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**Theatrical Transvestism in the United States and the
Performance of American Identities: 1870-1935**

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by

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For Paul

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Theatrical Transvestism in the United States and the Performance of American Identities: 1870-1935

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This study documents and analyzes the work of several variety acts of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries: the Russell Brothers, who were famous for their Irish Servant Girls characters before coming under attack by Irish American protestors; James McIntyre and Thomas Heath, who performed various blackface characters on the vaudeville stage long after minstrelsy waned; and Harrigan and Hart, whose musical plays included a multitude of ethnic types in an exaggerated mirror of the immigrant slums of New York. Each of these acts included female impersonation as a prominent component, and also created detailed “race delineations.” Every one of these performers was accorded expert status in the popular press as authorities on the behavior, dialect and slang of the racial group they depicted. These acts also all experienced a decline in popularity as female comedians, chorus girls, and glamour drag queens staked out theatrical

territories in the twentieth century. Of these acts, only Harrigan and Hart have received extensive biographical attention; but the strange production history of Michael Stewart's *Harrigan 'n Hart* illustrates the effects of sexual anxiety on the writing of theatrical biography. Not until the 1990s would performers of multiple ethnicities and genders, such as John Leguizamo, Tracey Ullman, and Anna Deavere Smith, regain mainstream currency as authorities on race relations and sexuality. This study correlates the decline of a rich period of multivalent social impersonation with shifting perceptions of homosexuality, gender play, class consciousness and racial identity in the United States.

Table of Contents

I.	Hourglass Authority Figures	1
II.	"Our Servant Girls": The Russell Brothers and the Ownership of Authenticity	60
III.	Blackface Brides and "Ham Tree Girls": Female Images in the Minstrelsy of McIntyre and Heath	105
IV.	Harrigan's Wench: Identity Play in the Work of Tony Hart	142
V.	Writing Hart: Anxiety and Homophobia in the "Nedda Trilogy"	186
VI.	Conclusion: Enter the Tough Girls--and Guys.....	214
	Bibliography.....	230
	Vita.....	243

I

Hourglass (Authority) Figures

1. Introduction

In the archives of the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Public Library of the Performing Arts, I discovered an undated, unattributed etching which appears to be a publicity poster for the late-nineteenth century variety theatre duo Edward Harrigan and Tony Hart.¹ The printing at the bottom of the poster names the sketch depicted as “The Little Frauds.” Beneath the title are the actors’ names, Harrigan and Hart. Two things fascinate me about this image. First, this sketch is described and photographed in much of the contemporary press of Harrigan and Hart, but it is usually called “The Little Fraud.” This was their first act as partners and was first performed in 1871. In this etching, the title has been made plural to include both characters (or performers) in the “fraud.”

A second intriguing element is in the detailed faces and bodies of the characters. The etching depicts a man who is clearly Edward Harrigan, with the strong nose and heavy brow familiar to Harrigan fans and researchers from numerous photographs. But Harrigan's companion in the image is a perfectly rendered young girl in a fashionable dress, with an hourglass figure and delicate

laced boots. Her arms reach out beseechingly to Harrigan, so that her face with its coquettish smile and lowered lids is seen in profile. Harrigan appears to recoil from the girl, his legs, torso and arms all leaning away in one long line, while his arms rise protectively, one hand grasping at his own lapel and the other holding his hat up and away from the reaching girl. Her face bears no particular likeness to Tony Hart's, but he did play a young female in the original sketch, and was associated with cross-dressed roles throughout his career with Harrigan.

Confronted with this image, with Tony Hart's name boldly printed underneath it, I must conclude that the duo's audience read this girl as a symbol for Hart's on-stage female persona. But this substitution of symbolic femininity for Hart's masculine reality may not have been easy or total. The strange plurality of the title suggests a metatheatrical comment on the fraudulent nature of performance. Are *both* of these men hiding something from the audience? Is the title a challenge to uncover hidden secrets? Is all theatre inherently fraudulent, or is it the seamless transvestism in this image that earns the accusation?

There is also a struggle for power in the image. Harrigan's character wears sartorial signs of power, in his stylish, light-colored suit with vest and hat. He appears tall and strong and easily capable of overpowering the young girl. Yet, he is threatened. The Harrigan figure's physicalization of anxiety involves a two-step process: he validates the feminine identity of his companion, and he acknowledges the threatening potential of her female power. My reading of the

Harrigan figure anticipates potential readings of an audience member: while Hart's identity as a doubly-gendered performer is understood and validated by the image, I also see the unease—perhaps pleasurable unease—evoked by his gender play. The tense alliances of male and female, attraction and repulsion, staged and off-stage performances of gender, all have been captured in Harrigan's rejecting posture. Harrigan seems to resist, in spite of the great success of his partnership with Tony Hart, sharing the stage with a potentially dangerous person who embodied both genders at once.

Recent scholarship on cross-dressing, including Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests* and Laurence Senelick's monumental history, *The Changing Room*, has addressed the gender alchemy of theatrical transvestism and its relationship to the private sexual activities of the actor. While Garber sees the cross-dressed performance as evoking a "third sex" that somehow transcends the gender binary of mainstream (Western, particularly American) society, Senelick describes a complex collection of theatrical creations that perform specifically theatrical functions and may or may not comment upon or interact with off-stage sexual behavior, depending on the context.² Garber's celebration of the "third sex" seems to have anticipated the recent vogue for a televised "Queer" creature who serves, among other functions, as fashion advisor for the American mainstream, while Senelick's examination of specific performances within their original social and sexual contexts models a sophisticated negotiation of identity politics and

theatrical convention. In spite of these multifaceted inquiries, the study of cross-dressing still involves a deep compulsion to “know”—to discover the biological or “true” sex of the cross-dressed performer, as well as their sexual history. As writer Francine Pascal once asked director William Wesbrooks, while discussing Harrigan and Hart, “Do you believe that Tony Hart was gay?” Wesbrooks reports,

She said [of Hart being gay], well that’s really just

common knowledge, all of my friends know that.

And I thought, all of your friends sit around and talk

about the sexuality of a man who died over a

hundred years ago?³

I would argue that this fixation with “solving” the mystery of transvestite performance, and thereby negating myriad potential pleasures and meanings of a specific cross-dressed performance, is a development of the late-nineteenth century that intensified throughout the twentieth century. Particularly in the United States, where the mass media burst from and fell back upon a Puritanical cultural landscape, the twentieth century was an era of unmasking. The urge to multiply—to mass-produce—was matched by an anxious desire to quantify and categorize the familiar and to diagnose and quarantine the unknown. Scholars of American sexuality, such as Sharon R. Ullman, John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, frequently describe the latter half of the nineteenth century as a period of social and cultural upheaval from which emerged particular sexual sensibilities

which might be recognized as "modern."⁴ These sensibilities included a curiosity and playfulness toward female desire, and a redefinition of both masculinity and femininity that began to demarcate an arena of homosexual behaviors as "abnormal" sexuality. Transvestism, including theatrical cross-dressing, became one of these pathologized behaviors:

In their ongoing fascination with how [Julian] Eltinge and others either avoided or fell into the "trap" of effeminacy, critics demonstrated anxiety over sexual practice and its relationship to an anchored, visible, and impermeable notion of masculinity . . . Manliness may have been the term, but sexual perversity was the issue.⁵

Ullman describes the activities of a Long Beach, California vice squad in 1914, who conducted undercover "sting" operations on gatherings of homosexual men. While the city debated the "perversity" of their activities, and charged the men with "social vagrancy," both legal definitions and popular conceptions of specific sexual activities were publicly contested. Transcripts of heterosexual rape trials, such as the case of Antonio Kuches and Emma Metz in 1896, illustrate contested ideas about female sexuality in the "modern" age. Ullman explains that the defense attorney in this trial "explicitly presumed the existence of female desire,

even among younger women, and [his] bold assumption that women owned their own bodies crossed barriers of age and spoke directly to a new generation.”⁶

Many forces shaped sexual mores in the United States through the turn of the century: industrialization, the exodus from rural communities to urban centers, the suffrage movement, the growth of the medical establishment, the development of psychiatry, massive waves of immigrants from varying cultures, the development of mass transit systems, and the explosion of communications through new media, among others. These same forces contributed to the development of the American variety theatre, later termed "vaudeville," whose structures and content were adopted and expanded upon by radio and television as well as American musical theatre.⁷ Because nineteenth-century variety audiences were particularly vociferous in their reception of performances, the relationship between performers and spectators of this period is often characterized as a kind of dialogue, however incomplete or imperfect. The values, expectations and aspirations expressed in that dialogue, including those concerning sexuality and gendered behavior, are frequently examined for clues to off-stage behaviors and attitudes of the period. Certainly, the twenty-first century association of transvestite performance with homosexuality reflects a renewed concern with the definition and containment of sexuality. But sexuality was not the only identity category at play in late-nineteenth century theatrical cross-dressing. Furthermore, its rejection by mainstream audiences reflects changing attitudes, not only toward

sexuality, but also toward the social masks of class, race and the shifting racial sub-category known as “ethnicity.”⁸

By the 1920s, male-to-female transvestism had been shunted from the mainstream into the margins, yielding at least one specifically homoerotic cultural product, often called “glamour drag.” As Marybeth Hamilton explains of glamour drag, “Apart from a few (very recent) exceptions, its practitioners are consigned to the margins of show business, to a netherworld of bars and nightclubs far removed from the entertainment mainstream.”⁹ A glamour drag performer projects an idealized, hyper-real ultra-woman, whose clothing, hairstyle and makeup exaggeratedly marked her as not only feminine, but impossibly, artificially wealthy. This fantasy female is also, usually, white. This “high-class,” racially “supreme” homoerotic caricature has represented American female-to-male cross-dressed performance throughout most of the twentieth century, until homosexuality itself began to reclaim a place in mainstream culture in the 1980s and ‘90s. In the twenty-first century, the one-to-one correlations of glamour drag with homoeroticism or homosexuality have been problematized by scholars and performers; yet the popular impression remains that cross-dressing is constitutive of homosexual desire and practice.¹⁰

In spite of this perception, the development of glamour drag can be traced directly out of the various styles of female impersonation of the minstrel show and variety theatre, particularly gaining popularity with working- and middle-

class audiences, including women, in the 1870s. These female impersonations were not specifically or exclusively homoerotic performances. In fact, the female impersonations of the nineteenth century often overlaid gender play upon characterizations of a particular race, especially the distorted blackface and stage Irish personalities. Both of these stereotyped racial figures also represented enslaved or working-class people, whose behaviors belied their inferior social status as well as their race. Glamour drag is a fascinating, sometimes mind-boggling, performance genre, but its use as a lens through which to view earlier female impersonation is limiting because of its frequent association with a specific sub-category of white, male homosexuality.

I argue that we cannot reduce the female impersonations of the late-nineteenth century to the male sex underneath their skirts, or to some generic and fashionable idea of the “homoerotic.” Each skirted male performer projects a unique combination of gendered signs and also layers on masks of race and class. The interplay of these levels of identity masquerade, I contend, lent richness of both pleasure and meaning to these female impersonations. This richness was subdued during the era of glamour drag, due to the increased emphasis on homoerotic play in what became a highly specialized genre featuring mimicry of famous women and lip-synching of pre-recorded music. But the performance of race and class has returned in recent years to inflect gender impersonation by performers of both sexes, such as John Leguizamo, Anna Deavere Smith and

Tracey Ullman. While the erotic potential of gender blending is not absent from such performances, gender impersonation is but one component in a complex masquerade, often guided by conscious social commentary. Certainly, the animating impulse behind Smith's impersonation of Al Sharpton in *Fires in the Mirror* is not to evoke erotic responses at her gender transformation.¹¹ Instead, the overlay of her female identity with markers of Sharpton's masculinity is wrapped in her performances of his race, of his identification with James Brown, and of the political history he symbolizes, the collective political memory conjured by his voice, his hairstyle and his manner of dress. This enfolding of gender play within an interlocked network of identity markers is clearly analogous to the use of female impersonation in the late-nineteenth century.

In this study, I will explore the work of three acts: The Russell Brothers, who were famous for their Irish Servant Girls characters; James McIntyre and Thomas Heath, who performed various blackface characters on the vaudeville stage long after minstrelsy waned; and Harrigan and Hart, whose musical plays included a multitude of ethnic types all mixed together in an exaggerated mirror of the immigrant slums of New York. These performers share many common qualities, but a comparison of their stories reveals several striking patterns. Each of these acts originated in the 1870s and performed until or into the twentieth century. They all included female impersonation as a prominent component. The acts also created detailed "race delineations,"¹² and their publicity and reviews

focused as much on their success in racial portrayal as on their abilities as female impersonators. None of these acts actively addressed the growing homosexual subculture that would emerge as the first, dominant audience for glamour drag. Every one of these performers was accorded expert status in the popular press as authorities on the behavior, dialect and slang of the racial group they depicted. Lastly, all of these acts experienced a decrease in popularity as the perception of female impersonation became aligned with homoeroticism; furthermore, their decline in popularity can be balanced by corresponding upturns in the fortunes of actresses competing in similar acts. In gathering and analyzing the details of these female impersonations, I will accomplish two goals: to document the work of several relatively unknown and un-historicized performers; and to demonstrate a relationship between the decline of this rich period of multivalent social impersonation and the shifting perceptions of homosexuality and gender identity play in the United States.

I have stated previously that all of the actors in this study claimed or were accorded some type of expert status as authorities on particular ethnic groups. Although the actors purported to bring “authenticity” to their work, their impersonations grew from well-established stock characters of the minstrel and vaudeville stage. The particular attractions of these performers for audiences are more clearly understood against the backdrop of the stage traditions within which they developed and endeavored to stand out. In this chapter, I will review

literature pertaining to female impersonation, blackface minstrelsy, and vaudeville, as well as several studies of sexuality, immigration, racial integration, and the patterns of consumption that shaped theatre audiences of the late-nineteenth century.

After the literature review, I will provide theatrical and social contexts within which to examine the work of the Russell Brothers, McIntyre and Heath, and Harrigan and Hart, by describing the characters from which they drew their inspiration. Several of these characters derive from minstrelsy: the blackface binary of Jim Crow and Zip Coon, and their female counterparts, the grotesque Funny Old Gal and the lovely, passively feminine Prima Donna.¹³ These blackface characters directly influenced McIntyre and Heath as well as Tony Hart; the Funny Old Gal is also echoed in the Irish Servant Girls of the Russell Brothers. The Russell Brothers and Hart also drew from the English Dame and Old Maid characters of European theatre, who were grotesquely masculine and often mingled hypersexuality with menopausal ambiguity. Variety theatre blended the ethnic sketch-and-song format of blackface minstrelsy with the new accents and mannerisms of immigrant America, particularly the Irish, “Hebrew” (Jewish), and “Dutch” (German) types, and so the “Ethnic Comedian” became a staple performer, often changing dialects and costumes within one performance as a “quick-change artist.” A last character category I will discuss is the chorus girl, whose idealized, white femininity contrasted sharply with blackface images when

adopted by McIntyre and Heath in their Ham Tree Girls Chorus. As I outline these character types, I will reference some of the most current literature concerning aspects of minstrelsy, variety theatre or vaudeville, and burlesque, including work by Laurence Senelick, Annemarie Bean, Eric Lott and Douglas Gilbert.

2. Review of Literature

The major texts concerning cross-dressing foreground historical or theoretical concerns to varying degrees. Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, begins with the concept that transvestism is crucial to the production of culture, and presents evidence in a non-chronological approach that connects diverse examples to support thematic arguments.¹⁴

Examining the role of clothing in gender identity (both on- and off-stage), and the particular confusions, pleasures and anxieties that arise when clothing mixes or masks gender identity, Garber arranges a complex collage of images and ideas. Linking Lacan, Foucault and Freud to such popular icons as Tootsie, Madonna, and Elvis, Garber identifies and evaluates transvestite behavior in various time periods and locations, as well as in modern culture. Her chapter entitled "Black and White TV" most closely bears upon the historical period of my research. Her explanation of the charms of the famous blackface Prima Donna Francis Leon is embedded within discussions of partial cross-gender sartorial appropriations, such

as the gold chains of Mr. T, and the use of feminized clothing and behavior by light-skinned African American pop musicians, like Prince, to mitigate the threat of their virility.¹⁵ The theoretical links employed by Garber have clarified two concepts for me: that the attempt to ascribe either a heterosexual or homosexual identity to the cross-dressed performer may be a denial of the cross-dressed moment, a moment which engenders specific and multivalent meanings which vary according to the desires, associations and fears of the spectator; and that the pleasures associated with cross-dressed performance may be narcissistic as well as hetero- or homoerotic. In other words, the gender mask invites the spectator of either sex to envision him- or herself within the performed image.¹⁶

In contrast with Garber's eclectic work, two basic, historical texts focused on theatrical cross-dressing are Anthony Slide's *Great Pretenders: A History of Male and Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts* and F. Michael Moore's *Drag! Male and Female Impersonators on Stage, Screen and Television*.¹⁷ While Slide aims merely to describe an art form which entertained, Moore develops a straightforward thesis "that drag performances convey important truths about perception, gender roles and sexuality."¹⁸ Moore goes on to describe the different effects of performances that blur gender markers and those that create over-determined "ideal" figures of the opposite sex. Neither volume engages the material from a strongly theoretical perspective, and neither employs citations; but both provide numerous examples of cross-dressed performances in the period

of Shakespeare, in Victorian "breeches" roles for actresses, on the minstrel stage, in vaudeville, and in the glamour drag clubs of recent years. For basic, chronological reference defining the recent research, these books are invaluable.

Laurence Senelick's *The Changing Room* is his most recent work, but his previous scholarship concerning theatrical cross-dressing provides both meticulously documented historical evidence and in-depth theoretical analysis. In the 1992 anthology which he edited, *Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts*, Senelick maintains that, while many forms of female impersonation have been viewed as repressive institutions aimed at controlling women through representation, "[i]n twentieth-century America...stage transvestism has been used to mediate social awareness."¹⁹ In his own essay in the volume, "Lady and the Tramp: Drag Differentials in the Progressive Era," Senelick examines the gender experimentations of Julian Eltinge and Bert Savoy, who, he claims, "neutralized and humanized the New Woman and the fairy, types of gender intermediacy that were impinging upon public consciousness."²⁰ This "neutralization" may have relieved the anxieties produced by the activities of Mae West, whose exaggerated physique and breathy innuendo made the same promises as Eltinge and Savoy, but whose ability to deliver on those promises may have been extremely threatening to the Progressive reformers.

Another article of Senelick's appears in an important anthology edited by Lesley Ferris, entitled *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing*.²¹ This collection of readings of cross-dressed performances throughout history not only provides important contextual information, it also contains two essays which bear closely upon my field of study. Senelick anatomizes the phenomenon of the blackface Prima Donna within a larger theatrical tradition as well as a social framework of off-stage transvestism. This essay provides connections between the cross-dressed minstrel and the exploits of such notorious English gentlemen as Boulton and Park, who were charged with "buggery" in 1871, largely due to their public appearances in drag. They were acquitted to loud cheers, as they were well loved for their onstage performances. Senelick also recounts the story of Annie Hindle, whose career as a male impersonator and unfortunate marriage to an abusive man led her to marry her female dresser and live out her days as a "husband" in women's dress.²² Although these examples include off-stage transvestism, the essay chiefly revolves around highly sexualized stage personas which Senelick claims allowed audiences to "savor sexually provocative behavior because it had ostensibly been neutralized by the transvestism."²³ While he begins by proposing that nineteenth-century theatrical cross-dressing is the co-optation by the mainstream of the product of "a newly conspicuous homosexual subculture" Senelick ends by allowing that both heterosexual and homosexual audiences might find pleasure and "wish-fulfillment" in viewing such a

performance.²⁴ The suggestions that all cross-dressing originates in an ever-present homosexual subculture and that cross-dressing's chief attraction lies in the opportunity to experience same-sex desire raise several areas for potential exploration and dialogue. For example, is all gender play inherently sexual? If so, is it necessarily a play between two modes of sexual preference, homosexual or heterosexual? Does Senelick's claim that cross-dressing "neutralizes" the threat of sexually provocative role-play side-step the "neutralizing" factor of the stage—the fact that players and audience alike create a theatrical frame which may or may not mitigate attitudes toward off-stage sexuality? Might Senelick's analysis cause the transvestite image itself to disappear, as Garber has suggested?

Although these early works of Senelick's posit important links between nineteenth-century female impersonation and the emergence of a homosexual subculture, his more recent work, *The Changing Room*, articulates the homoerotic exchange as one of many functions and pleasures in a world-wide spectrum of cross-dressed theatre and ritual. His discussion of the Dame character is particularly useful in my exploration of the Russell Brothers and Tony Hart; I will employ and critique his readings of the Dame in my examination of character traditions later in this chapter.

One other essay included in *Crossing the Stage*, "I'm the Queen of the Bitches," by Marybeth Hamilton, presents additional images of transvestism (and additional analyses) from the period of my study.²⁵ Hamilton's examination of the

career of Mae West tracks the "demonization" of cross-dressing, when it came to be equated with homosexuality. In West, Hamilton finds the aggressive manipulation of gender self-construction for the purpose of amassing sexual power—seemingly in order to further fuel the masquerade. Her deep and complex relationships with homosexual artists and admirers throughout her life, and her groundbreaking (and law-breaking) appropriation of homosexual drag culture in such shows as "Pleasure Man," grew from the same traditions as those shared by the Russells, McIntyre and Heath and Harrigan and Hart.

Annemarie Bean's work on blackface female impersonation is central to my study.²⁶ The article most pertinent to my project is "Transgressing the Gender Divide," from the anthology *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Minstrelsy*, edited by Bean, Hatch and McNamara. Bean's essay is brief but crucial, as the only recent work to attempt to describe and analyze Tony Hart's performance and to theorize the possible functions and effects of that performance in light of recent scholarship in both racial and gender studies. Bean describes the concept of the Prima Donna as a development from the crudely humorous wench of early minstrelsy into "the still, rigid, almost paralytic feminine being which was needed to insure the formation of a successful masculine identity" in the male audience members.²⁷ She then produces Francis Leon (clearly a Prima Donna in his stage dress and mannerisms and in his featured role on the minstrel stage) and Tony Hart as examples of this kind of specialty performer. Her description of

Hart's performance history includes his youthful beginnings singing in a girl's nightgown as well as his later work with Harrigan. In her analysis of Hart as a Prima Donna, Bean does not attempt to account for the diverse qualities of Hart's performances. Instead, she highlights certain differences between Hart's career and that of Leon, pointing out that Hart did not specialize exclusively in female impersonation, but "relied more on comic elements fused with believability."²⁸ Although incomplete, Bean's essay begins to describe Hart's work and to contain it within a developing vocabulary from studies of minstrelsy.

Bean developed her ideas in a second essay entitled "Black Minstrelsy and Double Inversion," in *African American Performance and Theater History*, edited by Harry J. Elam, Jr. and David Krasner. In one passage, Bean describes Tony Hart's blackface performance as epitomizing the Funny Old Gal role. Although she continues to explore the Prima Donna character, her re-categorization of Hart as a Funny Old Gal is not explained. Bean's focus here is primarily on African American minstrel performers, who, she argues, built upon the character types and structures of blackface minstrelsy to showcase their own talents. She finds transgressive, rebellious potential in the "double inversion" of African American gender impersonators, whom she feels subverted expectation of race and gender as they "created a new form of theater based in the skills of the performers, not in their ability to conform to stereotypes."²⁹ Her arguments concerning African American minstrels are compelling; yet I feel that she has not answered many of

the questions raised by her earlier essay. While her first piece depicts blackface female impersonation as complex and nuanced, her second essay flattens out this reading to form a platform for further work. As she shifts her focus to African American performers, Bean's theory of double inversion almost requires her to read white blackface minstrels as simple purveyors of stereotypes. Her conclusion—that the art of African American minstrels was “based in the skills of the performers”—suggests that true skill was not involved in blackface minstrelsy by white performers.

