This term and several other controversial elements were removed from the novella in 1890.

[105] In *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public,* Regenia Gagnier has a fascinating take on Sibyl's death, one that rethinks how Wilde positioned himself in relation to *Dorian Gray's* characters. Gagnier states:

> Contrary to Wilde's famous formula—"Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry is what the world thinks of me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps"—he was really Sibyl Vane, the actor who could play any part…Sibyl Vane embodied Wilde's ideal—until she thought to give it all up for a part in a middle-class marriage. For that Wilde killed her (98-99).

You must not think of anything but your acting'" (Wilde 53). Sibyl, as an actress, is a commodity that everyone wants. Sibyl, as a person, is not as in-demand. Sibyl's death is symbolic of her position in real life. She dies in an unremarkable, liminal space that reflects how forgettable, disposable, and insignificant she is to Dorian and the rest of the world. The stage was supposed to be Sibyl's enduring legacy, but she dies scandalously and quickly off-stage, an event that reveals how sequestered and powerless she is outside the realm of performance. There are no witnesses to her death, no audience in her thrall. The stage for Sibyl's death in real life is eerily empty and silent.[106]

It is quite telling that the marvelous Sibyl Vane dies unspectacularly and in lackluster fashion in her dressing-room. If the stage is, at least initially, a symbol of aspiration, metamorphosis, and becoming in *Dorian Gray*, the dressing-room is a metaphor for reality and materiality. Lord Henry informs Dorian that Sibyl died in her dressing-room:

> They ultimately found her lying dead on the floor of her dressing-room. She had swallowed something by mistake, some dreadful thing they use at theatres. I don't know what it was, but it had either prussic acid or white lead in it. I should fancy it was prussic acid, as she seems to have died instantaneously (Wilde 83).

Sibyl's suicide is both a self-erasure and a reckoning of self because, to borrow one of Higonnet's interpretations on the nature of suicide, "To take one's life is to force others to

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[106] In "A verdict of death: Oscar Wilde, actresses, and Victorian women," Kerry Powell states, "In her sickness and death Sibyl Vane thus performs the doom of actresses generally, as the Victorian imagination tended to conceive it…They kill themselves, off-stage like Sibyl Vane, or in the middle of a show, like the heroine of *The Life and Love of an Actress*, who stabs herself under the gaze of the man who just broke off her engagement" (191-192). For more on how actresses are represented in Victorian literature, see Lauren Chattman's "Actresses at Home and on Stage: Spectacular Domesticity and the Victorian Theatrical Novel."

read one's death" (103). Reading Sibyl's death is exactly what Lord Henry does. He stages Sibyl's death as art and theatre. Sibyl's lifeless body on the floor and her death are made into spectacle. That Sibyl dies in a dressing-room signals that she is defined by performance, oscillating between a dressing-room that makes performance possible through costuming and a stage that enables the presentation of performance.

Sibyl's suicide strategy of choice is poison. Higonnet assigns meaning to the manner in which suicide is conducted:

> The very means of suicide may be taken as a key to motive. Thus Freud finds sexual wish fulfillments: "To poison oneself is to become pregnant; to drown is to bear a child; to throw oneself from a height is to be delivered of a child" (Freud 1955, Vol. 18: 162n) (Higonnet 104).[107]

While Freud prescribes a sexual quality to suicide, Greek culture has its own assessments of female suicide. In *The Noose of Words*: *Readings of Desire, Violence, and Language in Euripides' Hippolytos*, Barbara E. Goff reads female suicide via hanging within Greek culture: "The bloodless death which is that of hanging held a gender specific position within Greek culture as an avoidance of the bloodshed of rape and defloration, and hence as a denial of active sexuality" (38). Sibyl, who is described by Dorian as a Greek beauty and functions as the Echo to his Narcissus, does not kill herself through hanging, but no blood is spilled in her death. Dorian has blood on his hands from playing a role in Sibyl's death,[108] but she dies possibly signaling her virginal status.

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[107] In *Dorian Gray*, both Sibyl and Dorian are afflicted by poison. Dorian is poisoned by Lord Henry's teachings and a yellow book. And Sibyl ingests poison to kill herself.
[108] Dorian tells Lord Henry: "'So I have murdered Sibyl Vane'" (Wilde 83).

In *Lover's Leap Legends: From Sappho of Lesbos to Wah-Wah-Tee of Waco*, Leland and Crystal Peyton describe the allure of suicide for Romantics. They state: "Romantics adored suicide—it's rebellious, dark, and final. While there are a few fallen women (rather, women who fell) who accidently lived, almost all the examples in nineteenth-century Lover's Leap stories end in death, often artfully described" (59). Sibyl's suicide is a fraught, complicated performance that Lord Henry attempts to synthesize and romanticize:

> No, she will never come to life. She has played her last part. But you must think of that lonely death in the tawdry dressing-room simply as a strange lurid fragment from some Jacobean tragedy, as a wonderful scene from Webster, or Ford, or Cyril Tourneur. The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died. To you at least she was always a dream, a phantom that flitted through Shakespeare's plays and left them lovelier for its presence, a reed through which Shakespeare's music sounded richer and more full of joy. The moment she touched actual life, she marred it, and it marred her, and so she passed away. Mourn for Ophelia, if you like. Put ashes on your head because Cordelia was strangled. Cry out against Heaven because the daughter of Brabantio died. But don't waste your tears over Sibyl Vane. She was less real than they are (Wilde 87).

Lord Henry speaks about Sibyl not because he knows her with any great certainty, but because he vaguely knows about her. He bases his conclusions about Sibyl's character not on his thorough interactions with her—he sees her briefly on stage—but from his generalized, prejudiced assessments of her class and profession as an actress. Upon learning of Sibyl's profession, Lord Henry caustically remarks, ""That is a rather common-place *début*" (Wilde

43).[109] Given that Lord Henry has never met Sibyl and knows very little about her life, he is hardly the most appropriate person to be giving her eulogy. If, as previously suggested, Dorian plays a role in Sibyl's death, Lord Henry is responsible for her attempted burial. In the aforementioned passage, Lord Henry buries Sibyl beneath layers of performance.

For Lord Henry, Sibyl comes alive in death. And this time, Lord Henry cannot look away. Note that Lord Henry leaves a poorly acted theatrical performance of *Romeo and Juliet* in which Sibyl plays the titular heroine. Lord Henry remains seated and captivated by Sibyl's death scene. Sibyl's real-life suicide is not a death scene in a play, but Lord Henry declares that it is. In depicting Sibyl as a number of Shakespeare's tragic heroines, Lord Henry illustrates the relentless nature of theatricality and performance in *Dorian Gray*. There is no reprieve from theatricality and performance in the novel. Not even death can put a stop to either.

It is ironic that Lord Henry, a seemingly Godless man, is the one tasked with eulogizing Sibyl. Lord Henry's task with the eulogy is not to ensure that Dorian sincerely mourns Sibyl, but to make the protagonist appraise her life through performance. He implores Dorian not to ""waste your tears over Sibyl Vane. She was less real than they are'" (Wilde 87). With that in mind, Lord Henry is not a makeshift priest burying the dead, but a ruthless cultural critic transforming the scandalous death of a working-class actress into a performance worthy of critique. To Lord Henry, performance is the most memorable trace of Sibyl. In fact, he even goes as far as suggesting that it is the only thing worth remembering about Sibyl.

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[109] Lord Henry is primed to hate Sibyl not merely because of his bias against her class, sex, and profession, but because she threatens his burgeoning relationship with Dorian.

Lord Henry is the last main character left standing in a novel wherein theatricality and performance have life-and-death stakes. He is alive because he risks and sacrifices nothing in the name of art, commenting on Basil's painting and Sibyl's performance with the detachment of a cultural critic. Sibyl's death, for Lord Henry, is just another performance. This is evidenced by the fact that once he quickly reviews Sibyl's death, he asks to go to the theatre with Dorian to see another performance.

In *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity,* Lynn M. Voskuil reads Lord Henry's monologue on Sibyl's death as an attempt to authentically theatricalize everyday life:

> As he makes clear to Dorian, he does not theatricalize real life in order to decompose its authenticity; he does so instead to render life more shapely, pleasing, and seemingly natural—to render it, that is, more authentic—even as he acknowledges the capacity of most experience to defy theatricalization altogether (19).

In "Play on Life: Exploring the Theatrical World of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," Maho Hidaka echoes Voskuil's argument that Lord Henry theatricalizes everyday life, stating:

> Lord Henry not only points at the intersection of life and art in life's inherent theatricality, but also sees humans as actors or spectators, or both, of life as theatre. Sibyl's case seems to give an opportunity for Dorian to learn the dramatic essence of life, with the support of Lord Henry (99).

The problem with theatricalizing everyday life is that it comes at the expense of Sibyl. Lord Henry encourages Dorian to forget Sibyl and remember her performances. According to Lord Henry, Sibyl embodies the characters of drama, but she herself signifies nothing. She has the capacity to articulate and give life to the exalted words of Shakespeare and other playwrights,

but she herself has nothing meaningful to say. She excels as a performer, but fails to be of interest as a person in real life. For Lord Henry, Sibyl is empty, but her performance of death is surprisingly fulfilling.

Prior to her death, Sibyl's physical form is on stage every night working to create various performances. However, Lord Henry imagines her as estranged from her body and depicts her as an idea, a vacuum, a ghost, a dream, a memory, a figure of representation, and an absence, telling Dorian: ""To you at least she was always a dream, a phantom that flitted through Shakespeare's plays and left them lovelier for its presence…'" (Wilde 87). In divorcing Sibyl from her physical body and focusing on her body of work as an actress, Lord Henry mystifies her through performance. Because she is an actress, Sibyl remains elusive and other-worldly. Lord Henry fails in expelling the ghost of Sibyl. The actress haunts Dorian for the rest of his life. The ghostliness that Lord Henry projects onto Sibyl, more importantly, denies the materiality of her world.