Bean's essays do illustrate a gap in the documentation and analysis of Hart and other performers whose craft might have crossed stylistic as well as racial and gender lines. Can Tony Hart's characters truly be defined as Prima Donnas or Funny Old Gals, since his impersonations lacked some of the framing devices of minstrelsy described by Bean? If not, were the pleasures derived from his work necessarily the same as those described by Bean, Lott, and Senelick in their work on minstrelsy? What other desires or functions might have been fulfilled by Hart's work?

In addition to "Transgressing the Gender Divide," the Bean, Hatch, McNamara anthology provides essays by Eric Lott and Robert Toll, among other scholars, and excerpts from the minstrel shows themselves. This collection guided me in my selection and analysis of several foundational texts, which I will describe in the next section of my review.

In his 1974 history of American minstrelsy, *Blacking Up*, Robert Toll describes the sense of displacement experienced by white, rural families who relocated to the cities between 1820 and 1860. Toll posits that the harsh living and working conditions of the city, and the varied ethnicities of the new neighbors, many of whom did not speak English, aroused in white Americans the desire for new forms of entertainment which were particularly "American" and which could replace the songs and story-telling of the largely oral, rural culture of an earlier period.³⁰ Toll states that blackface representations allowed white Americans to explore troubling issues surrounding race and the dissolution of the slave system.³¹ In his "Note on Method," Toll describes his exhaustive examination of minstrel songs and acts, during which he created tally lists to record appearances of recurrent tropes such as "Old Folks at Home" and "Longing for the Plantation."³² The analysis that Toll applies to this data is probing and multifaceted; the issue of race is overlaid with the anti-aristocratic class-consciousness of the "common" white American male during a period of rapid urbanization. Toll explores the contradictions presented by minstrelsy—for example, the simultaneous evocation of the wild, grotesque dancer of breakdowns and the crooning, peaceful, happy slave—while expressing compassion for both black and white participants. The appropriation and distortion of images of blacks

is exposed and catalogued; but the function of the form is explained somewhat reductively:

. . . minstrelsy provided a non-threatening way for vast numbers of white Americans to work out their ambivalence about race at a time when that issue was paramount . . . Minstrelsy, in short, was one of the few comforting and reassuring experiences that nineteenth-century white Americans shared.³³

The disturbing simplicity of these statements lies in an implicit assumption that race is no longer a "paramount" issue. More recent scholarship not only interrogates the continued influence of minstrelsy in American culture, but also deepens our understanding of its function: the minstrel stage was not merely an arena for airing anxieties, but also a site which established and justified patterns of consumption of the black body. In spite of this reductive quality, Toll's book not only provides a thorough narrative of the evolution of minstrelsy, but also includes a useful appendix of black minstrel troupes touring from 1855 to 1890, an extensive bibliography for further research, and a good sampling of illustrations from programs and songsters.

Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* "grew out of a dissatisfaction with erstwhile modes of racial

critique, which in their political disapprobation, dovetailing with aesthetic disdain, were unwilling to engage with the artifacts and social realities of popular life.”³⁴ He frames his examination with debates surrounding the nature of various popular institutions, the performance and consumption of the body, the application of cinematic theory to live performance, and the relationship of politics and performance.³⁵ Lott's project is multi-layered, resisting well-intentioned but essentialist readings of African American culture and providing contrasting images of “white” and “black” cultures creating and articulating signifiers of themselves through the “vernacular rowdiness” of minstrelsy.³⁶ Lott critiques the “monolithic” view of the white working class and problematizes the relationship between antebellum white and black labor. He also employs vocabularies of desire, commodification, containment and “counterfeit” representation familiar from feminist critical theory, particularly the idea of masquerade.

Lott's exploration of minstrelsy through the adamantly invested lenses I have described provides valuable background on both historical and theoretical levels. In the first part of the book, he provides in-depth sociological and political backgrounds for the development of the form. In the second, he analyzes specific acts in terms of their racial, class and gender identity play. The two chapters which I have found most immediately applicable to my examination address “Early Blackface Acts, the Body, and Social Contradiction,” and “Racial Pleasure and Class Formation in the 1840s.” These chapters examine the production and

reception of both female and male images, employing language that greatly complicates the performative setting for the ethnic "types" of the variety theatre. In particular, Lott reads both male and female blackface characters (played by males) as recipients of a homoerotic gaze that attempts to possess and/or integrate the black male body into white, male sexual identity. I am persuaded by Lott's analysis of the mechanics of minstrelsy, through which the black, male body is objectified and sexualized. Yet, I find here the same pressing binary between heterosexual and homosexual desire that seems to infuse readings of all female impersonation. I will use Lott's reading of the homoerotic energies of minstrelsy in my discussion of character traditions later in this chapter; however, the theoretical possibilities raised by homoeroticism should not be read as a finite containment by any particular definition of homosexuality.

Histories of variety theatre generally focus on the period of vaudeville's peak, the first two decades of the twentieth century, several outline the development of variety theatre from the minstrel show, concert saloon, melodrama and other sources through the efforts of Tony Pastor, P.T. Barnum, Harrigan and Hart, and George M. Cohan. Of the myriad texts on vaudeville, the work most frequently cited in my research is Douglas Gilbert's 1940 volume, *American Vaudeville*.³⁷ Despite being anecdotal in tone and lacking formal documentation, the text's considerable authority derives from numerous interviews with the artists and access to archives at the New York Public Library

and the Harvard Theatre Collection. Gilbert provides a thorough chronicle of the beginnings in minstrelsy and the dime museum; the contributions of Pastor; the cruel tyranny of the circuit managers Keith and Albee; the White Rats and the Equity strike; and the death of the two-a-day (and more-a-day) as movies took the stage. Gilbert includes chapters on "Racial Comics of the Eighties," and the performers like Eva Tanguay, Lillian Russell and Weber and Fields, whom he calls the "In-and-Outers," who performed in both variety and legitimate theatre. The volume includes brief reproductions of sheet music and excerpts of lyrics, as well as a selection of photographs, although none feature female impersonators.

Similar to the Gilbert volume in construction and tone, Joe Laurie, Jr.'s *Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace* (1953) draws from his own experience as a vaudeville performer.³⁸ For his narrative, he has created two composite vaudeville performers, whom he calls Lefty and Aggie, who address the author in long letters about their "memories" of vaudeville's history, structure, administration, and daily routine. This narrative device inflects the information with a nostalgic tone, and none of the memories are specifically supported with documentary material. But, there is a brief chapter entitled "She-He's and He-She's" which describes the "female imps" of the 1880s ("old-time biddies and wenches") who were eventually replaced by "classy" acts like Julian Eltinge.³⁹ Laurie assures us, "Many of these guys had wives and families," and although his quick recitation of names and acts is somewhat unclear, he provides a glimpse

into the mindset that acting is acting, and "fem imps" were nothing unusual.

Together, the Gilbert and Laurie texts provide a sense of the enormously varied talents presented by vaudeville, within which female impersonation seems one of many tools of the clever comic actor.

Robert Snyder's *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* provides a well-documented synthesis of the development of vaudeville from its various sources, particularly in New York City, which became the center of a massive network of touring circuits. Throughout his text, Snyder points up the contradictions and "genial subversion" inherent in a theatrical format targeted at such diverse populations as the growing working and middle-classes of New York at the turn of the century.⁴⁰ Although Snyder does not theorize the implications of this subversion to the extent of Lott or Bean (in reference to minstrelsy), he does address the possible positive functions of ethnic stereotyping in the work of the Russell Brothers, Sophie Tucker, Maggie Cline, Eddie Cantor and others. Not only were ethnic comedians providing an outlet for identity affirmation and experimentation, they were participating in the economy and the developing culture of the city in extremely visible ways.⁴¹ Snyder does not directly address the presence of female impersonation in vaudeville, but his volume with its copious notes provides a guide to archival materials, as well as further reading in contextual materials.

Nadine George-Graves provides a detailed reconstruction of the lives and careers of the Whitman Sisters in *The Royalty of Negro Vaudeville*.⁴² This study of four sisters living and performing in the early- twentieth century examines many of the practical realities and the theoretical ramifications of blackface minstrelsy, particularly when performed by light-skinned African Americans. In her reading, George-Graves describes the sisters as doubly-masked: although they performed often in blackface, they also created an anxious suspense by appearing without blackface. Being so fair in coloring, they evoked images of miscegenation merely by sharing the stage with African American male actors. In skits and songs recalling blackface minstrel characters like the Mammy, the Whitman Sisters attempted to elevate images of African American women by incorporating Christian hymns and “respectable” dances and gestures. They also worked to include dark-skinned actresses in their acts. Yet, their actions on- and off-stage were not clearly “revolutionary,” since they seem to have “passed” as white in many circumstances.⁴³ The Whitman Sisters embody the ambiguous racial and gender performances of this era, and the feminist critique of George-Graves models a historiographical approach that spans performance genres and theoretical frameworks.

John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman's *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* provides an invaluable synthesis and analysis of a wealth of

primary source material concerning sexual attitudes and behaviors from the colonial period to the present.⁴⁴ The text analyzes civil and court records, diaries, early reform tracts and contraceptive advice pamphlets, and letters and diary excerpts in which the citizens themselves describe their desires, anxieties and actual experiences. The detailed history complicates simple notions of Victorian "propriety" by demonstrating, for example, that female desire and the function of the female orgasm in conception have been the subject of debate for centuries. The authors delineate the presence of and policies concerning prostitution, rape, incest, sodomy, homosexuality and transvestism, accounting for the exacerbating forces of class divisions, racial stress, and religious and "moral" transformations. During the period from 1880-1930, D'Emilio and Freedman describe a "'Civilized Morality' Under Stress." In this period, female activists and advocates of birth control were redefining marriage in terms of passionate union rather than procreative purpose. Same-sex friendships, which had provided supplemental companionship in earlier days of more practical marriages, came under scrutiny, as either suspicious or attractive alternatives to marriage. And transvestism provided some experimenters with protection from prying eyes—even to the extent that individuals could live their whole lives in gender masquerade, only to be found out upon medical examination after death.⁴⁵ This text does not address issues of representation in the live theatre, fiction or popular press of the period of my research. It is enormously useful, however, as a repository of information,

chronologically ordered, concerning actual sexual behaviors beyond the footlights which may reflect, complement or contradict the activities of female impersonators in any given period.

Sharon Ullman's *Sex Seen: The Emergence of Modern Sexuality in America* does address the interplay of sexualities in representation and in life; her focus is the early twentieth century. Ullman draws primarily from two areas of primary source material: early photography and film and court records concerning state litigation in rape cases (more specifically, in Sacramento, California). Her case studies compare the attitudes towards women and the represented behaviors of women expressed in early films with the attitudes expressed by and behavior attributed to women involved in rape litigation. Her analysis reveals the confusion wrought by young men and women—even in fairly rural areas like turn-of-the-century Sacramento—who experimented with sexual aggressiveness and the re-negotiation of sexual codes. In Ullman's view, the development of assertive and varied forms of desire within American communities was not entirely in response to the images presented in cultural products; rather, the films may have reflected the "aggressive sexual play by young women and men who created their own rules but ran afoul of community standards."⁴⁶

Two recent examinations of actresses in popular culture address the same historical period and performance genres of my project. M. Alison Kibler's *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* rereads many of

the standard narratives concerning vaudeville from a feminist perspective, highlighting the participation of actresses on stage, interrogating the gendered images they created, and noting correlations with off-stage behaviors and conceptions.⁴⁷ Kibler devotes an entire chapter to an exploration of the Elinore Sisters' comic Irish characters, which were often compared to the Russell Brothers' act. Kibler's analysis of the Elinores' success provides an important point of reference in my chapter on the Russell Brothers, as the Elinores replaced the Russell Brothers as purveyors of images of Irish American womanhood.

Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism, by Susan A. Glenn, exposes the dynamics of female appeal in vaudeville comedy and the Broadway "leg show," among other forms. She describes the challenges to male theatrical authority made by female comics claiming "the right to be funny," as well as the exploitation of chorus girls in enormous, dehumanizing productions. Glenn articulates "a central paradox of popular theatre," which is as applicable for the twenty-first century as for previous eras, that "it simultaneously magnified and diminished the idea of female agency and individuality."⁴⁸

Kathy Peiss discusses "Working Class Theater Before the Movies" in her study, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*.⁴⁹ Peiss focuses particularly on the immigrant women who formed a new consumer sector in the Bowery of New York in the last decades of the twentieth century. Peiss's history of Tony Pastor's "refinement" of the American

variety theatre and subsequent targeting of women and families for his audience highlights the aggressively heterosexual culture of the variety theatre. The sexual innuendo of comical sketches and songs, and the sentimental reiteration of feminine emotionality versus masculine strength in melodramatic scenes, linked the newly “feminized” vaudeville to its concert saloon origins. Although Peiss does not address female impersonation specifically, she evokes the many vibrant social roles played by women workers in this period, those of wife, mother, laborer and mass-market consumer. These women not only formed audiences for the actors in my study, they contributed to the pool of feminine images from which the actors selected and shaped their impersonations.

The Russell Brothers, McIntyre and Heath, and Harrigan and Hart were all of Irish descent. Irish American performers, playwrights and producers made huge contributions to nineteenth-century theatre; furthermore, many Irish immigrants were avid theatre-goers who embraced certain staged images of themselves. As Irish Americans entered politics and social activism, many community leaders protested the symbol of the stage Irishman, linking theatrical images to negative popular perceptions of Irish identity. Irish American history, and the roles of various media within that history, is a vast and fascinating study. Three works have contributed to my understanding of the Irish American experience in the Northeast in the nineteenth century. Matthew Frye Jacobson’s

*Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*⁵⁰ examines the legal and linguistic foundations of citizenship and freedom in the United States and the dependence of citizenship on conceptions of biological race. Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White*⁵¹ is a narrative of the relationships between Irish immigrants and African slaves and their descendents; like Jacobson, Ignatiev emphasizes the constructed nature of "race," in this case to analyze the strategies whereby the Irish negotiated American racism to rise above African Americans. *Inventing Irish America: Generation, Class, and Ethnic Identity in a New England City, 1880-1928*⁵² is a finely detailed portrait of the Irish communities in Worcester, Massachusetts (incidentally the home town of Tony Hart). These works not only provide historical context for the life stories of Irish American performers, they also extend the discussion of race beyond the black-and-white binary constructed by minstrelsy.

The final area of research I will review includes primary and secondary source materials directly related to the lives and careers of the Russell Brothers, McIntyre and Heath, and Harrigan and Hart. I examined files in three archives: the Harry Ransom Humanities Resource Center at the University of Texas at Austin (HRC); the Billy Rose Collection at the New York Public Library of the Performing Arts (NYPL); and the Harvard Theatre Collection (Harvard). Of the

performers under examination, Harrigan and Hart are the most completely documented.

Prominent among biographical treatments of the lives and careers of Edward Harrigan and Tony Hart are three works that have all employed the participation of Harrigan's daughter, Nedda Harrigan Logan, who provided the biographers with access to scrapbooks, manuscripts, letters and photographs, as well as anecdotal information. Kahn's *The Merry Partners* (1955), apparently draws from Logan's material but contains no documentation or bibliographic information.⁵³ Structurally, material is organized around a "life and times" model, veering off of the story of the duo to discuss immigration, the political machines of New York, as well as the transitions from minstrelsy to Tony Pastor's variety theatre to the theatre of Harrigan and Hart. These digressions help to color the backdrop and point to fruitful areas of secondary research, but it is difficult to follow the chronology of events and the identities of bit players who wander through the narrative. Kahn adopts the sympathetic tone of much of Harrigan and Hart's contemporary press when he describes the fortunes of "Poor Tony" in a chapter of that title. Moody was to carry on in a similar fashion by reporting the events of Hart's demise with little contextualization or interrogation of the sketchy, potentially scandalous details available.

Richard Moody's *Ned Harrigan, From Corlear's Hook to Herald Square* (1980), retells many of the anecdotes included in *The Merry Partners*, but tightens

up the narrative by applying a strict chronological structure. Deviating less frequently from his main subject, Edward Harrigan, Moody meticulously documents every anecdote, whether derived from contemporary press, correspondence between Harrigan and his wife, or interviews by the author with Logan. This text not only confirms undocumented information provided by Kahn, it also supplies invaluable corroboration of dates and publication names of articles available to me in the HRC with less complete documentation.⁵⁴

These two texts were followed up by *Harrigan 'n Hart* (1985), a musical adaptation of Kahn's book written by Michael Stewart which included original songs by Harrigan and David Braham as well as new music by Max Showalter with lyrics by Peter Walker.⁵⁵ Nedda Harrigan Logan served as "Production Consultant" for the show. An unsuccessful Broadway run led to an indefinite shelving of the project, due in large part to conflicts over the depictions of the two title characters. The controversy surrounding the musical may be foreshadowed by recurring omissions in descriptions of Hart's craft and personal life in the Kahn and Moody volumes; however, Harrigan's long life and prolific success do partly explain the imbalance in documentation of the duo.

Three weaknesses of Moody's text provide me with my points of departure for my examination of Tony Hart: its failure to describe effectively the non-textual aspects of Harrigan's theatre, to acknowledge the contributions to that aesthetic made by Tony Hart and the other members of the Harrigan and Hart

company, and to analyze the Harrigan project—the faithful depiction of New York's ethnic "types"—from a modern standpoint. The nostalgic tone of Kahn's volume is closely echoed, so that troubling evocations of ethnic and gender stereotypes, or puzzling behavior of the principal subjects, remain unremarked. It is not my intention merely to poke holes in the achievements of Harrigan, but to examine the relationship between the theatre he created *with his company, not in isolation*, and the community that the company sought to reflect and to entertain.

Moving beyond the biographical works, Alicia K. Koger provided a significant contribution to the study of Harrigan with her 1984 dissertation, "A Critical Analysis of Edward Harrigan's Comedy."⁵⁶ In her acknowledgements, Koger first thanks Nedda Harrigan Logan for her assistance; once again, access to Logan's own collection of archival material facilitated research aimed at establishing the significance of Edward Harrigan as an American playwright. Koger's project analyzes all of the extant manuscripts of Harrigan's plays and sketches, dividing areas of focus into Aristotelian parts of drama: plot and structure, characters, theme and subject matter, diction, music and spectacle. Koger utilizes contemporary reviews as well as contextual analysis by Robert Toll, Richard Moody and others to trace the development of Harrigan's dramaturgy and its reception by audience members and critics. In this study, the tendency to emphasize the textual aspect of this extremely lively, physical theatre is extremely clear. Koger's study is extraordinarily thorough and provides a

blueprint for study of the extant Harrigan materials. The introduction succinctly describes the number and nature of surviving works by Harrigan and briefly critiques the Kahn and Moody texts. The carefully delineated chapters separate sketches from plays and melodramas from comedies, providing outlines of plots and notable characters. The bibliography makes note of every major and minor book, chapter, essay or article on Harrigan written before 1984.

Only two of Harrigan's plays are available in print: "The Mulligan Guard Ball," which appears in its original one-act version in Moody's 1966 volume *Dramas from the American Theatre, 1762-1909* and in its final three-act version in Katherine Preston's "Irish American" volume of *Nineteenth Century American Musical Theater*; and "Reilly and the 400," which also appears in the Preston volume.⁵⁷ Preston's anthology is significant in that it presents play texts with their scores. Moody's introduction to "The Mulligan Guard Ball" provides a sketch of the Harrigan and Hart biography he would develop later. Preston's introduction to the two Harrigan plays only glosses the standard history of Harrigan and the importance of his ethnic portrayals, but offers valuable description of the extant manuscripts and scores and their locations in various archives.

The final group of materials concerning Harrigan and Hart are the original source materials available in the three archives I have explored, at the University of Texas, the New York Public Library, and Harvard. The first two archives contain many of the same newspaper and magazine clippings, but each has

yielded a unique collection of publicity photographs and lithographs. The clippings I use in this study include both contemporary reviews and retrospective articles, the latest of which appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1965. The Theatre Collection at Harvard University is well-known for its collection of minstrelsy memorabilia. It was extremely useful in my original identification of performers, but has served largely to confirm historical information gleaned from the HRC and NYPL collections.

My examination of Harrigan and Hart will include an in-depth critique of their biographies. But, of the remaining performers I plan to examine, only the Russell Brothers, John and James, have received recent documentation, and this is slight. Geraldine Maschio describes their career and their fall from the favor of the Irish-American community in "Ethnic Humor and the Demise of the Russell Brothers."⁵⁸ Maschio focuses on the chronology of the brothers' career in regards to the development of the Irish population who, as newly-arrived immigrants, embraced the duo, only to reject them and accuse them of defamation of Irish-American females once their people had become established in the middle-class urban society. This chronology is foundational for my own examination of the Russells and their audiences. As mentioned previously, Kibler briefly mentions the Russell Brothers in her description of the Elinore Sisters.

The names of the Russell Brothers and McIntyre and Heath appear repeatedly in the older histories of vaudeville, but are rarely accompanied by any

description of the acts.⁵⁹ I was surprised and thrilled, then, to discover enormous clippings and photographic files documenting both duos at the NYPL. Therefore, my examinations of the Russell Brothers and McIntyre and Heath include extensive description and analysis of this primary resource material, through which I will contribute to preserving their memory.

3. The Characters

The performances of The Russell Brothers, McIntyre and Heath, and Harrigan and Hart all built upon established traditions of racial and gender impersonation. American ethnic caricatures and the structures of variety theatre owe much to the music halls of Europe, but came into their own in the early 1800s on the minstrel stages. Minstrelsy, sometimes credited as the first original American theatrical product, interspersed song-and-dance numbers with comic dialogue or brief sketches. The chief characteristic of minstrelsy was the use of blackface: its humorous content and the inspiration for its musical and dance forms derived from the cruel satire of African Americans by white performers. So popular was this mode of performance that later minstrel companies composed of African Americans also appeared in blackface, to provide the exaggerated mask expected by audiences. Another feature of minstrelsy brings the issue of gender identity to the fore: the "wench" performer.

A popular act in the minstrel show was the female impersonator, or “wench” role. These included both the Funny Old Gal, whose grotesque caricature of femininity capitalized upon the obvious masculine attributes of the player, and the Prima Donna—usually a passive, mulatta character for whose affection darker-skinned, male characters would vie. As previously discussed, Eric Lott and Annemarie Bean particularly focus on gender and sexual tensions within the form. Lott reads the all-male performances of minstrelsy as homoerotic exchanges with a white male audience that simultaneously covets and reviles the black male body. Bean also sees sexual anxiety, particularly in the “double inversion” that turns a white male performer into a black female.⁶⁰ Lott’s descriptions of Jim Crow and Zip Coon, and the aspects of African American behavior, speech and mannerisms they purport to represent, coincide with Bean’s readings of the two wench roles.

Minstrel performers developed costume and movement traits for the Funny Old Gal character that mirrored the masculine cornerstone of the form, the lazy, dim-witted, yet “happy” Jim Crow. Like Jim Crow, the Funny Old Gal had long limbs exaggerated by tattered clothing and oversized feet protruding from worn-out shoes. Her masculine body literally poked through her clothing to mock her pretensions at femininity and to broadly signal the identity of the male performer underneath the costume. Her blackface makeup emphasized her rolling eyes and a huge, threatening mouthful of ragged teeth. Minstrel songs that

accompanied the Gal's appearances also featured detailed descriptions of unattractive, oversized body parts that threatened to consume the male singer in absurd, physically impossible ways.