After Sibyl commits suicide, Dorian, with the aid of Lord Henry, absolves himself of guilt by describing and processing her death through theatricality and performance. Dorian turns Sibyl's death into Greek tragedy,[110] telling Lord Henry: "'It seems to me to be simply like a wonderful ending to a wonderful play. It has all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy, a tragedy in which I took a great part, but by which I have not been wounded"' (Wilde 84). This dramatization of Sibyl's real-life death, which turns Dorian into a passive spectator to tragedy, is alarming in its level of cynicism, dismissiveness, and delusion. Dorian distances himself

[110] Wilde held a passion for Greek culture. He travelled to Greece and his writings reflect his interest in classical antiquity. For a detailed analysis of the influence of Greek culture on Wilde's life and work, see Iain Ross's *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece*.

from Sibyl, obscuring and ignoring the horrific details of her death by reimagining it as a work of aesthetic contemplation or, as he puts it, "'a wonderful ending to a wonderful play'" (Wilde 84). In aestheticizing and theatricalizing her death, Dorian conveniently contrives to turn an ugly, brutal, and premature ending in which he is culpable into one of artistic beauty and achievement. This ending has no basis in reality, but it is the one that Dorian imagines for himself. Even in death, Sibyl is reduced to an actress playing a role in Dorian's life.

Dorian's indifferent tone when describing Sibyl's death reveals the rapid decline of his morality; it also conveys that he still cannot perceive Sibyl as a figure who exists outside of her numerous performances on stage. Perceiving Sibyl's death as Greek tragedy reaffirms that Sibyl and Dorian's relationship is based on theatrical performance. In "Fate and Freedom in Greek Tragedy," Walter R. Agard states, "the cause of tragedy [in Aristotle's *Poetics*] is attributed to a flaw in the character of the victim: his ignorance, passion, or moral weakness" (118). Invoking Greek tragedy signals several notions to the reader. First, it foreshadows Dorian's death, as he succumbs to vanity, his fatal character flaw. Second, it further demystifies and unmasks Dorian, adding credence to the notion that he is losing his humanity—instead of mourning Sibyl's death, he recreates and restages it for his benefit. During his brief relationship with Sibyl, Dorian is an actor, audience member, and cultural critic in the actress's life. In framing her death as Greek tragedy, Dorian becomes her playwright, dramatizing her death to ease his guilty conscience. In death, Sibyl gains a more outspoken role in Dorian's life than she held when she was alive. Her death speaks out against

Dorian and alters his painting. Sibyl, like Becky in *Vanity Fair*, is an actress who has a haunting, commanding presence.[111]

The Symbolism of Space in *Dorian Gray*

Physical space in *Dorian Gray* is used alternately as a tool for symbolism and foreshadowing. The stage in particular becomes synonymous with female performance, a place wherein Sibyl animates the words of Shakespeare for Dorian and her working-class audience. Initially depicted as a highly romanticized space, the stage is where Sibyl has value as an impeccable performer and, to a much lesser degree, commercial value as an in-demand actress. However, the stage soon loses its romanticized connotations, as it becomes increasingly apparent throughout *Dorian Gray* that it is a site of transaction, class tensions, materiality, and poverty. This is evidenced in Sibyl's relationship with her mother who pressures Sibyl to act not because it is her calling, but because it is her vocation and because the family is in debt to Mr. Isaacs.

Dorian Gray continues to demystify the stage by juxtaposing it with the liminality of Sibyl's greenroom. The theatre and the stage provide a site for Sibyl to assert her performed identities. As an actress, Sibyl roams freely on stage, entrancing her audience with the power of her performances. The stage not only becomes her salvation, but her domain, a space for her to exude her femininity, artistry, talent, and creativity. Outside the spaciousness of the stage, Sibyl is disempowered. In the theatre's greenroom, for example, she transforms from a

[111] See Chapter 2 and its reading of the charades scene in which Becky performs the role of Lady Clytemnestra and gives a haunting performance that also depicts her in ghostly terms. Becky also haunts the psyche of Lord Steyne and Jos.

capable, self-assured actress to an insecure child in need of guidance. Dorian describes her demeanor to Lord Henry: ""Oh, she was so shy, and so gentle. There is something of a child about her. Her eyes opened wide in exquisite wonder when I told her what I thought of her performance, and she seemed quite unconscious of her power'" (Wilde 48). Dorian's description of Sibyl starkly clashes with how he discusses her onstage personas. The strength, vitality, and aura of Sibyl deflate offstage. In the theatre's greenroom, she becomes an introverted, emotionally vulnerable young woman who seemingly lacks self-awareness and yearns for validation from strangers. Sibyl's expressiveness and conviction of presence, which she displays easily and repeatedly on stage, is gone, displaced by a vexed female frailty that registers her as "'shy'" and "'gentle'" (Wilde 48). These descriptions of diminishment and submission convey a withdrawal for Sibyl, a turning away from the potent qualities that define her as an actress. Dorian's description articulates Sibyl's altered position relative to space and power. Through the intimacy of proximity, the theatre's greenroom demystifies Sibyl for Dorian and the reader. If on stage Sibyl is powerful and ethereal, in the greenroom she becomes awkwardly human. Like the dressing-room wherein she dies, the greenroom, as a liminal space, reinforces Sibyl's status as a liminal figure in *Dorian Gray*.

If the greenroom and dressing-room stage Sibyl's liminality, what does the theatre in its materiality convey in *Dorian Gray*? Dorian offers a detailed description of the crass materiality of the theatre in which Sibyl is a performer:

> There was a dreadful orchestra, presided over by a young Hebrew who sat at a cracked piano, that nearly drove me away, but at last the drop-scene was drawn up, and the play began. Romeo was a stout elderly gentleman, with corked eyebrows, a husky tragedy voice, and a figure like a beer-barrel. Mercutio was almost as bad. He was

> played by the low-comedian, who had introduced gags of his own and was on most friendly terms with the pit. They were both as grotesque as the scenery, and that looked as if it had come out of a country-booth (Wilde 45-46).

The cracked piano, which offends Dorian in part because he himself is a pianist, is a metaphor for the multiple forms of butchering occurring in the scene. The music is botched and Shakespeare is debased. This Romeo is an abomination. His body is all wrong. He is clearly too old and obese for the role. Dorian's account of the miscast Romeo fixes aesthetic displeasure on the materiality of the actor's bloated, elderly body. Who could love this ugly Romeo? Who would want to? Beautiful things are dainty in *Dorian Gray*. This Romeo's body is rendered ugly because he does not match the lithe, youthful bodies of Sibyl and Dorian. The actor, in addition to embodying none of the youth and virility associated with Romeo, has a life off-stage that desecrates the authenticity of the performance. His beer-barrel figure suggests that he is a habitual drunk, an unsavory type plucked from the street and put on stage for mass entertainment.

Dorian's conception of the theatre's materiality is tinged with class prejudice.[112] Dorian is an elitist, a sheltered upper-class Victorian gentleman who remains in Sibyl's

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[112] Dorian rents out a private box in Sibyl's theatre. This suggests that he wants to be separated from the working-class audience who is loud and indecorous. The class composition of the theatre audience is an important aspect for understanding why the theatre, as a public space, provoked anxiety in the nineteenth century. In "Promenading the Halls: Theaters as Sexual Spaces in London, Paris, and Berlin Around 1900," Tobias Becker showcases how theatres segregated audiences according to class:

> While in most West End theaters the audience was segregated by class, even to the extent of separate entrances to the theater, such restrictions did not exist at the Empire, where the audience could move freely between the different spaces of the theater. One of the requirements imposed on the Empire by the Licensing Committee was, however, to separate the different parts of the auditorium and, hence, the audience, which meant in effect to restore the social order of the class system as represented in the spatial arrangements of the theater (159).

theatre with the utmost reluctance and with one eye on the exit. Instead of joining in the lively communal ambiance of Sibyl's theatre, he, like a cultural critic in training, solitarily and stoically tallies the reasons that the theatre in which Sibyl works is aesthetically troubling and offensive.[113] For Dorian, it is not simply that Romeo does not have the right body, but that both the actor and the protagonist are out of place. In fact, everything is out of place in Sibyl's theatre. Consider the way in which nothing in the aforementioned passage points to a sense of unity. The brutish Romeo is visually jarring and out of his depth. He looks more like an uncouth villain than a romantic lead. The comedian who is hired to play a role breaks character. And the cheap scenery does not contribute to but rather detracts from the theatrical production. Dorian envisions Sibyl's theatre as fundamentally fragmented, random, chaotic, eccentric, and vulgar. This is a theatre filled with grotesque people and bad aesthetics. The materiality of the theatre dilutes and corrupts performance, creating a bad aesthetic experience, which as far as Wilde is concerned is unconscionable.[114] The materiality of Sibyl's theatre is also an issue because it undermines the work of Shakespeare: "'I must admit that I was rather annoyed at the idea of seeing Shakespeare done in such a wretched hole of a place[115]'" (Wilde 45). Who could walk into Sibyl theatre and watch a slovenly Romeo, tacky

[113]At this point in the narrative, Dorian is still receiving instruction from his mentor and the novel's definitive cultural critic, Lord Henry.

[114] This is a reference to Wilde's preface in which he states his aesthetic convictions: "*The artist is the creator of beautiful things*" (3). According to Wilde, works should be judged by their aesthetics and not their morality: "*There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all*" (Wilde 3). With than in mind, I call Sibyl's theatre unconscionable not because it is morally lacking, but because it is aesthetically deficient for Dorian.

[115] *Dorian Gray* was published decades after the 1843 Theatres Act allowed minor theatres to perform spoken-word drama, including Shakespeare's plays. Dorian's lament about Sibyl's theatre suggests his elitism. Shakespeare, for Dorian, deserves better than to be performed in a cheap theatre in front of a working-class audience, an argument that the 1737 Licensing Act partly validated.

scenery, and a rowdy audience and leave thinking of the genius of Shakespeare? In his depiction of a working-class theatre ravaged by materiality, Wilde highlights one more site of rotting in *Dorian Gray*.[116]

The excessive materiality of the stage is further reinforced by the presence of the "young Hebrew" (Wilde 45). This peripheral Jewish character who Dorian witness on stage is enclosed in the depressing materiality of the theatre. He, along with Sibyl's Jewish stage manager, Mr. Isaacs, are racialized figures who are a part of and contribute to the materiality of the theatre in *Dorian Gray*. In *Aesthetic Theology and its Enemies: Judaism in Christian Painting, Poetry, and Politic*s, David Nirenberg argues that Christianity has long used Judaism and Judaizing for "self-definition and self-critique" (13). Nirenberg states:

> Instead, it designated the damning displacement of a *gentile* believer's attention away from Jesus' spiritual message and toward the literal commandments of the Jewish tradition within which Jesus was born and taught. By analogy, it quickly came to signify the *Christian's* erroneous orientation of attention away from the spirit and toward the flesh, the letter of scripture, and the material things of this world, all loosely associated with or mapable onto "Judaism" through the analogies and polarities available to the age (13).