Scholars argue about the role of misogyny in this characterization. Eric Lott explains,

White men's fear of female power was dramatized with a suspiciously draconian punitiveness in early minstrelsy, usually in the grotesque transformations of its female figures.⁶¹

One of Lott's many examples of such transformations is the subject of the song "Gal from the South," whose nose was used by "massa" for a coat hook, and whose mouth was so huge she could swallow the tailor sent to "make it small."⁶²

In addition to physical appearance, the "spastic antics" of the Funny Old Gal described by Lott and others also echo the elbow-flapping, high-kicking dance steps of Jim Crow. I believe that these erratic, animalistic movements communicate several meanings, which have contributed to the development of the blackface stereotypes. First, the movement suggests that African Americans have "natural" rhythm and dancing ability, which is a problematic specialty in a Puritan-based culture. This exotic-looking display, which minstrel performers claimed to have developed from the "real" dances of slaves and their descendents, compelled and repulsed audiences simultaneously. A second message of the

minstrel dance was that African American bodies are especially loose-limbed. This “looseness” evokes physical and sexual spontaneity, explosiveness, and expansiveness. A closely-linked suggestion is that African American bodies are inherently sloppy, uncontrolled or lazy, which reflects a “moral” laziness, and suits the many minstrel characters who avoid work at all costs. Lastly, the foreign and unpredictable movement often bloomed into slapstick violence. This physical potential, for startling artistry and frightening power, is unsettling in the masculine form of Jim Crow, but is comprehensible, perhaps even expected, because of his gender. In the Gal, however, the movement is doubly grotesque and alarming.

Lott reads these degrading, dehumanizing images as potentially masking a homoerotic charge, but Laurence Senelick argues that “it is hard to find any point at which sexual desire can gain purchase on the loose-limbed scarecrows” of the Funny Old Gal characters.⁶³ Senelick’s recent work on gender impersonation, *The Changing Room*, creates a useful genealogy for the Funny Old Gal that links her to the Dame character of eighteenth-century England, as well as the “predatory hags” of a wide range of tribal cultures. He cites two similar myths: a Somali story of a woman who usurps male power by pretending to be a man and then castrating the male children; and the Balinese tale of Rangda the “witch-queen” who combines masculine and feminine traits of appearance and behavior.

Senelick distills certain qualities from these myths that he then traces through the development of English pantomime in the eighteenth century.

According to Senelick, the “hag” is past child-bearing age, and therefore “the laws of sexual taboo no longer apply” to her; the hag is generally envious of male power; and the hag still performs sexual desire, which is dangerous to the community because she is free from the shackles of fertility that might contain her desire within a spousal relationship. In certain tribal cultures, these mythical female figures are portrayed by men during rituals as a way of wresting back the usurped male power; furthermore, the obvious male attributes of the impersonator render the female disguise ridiculous. Laughter diminishes the predatory, usurping power of the image.⁶⁴

Senelick tracks this hag through a variety of European performance traditions, including *commedia dell’arte*, French farce and English pantomime. Through these forms, the hag often was associated with a grotesque servant character, whose social station was linked to the absurdity of her sexual desire. On the minstrel stage, this absurd servant gained another dimension:

A standard butt of ridicule in English farce and folk-song was the hopeless attempt of servants to copy upper-class fashion . . . It so happened that in America the cooks, maids and market-women caricatured were of African descent, and hence

disenfranchised not only by gender and station, but
also by race.⁶⁵

Low station and disenfranchisement were shared by all blackface characters on the minstrel stage. But the old comical conceit of servants imitating their masters' clothing and mannerisms usually was not a component in either Jim Crow or the Funny Old Gal. As Senelick noted, the Funny Old Gal's sexuality was distorted and horrifying; but other blackface characters, who pranced and flirted in pretentious finery, served as sexual objects more clearly.

While Jim Crow was slovenly, slow and rustic, Zip Coon (in various permutations also called "Jim Coon," "Long Tail Blue" and "Daddy Blue") represented the slick, conniving, urban African American. He had high-class aspirations and his dress and speech aped those of the "masters." Zip Coon's schemes usually backfired and left him where he started, dominant over only the Jim Crows of his environment. Barbara Lewis points out a commonality in the characters' names and status: "[T]he clowns Crow and Coon belong to the brutish continuum. The alliterative twins fit into the lower tiers of the bestial topiary."⁶⁶ Although still animalistic, Zip Coon's threat is more specifically sexualized: his trousers are tight and brightly-colored, and, combined with his long-tailed coat, emphasize his legs, buttocks and pelvis. His dancing is more graceful and further emphasizes his powerful legs and snazzy trousers. He also fancies himself a ladies' man and often sings about his sexual exploits. Although his aspirations in

society and with women are forever doomed by his skin color, and therefore the object of humor, he is a sexual competitor, a potential seducer. Zip Coon also had his female counterpart, who invited sexual admiration because (and in spite) of her “African” features.

The “Prima Donna” or “yellow gal” capitalized on the soft faces and slender forms of young male actors who might sing soprano, flirt behind fans or simply pose in ladylike finery amidst the more darkly-painted blackface characters. Moore describes the “authenticity” of the most famous of minstrel Prima Donnas, Francis Leon, also known as “The Only Leon:” “Francis Leon did not burlesque women. He paid tribute to them with his trained and refined performances.”⁶⁷ Leon, like other drag performers who would follow him, prided himself on the beauty of his wardrobe, which women, as well as men, came to the theatre to admire.

Bean also explores images of women in minstrelsy, focusing on the Prima Donna, and Francis Leon in particular. Concerned with heterosexual, white, male responses to the Prima Donnas, Bean describes the enthusiastic embrace of these portrayals as a possible response to the anxiety of changing social and economic conditions, exacerbated by suspicions of sexual competition between the races:

One reading of this theatrical event is that the primary object of early minstrelsy, the South (as performed by minstrels), maintained a fixed object

for the collective libido of a displaced . . . male
audience . . . Through the blackened-up female
impersonator, sexuality was saved from
disappearance and contained by the white male
body at the same time.⁶⁸

Bean's reading suggests a homoerotic theatrical exchange that is not necessarily confined to or referencing homosexuality. In the work of Lott and Senelick, male-to-female transvestism is often read as a homoerotic display, allowing the male spectator to admire and desire another male while ostensibly responding to his female guise. In contrast (or complement), Bean suggests that white heterosexual males, made anxious by the threat of black male competition, could focus and perhaps purge their sexual anxiety in collusion with male transvestite performers. Bean's analysis of the Prima Donnas is richly nuanced, although, as stated previously, she is sometimes contradictory in her application of the label to specific performers. Overall, the Prima Donna, blending soft features, slender figure, and delicate costuming, was reportedly attractive to both men and women, and no doubt encouraged a wide spectrum of hetero- and homoerotic responses.

Laurence Senelick's extensive work, *The Changing Room*, is one of the most important secondary resources for my study. In turning to examine the Irish or German servant types of vaudeville, Senelick again provides important

historical context, linking these American “Dame Yankees” to the English Dame. He uses two examples: Neil Burgess, an extremely successful American actor who portrayed “Aunt Abby” in Charles Bernard’s 1889 play, *The County Fair*; and the Russell Brothers. Restating his thesis concerning the predatory hag in relation to Burgess, Senelick explains,

The widow or elderly maiden lady, in so many societies relegated to marginal status, feared for her barrenness or hated for her knowledge . . . becomes a heroine, her negative qualities neutralized by a male actor. The independence of her life is acceptable, but only under those circumstances.⁶⁹

Here, Senelick introduces positive connotations of the post-menopausal figure, suggesting that Burgess’s rendering is in some manner sympathetic and appealing, and would encourage sympathy, as well as laughter, from the audience. Yet, he is careful to say that the appeal of this figure is possible only due to the artificiality of the construction; as in the tribal cultures who employ a hag in their rituals, nineteenth-century America could laugh at the female when she was enacted by a male. My own research on Neil Burgess unearthed a review that addressed the actor’s ability to balance the grotesque with the engaging:

If it [female impersonation] is the sort of thing that should be done at all, it is only fair to admit that Mr.

Burgess does it very well. Besides, there is an honest, pastoral atmosphere about the productions in which Mr. Burgess figures, that softens whatever objectionable features might suggest themselves to supersensitive minds.⁷⁰

This review elevates Burgess over others engaged in female impersonation; while the average Dame might be “objectionable,” Burgess is “honest” and “softens” his characterization. The use of the word “pastoral” is strange and unique among discussions of female impersonation, and suggests a quiet, peaceful atmosphere that contrasts sharply with the robust physicality that seems central to the Dame tradition. As cited earlier, in Senelick’s language, Burgess’s performance “neutralizes” the potential for anxiety inherent in the Dame figure. In the more exhaustive discussion of English pantomime that follows, he describes the awkward, ungainly physicality of the dame, punctuated by slapstick violent action; this is certainly analogous of the Russell Brothers’ act and quite unlike the evocations of Burgess. Senelick reports that this boisterous humor was increasingly popular with European audiences who eschewed women for such gags because “[a] real woman on stage represents love, and love is death to comedy.”⁷¹ In his reading, young women with regular features and slender, graceful figures could only be seen as unfunny objects of desire on stage. Senelick himself seems to find femininity and comedy mutually exclusive, and to project

this reading onto nineteenth-century audiences. Interestingly, it is shapely, feminine women who made the greatest success in the light comic breeches roles that Senelick addresses elsewhere in his work.

Overall, Senelick's analysis of the Dame vividly evokes a process of conjuring and containment that he finds common to many cultures. This containment seems to fill distinct social needs to defend male power from elderly, ugly, "unsexed" women. There is a disjuncture between his explanation of the functions of tribal myths and his analysis of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western theatrical performances. It is in this disconnected space, in which he does not specifically state that English, French and American dames serve one or another function, that many possible meanings emerge. His treatment of the "Dame Yankees" within his larger argument implies several points. First, Senelick suggests that women who are marginalized in any way by a patriarchal society, either due to their infertility, lack of beauty, or inferior class position, present a threat to social stability. This threat is then conquered, or at least contained, by the co-optation of the threatening image by the men themselves. This argument is familiar from minstrelsy scholarship, including that of Bean concerning prima donnas, that posits a similar motivation to "blacken up."

The second point that reverberates in Senelick's work is the recurring contradiction discussed in many of the early texts on vaudeville: that these characters were successful because they were familiar, received with affection,

and frequently held to be in “faithful” to real life.⁷² Following up on his image of Neil Burgess’s Aunt Abby as appealingly independent, Senelick notes of the main character in Brandon Thomas’s *Charley’s Aunt* (1892), that the Dame character “reflected a reality. Victorian families were peopled with unmarried frumps, similarly bedecked.”⁷³ The elderly female is an unavoidable presence in society and is variously cherished, abhorred or tolerated by those who know her. She is increasingly familiar with the physical decay that precedes death, and those physical attributes that mark her as female are disappearing into the folds of age. These visible, bodily markers of life experience could be read as evidence of power, worthy of respect; or, as an embodiment of weakness, she could be the subject of compassion or disgust. Repeatedly, these examples of female impersonation seem to draw audiences with their combinations of the comfortable and the worrisome. Age, barrenness, perhaps even the suggestion of mental infirmity, combine the pleasantly familiar with the horrific unknown. Performance conventions certainly suggest that this potent mixture of images was intolerable when performed by a woman herself.

Although advanced age is generally associated with the Dame or Old Maid types, Senelick’s reading of the fearsome, marginalized female usurper includes characteristics that could be attributed to the ethnically-marked female servant in the United States: she was socially and economically inferior, yet was trying to better her position; she may have been without clearly-defined male

supervision, lacking father, brother or spouse; and she was engaged in hard physical labor that could “un-sex” her, at least in the eyes of Victorian middle- and upper-class society. Ethnic comedians, like the Russell Brothers and Harrigan and Hart, built upon the Funny Old Gal and Dame traditions to reflect these “realities” of working-class, female life, and were rewarded with descriptions such as “authentic,” “faithful,” or “loyal” to real life.

The chorus girl is an important figure to my exploration of the partnership of James McIntyre and Thomas Heath. Although she was not cross-dressing, she was as completely constructed as McIntyre’s blackface Funny Old Gal characters. She also provided a significant theatrical ideal of femininity by which to judge drag performances, particularly in the early twentieth century. McIntyre and Heath presented a compelling binary of feminine images when they developed a chorus to complement their minstrel act. Whereas the Funny Old Gal attempted to efface black female power by distorting and mocking it, the Ham Tree Girls contained female sexuality through calculated display. As Glenn states, “their eroticism was understood to be artfully managed by men, and in place of the passionate abandon of female self-expression, revue choreography emphasized impersonality, control, and repetition.”⁷⁴ In the case of McIntyre and Heath, their implementation of the chorus girl underlines the industrial nature of their act: blackface minstrelsy as a product was losing market share, while nude legs were

the craze that could revive the McIntyre and Heath enterprise. This equation of cultural products calls into question the blackface artists' claims of "authenticity" in representing African American culture.

The work of the Russell Brothers, McIntyre and Heath, and Harrigan and Hart intersected with the lives of their communities on many levels. The component of female impersonation within their acts provides a vantage point from which to examine the workings of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, politics and economics on their stages and in their worlds. Whereas previous studies of late nineteenth-century female impersonation have tended to focus on the erotic, generally homoerotic, possibilities of cross-gender play, I believe that racial and class masquerade was equally significant in these performances. Furthermore, the performance of multiple identities by one actor, in solo work or while sharing the stage with other multiply-identified performers, has been revived as a significant theatrical genre. In the twenty-first century, as audience members for gender- and class- and race-bending entertainers and social activists, these nineteenth-century performances look familiar. In his feminine garb, we could say of Tony Hart what one reviewer said of John Leguizamo in *Freak*, "he gave himself up and gave himself away."⁷⁵

Notes to Chapter One

1. "Little Frauds," Harrigan and Hart Iconography File, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

2. Garber, Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross and Cultural Anxiety*, (New York: Routledge, 1992); Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre*, (London: Routledge, 2000).

3. Telephone interview with William Wesbrooks, July 25, 1998.

4. Sharon R. Ullman, *Sex Seen: The Emergence of Modern Sexuality in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

5. Ibid., 60.

6. Ibid., 31.

7. The term "vaudeville" was coined late in the century, probably the 1880s, to lend a cultured air to variety—long associated with licentious entertainments. But the structure of variety and vaudeville were the same: a smorgasbord approach to an evening's entertainment, which presented short

sketches, singers, dancers, musicians, acrobats, trained animals, and bizarre novelty acts. The origin of the word "vaudeville" is disputed, but it may derive from "voix de ville" ("voice of the city"), or Val de Vire, a valley in Normandy associated with "quaint and sprightly songs and ballads." See Douglas Gilbert, *American Vaudeville, Its Life and Times* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1940), 4.

8. Recent scholarship has destabilized such terms as "race" and "ethnicity" by highlighting the constructed nature of such distinctions, the fluidity of racial or ethnic labels, and the lack of biological bases for such labeling. In this study, I will echo the popular use of these terms in the most recent scholarship, wherein "race" is used to discuss perceived "visible" differences, particularly the separation of "black" and "white" in the United States, while "ethnicity" describes smaller categories of people defined (or self-defined) by common languages, religious customs, social institutions and/or national origins. Thus, minstrelsy is often construed as a "racial" impersonation, while conflicts between Irish Americans and English Americans are often termed "ethnic" clashes. I will address the blurring of "race" and "ethnicity" specifically in Chapter Two, which concerns the Russell Brothers. See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); and Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, (New York: Routledge, 1995).

9. Marybeth Hamilton, "'I'm the Queen of the Bitches': Female Impersonation and Mae West's *Pleasure Man*," *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing*, ed. Lesley Ferris (New York: Routledge, 1993), 107.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the pitfalls of equating drag performance with homosexuality, homoeroticism, or misogyny, see Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993). For a male-to-female transvestite performer's discussion of drag and sexuality, see Eddie Izzard's discussion of his self-identification as a "male lesbian" in *Dress to Kill*, NTSC, directed by Larry Jordan (London: Ella Communications, 1998). Although Izzard wears women's makeup, shoes, and clothing pieces on-stage and off-, he only recently began wearing prosthetic breasts, and discussing his feelings about them, during his 2003 tour of *Sexie*.

11. Anna Deavere Smith, *Fires in the Mirror*, VHS, directed by George C. Wolfe (Alexandria, VA: PBS Video, 1993).

12. The phrase "race delineations" is used by blackface minstrelsy and vaudeville performers, as well as their promoters and critics. See, for example, *The Ham Tree*, program, Colonial Theatre, Cleveland, n.d., McIntyre and Heath Clippings File, NYPL. The word "delineation" is interesting in that it suggests the creation of the outlines of a character—caricature. This suggestion would be at odds with some performers' contention to present well-observed, multi-dimensional characters.

13. All references to the Prima Donna that I have found leave the character title in lower-case letters, sometimes in quotes: prima donna, or "prima donna." However, the Funny Old Gal (or Funny Ole Gal) is usually capitalized, whether in quotation marks or not. For clarity and consistency, I will capitalize Prima Donna—then she will be accorded the same emphasis as the other characters and she will not be confused with someone who is merely uppity.

14. Garber, *Vested Interests*.

15. Ibid., 271-81.

16. Ibid., 77.

17. Anthony Slide, *Great Pretenders: A History of Female and Male Impersonators in the Performing Arts* (Lombard: Wallace-Homestead Book Company, 1986); Michael Moore, *Drag! Male and Female Impersonators on Stage, Screen and Television* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc., 1994).

18. Moore, 2.

19. Laurence Senelick, ed., *Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts* (Hanover; University Press of New England, 1992) xv.

20. Ibid., xv-xvi.

21. Laurence Senelick, "Boys and Girls Together: Subcultural Origins of Glamour Drag and Male Impersonation on the Nineteenth-century Stage," *Crossing The Stage: Controversies on Cross-dressing*, ed. Lesley Ferris (New York: Routledge, 1993) 80-95.

22. Ibid., 86-7, 90-92.

23. Ibid., 93.

24. Ibid., 82.

25. Marybeth Hamilton, "'I'm the Queen of the Bitches': Female Impersonation and Mae West's Pleasure Man," *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing*, ed. Lesley Ferris (New York: Routledge, 1993) 107-19.

26. Annemarie Bean, "Transgressing the Gender Divide: The Female Impersonator in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy," *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, eds. Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, Brooks McNamara (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 245-56.

27. Ibid., 248.

28. Ibid., 254.

29. Annemarie Bean, "Black Minstrelsy and Double Inversion, Circa 1890," *African American Performance and Theater History*, eds. Harry Elam, Jr. and David Krasner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 191.

30. Robert Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974) 1-6.

31. Ibid., 34.

32. Ibid., 281-84.

33. Ibid., 272.

34. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 4.
35. Ibid., 10.
36. Ibid., 234.
37. Gilbert, *American Vaudeville*.
38. Joe Laurie, Jr., *Vaudeville, From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace* (New York: Holt, 1953).
39. Ibid., 88-91.
40. Robert Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 161.
41. Ibid., 43-8.
42. Nadine George-Graves, *The Royalty of Negro Vaudeville: The Whitman Sisters and the Negotiation of Race, Gender, and Class in African American Theater, 1900-1940* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).
43. George Graves, 63-71.
44. John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

45. Ibid., 124-5.

46. Ullman, *Sex Seen*, 7.

47. M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

48. Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) 41, 155.

49. Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 140-5.

50. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*.

51. Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*..

52. Timothy J. Meagher, *Inventing Irish America: Generation, Class and Ethnic Identity in a New England City, 1880-1928* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

53. E.J. Kahn, *The Merry Partners: The Age and Stage of Harrigan and Hart* (New York: Random House, 1955).

54. Richard Moody, *Ned Harrigan: From Corlear's Hook to Herald Square* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1980).
55. Michael Stewart, *Harrigan 'n Hart* (New York: Samuel French, 1986).
56. Alicia Kae Koger, "A Critical Analysis of Edward Harrigan's Comedy" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1984), 13.
57. Katherine Preston, "Introduction." *Nineteenth-Century American Musical Theatre, Volume 10: Irish American Theatre: "The Mulligan Guard Ball" and "Reilly and the 400"*, ed. Katherine Preston (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1994) xiii-xxiii.
58. Geraldine Maschio. "Ethnic Humor and the Demise of the Russell Brothers." *Journal of Popular Culture* 26, no.1 (1992): 81-92.
59. For example, Gilbert on the Russells Brothers, *American Vaudeville*, 61.
60. Bean, "Transgressing."
61. Lott, *Love and Theft*, 27.
62. Ibid., 26.
63. Senelick, *Changing Room*, 298.
64. Ibid., 229.

65. Ibid., 297.

66. Barbara Lewis, "Daddy Blue: The Evolution of the Dark Daddy," *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, eds. Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, Brooks McNamara (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 269.

67. Moore, *Drag!*, 60.

68. Bean, *Transgressing*, 246-7.

69. Senelick, *Changing Room*, 239.

70. "Our Gallery of Players. LXXIX. Neil Burgess," n.p., n.d., Neil Burgess Clippings Files, Harvard Theatre Collection.

71. Senelick, *Changing Room*, 238.

72. Gilbert, *American Vaudeville*, 73.

73. Senelick, *Changing Room*, 241.

74. Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, 162.

75. Lee Papa, *Freak*, performance review, *Theatre Journal*, 51, no. 1 (1999): 86.

II

“OUR SERVANT GIRLS”:

The Russell Brothers and the Ownership of Ethnicity

The evening of January 21, 1907 was disastrous for the Russell Brothers. On stage at Oscar Hammerstein’s Victoria Theatre, James and John Russell performed their classic vaudeville sketch, “The Irish Servant Girls,” expecting the same acclaim they had received for their standard offering for the previous thirty years. The Russells were marking time between larger projects, having scored a great success in one full-length play written especially for them, and waiting to begin rehearsal on their next contracted play. Everything was routine—from their stock lines to their slapstick buffoonery to their full skirts with white aprons—until the first bad egg hit James Russell in the face:

Look at me cheek . . . look at it . . . Imagine my
emotions when an egg with a past like Salome’s
smashes up against me map . . . Can a comejain get
anything of verve and fervor into his work knowin’
that he’s takin’ his life in his hands? ¹

The “eggs of the late-lamented sort” that Russell described for the *New York Telegraph* signaled a breach between the Irish vaudeville performers and their formerly-assured public. This breach expressed itself not merely in ticket sales but through vociferous and sometimes violent protests against a style of ethnic caricature that had ruled the New York stage since the 1870s.²

The rise and fall of the Russell Brothers provides insight into the changing perceptions and self-perceptions of Irish Americans at the close of the nineteenth century. The “Irish Servant Girls” sketch did not change in structure or content during the thirty years the Russells performed it. Therefore, some qualities that audiences originally seemed to embrace as innocent fun became offensive over time. Clearly, the performers experienced some disconnection from their vaudeville audiences while touring in full-length plays; when returning to vaudeville, they appeared baffled by their hostile reception and claimed ignorance of any offense.

In her essay, “Ethnic Humor and the Demise of the Russell Brothers,” Geraldine Maschio briefly discusses the generation gap between the older Irish audience members who had first lauded the Russells and the younger spectators who also formed the membership of various Irish Societies in New York City.³ This gap was comprised at least in part of a new awareness of the public image of

the Irish and the role that stage representations might play in the development of that image.