In *Dorian Gray*, Sibyl and Dorian, each of whom have an ethereal, transcendent beauty, have monologues that decry the upsetting and unsettling materiality of the theatre. Sibyl's Jewish

[116]Dorian's painting rots. His love for Sibyl rots. His friendship with Basil rots. His psyche and morality rot. Sibyl, Dorian, and Basil's bodies rot. The culture represented in *Dorian Gray* is much darker than those shown in *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Vanity Fair*.

stage manager, Mr. Isaacs, is, as Jewish stereotypes dictate, obsessed with materiality.[117] Note the way in which Sibyl's stage manager is described as excessively fleshy, materialistic, devious, and villainous: "…the fat Jew manager who met them at the door was beaming from ear to ear with an oily, tremulous smile. He escorted them to their box with a sort of pompous humility, waving his fat jewelled hands, and talking at the top of his voice" (Wilde 69). The Jewish stage manager is not only an example of and a contributor to the theatre's excessive materiality; he also oversees the materiality of the theatre that Dorian and Sibyl find aesthetically distasteful. Wilde's depiction of the Jewish stage manager reinforces and combines stereotypes of the materialistic, deceptive, untrustworthy Jew and the exploitative, controlling stage manager, stereotypes that were common in the Victorian period.[118] Ironically, Dorian villainizes Mr. Isaacs when he himself is Sibyl's villain.

Basil's picturesque studio is not defined by materiality. Contrast the harsh materiality of Sibyl's theatre with Basil's studio, which is warm, ethereal, romanticized, and inviting: "The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn" (Wilde 1). The natural light coming into the studio and the space's strong relationship to Nature evoke a sense of tranquility, serenity, and authenticity. Sibyl's theatre, with its over-the-top production designs, has none

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[117] For a reading of Mr. Isaacs, see Christopher S. Nassaar's "The Problem of the Jewish Stage Manager in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*."

[118] Each of the novels in this dissertation have one or more stage managers that are contemptible and domineering. *Nicholas Nickleby* has Mr. Squeers and Mr. Crummles, a man who is nowhere near as villainous as Mr. Squeers. *Vanity Fair*, meanwhile, has the Manager of the Performance. To understand how Victorian actors and stage managers were perceived, see Glavin's *After Dickens: Reading, Adaptation and Performance*.

of the sanctity and subtlety of Basil's studio. In the theatre, the simplicity of Nature is remarkably absent. In its place, as Dorian bleakly demonstrates, is profound materiality: "'Well, I found myself seated in a horrid little private box, with a vulgar drop-scene staring me in the face… It was a tawdry affair, all Cupids and cornucopias, like a third-rate wedding cake'" (Wilde 45). The flowers in Basil's studio offer a subtle aroma and evoke a sensuality to Basil's visual art. Meanwhile, the strikingly vulgar and off-putting quality of the theatre's man-made materiality exposes its artificiality. If Basil's studio is a space that celebrates Nature, the theatre is its opposite, a site that rejects and destroys Nature with its profound materiality.

After Sibyl's last performance as Juliet, she gives an impassioned monologue to Dorian wherein she denounces the theatre, its materiality, and its mimetic nature:[119]

> "Dorian, Dorian," she cried, "before I knew you, acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived. I thought that it was all true. I was Rosalind one night, and Portia the other. The joy of Beatrice was my joy, and the sorrows of Cordelia were mine also. I believed in everything. The common people who acted with me seemed to me to be godlike. The painted scenes were my world. I knew nothing but shadows, and I thought them real. You came—oh, my beautiful love!—and you freed my soul from prison. You taught me what reality really is. To-night, for the first time in my life, I saw through the hollowness, the sham, the silliness of the empty pageant in which I had always played. To-night, for the first time, I became

[119] Sibyl's monologue about representation, shadows, and the nature of reality invokes Plato's allegory of the cave. See Plato's *The Republic*.

> conscious that the Romeo was hideous, and old, and painted, that the moonlight in the orchard was false, that the scenery was vulgar, and that the words I had to speak were unreal, were not my words, were not what I wanted to say. You had brought me something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection. You had made me understand what love really is. My love! my love! Prince Charming! Prince of life! I have grown sick of shadows. You are more to me than all art can ever be. What have I to do with the puppets of a play? When I came on to-night, I could not understand how it was that everything had gone from me. I thought that I was going to be wonderful. I found that I could do nothing. Suddenly it dawned on my soul what it all meant. The knowledge was exquisite to me" (Wilde 73-74).