Additionally, the expected behavior of all social classes of women had undergone changes since the start of the Russell's careers. Norms of female behavior were represented and viewed in both old and new media, as theatrical and literary characterizations mingled in the public imagination with images from magazine articles and advertisements. At the same time, the increasing numbers of women in the labor force, the growing suffrage movement, and the targeting of both working- and middle-class women as consumers of mass-produced goods and entertainments, resulted in new rights, new responsibilities, and new roles for women as subjects and objects of culture. This increased involvement of women in social, political and economic affairs complicated their self-images and their societal reception. In 1907, to "impersonate" a woman would have had different ramifications than to do so in 1877, as a woman's "personhood" was under constant development and even debate. Furthermore, Irish American actresses gained popularity in the twentieth century, challenging the female impersonators' claims to "authenticity." For the Russell Brothers, the interaction of these political and social concerns with the stage must have seemed to appear suddenly, as if overnight; yet, the formation and articulation of such concerns had roots in the earliest days of vaudeville's dialogue with the Irish immigrant public. In this

chapter, I will reconstruct aspects of the Irish Servant girls act from photographs and newspaper reviews. I will then focus on specific changes in the living conditions and the social attitudes of Irish Americans during the late-nineteenth century and demonstrate the role of such changes in the professional failure of the Russell Brothers. Their story illustrates the shifting fortunes of ethnic and gender impersonation that accompanied social and political developments off-stage at the turn of the century.

Many of the details of “The Irish Servant Girls” were not recorded until protestors raised objections to specific actions or gestures; dialect and vocabulary were not specifically protested. “The Irish Servant Girls” was described by reviewers as a “knockabout” act, meaning that it included slapstick violence as a chief source of humor. The wealth of household objects wielded by servants seems to have provided weapons for the Russells; in existing photographs, they sometimes hold a broom or mop.⁴ Maschio notes that offensive material in the act included “[k]icks in the backside” and “raising their dresses on stage,” which is also visible as a playful baring of the ankles in a dance-like attitude in an existing photograph.⁵ James is noted for playing the buffoon to John’s “straight man;” James’s entrance was marked by the huge holler, “Oh, Maggie!” that became a tag-line for the sketch. James was also known for weaving comical

impersonations of female celebrities into the sketch; Sarah Bernhardt is the name usually cited. John was known to have a lovely singing voice and would perform several songs, his signature being “Where the River Shannon Flows.”⁶ This song seems to have concluded the act. James had an assortment of ridiculous, punning one-liners that established him as energetic but foolish, some of which were recorded in the *Toledo Blade* in 1907:

"Look out, don't fall and break your mustache."

"Annie O'Brien, get off my stove, I just cleaned it.

The nerve of her—sitting on my stove, buttering her
bread with my brand new hatchet."

"Maggie, give the horse a bucket of milk, I hear it's
very good for the complexion."

"Mr. Brown was saying his bed was too short for
him. I told him he was too long in it."

"Mary, wake up the man in 23. He wants to catch
the nine o'clock train. It's half-past nine now. He'll
have to run like h—I to catch it."⁷

These lines create a character for James who, like commedia dell'arte's Arlecchino, could be either clever or obtuse, but was never serious. John was described as the more “dignified” of the two actors onstage; perhaps his character

was an older sister-type who had to rein in James in order to protect both of their positions in the household.⁸ The opposition of the wholly foolish character and the industrious one was overlaid with traits common to the two: masculine faces in female, working-class clothes; a tendency to physical exuberance, including dancing, violence, and possibly sexual suggestiveness; and an overriding concern with all things domestic and earthbound.

The greatest amount of extant data concerning the career of the Russell Brothers is in posed photographs that recreate moments from the act. I have chosen to focus upon two images from a series of shots that I believe represent the usual appearance of these actors as the Irish Servant Girls.⁹ The two photos are taken on a set with a patterned carpet and an elaborate window with open shutters, light pouring through, and foliage visible outside. The background walls are indistinct. Although these photographs are not dated, handwriting and printing on the two suggest that they represent a scene from *The Female Detectives*; as mentioned earlier, this was the first full-length play featuring the Russell Brothers and debuted in 1904. Reviews confirm that the play concluded with an appearance by The Irish Servant Girls, and comparison with other photographs indicate that the costuming and makeup for this appearance recreated those of the original act in just about every detail.

Handwriting on the back of the first photograph reads “The Female Detectives’/Metropolis Theatre Aug 29.” Handwriting on the front of the photograph reads, “Irish Servant Girls.” This photograph has a border, and the lower left-hand corner has the name “Miner” printed in script, with the address “342 W. 14th St. New York.” In this photo, James and John Russell stand on the patterned carpeting in a frozen tableau with clear and contrasting facial expressions that indicate a conflict. James stands house left and John stands house right. James holds a broom with both hands, almost vertically and touching the floor with the bristles, as if he stopped mid-sweep. His head is turned away from John and is tipped down. His brow is furrowed, his eyes are squeezed shut, and his mouth is open and pulled back at the corners as if he were lamenting something with great tension. John holds a feather duster in both hands across his waist and is facing towards James in three-quarter profile. The feather end of the duster is downstage. He is looking directly at James as if he were listening to the complaint, with a large, relaxed grin on his face. Something about James’s lament seems to amuse him greatly, yet he doesn’t look malicious or crafty, as his eyes and smile are open and symmetrical, rather than deviously twisted or cocked. The two figures stand quite close together; James’s elbow almost touches John’s ample but natural-looking bosom.

Both of the maids wear white dresses with white aprons over the skirts. James's feet are hidden by his broom, but John appears to wear tidy, black shoes. John's dress has a high band collar that completely covers his throat. His collar is ornamented by a dark ribbon that crosses at the top of his chest and is secured by a brooch. The ends of the ribbon are short, so the ornament looks like an X at the top of his chest. John's apron also appears to have lace detailing, as does the bib. His hair, clearly a wig, is a tight cap of dark curls that seems to be knotted at the nape of the neck; his curly bangs entirely cover his forehead. James's wig is parted in the middle and pulled back tightly on both sides, presumably to a bun at the nape of the neck. His neckline is open and low, exposing several inches of his bare chest, which appears pale and hairless. His collar is partly obscured by a huge bow at the center of this low opening; the bow is loose and flops against his chest in bug loops. In other photos, James's collar lacks the ribbon and sports wide, notched lapels, like a sailor's blouse. The collar here looks the same, but the bow has been placed to cover some of the "décolletage." James's apron is slightly fuller than John's and also has ruffles at the bottom, which makes his lower half round like a bell. The shoulders of his dress are puffed, and his sleeves also seem looser than John's, even exposing a bit of his right wrist.

The second photograph bears no inscription on the back, but the words "Marceau/Los Angeles, Cal" are printed in script in the lower right corner. There

is no border around this picture. The setting and costumes are exactly alike between these two photographs. Perhaps, although they were taken at the same time, one is a reprint from a later date; I would think the original shoot was done in New York, since that was the Russell Brothers' home city, and the California print was made later. In this photo, James is still house left and John is still house right. The men stand in profile with their heads and busts turned forward. Each man holds up his own skirts to expose the ankles, while holding their downstage foot before them. They have created a two-person dancing kick-line, with John in front and James close behind. James's skirt is raised slightly higher than John's, with his downstage hand, clasping the fabric of his skirt, resting on his hip. John's hands are held at mid-thigh level. Underneath the skirts, bits of lacy, ruffled petticoats peek out, and the legs are covered with black stockings. Both men wear black, low-heeled, laced shoes. Although the shoes appear worn, they are not evidently torn or discolored.

Facial makeup in these two photographs does not appear exceptional or exaggerated. There are no age lines, obviously artificial birthmarks, blackened teeth or garish decorative designs. Additional photographs that focus more closely on the faces reveal the use of fair-colored pancake makeup, dark eyeliner to accentuate the lash lines and brows, and some kind of lip tint that follows the natural lines of the performers' mouths. John's curly hair blends naturally with his

facial features and appears less artificial than James's severe center-part style. John's costume is also more realistically tailored to fit his body. Whatever prosthetic help the men used in creating bust lines is also fairly realistic, and, except for James's exposed neckline, the outfits offer no revelation of male skin or hair or shape.¹⁰

Taken altogether, the costumes and makeup of the Russell Brothers are a fairly convincing female disguise. By avoiding the exaggeration of facial features, hairstyle and hourglass feminine features associated with twentieth century glamour drag, the Irish Servant Girl characters successfully mimic ordinary women. They also capture the de-feminizing effect of Victorian clothing for domestics that sought to present uniformity and obfuscate sexuality.¹¹ The photograph depicting the impish dance in which the girls raise their skirts suggests to me that the shock value of the knockabout antics of the characters depended on the success of the illusion of femininity. The particular fun, and threat, involved in this performance did not lie in the evocation of a grotesque and terrifying hag, but in the unexpected juxtaposition of proper appearance and improper behavior. The fact that John Russell seems to have portrayed a more conservative character presents a further contrast in behaviors. It is easy to imagine that John began the act with a dignified stance and was gradually drawn into less and less civilized behavior by the antics of his partner. Because the

illusion of femininity was well-established, the spectator would seem to see one woman capering about and another woman swiftly losing composure as a result.

The photographs, then, capture the remarkable transformations that fascinated spectators of vaudeville female impersonation. They also concretize the tension between endearing and shocking elements of the portrayals. Repeatedly, publications record the simultaneous sensations of pleasure in looking and concern with changing notions of propriety that surrounded these male/female creations. Although no longer fresh, the gender play of the Russells still earned the labels “clean” and “wholesome” from a reviewer as late as 1908, in a critique of *The Hired Girl’s Millions*: “[T]he brothers go from feminine disguise to feminine disguise, but always in the spirit of frank caricature and farcical burlesque. Thereby at least theirs is a wholesome miming.”¹² With no specific details to substantiate his meaning, the reviewer sanctions “caricature” when it is “frank” and “burlesque” when it is “farcical.” Does “frank” indicate that the actor is honest about his masculinity beneath the skirts? Does “farcical” suggest a level of exaggeration devised to reveal the truth rather than disguise it? If the use of “farce” is intended to suggest harmless, or at least gentle, social commentary, then this reviewer is at odds with the protestors of the United Irish Societies. For, when the protests came, this very overlay of female and male characteristics that

comprised the farcical commentary was seen as denigrating to Irish woman, suggesting that the women were masculine, asexual, turbulent and unsocialized.

What elements of this act may have contributed to this charge? James Russell was “the more active woman,” the clown who played off John’s comparatively sedate character, and he received more specific, descriptive criticism than his brother. He would also prove the most vocal in defense of the Irish Servant Girls act during the protests. James’ character had “a curious crescendo voice,” with which he would shrill his tag line, “Oh, Maggie!”¹³ In his physical and vocal work, James used speed, volume and frantic energy to get the laugh:

For James is a funny man, say what you will of his
methods and the queer field of comedy he has
chosen. He doesn’t need to provide a diagram to
make his humor clear, preferring to use a maul to
drive his points home.¹⁴

The use of the word “queer” in this undated fragment may have a double meaning, suggesting that female impersonation was losing its “legitimacy” within vaudeville and becoming relegated to the margins of respectable entertainment. The word may even nod to covert homoeroticism, although the overall tone of the comment is as overt as the “maul” of James’s humor. In spite of this linguistic

mystery, the review acknowledges a simple pleasure in the exaggerated physicality of James's work. Less-enamored critics said that James "is rough and at times not only borders on absolute vulgarity but [he] is that pure and simple."¹⁵ Of James's costume, one reviewer said, "I should advise one of these clever men to quit the décolleté gown, which is quite unnecessary and not at all agreeable."¹⁶ The Irish Servant Girls, then, in spite of the fairly convincing illusion of their costume and makeup, are not feminine creatures; they are not the seductive prima donnas of minstrelsy. They are loud, blunt, physically "active" and impressed with their own wit. They are bodily and vocally imposing upon their environment. Thus imposing, and wrapped in realistic, detailed maid's uniforms, they stand in for Irish female domestics in the audience's imagination.

The fact that character names are rarely attributed to the Irish Servant Girls may be another clue to the low status that offended some viewers. Although James is famous for his line, "Oh, Maggie," the meaning of this line is ambiguous. He might be calling to his partner, played by John, which would suggest that John's character is named Maggie. Or James may be speaking in a mocking version of the mistress of the house's voice as she speaks to James himself. So James could be "Maggie." This ambiguity is further colored by a bit of history surrounding the name. For the young immigrant girls engaged in

domestic service who served as models for the Russells were often called “Maggie” by their employers, whether it was their name or not:

In . . . large households, the mistress of the house often did not bother to learn the names of the Irish girls, adopting instead the generic name of Maggie or Bridget for any female Irish servant.¹⁷

Therefore, the name “Maggie” could have served as a denigrating label in itself, the reduction of a woman to her function as a domestic laborer. The Russells’ use of the label, like so many other details of their characterizations, could be read as mockery of the lot of the servant girl—or as an expression of solidarity with her.

Interpreted by some as broadly farcical, by others as painfully close to prevalent stereotypes, the Russell Brothers’ act did raise the specter of “authenticity,” even before protestors sent the actors reaching for proof of their Irish heritage. An unpublished manuscript page that appears to be a rough draft for a newspaper article is dated January 1, 1905, during the run of *The Female Detectives*, and describes the pride with which James Russell developed and maintained his elaborate feminine wardrobe:

[he] has the first gown he ever wore on the stage and some hundred others which he has used showing ever (sic) change of the feminine styles

from that day to this. The Russells have always
made it a hobby to have their gowns up-to-date. . .¹⁸

The image of James as the glass of popular fashion complicates an analysis of the Russell Brothers as rough knockabout artists. Although their feminine disguise was not an end in itself, the brothers approached the craft of female impersonation with detailed commitment. Even when the laugh lines and choreography remained static, at least this one critic reported an evolution in their outward appearance to coincide with developments in fashion. This eye for detail, as well as an ear for the Irish dialect and the slang of working women, comprised the Russell Brothers' "authenticity," the mirror through which they reflected back a segment of the world as they saw it.

Other characteristics of the act can be extrapolated from descriptions of contemporary vaudeville acts in works such as "Humor and Ethnic Stereotypes in Vaudeville and Burlesque," by Lawrence E. Mintz.¹⁹ Mintz briefly acknowledges the Russell Brothers as a "Double Irish" act, which he categorically describes as using dialect humor and opposing stereotypes to drive the patter. Furthermore, Mintz distinguishes a "two-act" from a "sketch," meaning that a two-person act could derive ten or twenty minutes of comic material without necessarily resorting to a story. A "sketch" would be the application of that material to a minimal story featuring a location, such as a boarding house, and a circumstance,

such as a misunderstanding over money. Dialect humor derived from silly-sounding or sexually-suggestive malapropisms, such as the German or Yiddish mispronunciation of “bitches” for “peaches;” language misunderstandings could also drive the plots of sketches. Partner acts could apply oppositional pairs of stereotypes, such as sober versus drunk. This might work by opposing two different ethnicities, the stage Jew with the stage Irishman, or by highlighting contrasting aspects of one ethnic stereotype. Using Mintz’s framework to describe “The Irish Servant Girls,” I believe that the original act ran for about twenty minutes and was set in the kitchen or parlor of the servants’ place of employment, which may have been a private house or some sort of hotel. The original act probably did not contain a story but used the environment to trigger dialogue. Dialect humor, such as James Russell’s lines quoted above, does not seem to arise from malapropism per se, but rather from the broad exaggeration of the Irish brogue and the absurd juxtaposition of images that formed the content (horses drinking milk, buttering bread with a hatchet). The opposition of James’s frenetic energy and John’s fussy style, when posed with domestic tasks, would provide comic tension and visual humor. Underlining these basic mechanics of ethnic comedy, the combination of male bodies and female dress formed the foundational sight gag of the act.

Some aspects of the Irish Servant Girl characters were likely to have been repeated in various other stage ethnicities the Russells are known to have played. On their way to developing *The Irish Servant Girls*, the Russells briefly portrayed German (“Dutch”) and French females as well as the “Hottentot twins,” the latter also described as “indian squaws.”²⁰ These numerous ethnic impersonations were resurrected in the longer plays. A newspaper review of *The Hired Girls Millions* describes appearances by “two Yankee women...a German fraulein and a Scotch lassie singing and dancing...a French actress...and an Italian,” all “before Jimmie got into his familiar guise of an Irish servant girl, with John as his chum of the kitchen.”²¹ The “protean versatility” with which the Russells performed *The Irish Servant Girls* as well as other characters suggests an interchangeability of elements. This is consistent with vaudeville scholarship describing the combinations of exaggerated gestures and dialects that formed these impersonations, such as Douglas Gilbert’s discussion of “Racial Comics of the Eighties,” included in his book, *American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times*. Gilbert’s work, published in 1940, illustrates the duplicitous nature of vaudeville’s ethnic characters: they were standardized, “stock” caricatures that repeated the same elements over and over—and yet they were perceived to incorporate “authentic” touches. Gilbert cites an example of an act that used actual German, rather than stage “Dutch,” to authenticate its characters:

Nearly all of the [eighteen-] eighties racial comics were extraordinarily faithful in the burlesque of their types. The Yiddish in Burt and Leon's parody is a sturdy indication of this, and it was carried out by the Dutch comedians who followed them . . . One team—Moore and Lessinger—invariably concluded their crossfire and argumentative routine with a burlesque drama in the language. It was silly; but it was not dialect.²²

Gilbert's own language, in an echo of the conflicted definitions of the United Irish Societies, performs the self-contradiction inherent in the ethnic caricatures, for what is a "faithful" "burlesque"? This "parody" of German culture incorporates actual German rather than the "Dutch" dialect typically used on stage, yet relies on the standardized elements of "argumentative," "crossfire" dialogue (presumably complemented by slapstick violence). Although his analysis precedes recent readings of the performance of ethnic identity by forty years, and therefore does not often question or unpack the contradictions inherent in his examples, Gilbert has identified a contradiction crucial to the success of the racial comics: the perception of "truth" within the artificial framework of the stage type. In fact, a sense of truth may have arisen from the familiarity of the characters.

Whether they aped previous performers' work or established their own stage vocabulary, the Russell Brothers, and many of their contemporaries, were adept at presenting the exact same performance night after night, in effect teaching audiences what to expect in their act. This familiarity was part of the appeal, providing a sense of community between performers and spectators and among audience members who knew the act. Perhaps the skill with which the Russells could mimic their own performances came to seem synonymous with mimicry of actual people. This perception of accurate mirroring of reality was one key to the Russells' success, and central to the controversy that disrupted their careers. Based in a firm stage tradition of ethnic stereotypes, "The Irish Servant Girls" performed extremely well for thirty years, virtually unchanged, until the protests at Hammerstein's Victoria Theatre.

James and John Russell had been performing versions of "The Irish Servant Girls" since the late 1870s for enthusiastic audiences comprised largely of fellow Irishmen. Extant reviews of the Russells, even when laudatory, became less and less descriptive as their act became standard New York vaudeville fare. As Maschio points out, "[f]or vaudeville audiences long familiar with the brothers and their routine, no further elaboration was necessary."²³ By 1904, after several reviewers complained that the twenty-eight year old act was getting stale, they

attempted to inject new vigor into their careers by headlining in a full-length play called *The Female Detectives*.²⁴ This play provided a plot that required the brothers to don a series of disguises in both genders, thus capitalizing on their main strength, that of female impersonation. They built song and dance into the story and even contrived to conclude the show with the staple sketch of “The Irish Servant Girls.” The show toured with moderate success and led to a similar vehicle, *The Great Jewel Mystery*, during the following season. This established a new pattern for the Russells: they could headline a full company in an evening’s entertainment, as long as their plays incorporated female impersonation, singing, and dancing, and concluded with a turn as the Irish Servant Girls. As 1906 drew to a close, the Russells returned to vaudeville with their original short act while preparations were made for a new full-length play, *The Hired Girl’s Millions*.²⁵ In January of 1907, on the vaudeville stages of Manhattan and Brooklyn, James and John discovered that their audience had changed while they had been touring in plays. Members of the Irish community, participants in the ninety-one groups who formed the United Irish Societies had, that very month, formed a subcommittee called the “Society for the Prevention of Ridiculous and Perverse Misrepresentation of The Irish Character.”²⁶ This society was committed to suppressing negative portrayals of the Irish, particularly staged presentations of Irish women. In late January of 1907, the Society disrupted several of the

Russells' performances at the Victoria and the Orpheum with hisses, shouts, and well-aimed potatoes, lemons, and eggs. Through February, the Russells struggled with protestors in various ways: by "issuing defiance" in combative language during interviews for major newspapers; by appealing to the older generation of Irish patrons who had never objected to their caricatures of Irish womanhood; and, eventually, by cutting and changing portions of their act to appease the United Irish Societies who had developed the watchdog committee. According to an article from the *New York Telegraph* dated January 26, 1907, the Russells attempted to perform the act with Swedish accents, but then determined to carry on in their usual Irish dialect. The article also jokes that the last time any changes were made in the act was when the Russells received constructive criticism from General Washington on the banks of the Delaware.²⁷

The watchdog committee's spokespeople sought to avoid accusations of outright censorship by declaring, "it was not the intention of the Irish people to suppress decent burlesque or caricature of the race, but productions that drew contempt on Irish women would be pursued to the end."²⁸ One of the intriguing aspects of this statement is the implication that "burlesque or caricature of the race" could be "decent." This suggests that those who presumed to speak for the Irish Americans of New York were not wholly against theatre or theatrical comedy, nor were they rejecting all theatrical representations of Irish people.

Theirs was not an argument based on any inherent offensiveness of playacting, song or dance; in fact, the suggestion is that previous performers succeeded in making “decent” caricature of the Irish. The use of the word “race” is also telling, and implies an acceptance or even a celebration of the categorization of Irish people as a distinct racial group. This committee’s language, then, embodies the conflicting desires of turn-of-the-century Irish Americans: to unite as Irish people; to be respected as dignified Americans; to honor the similarities of those of Irish descent; and to divorce themselves from the negative qualities that had been exploited in theatrical stereotypes.

In the view of the protestors, the Russells’ mischief with lifting skirts and kicks to the backside conformed to the damaging myth that Irish girls were promiscuous and vulgar and this could adversely affect the upward mobility of Irish families. Interestingly, James Russell responded to this charge by evoking his own Irish heritage. In an interview with the *New York Telegraph*, Russell declared, “I’m Irish myself...Don’t I eat potatoes at every meal? Aint all that lace on my—you know, those things I show when I dance—aint that all Irish lace?”²⁹ Russell’s implied statement is that an Irishman would never insult an Irishwoman. Therefore, a demonstration—through his eating habits and costuming—of his “authentic” Irishness should settle the question: James and John Russell do not insult Irish womanhood. At issue here is the ownership of an essential Irish

identity within the fluid context of a developing Irish American culture. Both parties, the actors and the protestors, are defining Irish identity in terms of their own behavior, which necessarily excludes other behaviors. While the Russells struggle to include their performance behaviors within the definition of Irish comportment, the protestors exclude skirt-raising while including egg-tossing. In the same publication, on the following day, Russell attempts to catch the protestors in this act of un-Irish behavior, declaring, “I’m wise to these fake harps, now. I’ve had letters from over five hundred Irishmen telling me that these guys that sit around and pelt me with eggs don’t belong . . . [I’d] bet good money there wasn’t an Irishman in all that crowd . . .”³⁰ In each case, aggressive acts (sexually suggestive skirt-raising or violent egg-tossing) are censured; yet in each case, aggressive acts comprise the identification with “Irish.” The contentiousness with which these parties assert their own definitions of “Irishness” exemplifies the tensions described by Meagher and Ignatiev in their analyses of Irish American history.

In his interviews, James Russell also refers to his Irish wife, who performs volunteer work to benefit Irish charities.³¹ Russell evokes her and her charitable activities in order to suggest the respect with which he regards all Irish women, the very models for his impersonation. In the 1870s, when the Russell Brothers developed their servant girl characters, they shared working class neighborhoods

with the young women who became inspiration for their act. Although they experimented with other ethnic types, their audiences responded overwhelmingly to these “Sons of Erin” when they spoke with a brogue and sang nostalgic airs honoring the homeland. Although the accuracy of their depiction of Irish womanhood, or aspects of it, was contested by various reviewers, it was generally acknowledged that “[t]hey are the originators of the Irish servant girl act, in which they have had many imitators.”³² There is an implied affection running between the Russell Brothers, the girls on whom they base their impersonations, and their audience in such reviews as those of Hartley Davis: “One of the most thoroughly established acts in vaudeville is that of the Russell Brothers...who are irresistibly funny with their gorgeously exaggerated foolery. The most delicately refined intelligence is frequently not proof against their manner of delivery.”³³ Davis’s language invites even a female reader or spectator to join the fun with words such as “irresistible,” “gorgeous,” and “delicately refined intelligence.” Such reviews do not hint at the moral outrage, supposedly on behalf of Irish womanhood, that would explode in 1907. Although the economic hardships and ambivalent social status of Irish Americans no doubt contributed to this outrage, the key to the Russell Brothers’ act lay underneath their skirts. The Irish Servant Girls owed much of their fascination, and their eventual failure, to their interplay of

masculine and feminine images and to the threatening suggestion of a masculine Irish womanhood.

Presumably, the Russells' edited version of their act conformed to the standards of "decent burlesque or caricature," as the protests abated after the egg-tossers received a strong tongue-lashing in court.³⁴ But the chemistry between the Russells and their audience had ruptured; spectators perceived "contempt" for women in their material. After thirty years of success using a seemingly fool-proof formula, the Russells could not change quickly or thoroughly enough to suit their developing audience. Within two years, they were back to the small-time vaudeville circuit; a few years after that, they appear to have retired from the stage.³⁵

In order to explore the relationship between the Russell Brothers and their public, it is necessary to understand the social context for the protests. How did the protestors define themselves and why was their self-definition threatened by the Irish Servant Girls? Irish immigrants faced pressure to succeed as American citizens, providing economic support for families back home, and at the same time to sustain and uplift the image of the Irish as a distinct and unified people. The prevalent images of the drunken, unkempt stage Irishman and the politically-aggressive Hibernian are two side effects of this process of defining the Irish American. But as scholars point out, the multiple waves of Irish immigration

during the nineteenth century did not deposit on American shores a homogenous group of destitute and desperate laborers. Rather, Irish men and women of varied religious and economic backgrounds came to the United States with a range of goals and expectations. What they found, in cities such as New York, Boston and Worcester, and how they responded, also varied.

The Russell Brothers developed their Irish Servant Girls characters in the 1870s, in the wake of what Timothy J. Meagher describes as the second of three significant waves of Irish immigration during the nineteenth century.³⁶ In a study that focuses largely on the Irish community in Worcester, Massachusetts, Meagher describes economic and political factors that may have contributed to the self-perception of Irish immigrants to the Northeastern United States, and, by extension, to their reception by other ethnic groups. Meagher theorizes that Ireland's isolation from the industrial revolution, during which Belfast was the only Irish city to become significantly industrialized, exacerbated Ireland's inferior position with regards to England while at the same time strengthening the social network of rural communities. By the time the Irish began to emigrate to England or the United States to find work, they were much less suited for industrial jobs than their "native" competitors. Taking the lowest-paying, unskilled jobs, Irish immigrants supported each other in tightly-knit communities

that Meagher believes wavered between continued isolationism and attempts to “accommodate” and thereby assimilate:

[A]n enduring sense of a separate national identity
and a persistent peasant agricultural economy and
society . . . shap[ed] how the immigrants adapted in
America. Their sense of being Irishmen in exile
would indelibly stamp their identity . . . Their
communal ethos was a mixed blessing.
Communalism was not very helpful in a society that
favored individual ambition and risk-taking . . . ³⁷

Meagher describes the tension between the “communal ethos” of strangers in a new country wanting to preserve ties to the homeland and the ambition of people determined to adapt and thrive. This tension would fuel the immigrants’ devotion to their local politicians, propelling, for example, the rise of Boss Tweed and the Tammany Hall “machine.” In a less destructive manner, but perhaps with as much calculation, Irish comedians could exploit the homesickness, pride and nostalgia of their community to fashion theatrical careers.

The “communal ethos” described by Meagher was by no means unalloyed. Noel Ignatiev explores the dynamics among groups of Irish immigrants and between immigrants and African Americans in *How the Irish Became White*.

Ignatiev argues that one factor contributing to the association of Irish American with Catholic came from within immigrant communities:

. . . the majority of Irish immigrants to America in the eighteenth century and for the first third of the nineteenth were Presbyterians, descendents of Scots who had been settled in Ireland beginning with Cromwell . . . After the great influx of Irish immigrants and the problems created by [it], the Scotch-Irish insisted upon differentiating between the descendants of earlier immigrants from Ireland and more recent arrivals.³⁸

The “great influx” of the Famine years, 1845-1850, was the “second wave.” These immigrants were impoverished, ill, and predominantly Catholic, having suffered not only from the environmental pressures that destroyed their food stores, but also from the British oppression that penalized them for their religious choice. Seeking food, work, and the rights of citizenship denied them back home by the British, these were the Irish who crowded into port city slums and became the inspiration for stage characters. Ignatiev deconstructs the idea of the Irish as a “race” when he notes that the Scotch-Irish took pains to draw an *ethnic* line between themselves and the Irish Catholic immigrants—a line that had been

considered *racial* generations before in Ireland, when the Scots arrived, but which had largely disappeared as Scottish and Irish families intermarried. It was in the United States, when faced with “American” conceptions of race as predominantly “white” vs. “black,” that the Scotch-Irish used language of race and ethnicity to define themselves in opposition to other Irish immigrants.³⁹

This struggle for self-definition continued throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. As Meagher illustrates, the third large wave of immigrants, those whose families has survived the Famine and made the journey in later decades, left behind a different Ireland than their predecessors had known. Although still locked in battle for religious and political sovereignty from the British, the Irish had industrialized, and were better educated and more worldly than the dispossessed farm workers of the Famine era.⁴⁰ Perhaps most significantly, they were Anglicized, and sometimes found the Gaelic-inflected neighborhoods of American port cities as foreign-sounding as those of other immigrant groups. This three-step immigration is quite pertinent to the development of vaudeville Irish characters, as the extreme accent, costume and behaviors of these theatrical creations most clearly draws from the rural, unsophisticated, uneducated and desperate figures of the Famine era. In spite of the nostalgia that still clung to the homeland, these impoverished people embodied the worst of the Irish experience. Victimized by politics, economics,

and bad luck, the excessive behaviors of some individuals were exaggerated responses to the deprivations of life during the Famine—both in Ireland and in the overcrowded slums of their new home. The stage Irishman combined those behaviors associated with Famine immigrants that had the most comical potential—a thick accent ripe for misunderstandings, chronic drinking with its attendant clumsiness of movement and thought, and physical aggressiveness, which yielded slapstick buffoonery. This kind of verbal and physical comedy had existed for generations, but had a new and recognizable “Irish” face. For those Irish Americans whose families had arrived before the Famine, or who had come after the Famine from a relatively modern Ireland, characters like the Irish Servant Girls represented a step backward in their social journey.

During the Famine era, the figure of the Irish female domestic servant did embody the warring elements of sentimentality and estrangement felt by the poorest immigrants. A source of comedy on vaudeville stages, the first generation female immigrant had a powerful role in the establishment of Irish American communities. Her power made her particularly visible against the urban landscape, at a time when women’s rights to visibility were hotly contested. In her examination of audience members’ objections to the raised skirts of the Russell Brothers, Maschio describes the particular vulnerability of Irish females. Unlike girls and women from other countries, many Irish girls immigrated alone or in all-

female groups. Although frequently sent to raise money for their families back home, these women traveled and established new lives in the United States without the supervision of their fathers, husbands or brothers. This independence, and the anxiety produced by large numbers of unregulated women in the crowded immigrant neighborhoods of Northeastern cities, may have contributed to negative stereotypes of Irish girls as lazy, sexually promiscuous and disloyal to employers.⁴¹

Meagher also documents the efforts of young female immigrants to secure “a healthy, safe place to live” and work. Most male immigrants worked in manufacturing and boarded with Irish families. Sometimes two or more men would board in the same house, quickly creating a support network. A woman’s choices were more limited. Meagher reports that only about fourteen percent of women worked in manufacturing; they were paid less than men and this work required them to pay for their own lodging. Furthermore, it was generally held that a room in a boardinghouse was not as socially respectable or as physically safe for women as servants’ quarters would be. Thus, young women’s inferior earning power and social vulnerability led them to employment as domestics, where they could be housed and fed as partial compensation for their work.⁴²

Maureen Murphy explores the social networks of these servant girls in her essay, “Bridie, We Hardly Knew Ye: The Irish Domestic.” According to Murphy,

many girls were assisted by Catholic charitable organizations designed specifically to protect and support newly-arrived would-be domestics. Unfortunately, some jobs were barred to them due to their religious alignment: among other prejudices, suspicions that Irish servant girls spied on Protestant families on behalf of the Pope resulted in the notice “NO IRISH NEED APPLY.” But, once established, a girl’s attendance at Mass and involvement in charity work could provide a connection with her homeland and a measure of autonomy from the household where she worked up to eighteen hours a day. For many, the Catholic church could be a stabilizing, nurturing influence. Although some domestic servants may have used their freedom to pursue romantic or sexual relationships, economic hardship demanded that their chief occupations be work and churchgoing. When they married, many Irish women retired from service and focused on educating their children to attain higher positions in their own turn. Irish domestics also worked to imitate the style of dress and taste in furnishings of their employers, which may have led to the accusation of pretentiousness or “putting on airs,” but which attests to their intentions to better their status. In Murphy’s account, the young Irish girls who built the foundation for New York’s increasingly powerful Irish American population were generally hardworking and honest.⁴³

Although Murphy makes a strong defense for the virtue of Irish domestics, home service continually presented challenges to their reputations. Ignatiev points out that Irish and African American laborers were often “thrown together” on the job and in living situations. In households employing Irish domestics, there were often African American male servants as well, who might also be boarded at the house. These close working quarters may have contributed to the rise of what Ignatiev calls “mixed mating,” the cohabitation of Irish and African Americans in urban slums of the Northeast. These mixed communities and their “mulatto” children were documented by the Census of 1850 and in government and church reports on urban living conditions. These reports also document the horrified, racist language of government officials and missionaries who describe “living with Negroes” as a measure of depravity and degradation.⁴⁴

As with other cases of racial mixing, women bore the brunt of social disfavor. While an Irishman’s relationship with a woman of African American descent might be seen (at least within his community) as a sign of sexual prowess, Irish women in relationships with African American men were regarded with suspicion and disgust. Taking a non-Irish partner, and a first- or second-generation freed slave at that, may not have seemed to make social or economic sense—therefore, the motivations accorded to the Irish woman in such a union were sexual. Her children were visible evidence of her relationship, and therefore

of her sexuality. While a majority of Irish domestics were not involved in such relationships, their proximity to African American men in the workplace and in their immigrant communities suggested the possibility. The young, single, largely unsupervised women Murphy describes were especially provocative of gossip.

To summarize, I assert that four social factors strongly affected the development and eventual decline of the Russell Brothers' Irish Servant Girls characters: the earliest Irish immigrants were not Catholic, but "Scotch-Irish" Protestant, which allowed a hierarchical structure divided along religious lines to develop within the Irish American communities as they grew; the poorest immigrants arrived during the Famine years, while later immigrants were often better educated, better dressed and more Anglicized before they left Ireland; second and third generation Irish American women sought more skilled employment than domestic service, often supported in their aspirations by their mothers who had worked as domestics; and the poorest, Catholic immigrants often lived and worked in close proximity with African Americans, and instances of "mixed mating" came to be associated with Irish women domestic servants and the African American men employed as man-servants in the same household. Each of these conditions contributed to the image of the Irish domestic as unsophisticated, sexualized, animal-like and unskilled. These conceptions are

all reflected in the Russell Brothers' act or in the actions and words of their protestors.

As Irish American communities developed and began to actively shape their image in American culture, some actresses succeeded just where the Russell Brothers failed. The masculine femininity of James Russell that came to bore some audience members and to disgust others held its fascination when embodied by a woman—who still beguiled with the mystery under her skirt. In her book *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*, M. Alison Kibler examines the careers of Kate and May Elinore, sisters who followed in the Russells' footsteps and turned “female” impersonation inside out.⁴⁵

Kate and May Elinore achieved their greatest vaudeville popularity between 1894 and 1909, the same period of time when the Russell Brothers' act underwent reconstruction to strengthen its appeal. The Elinore Sisters' act provided some interesting new angles on the stage Irishwoman, using gender ambiguity to make gender and class commentary. First, the Elinores drew from the structures of classic ethnic vaudeville sketches, which were dominated by men and therefore by female impersonators in the female roles. By portraying their own gender—in this particular genre of vaudeville performance—Kate and May were potentially transgressing on male actors' territory. Secondly, the Elinore

Sisters depicted a contrast within Irish womanhood: while Kate played the rough domestic, May portrayed her foil, a youthful, upwardly aspiring lady-in-the-making. These key differences added up to formidable competition for the Russells. Kibler quotes a reviewer as saying, “There was a day when the Russell duo laid out any audience that ever appeared, but they shall have to give way to Kate Elinore.”⁴⁶ While Kate Elinore delivered “rawboned mimicry” to rival James’s coarse Maggie character, the sisters provided the novelty of women in “masculine” roles as well as an insight into the culture gap between the older Irish community and the upwardly mobile generation. This insight into the changing Irish American world provided the freshness the Russell Brothers lacked, and it also appealed to younger audiences of both genders who experienced the generational conflict at home.

The heart of the contrast between the Russell Brothers and the Elinore Sisters lies between James Russell and Kate Elinore, for they portrayed the grotesque, uncontrolled buffoons who created comic disorder as well as social threat. Kate Elinore did not soften the role she inherited from previous clowns. Kibler noted that Kate’s voice was like a “fog horn,” “her makeup [was] a nightmare” and her movements were “aggressive” and “awkward.”⁴⁷ Kate Elinore consciously worked to be grotesque, to contrast with the expected image of pleasant femininity. Her audiences were simultaneously repulsed and intrigued.

Kibler describes the attractions and offenses of Elinore's performance of the "immigrant clown" character:

. . . the immigrant clowns were not entirely negative figures who soothed patrons' nativist fears of the strange, urban masses . . . the immigrant clowns represented the pride of members of ethnic and working-class groups . . . ⁴⁸

This hero from the "underculture" is a chaotic force, on a "quest for excitement," part of the formula of "anarchistic comedy."⁴⁹ A challenge to existing American society, the immigrant clown also challenges the authority structures within his or her own immigrant community. Kibler pinpoints a particular struggle waged by the Irish immigrant clown: the battle against "stifling female social climbers," "civilizing women" who sought to raise the fortunes of their people by enshrouding them in the "[Irish] lace curtain."⁵⁰ Refinement and femininity, in the form of Irish womanhood, were to be protected but separated, and were perceived as threats to the masculinity of the Irishman. May Elinore, then, also had threatening potential as the "civilizing" force in the Sisters' act, with all its positive and negative connotations.

Kate Elinore was more successful than James Russell in portraying the grotesque Irish female for twentieth century audiences. The Elinores also

consciously satirized extreme gender roles and class conflict in their contrasting images of Irish women in American society. But Kibler believes that, as in the case of the Russells, the transgressive potential of Kate's work was made palatable by the supportive structures of vaudeville tradition. May Elinore's character, in her extreme femininity, was also an appealing feature of the act—although she represented a real and powerful trend in Irish American womanhood, her appearance and many of her espoused values were conservative.⁵¹ Regardless of the effects of their satire, the Elinore Sisters were successful in a type of “double Irish” act that had been played previously by two men or with a male in the buffoon role. Theirs was not the vaudeville stage the Russell Brothers first encountered in the 1870s.

On February 2, 1907, the *New York Telegraph* reported that a Magistrate O'Reilly had addressed protestors responsible for breaking up a performance by the Russell Brothers:

Your conduct last night . . . was in the highest degree reprehensible. You might have started a panic which would certainly have resulted in the maiming if not the killing of many innocent persons. Such conduct cannot be tolerated in a

civilized community. Lemons and eggs or any other kind of missiles must not be used in a Brooklyn playhouse as a means of showing disapprobation of an act.⁵²

O'Reilly supported the actors' rights to perform unmolested, but he did not address the underlying issues that concerned the protestors. It was not until April that the United Irish Societies would find a champion, who dismissed charges against them "for lack of evidence." The *Telegraph* declared, "Egging Russells is Not a Crime!"

Magistrate Fleming improved [sic] the occasion to deliver a homily on the unrighteousness of producing acts on the stage that should be offensive to this or that nationality, and especially to the Irish. "My impression of the Russell show," said the Justice, ". . . is very bad. The public should not encourage or patronize such plays. No man of blood, particularly of Irish blood, could sit and listen to any one who would thus disgrace the women of his race. I am satisfied from the

testimony that this act was indecent, shocking and
vulgar to the last degree."⁵³

For those who had followed the controversy closely, this reversal of legal opinion might have stirred debate. The United Irish Societies and other organizations representing minority groups would grow in numbers and sharpen their techniques as the new media magnified their images in culture. But the small number of reviews concerning the last portion of the Russell Brothers' career suggests that the protests of 1907 may have been just another sign that the Russell Brothers' time was passing. For every egg-tosser in the audience there were dozens who expressed their interests by supporting new acts and new images of womanhood or of Irishness.

Notes to Chapter Two

All newspaper articles or fragments used in this chapter are from the Russell Brothers "Clippings File" in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Some fragments have no headline, author, publication title, or date. All available publication information has been provided. All photographs used in this chapter are from various Russell Brothers "Photo Files" in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

1. "Jimmy Russell Issues His Defiance," *New York Telegraph*, February 3, 1907.

2. Geraldine Maschio, "Ethnic Humor and the Demise of the Russell Brothers," *Journal of Popular Culture* 26, no.1 (1992): 81-92.

3. Maschio, "Ethnic Humor," 85.

4. "Irish Servant Girls," Photo File B.

5. Maschio, "Ethnic Humor," 85; Photo File B.

6. N.p., October 30, 1906.

7. *Toledo Blade*, September 17, 1907.

8. "Some Pretty Rough Comedy," *Pittsburgh Sun*, November 2, 1906.

9. "Irish Servant Girls," Photo File B.

10. Laurence Senelick notes that an image of the Russell Brothers was used in a 1905 manual treating stage makeup for Irish characters. Senelick incorrectly identifies James Russell as having curly hair and John Russell as being the brother sporting the center-part. This may be due to an error in the 1905 manual being referenced. *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2000), 240-1.

11. Senelick, *Changing Room*, 238.
12. N.p., February 25, 1908.
13. *New York Variety*, December 28, 1907.
14. N.p., n.d.
15. "Some Pretty Rough Comedy."
16. N.p., n.d.
17. Maureen Murphy, "Bridie, We Hardly Knew Ye: The Irish Domestic," *The Irish in America*, ed. Michael Coffey (New York: Hyperion, 1997), 144-5.
18. Anonymous, unpublished manuscript page, January 1, 1905. Russell Brothers Clippings file, NYPL.
19. Lawrence E. Mintz, "Humor and Ethnic Stereotypes in Vaudeville and Burlesque," *MELUS* 21, no. 4 (1996): 19-29.
20. *Pittsburg Post*, May 13, 1907.
21. *Chicago Tribune*, May 5, 1907.

22. Gilbert, Douglas Gilbert, *American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1940), 73.
23. Maschio, "Ethnic Humor," 83.
24. "Russell Brothers as Coy Ingenues at Grand," n.p., n.d.
25. *Chicago Tribune*, May 5, 1907.
26. Maschio, "Ethnic Humor," 85.
27. *New York Telegraph*, January 26, 1907.
28. "Rocky Road for Russell Brothers," *New York World*, January 25, 1907.
29. "Eggtossers Arraigned in Court," *New York Telegraph*, February 2, 1907.
30. "Jimmy Russell Issues His Defiance," *New York Telegraph*, February 3, 1907.
31. "Eggtossers."
32. "Vaudeville Stage: The Irish Servant Girls," n.p., June 6, 1896.

33. Hartley Davis, "In Vaudeville," *Everybody's Magazine* 13 (August 1905). Reprinted in *American Vaudeville as Seen by Its Contemporaries*, ed. Charles W. Stein (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984).

34. "Eggtossers."

35. Maschio, "Ethnic Humor," 87.

36. Timothy J. Meagher, *Inventing Irish America: Generation, Class, and Ethnic Identity in a New England City, 1880-1928* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

37. Ibid., 21-2.

38. Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, (New York: Routledge, 1995) 39.

39. Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 42.

40. Meagher, *Inventing Irish America*, 65.

41. Maschio, "Ethnic Humor," 81.

42. Meagher, *Inventing Irish America*, 40-1.

43. Murphy, "Bridie," 144.

44. Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 40-1. Ignatiev's chief focus is the conflict between Irish Americans and African Americans, particularly with regards to the Irish opposition to slavery and the pressures Ireland put upon Irish Americans to support abolition. Although an in-depth examination of this dynamic is beyond the scope of my present project, the following chapters will attest to Irish American participation in blackface minstrelsy through the performances of McIntyre and Heath and Harrigan and Hart.

45. M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 55-77.

46. Ibid., 68.

47. Ibid., 60.

48. Ibid., 58

49. Ibid., 63.

50. Ibid., 58.

51. Ibid., 71.

52. "Eggtossers."

53. "Egging Russells Not a Crime!", *New York Telegraph*, April 16. 1907.

III

BLACKFACE BRIDES AND "HAM TREE GIRLS":

Female Images in the Minstrelsy of McIntyre & Heath

A newspaper advertisement for James McIntyre and Thomas Heath's 1919 musical play *Hello, Alexander!* describes it as a "Gorgeous Musical Extravaganza" featuring "50 Talented Singing and Dancing Broadway Beauties." The advertisement contains only one, hand-drawn image: a chorine performs a high kick, one lifted arm partially overlapping the name of "McIntyre," with the tip of her outstretched dancing shoe almost grazing the underside of the "e." The chorine's costume exposes long, shapely legs, and apparently bare arms, shoulders, throat and décolletage, topped by diminutive facial features.¹ To look at this image, and the descriptive text, one would think that the focal point of *Hello, Alexander!* was a collection of pretty white girls presenting the slightly risqué leg show of early twentieth-century popular theatre. This assumption is half-correct, for the chorus girls strongly appealed to the predominantly white, male, middle-class audiences of vaudeville. McIntyre and Heath needed this appeal because the true centerpiece of their decades-old act—blackface minstrelsy—was losing popularity quickly. The "Alexander" of the play's title

was the same blackface character who had first appeared, with his partner “Henry,” during the 1870s.

McIntyre and Heath’s introduction of white chorus girls to their blackface act was symptomatic of the decline of minstrelsy; it also provides an entry into an interrogation of the blackface duo’s career-long play on race and gender.

McIntyre and Heath are particularly interesting because their long career began during the height of blackface minstrelsy, ran through the glory days of Tony Pastor’s variety, and survived into the roaring 1920s environment of vaudeville and burlesque, requiring the duo to adapt to changing theatrical conventions.