There is no direct access to truth or Nature in Sibyl's shattered conception of the theatre. Once intrinsically beautiful, real, transcendent, valuable, powerful, and sanctified in Sibyl's mind, the theatre is revealed as an ineffective substitute and perfunctory imitation of reality. What she believes is her love for Dorian, a shallow love that is based on and retains its strength from theatricality and performance, makes her "'sick of shadows'" (Wilde 74). In *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, Michael Taussig analyzes the mimetic faculty. Taussig argues that "Once the mimetic has sprung into being, a terrifically ambiguous power is established; there is born the power to represent the world, yet that same power is a power to falsify, mask, and pose. The two powers are inseparable" (42-43). Taussig's conceptualization of the power of the mimetic provides insight into why a character like Sibyl retreats from mimesis in the theatre. The power of mimesis belongs almost exclusively to men

in *Dorian Gray* who revel in it: Basil paints[120] and Lord Henry and Dorian pose. Dorian, like Wilde, the author who created him, spends his life, to borrow Taussig's description for one of the powers of the mimetic, falsifying, masking, and posing. Recall, for example, that Dorian begins the novel posing for Basil's painting and ends it in a death pose in his attic and that he hides his identity behind the masks he wears in public. Mimesis, for Dorian and Lord Henry, as reflected in their trips to the theatre and Dorian's compulsion to see his painting, bring them some semblance of pleasure.[121] In informing Dorian "'you freed my soul from prison,'" Sibyl suggests that the mimesis of the theatre is a punishment (Wilde 74).

Sibyl is not just anguished by the mimesis of the theatre. She also becomes alienated from and disillusioned by the deception caused by the theatre's materiality. In her searing monologue to Dorian, Sibyl suggests that the sensory experience of the theatre is a full-fledged, all-encompassing lie masquerading as reality. In Basil's studio wherein Nature thrives, the aroma of flowers elicits a certain sentimentality and seasonality. In Sibyl's theatre, the absence of Nature produces a foreboding sense of stagnation. For Sibyl, it is always nighttime and it is always time to perform. Trapped in the theatre, Sibyl cannot escape performance. And since there are no markers of Nature to signal beginnings and ends in Sibyl's theatre, nothing that genuinely lives or dies, the theatre's temporality becomes glaring. Juxtapose the vibrant cyclicality of Nature in Basil's studio with the staggering permanence of endless representation and performance in Sibyl's theatre—the former space evokes life and

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[120] Basil's painting of Dorian brings the artist joy and anguish.

[121] *In Oscar Wilde and the Simulacrum*: *The Truth of Masks*, Giles Whiteley argues that Basil's portrait of Dorian "is a reflection not *of* Dorian, but a composite of other texts (none of which have priority)…Not a simple *mimesis* then, the portrait becomes a simulacrum, and Dorian in his turn thus 'identifies' not with *his* image but becomes 'fascinated' with his simulacrum" (123).

art, while the theatre reeks of confinement and imitation. Sibyl cannot willfully suspend disbelief any longer. In indicating to Dorian that she wants out of the world of shadows, Sibyl rejects the theatre.[122] This is not a clean break by any means. After calling out the insincerity of the theatre, she immediately becomes out of place. As she implies in her monologue, she is a Juliet who finds Romeo abhorrent. What role is there for an actress who no longer wants to suspend disbelief and perform? What position is there for a young, working-class woman with no talent outside the theatre and no eligible man to marry? Sibyl emerges from the theatre with few prospects. In voicing her desire to abandon the theatre, the teenage, girlish Sibyl becomes a woman and finds her voice. Shortly after speaking her own words in her own voice in front of Dorian, she commits suicide.[123] Compelled to leave the theatre because of its atrocious materiality and mimetic nature, Sibyl, like the prisoner who leaves the cave in Plato's cave allegory, is disturbed by the real world.[124] Sibyl's suicide not only conveys that she would rather die than live without Dorian—Sibyl is clearly as melodramatic in real life as she is on stage—but that she would rather be dead than return to "'the hollowness, the sham,

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[122] The theatre produces a sense of irony in *Dorian Gray*: Sibyl initially perceives the theatre as her salvation, but comes to know it as her prison; the practice of acting, which for a time makes her feel most alive, is what kills her. And the stage that grants her a space to be seen and heard is the same stage that effectively silences her with the words of Shakespeare's heroines.

[123] Sibyl implies that she cannot go back to the world of shadows. When Dorian forsakes her after her monologue, Sibyl loses the two things that orient her life: the theatre and the man she loves. Sibyl's suicide is born from grief, loss, and trauma. However, her death has to be read as part of her materiality: She kills herself in part because she has nothing to live for and nothing to live on. The theatre and the possibility of marrying Dorian are her only means of securing her livelihood. Sibyl represents the limited options available to Victorian women. She is not respectable enough to marry well—she is a working-class actress and has an actress for a mother. And after her disastrous performance as Juliet, she cannot even call herself an actress. Sibyl in part kills herself because she few choices at her disposal.

[124] Dorian is too real for Sibyl in their last interaction together. Sibyl clearly prefers the Dorian that was accessible to her when she "'knew nothing but shadows'" in the theatre (Wilde 74). The Dorian that Sibyl meets in the theatre is a prince. After she abandons the shadows and illusions of the theatre, Sibyl discovers that the Dorian that exists in the real world is not just a stranger, but a monster.

the silliness of the empty pageant'" of the theatre (Wilde 74). Conversely, Sibyl's suicide can be read as her inability to survive in the real world.[125] While her suicide is Sibyl's message and performance for Dorian, it is also her way out: Out of her mother's looming shadow, out of Dorian's way, out of her stage manager's control, and out of the misleading shadows of the theatre.[126] Death liberates Sibyl from the theatre, but it irrevocably tethers her to the roles she plays in *Dorian Gray*: Sibyl is forever Juliet standing on the balcony receiving her love-struck Romeo. She is forever the young girl waiting for her prince to visit. She is perennially the damsel waiting to be saved. If Dorian is immortalized in his painting, Sibyl is immortalized in death and commemorated by performance.