Although the delineations of Henry and Alexander remained the chief attraction of their act, McIntyre and Heath developed spectacular framing devices for these characters by incorporating supporting players and large female choruses. These dazzling elements, including song, dance, complex choreography and risqué costumes, layered new objects of humor and desire upon the established racial foundation of minstrelsy.²

Unlike the Russell Brothers, McIntyre and Heath were not specialists in cross-dressing; they used blackface female impersonation as an occasional accent to the adventures of their trademark characters, Henry and Alexander. Henry and Alexander were typical of blackface minstrelsy, representing the urban dandy and the dim-witted stable hand, respectively. The original dynamic between Henry and Alexander—before they began sharing the stage with chorus girls—

demonstrates several of the qualities described by Eric Lott: African American masculinity is reduced to a blackface binary; plots revolve around bodily urges such as hunger and lust; much of the humor arises from punning malapropism; and the blackface world they live in also contained grotesque blackface females, who represented a monstrous, devouring sexual power.³ There is also evidence of a strong homosocial bond between the two actors, which echoes the larger homosocial context Lott ascribes to blackface minstrelsy. I would argue that, when the white chorus girls were added to this relationship, additional attractions and repulsions would have drawn new audiences for McIntyre and Heath, such as working women exerting choice in their leisure activities, who often took fashion and beauty cues from performers; and middle-class men, for whom the sexualized spectacles of the earlier concert saloon were now legitimized in mass-produced entertainment and enacted increasingly complex race, class and gender relationships.⁴ Some scholars contend that blackface minstrelsy could demonstrate transgressive, revolutionary potential, by depicting sartorial, gestural and linguistic images of African American power that challenged the dominant white position—as Eric Lott describes it, the “promised undoing of white male sexual sanctity.”⁵ In shows like *Hello, Alexander!*, these risks were compounded by the presence of white, female sex objects: white, half-naked women shared the stage with “black” men, simultaneously suggesting the titillation and the threat of miscegenation. But risks were also mitigated by the relocation of minstrelsy from

a working-class venue to the pleasure palaces of the growing industrial complex of American theatre.

The contrast between the mythologized, nostalgic faux-Southern setting of McIntyre and Heath's earliest sketches and the glossy atmosphere of their later shows is extreme. Twentieth-century chorus girls were a mass-produced commodity. Ned Wayburn, in particular, staged McIntyre and Heath's earliest Ham Tree Girls Chorus, was known for providing Florenz Ziegfeld with uniformly beautiful dancers who moved with mechanized regularity. Wayburn was a great collaborator for McIntyre and Heath, because he, too, had begun as a minstrel performer and was a pioneer in the expansion of minstrel shows into large spectacle:

Although Wayburn did not invent the union of sexual spectacle with the minstrel show, his productions . . . were part of the escalation of girl acts into vaudeville. These acts . . . reveal the centrality of a particular type of chorus girl to the consumer culture that was gaining prominence . . .⁶

Although displaying their legs, the chorus girls presented a regimented sexuality that discouraged individuality or the equation of sex appeal with personality. Flanked by this chorus, the blackface characters seem sanitized, separated from their original racist, yet erotic, contexts. Audiences for these extravaganzas were

invited to combine the representational negotiation of race and gender positions with the voyeuristic distance of the burlesque patron. McIntyre and Heath's depictions of black and white femininity not only complemented, but can be read as commenting upon, the black/white male binary at the core of their act.

In this chapter, I will explore the development of McIntyre and Heath's career and how the changing images of femininity in their work—the grotesque blackface “gal” and the mechanized white sex object—create a link between the oldest blackface traditions and the commodification of race and sexuality in the twentieth century. In both blackface stereotypes and idealized white dancing choruses, white, male theatrical artists projected an illusion of knowledge, even intimacy, with the bodies of people—African American men and white women—who held inferior social positions. McIntyre and Heath used this process to assert and confirm their performative authority, which translated into decades of ticket sales.

Thomas K. Heath and James McIntyre were solo blackface minstrels when they teamed up in 1874, during the early days of variety. They appeared for vaudeville producers Tony Pastor, Weber and Fields and Lew Dockstader and shared one of the longest-running stage partnerships in American popular culture. Until the 1920s, McIntyre and Heath toured in increasingly elaborate versions of three basic blackface sketches: "The Georgia Minstrels," "Waiting at the Church,"

and "The Man from Montana."⁷ They even came out of retirement in 1935, when McIntyre was seventy-nine and Heath was eighty-two, to briefly revive "The Georgia Minstrels." As the decades of their partnership unfurled and their act developed from one short turn on a minstrel bill to an evening-long extravaganza, the actors were often interviewed about their personal histories, their experiences in show business, and their philosophical approach to "delineating the Negro." The duo used these interviews to establish themselves as experts on "Negro" behavior. Their cultural insights, they claimed, lent "authenticity" to their character delineations.⁸ McIntyre in particular claimed expert status; he even takes credit for introducing ragtime music and buck and wing dancing to New York audiences.⁹ The interviews argue that McIntyre and Heath possessed unique insight into the soul of the "darkey." Complimentary writers often referenced the longevity of the duo's partnership, as if to bear testimony to some enduring morality in their project: in the words of Heath, "to give the colored brother a fair deal, treating him with perfect justice."¹⁰ Numerous portraits of the duo posed affectionately together emphasize this apparent earnestness, purportedly grounded in their deep friendship. In the manner of the day, Jim and Tom were often photographed with their heads inclined toward one another, their foreheads touching. Their affection seemed to radiate and envelop the characters they had created and the real people they supposedly used as their inspiration. This image of the actors "out of character" was no doubt as careful a construction as the

Henry and Alexander characters. Together, McIntyre and Heath built several levels of theatrical, and yet authoritative, illusion. As one reviewer remembered, “They gave to blackface a new humor, of almost philosophical quality, that it had never possessed before.”¹¹ Their deft appropriation of blackness accorded them status long after other blackface performers had ceded the stage to new forms of performance.

One technique shared by McIntyre and Heath in order to establish their authoritative voices was to describe their work through the peculiar dialect of the blackface character. In interviews, the actors often spoke as Henry and Alexander; both they and their interviewers (who sometimes wrote themselves into the dialogue as folksy narrators) appropriated the uneducated language and the outrageous racism of minstrelsy to discuss the so-called “obvious” characteristics of the “Negro” both on and off-stage. McIntyre, it was explained, usually portrayed Alexander Hambletonian, a “shufflin’ no count nigguh,” while Heath enacted the “straight man” role of Henry (or “Hennery”) Jones, the “cullahed gem’mun,” the high and mighty “nigguh wat ax lak white folks.”¹² The mingling of theatrical terms such as “straight man” with the distinctly off-stage language surrounding “nigguhs” and “white folks” signals a disturbing blend of on- and off-stage realities. This blending lends propriety to the project of minstrel performers, that of creating wildly exaggerated and demeaning images of African Americans in the service of comedy, while simultaneously promulgating the

image of “white folks” as superior. This seeming propriety is consistent with the well-documented vision of plantation life that lay at the heart of minstrelsy: a drowsy, pastoral setting for nostalgic re-imaginings of the Deep South. Myriad newspaper clippings capture Jim or Tom (as McIntyre and Heath preferred to be called) exuding warmth, ease and humor, sometimes cloaking that humor in the soft patter of the stage “darkey.” These actors helped to develop and keep alive the myth of “happy Negroes” on the plantation, not only through their on-stage antics, but through their appropriation of blackness in their off-stage personae. In addition to their race- or color-, appropriation, McIntyre sometimes played a blackface bride in the grotesque, mannish Funny Old Gal tradition, which I will explore later in this chapter. The lowliness of McIntyre’s Alexander character echoed in the exaggerated ugliness of his female impersonation. Although these characters—Alexander, Henry, and the Bride—all displayed standardized costume, makeup, textual and performative elements of minstrelsy, McIntyre and Heath persisted in asserting their unique “authenticity.”

By the time McIntyre and Heath formed their partnership, the racist stereotypes and stock elements of blackface minstrelsy were in place. Like many minstrel performers, these so-called “high potentates of the mispronounced word, the hollow tummy, the shady flirtation and the pest of penury as embodied in the lives of the southern darkey” were not Southern at all.¹³ Thomas K. Heath was born in Philadelphia in 1853. He ran away from home at age eleven to sing and

dance in a rough saloon in New York City managed by Kit Burns. In a 1922 interview, Heath described the lowliness of this venue by explaining its main attraction: rat-killing dogs.¹⁴ After ten years of roving the country working odd jobs as well as variety halls, Heath felt his health failing and headed to Texas in search of warmer weather and greater fortune. He would meet James McIntyre in San Antonio.

McIntyre was born in 1857 in Kenosha, Wisconsin, in a poor Irish community. McIntyre's father died when the boy was nine years old, and he immediately set out to help his mother support the family. He began by selling peanuts and candy on the trains; he would dance for the passengers to earn extra cash. Then he joined a series of circuses, where he expanded his singing and dancing skills while traveling the country and observing people. He claimed to have worked for a time in a livery stable in Henderson, Kentucky, and to have encountered a low-status, befuddled, "natural comejean" [comedian] upon which he based his character "Alexander Hambletonian."¹⁵ Upon teaming up with Heath, McIntyre's buffoonish livery boy met his match in Heath's portrayal of a smooth-talking "darkey" entertainer he called "Henry Jones."

In the "Georgia Minstrels" sketch in which the characters Henry and Alexander met for the first time, Henry wooed Alexander away from the stables to join a dubious band of traveling performers. Henry's promises of fame and fortune never materialized, but his knack for convincing Alexander to perform

outrageous tasks kept the duo busy for decades. This plot device, that of trying to turn Alexander into a minstrel, shows great dramatic economy, as it allowed the duo to weave song and dance turns into their comic dialogue more fluidly than in the traditional minstrel format of disconnected entertainments. Henry and Alexander could also send up the traditions of minstrelsy, squeezing new life from old material by lampooning the lampoon. In spite of their particular skill at creating plots and characters, McIntyre and Heath built their act on the most common plank of minstrelsy, indeed of much Western comedy, the desperate and unrequited desires of the lowest character.

One of the most famous bits of their act featured a desperately hungry, betrayed and disgusted Alexander moaning for food. Henry begins to reminisce about the Ham Tree, on which ham is grown:

“I never sawed no ham tree,” Alexander would protest.

“Is it possible you never studied bo-not-tany? The language of flowers?” Hennery would inquire, with deepest scorn.

“How come you mixing up flowers wid hams?”

“Well, on the ham tree there is a bud. The bud becomes a flower and the flower becomes a ham.

Thus the production of a juicy ham.”

“How big does that tree grow?”

“Oh, three hundred feet at least.”

“Don’t get ‘em too high,” Alexander was quick to caution, “or we cain’t climb up to that ham.”¹⁶

By the end of this brief bit of dialogue, Alexander has come to believe in the Ham Tree. He pines after the fantasy ham with a whiney voice and desperate gesticulations. His disappointment and aggravated discomfort upon learning that he has been conned became a hallmark of the sketch and the relationship between the characters. This disappointment would lead to another stock component: the nostalgic memory of his former life in the stable:

It wasn’t the doleful story that Alexander told . . .
that was funny. It was [his] whining recital of that
disaster that counted. No imitator ever since has
been able to give the same affectionate turn to the
picture of contentment possible in a “levery”
stable.¹⁷

While fulfilling the typical lowly role in comedy across many genres, McIntyre’s Alexander also reinforces the myth of the simple “contentment” of the plantation slave. The verbal gags and whining physicality associated with The Ham Tree vehicle were a hit with audiences and became McIntyre and Heath’s key lazzi.

After playing the variety halls and circuses for four years, McIntyre and Heath formed their own minstrel combination in 1878. They performed in New York for Tony Pastor for several seasons, then their company toured nationally in 1882-83. In ensuing seasons, they were produced by various minstrel impresarios, including Lew Dockstader. In 1894, their "Georgia Minstrels" sketch was produced by Weber and Fields at the Gaiety Theatre in Brooklyn introducing Henry and Alexander to their largest audience yet. Their involvement with Weber and Fields led to a lavish, musical extravaganza version of the Georgia Minstrels, called *The Ham Tree*, which debuted in 1906. Thereafter, the basic characters and themes were periodically revamped under titles such as *In Hayti*, *The Show of Wonders*, and *Hello, Alexander!*, in large-scale Broadway productions replete with choruses of Ham Tree Girls. These productions spawned national tours which ran through the late 1920s.¹⁸

James McIntyre insisted that he had learned to imitate African American dialect and movements during his theatrical circuits of the South while mingling with "real Negroes." But McIntyre had "joined the circus" more than twenty years after minstrelsy developed in the marketplaces of New York; his working education would have exposed him to blackface mannerisms and stock dialogue gathered and refined by scores of performers before him. In an undated fragment entitled "Learned About Darkies," McIntyre explains, "All through the South there are two distinct types of Negro—one the ignorant, gullible sort, the other the

wise, domineering kind."¹⁹ This perfect combination of low comedian and straight man neatly corresponded to the classic binary of blackface stereotypes discussed in my Introduction: the shuffling, idiotic Jim Crow character and the preposterous, overreaching dandy (Zip Coon, Daddy Blue, Jim Dandy). McIntyre and Heath's claim to unique insight into "Negro" character affirmed pre-existing social and theatrical stereotypes.

The Jim Crow character, who no doubt provided the chief model for McIntyre's Alexander, has been well-documented in American culture and seems to typify the offensive stereotype associated with blackface minstrelsy (due in part to the racist Jim Crow laws that legislated real life under a theatrical rubric). Jim Crow is large-footed, bent-legged and elbow-crooked, and his dark skin shows through numerous holes and tears in his hat, shirt, trousers and shoes. His smile and eyes are huge and his bent limbs suggest dancing jollity as well as chaotic infirmity. Lott traces Jim Crow's genealogy back to several European characters including Harlequin, who was dispossessed of land and virtually enslaved to cruel masters; he also describes aspects of the Jim Crow character that are distinctly American and both drew from and were absorbed by the southwestern tradition of humorous monologues and novels such as Mark Twain's.²⁰ In 1940, Douglas Gilbert reported spectators' memories of McIntyre's version of Jim Crow, his Alexander character:

Alexander was soft, credulous, thin, with a whiny piping voice, but the character was dejected, not meek . . . McIntyre, never servile, carried no suggestion of slavery days, as did so many of [his] contemporaries.²¹

This description not only conjures the scrawny, bent figure of Jim Crow, it reflects the loyalty inspired in McIntyre and Heath's audiences, who qualified the character's negative traits with the strengths they perceived. Alexander is "dejected, but not meek," perhaps meaning that he is frustrated but not yet beaten. "Never servile," McIntyre's creation is low status in his world but somehow superior to those of his competitors. This superior lowliness again echoes the European and American forbears of Jim Crow, who used humor to survive mistreatment, but remained locked in their inferior social position.

In photos of Henry and Alexander, their costumes are similarly shabby, with heavy, dark fabrics heavily layered: jackets and vests top formerly-white shirts. Both often wear stovepipe hats. Their power relationship is demonstrated in the small differences in their costumes: lowly Alexander is thin, his trousers are patched at the knee with large, light-colored pieces that draw attention, his hat is bent and his collar is undone and unadorned: Henry is fat, his suit is less worn and he usually sports flashy neckwear. Given the limited resources of these

unemployed entertainers, Henry is well-dressed—he is the dandy, full of what one reviewer termed “braggadocio and pomp.”²²

As Barbara Lewis explains, the “urban dandy” is at least as old as Jim Crow, with his earliest extant musical appearance in 1827’s “Long Tail Blue.” This song, attributed to George Washington Dixon, describes the dandy’s satisfaction with his fancy, blue, tailed coat, which both attracts and signifies sexual success, perhaps even with white women. This preening character has transgressive potential, as he embodies, powerfully and proudly, an African American male sexuality to rival white masculinity. Yet, he also parodies himself, as his dress and citified manners may be read as imitations of or aspirations toward whiteness. Lewis finds evidence that “Daddy Blue” is continually slapped down for his aspirations, exposed for a fraud. This is frequently symbolized by damage to his tailed coat.²³ Heath’s dandy was a bit of a hybrid; because of his “pillowed belly,” of which he seemed quite proud, he reads like Zip Coon crossed with Falstaff. Gilbert claims,

Tom Heath . . . dressed rather shabby-genteel,
played Hennery, a big-mouth know-it-all, but not so
dumb as radio Andy . . . [he] approached in
demeanor the novel “coon dandy . . .”²⁴

Lewis describes the Jim Crow character as a later development of minstrelsy, a sort of corrective to Blue’s potential overreaching. In her argument, the slow,

cowardly Jim Crow character was linked to the dandy in order to ground him. This image, of the striving dandy figuratively shackled to the buffoon, certainly fits Heath's Henry and McIntyre's Alexander. This destructive coupling also supplants the master-slave relationship on the minstrel stage, creating a contained circuit of blame while maintaining a theatrical cycle of comic failure.

James McIntyre would have agreed with Lewis's description of the dandy's behavior: "You can dress the darkey up, you can put new ideas into his head, but he will retain one unchanging characteristic. He is always an unconscious imitator of the white man."²⁵ With such a philosophy of race relations, McIntyre describes a complex mirror effect: the white actor looks into the black character to see reflected the aspiration after whiteness itself. The comedy arises, of course, from the impossibility of the aspiration and the enormity of the failure to measure up. But the cruelty of this white vision is at least partly mitigated by the hierarchy between the blackface types: Alexander is not manipulated, duped and abused by white men, but by his own partner, Henry. By reiterating this image of power struggle between black binaries, McIntyre and Heath veil their judgmental position as compassionate, affectionate observation. They appear to reflect an intra-racial struggle from the sidelines. In actuality, they are constructing an image of white superiority defined by the blackface characters' lowliness.

This intra-racial struggle was not only about skin color or race, but about masculine competition. Lott theorizes that blackface impersonators borrowed aspects of African American maleness, replete with all the mythologized power attached to that maleness in the minds of whites:

To wear or even enjoy blackface was literally, for a time, to become black, to inherit the cool, virility, humility, abandon or *gaité de coeur* that were the prime components of white ideologies of black men.

Lott continues to explain that minstrelsy commodified an attractive black male, “that obscure object of desire,” in an exchange between white males that may have “buttressed the social relations of patriarchy, however variable their racial results.”²⁶ In other words, an original function of minstrelsy, as performed by white men in theatres catering primarily to white men, was as a means of communication between white men. But it is the nature of this communication that evades definition, in large part due to the difficult task of defining minstrelsy’s audience. Lott’s theory of homosocial communication between white males suggests either collective role-play as the heterosexually-potent, hyper-masculine figure of blackface or a kind of “homoerotic charge” provided by the voyeuristic opportunities of the theatre that were heightened by the burnt cork mask. The obvious artificiality of the blackface makeup may have allowed some

spectators to express desire for black males or for the white males hidden beneath the mask. Minstrelsy's origins, before the late-nineteenth century pathologization of homosexuality and the subsequent segregation of "proper," heterosexual desire, may have capitalized on a more permissive approach to voyeuristic pleasure. Regardless of the erotic potential, blackface minstrelsy served to construct whiteness as much as blackness.

Notices and reviews of McIntyre and Heath occasionally make mention of female impersonators in their touring company. Annemarie Bean discovered a reference to a Prima Donna named "Stuart" who was supposedly discovered by Heath in 1887.²⁷ However, the most thoroughly documented presence of female impersonation within McIntyre and Heath's work was performed by James McIntyre himself. McIntyre was four years younger than Heath, and his face may have seemed more appropriate for feminizing than his partner's: he had a straight nose, a full mouth, slightly rounded cheekbones and a triangular jaw. His sparkling eyes and ready smile often gave him an impish look. Heath, by contrast, had a square jaw, thin lips, and a high forehead, appearing patrician and stern in many of their posed portraits together. Interestingly, the prettiness that may have encouraged McIntyre to don petticoats was not expressed in the coy illusions of the Prima Donna. He did not aim to amaze and seduce, as "Stuart" may have. Instead, McIntyre used his good looks to distort and mock images of femininity.

One of their earliest sketches, "Waiting at the Church," was revived throughout McIntyre and Heath's partnership and is documented as late as 1912.²⁸ This sketch is not only reminiscent of traditional blackface humor, it borrows an important stock character: The Funny Old Gal. She is similar to the masculine Irish maid characters perfected by the Russell Brothers, and the "Dutch" girl of Tony Hart (to be discussed in the next chapter). These characters also echo the "old maids" of European folk humor which resurfaced prominently in the early silent films. Many ethnic impersonations have included a female made grotesque by her obvious masculinity. Like Jim Crow, the Funny Old Gal has oversized feet and hands, gangly limbs, an enormous, devouring mouth, and either a concave or barrel-shaped posture that obscures gender. Any suggestion of femininity is distorted further by a sexual appetite considered inappropriate for the Funny Old Gal's age, position in life, or appearance. The entire premise of "Waiting at the Church," in which a cowering groom is violently coerced into marrying an ugly woman, reiterates negative stereotypes of all women, and black women in particular: the bride seems desperate for sexual union, desperate for the security of marriage, oblivious to her own ugliness, and potentially violent.

In 1912, the *Chicago Examiner* carried an article entitled, "Mark Twain Lives in McIntyre and Heath: Present 'Waiting at the Church' at Majestic in Way to Stir Risibilities." This brief description enumerates many of the qualities of the Funny Old Gal:

. . . with grave, chocolate malapropisms Heath takes
up the whys and whereifs . . . McIntyre's bride has
an enormous razor which she pulls from her corsage
as she announces, "There will be a wedding march
or a funeral march."²⁹

The juxtaposition of razor and bridal flowers underscores the contrast between the blissful promise of marriage and hellish "reality" in store for this stage groom. The contrast also signals a deception or betrayal. The use of the oversized razor and the death threat blatantly symbolize the castration-anxiety long associated with comic representations of marriage. The Bride wields a penis-substitute, which symbolically threatens her groom's power in the relationship; the razor also threatens castration in a literal way. The flowers, often associated with female genitalia, locate this threat within the female body itself, or in female sexuality. The sketch seems extremely familiar, clearly steeped in blackface traditions and probably hackneyed from its first performance, but stunning in its implied violence.

In photographs of the sketch, McIntyre complicates his take on the simple buffoon/dandy binary of black humanity. He is a wily and powerful Funny Old Gal. The Bride wears a headpiece of flowers and leaves with a veil trailing down past her hips, perhaps to knee level. Her face features standard blackface makeup that emphasizes her mouth and eyes, making each expression into a gleeful or

enraged grimace. Under a frilly, excessively ornamented white wedding gown, her “skin” looks dirty, almost polluting to the lacy fabric. The Bride’s dress has a lace collar that sits fairly neatly over the rounded neck of the gown. McIntyre has not padded the bride’s bust, but wears a high ribbon with a flower in the center that cuts across the chest. These costume details, evocative of young girlhood and sexual innocence, create a stark contrast between the virginal role of the bride and the wildness and sexual appetite associated with her “dark” persona. Her hair peeks out from under the veil and is the rough, wild, impossibly nappy wig of the minstrel.³⁰

The skirt of the gown does not reach the Bride's ankles and reveals a white, either wrinkled or patterned stocking in an old, dirty, black or dark brown man's lace up shoe. She wears white gloves and appears to have a white shirt cuff peeking out from under the long sleeves of the gown, which do not quite reach her wrists. These masculine images, of a shirt cuff and shoes, signal multiple messages. McIntyre’s own masculinity is quoted, perhaps as reassurance for the audience that he is still “himself.” These details also underscore the defeminization of the Bride, the social negation associated with masculine attributes. The worn and dirty qualities of the shoes also link the blackface Bride to her inferior class status: even dressed in her finest clothes on her happiest day, she is disadvantage. The contrast between the white cleanliness and shoddy

darkness also provides a provocative visual contrast that foreshadows the disruption of the wedding service, chaos being a key ingredient for comedy.

In a group shot, the Bride smirks up at the stunned groom, played by Otto T. Johnson, her exaggerated smile and sideways glance implying mischief. The groom's top hat is a comically tall, crooked stovepipe. His pants are six inches too short and his shabby shoes are missing laces and have holes on the tops. His socks are white, as are his gloves and his shirt, which seems to have an unknotted bowtie hanging from a collar that won't lie flat. The coat, which is light in color, has a contrasting velvet-like collar that is noticeably worn and dirty at the edges. His face is twisted in a scowl of distaste as he tries to lean away from his bride-to-be.

Heath, as the Preacher, beams expansively and seems oblivious to the bride's wily intentions; with his puffed-up chest he seems too impressed with his own social position to notice the groom's panic. He has a long, military style coat with three rows of three buttons and light, suede-looking trim on the shoulders and cuffs. He has a white shirt with a thickly knotted white cravat, and he appears to have the ends of a shirt collar sticking up out of the cravat near his ears. His blackface wig is balding and grayed and his makeup includes white eyebrows. A glint near the bridge of his nose suggests that he is wearing spectacles of some sort. He holds a book in his upstage hand, suggesting a Bible. He holds a hat in his downstage hand. His trousers, of which only a few inches show beneath the

coat, are light gray and look textured, but he too sports the ratty minstrel shoes. According to the review quoted above, the Preacher would be spouting a mangled version of a “white” wedding service. Combined with his deep-chested posture and mock-authoritative costume, the Preacher’s language mark him as an “uppity” dandy with a religious specialty.

In a pose from later in the sketch, the Groom attempts to escape, with arms and legs reaching off-stage while he turns his glance backward in wide-eyed horror; the bride holds his coat, frowns and leans backwards, trapping the tall, thin man easily in her grasp; and the Preacher looks on in consternation, holding his Bible in one hand and his hat in the other as his brows lower in displeasure. These images from one sketch interlock stereotypes of masculine women, emasculated men, violent marriages, corrupt religious figures, as well as the pompous mimicry of educated, “white” speech that marks the dandy character.

McIntyre’s razor-wielding, nightmarish Funny Old Gal must be read in the context of the duo’s better-known characters, Henry and Alexander. She does not share the stage with them—in a creative choice that may “protect” their favorite characters from her, it is not the hapless Alexander who has to marry her, and it is not the overbearing Henry who presides at the wedding. But the specter of the blackface female, whether terrifying or tantalizing, is always present in the traditions of minstrelsy, a feminine object conjured by the blackface males who talk and sing about their own lives. McIntyre and Heath, as “expert delineators of

the Negro,” established themselves by extension as authorities on “Negro” womanhood. Their fascination with and devotion to a notion of “authenticity” was aggressively promoted as a selling point for their shows, but I believe it also exemplified the combination of admiration and mistrust of African Americans that underlay the impersonations. This admiration and mistrust extends itself to women.

As stated previously, the homosocial, or perhaps homoerotic, link between Henry and Alexander (and/or their audience) seems to have been shielded from the interference of a Funny Old Gal character. McIntyre's turn in drag is interesting in comparison with other blackface female delineators of the late-nineteenth century. Although he played the bride repeatedly for decades, cross-dressing was not a specialty of the act, as it was for the Russell Brothers. McIntyre played no other drag roles that have received significant documentation. Heath did not appear to play any drag roles. This sketch did not appear compelling to interviewers and writers of retrospectives who described Henry and Alexander in minute detail. Yet, colleagues of McIntyre were so successful as either Funny Old Gals or Prima Donnas that they made entire careers in skirts. Blackface wench impersonator Francis Leon received visitors in his salon in his female guise, and was admired as a trend-setter in women's fashion. Given this rich context of blackface female impersonation, why did McIntyre so rarely explore the bride? Given the popularity of Alexander, why did he bother at all?

I think the Bride is evidence of McIntyre and Heath's bottom line: they catered to the audiences' expectations. Audiences were accustomed to the Funny Old Gal; she was part of the blackface world. The Bride was a one-gag vehicle, an easy target, an incomplete image depending on existing stereotypes to "go over" in the audience's minds. I think the Bride's de-feminization went beyond the exciting and potentially troubling masculinity of the professional female impersonator; I think, in McIntyre's rendering, she was completely sexless. Whereas a female impersonator tantalizes with the contradiction under his skirt, McIntyre, I believe, aped the role to fill a gap in the program. Significantly, this bride did not marry Henry or Alexander; she does not seem to have even enough depth to share the stage with the Georgia Minstrels. Henry and Alexander were most successful when they kept to themselves. Theirs was a homosocial relationship, and their stage reality was richest when it contained only males. But even that richness was not the chief goal: McIntyre is rumored to have described his motivation as "dishonest dough."³¹

The drive for financial success on the part of McIntyre and Heath is not a crime, nor indicative of an insidious racist or chauvinist agenda. But it may partly explain the lopsided relationship between the relatively obscure Church sketch and the Georgia Minstrels routines. The comparatively infrequent appearance of blackface female images on McIntyre and Heath's stage, where they do not seem to have held the racial "authenticity" of Henry and Alexander, is mirrored by the

vacuous implementation of the Ham Tree Girls. The relationship between the blackface delineations and the chorus girls within a McIntyre and Heath production is neatly summed up by an undated fragment written in anticipation of a performance of "Hello, Alexander!," which premiered in 1919. The critic writes:

. . . the "second part" of the entertainment is in the shape of a musical comedy and . . . the management has supplied a large number of singularly pretty women to grace the stage. They will provide both enjoyment and contrast, for neither Mr. M nor Mr. H in their black-face makeup is a thing of beauty, although always amusing. Just what these fair feminines will do I cannot state, and really it doesn't matter much as long as they keep things moving.³²

As described at the opening of this chapter, the publicity poster for this show emphasizes the draw of these "fair feminines." There are no images of the blackface characters, and the word "minstrel" is conspicuously absent from this advertisement for a "gorgeous musical extravaganza."³³ Similarly, a program for a production of "The Ham Tree" boasts the "world's best dancing chorus."³⁴ In the program, several paragraphs describe McIntyre and Heath as the "foremost funmakers of the universe whose fame as delineators of quaint Negro characters is

predominant" and briefly outline the plot of the play. Surrounding these paragraphs are small head shots of sixteen unnamed chorus girls. The elements of these spectacles remain unrelated; there is no indication that the chorus girls have even marginal functions as characters. The girls are flat, iconic and serve only to titillate. They are not integrated into the blackface world of the main characters, and they do not seem to detract from it. Rather, in the style of the original minstrel show or of vaudeville, the elements of such an extravaganza please through their contrast. The audiences of McIntyre and Heath were used to abrupt changes in tone, tempo or content in an evening's bill, and their attention to the Henry/Alexander narrative would not necessarily be broken by the appearance of chorus girls, but perhaps refreshed. However, the ease with which audiences (or reviewers) followed the transitions in "Hello, Alexander!" does not argue for the depth of the story or characterizations. To the contrary, the integration of a large chorus of interchangeable beauties suggests that Henry and Alexander's blackface male world was extremely small and shallow.

The cardboard cut-outs of the Ham Tree chorines evoke the flat, unsexed character of McIntyre's bride. Womanhood held no place on their stage. Female creatures who shared their spotlight were lifeless icons who failed to develop to the richness of even a Henry or Alexander. This flatness must reflect back upon the chief characteristics that formed the duo's success. These complex, overlapping images of desire complicate the claims of McIntyre and Heath to

authentically represent the “darkey,” to provide him with a measure of theatrical “justice.” As evidence of their power to capture the true spirit of the Southern black man, Heath frequently shared an anecdote about “an old Negro down in Atlanta” who was convinced that McIntyre and Heath shared his African American heritage. Heath’s telling would culminate with a punch line delivered in the dialect of blackface:

Well, Mistah Heath, one thing suah is you-all doan
make fools of us. Say, hones’ now, ain you-all got a
little niggah blood in you?³⁵

Whether true or not, I believe this anecdote points captures the recognizable patterns of blackface minstrelsy clearly indicated by the extant documentation. Even more than suggestions of “authenticity,” it was rhythmic patterns, of speech and movement, that created the laughs. An audience’s laughing recognition was as much a recognition of theatrical structure as it was of “real-life” truths.

I have no doubt that Henry and Alexander were, to many people, funny and endearing, and that they inspired affection from several generations of theatre-goers of various economic and racial backgrounds. But if their act did touch a chord of truth, it rang only briefly. The growing element of spectacle in the duo's work, including scenery, costumes and chorus girls, testifies to the waning popularity of blackface. In an untitled fragment published around 1920, McIntyre states that,

People don't think as much of minstrel men
nowadays as they used to. For one thing, the
attitude toward the colored man and his comedy has
changed. He has found his place in the community
and assumed the responsibilities of citizenship.³⁶

The increasing visibility of black Americans in public life problematized the grotesque creations of blackface. In a comment so outrageous it is hard to gauge its seriousness, McIntyre and Heath insist that Southern Negroes hadn't changed, they were just harder to find because Italians were displacing them. Furthermore, the argument continued, young performers no longer nurtured the craft of blackface delineation. Only Al Jolson, claimed McIntyre and Heath, carried on their work with competence and style.³⁷

The extant history of McIntyre and Heath ends on a curious note. In their lifetime, a story circulated that the duo hated each other and would never speak off-stage.³⁸ In numerous interviews, principally those celebrating the longevity of the partnership, McIntyre and Heath denied the rumor, saying that it developed out of jealousy on the part of a rival act or perhaps as a publicity stunt by a promoter, but they didn't know its exact origin. Said McIntyre:

There never was a word of truth in it! Tom and I
don't have to talk much to each other, because we

know, *without* talking, just what the other is
thinking and feeling. Don't we, Tom?³⁹

As previously mentioned, many publicity photos of the actors out of character depict the duo in close physical proximity, perhaps in corroboration of their deeply-felt friendship. Standing or sitting together, one will have a hand on the other's shoulder; frequently, their heads are bent towards each other, even touching. In one particular photo, Heath's ear is pressed so tightly against McIntyre's head that his ear wrinkles. Although many photos of their contemporaries feature friendly poses, McIntyre and Heath's body language is consistently more intimate than their peers'.⁴⁰

The last photo taken of Thomas Heath depicts him in his bed, dressed in a smoking jacket with white hair and a deeply-lined face, holding a large portrait of his partner in his lap and gazing at it.⁴¹ Although both men married, there is some discrepancy in reports of their family lives; at least one account claims that each man had a son, while another declares that McIntyre had no sons, and so "shared" Heath's boy: "they had one son and the boy four parents." This close bond supported them in 1918 or 1919 when Heath's son died from influenza.⁴²

One of McIntyre's obituaries does name one grown and married daughter, but she does not figure in the romanticized stories about the partners' closeness. The partners died almost exactly one year apart. When McIntyre died, on August 18, 1937, Heath's family reportedly did not tell him that his partner was gone. Bed-

ridden, Heath was interviewed and photographed, allegedly unaware that his dear friend was dead. One year and one day later, on August 19, 1938, Heath died.

The fascination with McIntyre and Heath's friendship generated rumors, blurred their familial boundaries and invaded their sickrooms at the end of their lives. These intrusions into the private space, no doubt invited much of the time in order to generate publicity, echo the homoerotic charge that may have been exchanged by the Henry and Alexander characters, or by the duo and their audience. The ambiguity of their relationship—friendly or tense, personal or merely professional, fraternal or erotic—mirrors the images of love, affection, superiority and condescension that McIntyre and Heath created with regards to “the darkey.” Is friendship laced with rivalry? Is admiration a mask for contempt and/or sexual competition? Although we will never know the true nature of McIntyre and Heath's friendship—whether they were indeed fast friends, despised each other, or were lovers—I find in their work evidence of these same emotional possibilities towards their subject. In an extremely specific and parasitic way, they adored African Americans: they spent decades donning an approximation of black skin, imitating what they believed was African American speech, and speaking publicly about their affection for African American culture. Yet there is no denying their blatant exploitation of African Americans to sell tickets. This exploitation can be read as a covert expression of malice, or as a

factor of show business in an era when racial battles were only just beginning to be fought on stage as well as off.

As with other aspects of this study, the case of McIntyre's portrayal of the blackface Bride in "Waiting at the Church," and the heavy-handed incorporation of chorus girls, throw these issues into sharp relief. The grotesque behavior, costuming, facial expressions and gestures of McIntyre's Funny Old Gal character belie the tenderness the duo claimed to feel while impersonating Henry and Alexander. The substitution of the white, sanitized Ham Tree Girls does not improve the role of women on McIntyre and Heath's stage, but emphasizes the exclusivity enjoyed by this particular blackface men's club.

Notes to Chapter Three

All newspaper articles or fragments used in this chapter are from the McIntyre and Heath “Clippings File” in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. All photographs used in this chapter are from various McIntyre and Heath “Photo Files” in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

1. *Hello, Alexander!* Newspaper advertisement for the Schubert Majestic Theatre, n.p., n.d.

2. See, for example, an undated program for *The Ham Tree*, at the Colonial Theatre in Cleveland, for which Ned Wayburn staged McIntyre and Heath and the “World’s Best Dancing Chorus.” The chorus girls’ head shots are displayed in a ring around a synopsis of the show. *The Ham Tree* was first adapted from the Henry and Alexander sketches in 1905.

3. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). See, for example, the discussion of “Gal from the South,” 14-15.

4. See, for example, Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 62-3, 139-45; Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque in American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 245-6.

5. Lott, *Love and Theft*, 147.

6. M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 136.

7. “Introduced Ragtime.” *New York Times*, November 4, 1916.

8. “Learned About Darkies,” n.p., n.d.

9. “Introduced Ragtime,” *New York Times*, November 4, 1916.

10. “Square with the Negro.” *New York Times*, November 4, 1916.

11. “McIntyre, Famous Minstrel of ‘Ham Tree Sketch,’ Dies,” *New York Journal-American*, August 18, 1937.

12. *New York Evening Telegram*, 1919. Use of the word “Negro,” as well as examples of “chocolate malapropisms” will be presented in quotation marks throughout this chapter as examples of McIntyre and Heath’s language both on- and off-stage when describing their perceptions of African Americans. Although self-identification by Americans of various and mixed backgrounds continues to evolve, I adopt the terminology of recent scholarship when I describe certain people as “African Americans,” and use “Negro” only to indicate a historically-specific term, made further remote from reality in its application to theatrical characters.

13. N.p., December 1, 1919.
14. Mary B. Mullett, "Friends and Partners 48 Years Without a Single Break," *American Magazine*, September, 1922, 34+. In Mullett's article, Kit Burns is incorrectly identified as "Kid Burns."
15. *Chicago Herald*, 1919.
16. "McIntyre and Heath, Top Men in Old Days, Flourished on Simple Fare," *New York Daily News*, August 29, 1937.
17. Ibid.
18. *St. Joseph's Gazette*, December 28, 1913.
19. N.p., n.d., possibly the same article as "Square With the Negro," see note 6.
20. Lott, 22, 30-1.
21. Gilbert, Douglas, *American Vaudeville, Its Life and Times* (New York, Dover Publications, 1940) 83-4.
22. N.p., September 28, 1899.

23. Lewis, Barbara, "Daddy Blue: The Evolution of the Dark Daddy," *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, 265-7.

24. Gilbert, 84.

25. N.p., n.d.

26. Lott, 50-1.

27. Annemarie Bean, "Transgressing the Gender Divide," *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, eds. Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 249.

28. Although I have found photographs of McIntyre playing at least one other female character, "The Ranee," his Bride from "Waiting at the Church" is his most well-known and will be my focus in this chapter.

29. "Mark Twain Lives in McIntyre and Heath," *Chicago Examiner*, 1912.

30. McIntyre and Heath Photo File B, NYPL.

31. Gilbert, 83.

32. N.p., n.d.

33. *Hello, Alexander!*, see note 1.

34. *The Ham Tree*, program, n.d., Colonial Theatre, Cleveland.

35. *New York Times*, November 4, 1916.

36. N.p., n.d., in an interview associated with the forty-fifth anniversary of the partnership, circa. 1920.

37. *New York Times*, November 4, 1916.

38. One of the most recent repetitions of this story appears in *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre*, ed. Gerald Bordman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984). See also Gilbert, 85.

39. Mullet, Mary B. "Friends and Partners 48 Years Without a Single Break," *American Magazine*, September, 1922, 34+. Quoted italics appear in the original text.

40. For example, Harrigan and Hart, whom I will profile in the next chapter, would stand with a hand placed on a shoulder. Interestingly, Harrigan and Hart will be posthumously accused of homosexuality, while McIntyre and Heath's extensive photographic evidence has not previously received a queer reading.

41. N.p., August 18, 1937.

42. *Chicago Herald*, 1919.

IV

HARRIGAN'S WENCH:

Identity Play in the Work of Tony Hart

In my introductory chapter, I described a publicity poster for the variety performers Harrigan and Hart, in their sketch entitled “The Little Frauds.” This brilliant advertisement conjures two conflicting images simultaneously: the male actor, Tony Hart, is evoked through the use of his last name; and a curvaceous, daintily-dressed young woman is rendered with exquisite detail. This conflict of linguistic and pictorial images is both pleasing and disturbing. Numerous tensions are evoked by this image: between the stage characters it portrays, between the sexes of performer and character, and within the title of the sketch itself, which promises a story of deception. Tony Hart’s life and work were also characterized by tension: between men and women, between family members, between stage partners, and between the numerous ethnic groups depicted on Harrigan and Hart’s stage, often engaged in physical battle.

Annemarie Bean has addressed Hart’s cross-dressed roles in relation to the Prima Donna tradition of minstrelsy, but I feel that designation describes only a fraction of Hart’s work and does not account for his enormous popularity during his short lifetime. In this chapter, I will examine the range of Tony Hart’s

performances, including male and female characters of several different ethnicities, and the tensions evoked and reflected in his work. This one performer, through the variety of roles he played, embodied the pains and frustrations of poor immigrants, the joyful musicality and laughter of Bowery families, and the destructive prejudices of late-nineteenth century New York City. As in the other acts I have explored in this study, I find Hart's cross-dressing to be only one element of a complex interplay of identity representations; in this way, he combines many of the performance traditions discussed in previous chapters, and seems to have succeeded equally well in all of them.

In this chapter, I will also examine a particular working-class clown type, the Tough Girl. I believe that this role, created by and for actresses, challenged the superior position of the low comic female impersonator and contributed to his waning popularity. As previously discussed, Kate Elinore was a strong competitor for James Russell, transforming many of the received traits of the stage Irishwoman with the "authentic" physicality of her biologically-female body. Similarly, Ada Lewis developed the first widely-publicized and imitated Tough Girl character in the Tony Hart/"Little Fraud" mode. Lewis was hired and mentored by Edward Harrigan, who wrote parts for the character she had invented. In the Tough Girl, Lewis surprised and charmed audiences by blending rough mannerisms and street sense into her femininity. This blend mirrors Tony Hart's appeal, which lay in his lovely voice and girlish features contrasted with

his aggressive physical comedy. Partnered with a study of Hart, Lewis's story perfectly illustrates the parallels between the cultural work—both entertainment and social parody—of low comic female impersonators of the 1870s and '80s and the female comics of the 1890s and beyond.

In Hart's work, I find a strong affiliation with the Irish immigrant community that reflects thematic concerns and performance tropes similar to the Russell Brothers' act. There is also a presence of blackface minstrel traditions in many of Hart's impersonations, which I believe combined elements of both the Prima Donna and the Funny Old Gal. Like McIntyre and Heath, Harrigan and Hart were devoted to detailed impressions of ethnic types, which Harrigan claimed to be "authentic" representations of reality. Hart also drew attention through the chameleon-like fluidity with which he changed appearance and dialect, often in the same show. These multiple identities would have reflected upon one another as their images accumulated throughout the performance. Finally, there is an undercurrent of eroticism in many of the accounts of Tony Hart's work, overlaid with attention to ethnic accents and mannerisms and clever singing and dancing. He was a vivacious and physical performer, and loved attention. Hart's performances, even of ugly, old women, seduced the eyes and ears of his audience with their energy and convincing detail. This seductive power can be read as homoerotic, coinciding with the development of the homosexual

sub-culture described by Senelick. However, Hart's allure in both male and female guise suggests that he appealed to scopophiles of both genders and all sexual interests. People loved to look at him.¹

From 1872 until 1886, Edward Harrigan and Tony Hart entertained New York to tremendous acclaim, beginning as a minstrel variety act but quickly ascending to become actor-managers of their own touring combination based in the Theatre Comique. Harrigan was both a playwright and a performer, while Hart was described as a superb impersonator of myriad ethnicities in both genders, and a particularly fine singer and dancer. The duo became famous for their detailed portrayal of New York's immigrant "types," which were hailed by such critics as William Dean Howells as "authentic" studies that transported an audience "out of the world of conventions and traditions, and in[to] the presence of facts."² Harrigan and Hart created spectacles which linked variety sketches and songs revolving around a given group of characters into full-length plays with music. After the partners' separation in 1886, Harrigan continued writing and producing his musical plays (with composer David Braham), earning himself a reputation as a "Bowery Dickens." The failure of the plays to outlive their creators seems to arise from the very quality which rendered them contemporary successes: the highly-specific language and behaviors which formed the basis for the duo's

characterizations and which have fixed the characters in their own time and locale.

Edward Harrigan, Tony Hart and David Braham are often described as early originators of the American musical comedy. Harrigan's manuscripts were never published as a collection and largely survive in assorted archives, but his working method in creating the texts is well known from interviews he gave in his lifetime. He prided himself on his familiarity with his home, the Bowery of New York City, and his ability to recreate on stage the characteristics of its immigrant "types."³ Montrose Moses explains Harrigan's particular knack for character:

Out of the scribbled pages rises an entire era of political and social peculiarities . . . the historian of the 'eighties would find authentic reflection of ward politics and of neighborhood feuds in the dialogue of Harrigan . . . The fact is that Harrigan touched the mainspring of local life as it had not been touched before . . . it was vital and colorful and real.⁴

Moses goes on to admit that, however "real" the dialogue of these plays, the plots were "put together very lightly." In fact, a contemporary of Harrigan's, A.M. Palmer, the manager of the Madison Square Theatre, described the plays as mere "prolongations of sketches" which followed in the variety tradition.⁵ Yet these

plays, and Harrigan's approach to character, proved immensely popular with audiences and held the stage for decades before disappearing into relative anonymity. It is clear that Tony Hart was also deeply involved in the close observation and exaggerated mimicry of the immigrant communities around him. For, while Harrigan wrote the plays and worked them through rehearsal in the tradition of the actor-manager, "Hart could play all the parts seven Harrigans could write," according to the Boston *Traveller*.⁶

James H. Dormon unpacks Harrigan's supposed authenticity with regards to immigrant types in his 1992 essay, "Ethnic Cultures of the Mind: The Harrigan-Hart Mosaic." Dormon asserts that the types of Harrigan and Hart, although meticulously portrayed through dialect, posture, mannerism and costuming, were merely fresh embodiments of stereotypes well known within the minstrel tradition. Dormon argues that these stereotypes were not descriptive but rather ascriptive: the stereotypes assigned language, mannerisms and signifying objects such as stilettos or opium pipes to each ethnic group. In Dormon's view, the popular acceptance of these signifying elements as mirrors of reality was due to a need on the part of middle-class white America to know the unknown—to identify the Other—and thereby contain it.⁷ This reading echoes Lott's thesis concerning the simultaneous attempts to conjure and control the black male body on the minstrel stage.