Theatricality, the theatre, and performance in *Dorian Gray* are disarming, destructive, and deceptive. Sibyl fancies Dorian as Prince Charming; he desires her as Juliet, among other heroines; Lord Henry deviously plays the role of friend, cultural critic, audience member and actor for Dorian. The characters perform for each other constantly and when Dorian and Sibyl fail to perform, they fall victim to the unforgiving nature of theatricality and performance. Dorian dies after he can no longer keep up the appearance of Prince Charming. Meanwhile, Sibyl dies when she cannot perform the roles of Shakespeare's heroines on stage. *Dorian Gray* considers theatricality and performance lethal. The characters must perform on stage and off in dressing-rooms, greenrooms, art studios, and social gatherings. Anything short of immaculate performance is tantamount to a death sentence in *Dorian Gray*. Dorian and Sibyl

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[125] The real world, Sibyl founds out in her first honest conversation with Dorian, has nothing for her. It is too real, painful, brutal, unwelcoming and glaring.

[126] The loves of Sibyl's life, the theatre and Dorian, are what kill her. Dorian and Basil are also killed by what they love. Dorian kills Basil and Dorian accidently kills himself by stabbing his painting.

showcase the life-and-death stakes of theatricality and performance. Their performances demand no intermissions, breaks, or reprieves. They must perform for life and they do so even in death. In the callous world of *Dorian Gray*, theatricality and performance ruthlessly kill.

CONCLUSION:
A Closing Monologue

Through reading *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Dorian Gray*, contemporary readers can gain an appreciation for the versatility of Victorian theatricality and the theatre and become well-versed in their shortcomings, dangers, and possibilities. This is why I maintain that these novels, despite showing theatricality and the theatre as threatening and dangerous, are not wholly anti-theatrical. Any full-throttle anti-theatrical reading of these novels is not supported by what we know about Dickens's, Thackeray's, and Wilde's personal and professional lives. It also does not coincide with the amount of time, detail, and care that each novelist devotes to developing their novel's respective theatricality. In these novels, we encounter theatricality or the theatre at every turn. Even when there are no theatres in sight, the theatre comes to us in *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Vanity Fair,* and *Dorian Gray* through theatrical illustrations and theatre-related words, metaphors, and analogies that appear in dialogue or narration. These novels intricately build their narratives around theatricality, the theatre, and performance, and, as such, their complexity should not be reduced to simplistic readings that place them in pro or anti-theatricality camps.

I have tried in this dissertation to capture the expansiveness of theatricality and the theatre in *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Vanity Fair,* and *Dorian Gray*, analyzing depictions of actors, melodrama, acting, the theatre, and theatrical performance. Because there is a finite amount of space in a dissertation project, there are certain tangents of each novel's theatricality that I did not cover. Should this project be converted into a book, I would love to analyze the audacious theatricality of the Manager of the Performance in *Vanity Fair* and play closer attention to the theatre vocabulary of the novel. I would also love to address the vibrant theatricality of the

illustrations in *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Vanity Fair* in more detail. I bring up several illustrations in this dissertation, but there is a plethora of illustrations in *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Vanity Fair* that stage bodies and situations in a theatrical manner. Any study of the theatricality of illustrations in the Victorian novel would require its own chapter. I am not an art critic by any means, but I believe that I can expand upon the theatricality of *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Vanity Fair* by analyzing their illustrations.

Writing a dissertation is a serious undertaking, and I have let the genre and its conventions affect my approach. That said, any future expansion of this dissertation would focus more on the amusing and humorous aspects of theatricality. I gesture towards humor in my *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Vanity Fair* chapters, but I would love to elaborate further on the playfulness of theatricality. Now on to the novels that I did not get to in this dissertation. As I was reading *Vanity Fair*, I was struck by how much Becky Sharp reminded me of Arabella Donn, a cynical, manipulative woman in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. Becky never blushes and drops down to her knees to seduce and manipulate men. Arabella practices making dimples appear on her face and wears fake hair to attract Jude, her naïve suitor. Both Becky and Arabella are sexually aggressive women who entrap and entice men with theatricality. Like Becky, Arabella's theatricality is rendered horrifying, duplicitous, and unnatural. I would enjoy writing about Arabella in a future book version of this dissertation because she, like Becky, is bold, complicated, and messy.

In a future book version of this dissertation, I would love to explore the theatricality of the sensation novel, a popular 1860s genre of fiction known for its melodrama, that borrowed from and gave back to the Victorian stage. I am interested in analyzing sensation novels like Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* not only

because they are theatrical, but because they would allow me to investigate what it is that draws readers to melodrama. I discuss melodrama in this dissertation in Chapters 1 and 3, mostly to show a marked distinction between Dickens's and Wilde's theatricality: Dickens embraced melodrama, while Wilde resented it. Even though I assess melodrama in this dissertation, I do not unpack what it is about melodrama as a genre that pulls reader in. Is it the cliché archetypes and structures, the implausible plots, the angsty characters, or the sense of escapism that connects readers to the genre? Any discussion of melodrama would require analyzing the perception of literary genres in the Victorian period. Just like the Victorian theatre, the Victorian novel had genres that fell in and out of favor. Melodrama, as a stage genre, remained immensely popular throughout the nineteenth century, but it was not seen as particularly serious. On stage, melodrama bypassed the 1737 Licensing Act. In the Victorian novel, melodrama created over-the-top plots and recognizable archetypes. Melodrama was embraced by mass audiences, but it was not taken seriously by many Victorian critics.

I am interested in exploring Victorian novels, such as George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, that do not appear outwardly theatrical. Doing so would allow me to see if these novels have a more subtle kind of theatricality, examining what can be gleaned from what seems to be a contradiction: Theatricality in part calls attention to itself. To be theatrical is to have presence and to be vocal about that presence. Can novels that engage in theatricality and performance, but not in the showmanship dimensions of the term be called theatrical? Victorian novels that are theatrical, but that do not abide by the flamboyance of theatricality are fascinating because they complicate what it means to be theatrical. I am interested in unpacking this line of inquiry further in the future.

This dissertation has attempted to convey the immense scope of theatricality and performance in the Victorian novel without resorting to listing all the ways in which *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Dorian Gray* are theatrical. As I mentioned in my introduction, analyzing every aspect of theatricality, the theatre, and performance in the novels covered in this project would require more space than is typically given in a dissertation. *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Vanity Fair* in particular offer, in form and content, over six hundred pages of continuous theatricality and performance. Instead of approaching these novels with the intention of cataloguing their respective theatricality, this dissertation has focused its analysis on specific areas: Transgressive theatricality in *Vanity Fair*, melodrama and the performing body in *Nicholas Nickleby*, and the perils of the theatre and theatrical performance in *Dorian Gray*. The body of the actor as a fetishized commodity, the archetypes and elements of stage melodrama, the social risks and rewards of theatricality and performance, the polarizing nature of Victorian theatre, and the embattled profession of acting are connective threads for this dissertation. However, this dissertation, by design, has a narrow scope. Chapter 1, for example, does not explore the influence of Shakespeare on *Nicholas Nickleby*, the theatricality of its side-characters, or inspect how the novel's theatricality can be understood as separate from and a part of Dickens's novels, all of which have their own rich conceptualizations of theatricality and performance. I wish I had more space in this dissertation to spend on the Crummles theatre. I also wish there was more space to cover the structural elements of *Vanity Fair*. As for *Dorian Gray*, I wish I had more space to consider Dorian's acting.

I never went into writing this dissertation determined to focus on gender and sex in the Victorian novel. However, as the novels of this dissertation, particularly *Vanity Fair* and

Dorian Gray, drove me to contemplate theatricality through gender, sex, and sexuality, I began to realize that there is one essential component that I did not meaningfully incorporate into my readings: class. Acting was stigmatized in the Victorian period in part because of class prejudice. The actresses on stage were working-class women and theatre audiences were comprised of working-class, middle-class, and upper-class men and women. The blurring of class and gender lines in the Victorian theatre dismayed many Victorians. Though I mention class in Chapters 1, 2 and 3, I do not delve into class deeply enough in this dissertation. If this dissertation were to transition into a book, I would scrutinize class more thoroughly, particularly because it is important to understanding the fraught nature of Sibyl and Becky's theatricality.

Becky, Sibyl, and Nicholas are young, beautiful actors in their respective novels—none are older than twenty when they are first introduced. Becky attracts nearly every man in her vicinity. Nicholas is handsome enough to be immediately cast as Romeo on and off the stage. And Sibyl instantly inspires devotion from Dorian when he sees her on stage. This dissertation has addressed the allure of actors, particularly in *Vanity Fair*, but it does not investigate that attraction through the lens of Victorian aesthetics. Any future book version of this dissertation needs to analyze the theatricality of these novels with aesthetics in mind, especially since that area is one that Wilde was particularly invested in.

I have argued in this dissertation that *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Dorian Gray* frame theatricality, the theatre, and performance as dangerous, duplicitous, and threatening. However, I hope it is clear through reading this dissertation that theatricality and performance were not just existential threats in Victorian culture; they were sources of mass entertainment. As Nell Darby shows, the lives of Victorian actresses made headlines and sold

theatre tickets and newspapers. Meanwhile, cultural critics debated the morality and aesthetic value of the theatre; popular novels were adapted into plays; mass audiences and novelists attended the theatre; novelists borrowed from the theatre, and the theatre industry expanded with new genres and architectural designs. Victorians attended the theatre, despite their anxieties about the theatre as a public space, acting as a respectable profession, and plays as a serious form of cultural production. *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Dorian Gray* depict theatricality, the theatre, and performance as dangerous, but they are not anti-theatrical novels any more than the Victorians who flocked to music halls, circuses, pantomimes, and melodramas were anti-theatrical.

The Victorian theatre charmed Victorians and Victorian novels that considered theatricality and the theatre, by extension, charmed their readers. Who can help but have a good time reading about Becky's rebellious theatricality, even as it ruins everything around her? Who can help but be endeared by the Crummles theatre troupe and their foolish behind-the-scenes melodrama? Who can help but feel for Sibyl when the actress dies in the theatre? Bad things happen in the theatre, because of the theatre, or due to theatricality in *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Dorian Gray*, but the presence of theatricality, the theatre, and performance is invigorating for the form and content of these novels.

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