Harrigan himself is a consummate example of the illusory quality of this identification and containment of the immigrant, since, for generations after his death, he was largely regarded as the most Irish man ever to step onto American soil.⁸ In fact, his father was from Newfoundland and his mother from Massachusetts; Harrigan looked to his paternal grandfather, a fisherman from Cork, for his connection to Ireland.⁹ While this blurring of the truth might seem like a technicality, it illustrates the kind of identity mythology that blended Harrigan and Hart with their characters and then identified the characters as "true to life." The "Mulligan Guards" series, which revolved around a "typical" Irishman, Dan Mulligan, and his often adversarial relationship with his German neighbor, Gustave Lochmuller, was so popular that generations of Irishmen named their social clubs or military corps "The Mulligans."¹⁰ Dormon concludes that Harrigan's scripts (and the embodiment of his characters by Tony Hart and the entire company) "provid[ed] a basis for popular attitudes that would ultimately be reflected in collective behavior as well as public policy towards America's burgeoning immigrant/ethnic populations."¹¹ Indeed, Harrigan's scripts often include quick character descriptions that display their debt to the theatrical and social past, such as: "Uncle Tom, dressed in old modern darkey clothes or dressed as Uncle Tom."¹²

The history of the Harrigan and Hart partnership has been dominated by the involvement of Harrigan's family, and this has resulted in the overshadowing

of Tony Hart's life and work by the longer-lived and more-successful Harrigan. The effects of this imbalance in the construction of a Harrigan and Hart "narrative," and the curious emphasis by Harrigan's family on Tony Hart's sexual identity, will be the focus of my next chapter. Here, I will reconstruct the limited biographical information available on Tony Hart's life, and explore reviews and photographic documentation of several of his roles, which reveal complex combinations of ethnically-inflected and multi-gendered components.

Tony Hart was born Anthony J. Cannon in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1855. Both of his parents were Irish immigrants. As a child, Cannon loved to playact, and also to pull pranks. He was soft and pretty in appearance, but rebellious and disruptive at home and in school. When he was ten years old, he staged a melodrama in a friend's barn. Against Cannon's wishes, the child of the barn's owner got the lead in the performance. Cannon avenged himself by kicking the soapbox out from under the child's feet during the climactic hanging scene. Although an adult rescued the child before he strangled, Cannon's parents were horrified. They sent him off to the Lyman School, a state reformatory near Worcester. Cannon's experiences there have been vaguely described as "abusive" or "hard," with repeated reports of corporal punishment, and he lasted only a few weeks before contriving to escape.¹³

Rather than returning home, Cannon roamed New England, singing and dancing for money in saloons, first in Boston, and later in Providence, where he

was called "Master Antonio." Minstrel Billy Arlington heard Cannon, was particularly moved by his lovely voice, and gave him his first role in a minstrel troupe. While traveling New England with Arlington, Cannon was wooed away by M. B. Leavitt of Madame Rentz's Female Minstrels, with whom he began to journey cross-country. His most popular number consisted of a melodramatic song in which a little girl mourns the loss of her mother, "Put Me in My Little Bed." Hart sang in a little girl's nightdress and apparently reduced audiences to tears.¹⁴

The impulsive, self-absorbed behavior of young Cannon appears to have continued during his journeys. He is said to have parted ways with Leavitt's company due to an argument over a hotel towel. Finding his towel soiled by his roommate, Cannon allegedly tore a piece of the bedspread off to use instead. The hotel charged Leavitt, Leavitt docked Cannon's pay five dollars, and Cannon took his leave for Chicago. He was not quite sixteen, had been on the road for nearly five years, and was in need of a new gig.¹⁵

In 1871, Cannon and Harrigan were both in Chicago and having their shoes shined side by side when they struck up a conversation. Each had seen the other's work in passing on the minstrel circuit. Harrigan, whose luck with alcoholic or unreliable partners had been particularly poor, needed a female impersonator for his most recent act, "The Little Fraud," a spoof of a current love song, "Little Maud." Although Cannon could and would play male roles

throughout his career, his delicate, smooth features, curly hair and sweet singing voice combined in a convincing portrayal of femininity. And so the "Dutch" fräulein of the "Little Fraud" sketch became his first female role of the partnership. At this time, Cannon also changed his last name to Hart to mesh more musically with the name "Harrigan."¹⁶

In visual documentation of the "Little Fraud" sketch, there appears a fascinating contradiction. This first sketch, which provided a breakthrough success for the new partnership, was photographed; this photograph was often reprinted as typical of Harrigan and Hart's early work.¹⁷ The partners are posed close together, and Hart's left hand links through Harrigan's right elbow. Harrigan clasps his hands in front of him and looks thoughtfully at Hart, with his brows raised and a small smile bending his lips. Hart stands straight with his weight on both feet; only his right arm, which is raised and crooked beside his head, lends activity to the pose. His raised hand is in a loose fist. Hart's face is turned toward Harrigan, and he appears to be speaking, with slightly downcast eyes and an open, but smiling, mouth. The men look happy and relaxed with each other.

The costumes in this image are overtly ridiculous: Harrigan's dark, long suit jacket is worn over a striped vest and matching striped trousers that evoke a prison uniform. He wears a high collar and a black skullcap on his head. Hart's two-piece dress is also completely striped. The top buttons in the front and hangs

loosely, with no attempt made to shape the bust line or waist into feminine curves. The skirt also hangs loosely to Hart's mid-calf, where baggy white stockings are visible. Hart's ensemble is topped by a dark bonnet, which ties under his chin with wide straps tied into a floppy bow and which blossoms out and up behind his head. Hart's curly blond hair spills over his forehead. Hart wears no apparent makeup to accentuate his lips or eyes. Both costumes appear worn and slightly dirty.

The costumes in this photograph portray a bizarre vision of "foreign" dress, which is typical to the ethnic humor Harrigan sought to build upon. The gestures and facial expressions are comfortable and pleasant, confirming the intent of the sketch to spoof young love. The physical proximity and contact between the partners demonstrates the easy stage chemistry they discovered together.

This photograph conveys a completely different story from the image in the undated publicity poster for "The Little Frauds," which presumably was produced later in the duo's partnership. I cannot find any explanation for the word "fraud" becoming plural. The quality of the drawing is excellent: fine, detailed lines render the faces and bodies realistically. Both characters are attractive in face and body: the young woman is curvaceous though bust and hips and has a slender waist, while the young man is tall, slender, and boasts dark thick hair, a strong brow over bright eyes, and full, pouting lips. The man's face is

recognizable as Harrigan's. The characters are also well-dressed, with buttons, ties, sashes, flowers, vest, gloves and hats between them. In total, they are an elegant couple, pleasurable to see. Their pose, however, conveys conflict.

The pose of the two characters depicted certainly suggests sexual, or at least physical interaction. The female leans toward her stage partner, resting one hand on his shoulder and one on his arm while tipping her head up into his face. Her eyes are demurely downcast, but every other gesture is aggressive. Her foot positioning confirms the impression that she is leaning into her partner's body, as her weight rests on the leg nearest to him while her other foot points daintily away, resting lightly on the toe. Unlike in the photograph, Harrigan is not proffering his arm; rather, he is recoiling from this lovely creature. With both arms raised, Harrigan's character grasps at his hat with one hand as if he was in danger of losing his balance. His brows are lowered and his mouth is set in a straight line.

This image clearly mirrors the photograph, with Hart's character on the left and Harrigan on the right as you view them. But the suggestions of "foreignness" and absurdity in their clothing is gone. The social status of the couple is clearly higher than that of the original characters; this may reflect the increased prosperity of Harrigan and Hart's later patrons. Although originally performing about immigrants for a largely immigrant audience, the Theatre Comique appealed to the fashionable families encouraged by variety reformer

Tony Pastor, a great Harrigan and Hart supporter.¹⁸ Most intriguingly, the mutual comfort and affection expressed in the photograph is replaced by coy manipulation on the part of the female, with distrust and anxiety emanating from the male. The lithograph fixes the young woman under a fresh gaze, one that idealizes her beauty but also overlays a strong element of menace.

The “Little Fraud” sketch followed the models of French vaudeville and blackface minstrelsy by presenting a song interrupted by quick, spoken interjections and culminating in a dance. The content of the sketch is described in two opposing ways. Older accounts imply that the “coquettish” female played by Hart is the titular “fraud,” causing her sweetheart gentle exasperation through her flirting.¹⁹ Alicia Kae Koger, in her close reading of the lyrics, found that the sketch “revolved around a conflict between a young German and his sweetheart over a ‘waiter gal’ (waiter girl).”²⁰ This waiter girl, who is denigrated for chewing “terbaccar,” is the “fraud” who distracts the young man from his true love. Both readings support the potential for mild slapstick physicality, through sexual advances and repulsions or mock punishment for wayward glances. But surely the central fraud in the sketch was Hart’s transvestism; the title played upon the fraudulent performance itself.

Hart's close friend Nat C. Goodwin described Hart's appearance, which was so appealing to men and women alike:

He had the face of an Irish Apollo. His eyes were
liquid blue, almost feminine in their dovelike
expression. His head was large and round and
covered with a luxurious growth of brown, curly
hair, which clustered in ringlets over a strong brow.
His feet and hands were small, his smile almost
pathetic . . . I have loved three men in my life and
he was two of them.²¹

Goodwin's account not only captures Hart's cherubic features, it also places Hart within a context of passionate male friendship. Later generations would question Hart's attachment to his partner Harrigan, but Goodwin's words recall the deep regard male friends held for one another in this period. As with James McIntyre and Thomas Heath, the friendship between Hart and Goodwin had a sensual component—an appreciation for the physical beauty and grace of another man. Whether or not their relationship was expressly homoerotic can't be known; but Goodwin did seem to speak for many men and women in his praise of Hart.

One of Hart's best-known roles was the blackface servant to Dan and Cordelia Mulligan, Rebecca Allup. Hart played Rebecca in seven of Harrigan's famous "Mulligan Guard" plays, most of which were musical farces. Harrigan claimed to have based the character on a drunken washerwoman he had known.²² Although she loves to drink, Harrigan's dialogue and character descriptions make

Rebecca seem quick, sarcastic, energetic, and extremely loyal to Cordelia Mulligan. Harrigan and Hart developed costumes for Rebecca that included close-fitting, fashionable dresses with hourglass padding, often topped by an ostentatious ornament, such as a stuffed squirrel attached to her traveling hat. Rebecca's speech echoed the multisyllables and malapropisms of the Zip Coon character in such lines as, "If I'd a hung to my 'premier amour,' I'd a had happiness 'beaucoup.'" ²³ She also affects a European exoticism when she exclaims of her skin color, "While in Spain my visage received an olive tint." ²⁴ Rebecca's haughty pretensions partially fulfill the profile of the Prima Donna, described by Senelick as "a wench role [which] sought to delineate a young mulatto woman in a refined manner" and which frequently extended into an off-stage performance as public love-object. ²⁵

As discussed in my Introduction, Bean has described Tony Hart as either a Prima Donna and a Funny Old Gal. ²⁶ Neither categorization quite coincides with the complex role of Rebecca Allup in the "knockdown and slambang" theatre of Harrigan and Hart. Within the course of a Harrigan text, any and all characters are liable to be tossed in a river or blown up, or participate in an act-ending "melee"; these activities would belie the delicacy suggested by the Prima Donna. Rebecca was loud, physically aggressive, and more domineering than the low-status Funny Old Gal. The function of Hart's impersonations—the nature of the pleasure derived from them by audiences—is also in question because Hart's wenches were

not featured as special objects of attention (as were the Prima Donnas) but were played side by side with other female characters portrayed by actresses such as Annie Yeamans and Hart's own wife, Gertie Granville. Indeed, Rebecca Allup appeared in the same productions as Hart's male characters, like the German teenager Tommy Mulligan. This quick-change artist did not provide the seamless illusion of femininity of a Francis Leon. Instead, I believe, a large part of the pleasure audiences found in Tony Hart was his overt exploitation of both his masculine and feminine attributes. His dainty feet were equally impressive while clogging an Irish jig or kicking and pratfalling as a member of the Mulligan Guards.

In her physical energy, if not her outward appearance, Rebecca acted more like a Funny Old Gal than a Prima Donna. This impression is compounded by her active, expressive sexuality. Several of the Mulligan plays feature a blackface male character, Simpson Primrose, with whom Rebecca is infatuated. When she hears Simpson's voice, which she calls a "sweet warble," Rebecca shivers, "Goodness, I feel like ice cream running down a paper collar." Of her relationship with "de Rev. Palestine Puter," Rebecca admits, "our flirtations were numerous."²⁷ Rebecca's history also includes allusions to the deaths of two husbands, who choked on her cooking. This ominous pattern is more subtle than the razor wielded by McIntyre's Bride, but it conjures a similar equation of devouring matrimonial power. In Rebecca's case, the location of the threat in her

cooking symbolizes the perversion of the “natural” feminine tendency to nurture and plays upon the oral and genital imagery prevalent in blackface minstrelsy. Interestingly, Rebecca’s cooking never threatens someone she loves, including her employers. Her dangerous qualities are actually wedded to a strong nurturing streak and she shows each aspect of her character as she likes.

Rebecca Allup represents an interesting development in blackface female characters. Although clearly an outrageously racist stereotype, she is something of an anti-hero. All of Harrigan and Hart’s major characters were deeply flawed, often along lines stereotypical for their ascribed race and gender, yet they were all described as lovable and received with affection. Although the “lead” characters in the Mulligan series were ostensibly Dan and Cordelia Mulligan, played by Harrigan and Annie Yeamans respectively, Rebecca Allup was a much-lauded scene-stealer. In fact, after their last performance together on the evening of May 9, 1885, it was Dan and Rebecca who held hands at the footlights, accepting the accolades of their public.²⁸ Rebecca is rewarded for her sassy outspokenness and high-society aspirations with a protected place in the Mulligan family. She accumulates clothes and possessions and beaux, asserting her tastes for food, drink and finery as well as her sexuality. She combines elements of the Prima Donna and the Funny Old Gal in her minor functions as sexual object and grotesque, dark threat, but her character is much more than the sum of those parts. The Rebecca Allup role is a quantifiable example of how Tony Hart, and

Harrigan, presented “more” on their stage than other ethnic impersonators of their era, even if many of her parts were not accurate representations of reality but extensions of existing stage traditions.

In addition to Rebecca, Hart played numerous “buxom” Irish widows, including Widow Nolan, Widow O’Leary and Molly McGouldrick, and various young Bridgets and elderly blackface mammies. But he was also acclaimed for a variety of male roles. Early in their partnership, both Harrigan and Hart appeared in plays by other authors. *The Skibbeah*, by G. L. Stout, was a particular success, in part because Dion Boucicault accused Stout of plagiarizing his own play, *The Shaughraun*, in which he also starred. The *New York Spirit of the Times* contributed to the controversy with a series of opinionated reviews comparing the plays. One columnist was particularly impressed by Hart’s performance, and claimed his acting suggested more of the “ould sod” than Boucicault’s own:

Mr. Hart is one of the best interpreters of Irish
character on our local stage . . . [with his]
expressive and mobile face, and his remarkable
rapidity of facial expression . . . His brogue is rich
and fragrant, his action bold and picturesque . . .
[His] youthful ardor and enthusiasm appeal with a
more potent voice to the sympathies of an audience
. . . [he] throws into every word a ruddy insouciance

which Boucicault may have possessed but totally
lacks now.²⁹

This commentary on Hart's grace, energy, expressiveness and vocal power is consistent with many reviews of his male characters. As in Harrigan's case, Hart's Irish, working-class background seemed to authenticate many of his characters.³⁰

An important early success was the brief sketch entitled "The Mulligan Guard," first performed in 1873, that became the foundation for the Mulligan series. In the original piece, Hart played Captain Hussey, the leader of the little Bowery militia modeled after New York City's target companies. In an ill-fitting, cobbled-together, military-aspiring uniform, topped by an enormous bearskin hat and struggling to shoulder a long rifle, the Captain put his one trooper, Dan Mulligan, through ridiculous drills.³¹ The marching, pratfalls and boisterous singing of "The Mulligan Guard," and the beleaguered, besotted Irishmen who formed the militia, spawned a total of ten longer plays. Hart regularly appeared in the Mulligan series, not only as Rebecca Allup, but also as Tommy Mulligan, Dan's son. Tommy falls in love and elopes with the German neighbor's daughter, Katy Lochmuller, proving that it's possible to be a blackface servant and young male romantic lead in the same theatrical world.

In 1875, a two-scene sketch and a full-length play each afforded Hart the chance to portray both genders in one performance. *The Blue and the Grey* featured Harrigan as a Union soldier and Hart as his Confederate brother and the

brothers' mother. This brief melodrama encouraging peace between North and South required Hart to perform a quick change and inspire tearful sentimentality at the same time.³² *The Doyle Brothers* featured Harrigan and Hart as Darby and Lanty Doyle, but each also played a handful of supporting characters. Hart portrayed Johanna McCann, Hedwin of the Alhambra, Mrs. McGillicuddy, and Luce, "a Colored Cherub."³³ Harrigan continued this pattern of producing numerous boisterous musical farces interspersed with more serious "romantic dramas." In 1876, Harrigan's *Iascaire* cast Hart as Shaun O'Kelly, a "sweet-talking fisherman," a heroic figure who tries to rescue an imperiled family. In a completely different vein, Hart's Dick the Rat was a lovable sidekick for Harrigan's lead in *Old Lavender*. The Rat was a bootblack and greatly appealed to the young boys in the gallery.³⁴

In August of 1881, Harrigan and Hart opened their new Theatre Comique at 728 Broadway with *The Major*. Harrigan starred as Major Gilfeather, while Hart played "'Enry Higgins, an English servant who has nothing to do but be buffeted by his mistress [Annie Mack] who has nothing to do but buffet him . . . Tony Hart must have a part and a song."³⁵ This was a strange failure on the part of Harrigan to use Hart so lightly in a large production, but he followed with *Squatter's Sovereignty*, in which he cast Hart as the Widow Nolan. Harrigan and Comique scenic artist Charles Witham recreated the shanties then overtaking Central Park, and Hart's costume, movement and vocal delivery were apparently

note-perfect for this environment. “When... Tony Hart was revealed as the Widow Nolan, a shout of delight arose from all parts of the house . . . Her costumes must have been imported direct from Ireland, nobody ever saw such clothes elsewhere.”³⁶ Theatrical producer Augustin Daly wrote admiringly to Harrigan about the production including special praise for Hart: “Mr. Hart surpasses himself as the Widow Nolan. I have no leading woman who could touch the hem of his petticoat in the part.”³⁷ Daly’s comment underlines the ease with which audiences read both actors and actresses as female characters, even when sharing the stage.

In the remaining years of the partnership, Hart played several sizable male roles, including Leon Mendoza in *Mordecai Lyons*, Bernard McKenna in *The Investigation*, Tommy Mulligan, and even a strange character named Maurteen in G.L. Stout’s *The Blackbird*. This play was not well-received; Harrigan was advised by critics to produce only his own plays and utilize Hart more effectively:

“Tony Hart plays Maurteen, an idiot boy, very artistically, but his makeup is a mistake from wig to shoes. He is one of those clean vagabonds, seen only on stage . . . Mr. Hart’s admirable acting deserves a better setting than this.”³⁸

The greatest hits of these last years were the full-length, explosively-detailed Mulligan plays *Cordelia's Aspirations* (1883) and *Dan's Tribulations* (1884). In both plays, Hart portrayed both Tommy Mulligan and Rebecca Allup.

Although Tony Hart's friendship with Edward Harrigan began smoothly, and their on-stage interactions were admired by audiences and their fellow players, their partnership did not have the strength or longevity of many others. The air of seductive menace that pervades the mysterious "Little Frauds" lithograph seemed to follow Hart, even as the Harrigan and Hart aesthetic was finding imitators all over the city and the national touring circuit. Hart was known for his love of the high life, spending much of his earnings on diamonds and clothes and entertaining women, while Harrigan invested in his family and theatre. In 1882, Hart married company member Gertie Granville Hart. They had no children, although they did adopt the orphaned son of a fellow actor. Gertie was not well-liked; she was described as conniving, ambitious, jealous, and would become the scapegoat for many of Hart's troubles.³⁹

On December 22, 1884, tragedy struck the partnership when the Theatre Comique burned down. At the time of the fire, the theatre was uninsured and a huge investment was lost. Although the partners were able to quickly secure new quarters at the Park Theatre, their relationship was six months away from dissolution. Their families allegedly contributed to the strain between them. Hart's brother-in-law was the night watchman when the theatre burned.

Harrigan's father had been responsible for paying insurance premiums and was alleged to have led the payments lapse.⁴⁰ As *The New York Times* delicately, and mysteriously explained,

When the Theatre Comique became ashes there was connected with the conflagration a circumstance that, although neither partner was responsible for it, and one was much more to be sympathized with than blamed, naturally made their business relations strained, because their social ones had long before relaxed.⁴¹

Such controversy encouraged Hart to make a break and strike out on his own. Hart's solo career was short-lived, including only four plays, *Buttons* (1885), *Toy Pistols* (1886), *The Maid and the Moonshiner*, which featured Lillian Russell (1886), and *Donnybrook* (1887). Hart had begun to show symptoms of syphilis, which Harrigan may have known about before the breakup. Hart's "tell-tale lisp," resulting from the swollen tongue and nervous stutter symptomatic of the disease, was noted in his performance and publicized in newspapers. Although Hart may have demonstrated his "virility" through heterosexual promiscuity, I wonder if his rapid decline might indicate that he contracted the disease much earlier, perhaps as a child in reform school, a circumstance that certainly would explain his determination to escape the institution. In September of 1887, it was reported that

Hart suffered “a paralysis of the mouth and tongue, and his voice has been affected,” although his physician anticipated a complete recovery.⁴²

By 1888, it was clear that Hart’s illness would only worsen, and that his finances were in disarray. In March, Nat Goodwin performed as auctioneer, selling tickets for a massive benefit to pay for Hart’s medical care. Nearly \$5,000.00 were raised as Goodwin reminded the audience of their goal, “To help one of the best little men that ever played in New York City. When Tony Hart was himself, he was honest, charitable . . . [and] constantly had his hands in his pockets to help anyone deserving assistance . . . that is the kind of man that ought to be helped.”⁴³ On June 24, Hart was admitted to the State Lunatic Asylum in Worcester where he remained under constant care until his death in 1891. It was reported that Hart “Is suffering from the same disease that afflicted John McCullough, the tragedian.”⁴⁴ This guarded language speaks not only of the taboo nature of syphilis, but also of its horrible familiarity within the theatre community. The deep sadness of Hart’s friends, and their defensiveness of his moral character in the face of such a stigma, eventually led the late-twentieth century playwright Michael Stewart to use Hart’s illness as an AIDS metaphor. This act of artistic license demonstrates the ease with which homosocial friendship, homoeroticism and transvestism are conflated with twentieth-century definitions and experiences of homosexuality.

Interestingly, the fact that Hart was institutionalized due to syphilis is sometimes omitted from extant accounts of his fate. An undated fragment entitled, "Were Stage Favorites in Days Gone By" declares that "Hart had become depressed, and he seemed to feel that some evil spell was over him. He grew morbid and then the news spread that he had become insane. He was placed in the Worcester Insane Asylum, where he lingered for several years before the end came."⁴⁵ Another contemporary clipping avoids all mention of illness, attributing Hart's failure to thrive after the split with Harrigan to a lack of moral fiber: "Poor Hart soon went to the wall. Harrigan, made of sterner stuff, better able to endure some passing adversities, continued steadfastly in the course he had laid out for himself."⁴⁶ Moody's 1966 essay introducing the text of "The Mulligan Guard Ball" almost suggests that Hart's breakdown was due to emotional problems after the split with Harrigan: "Harrigan adjusted to the separation more easily than Hart. After two disappointing road tours and a brief engagement in New York . . . [Hart] was committed to the Worcester Insane Asylum, where he died . . . "⁴⁷ By 1980, Moody apparently felt he could tell the whole story, but there lingers the impression that insanity is more reputable than syphilis.

In March of 1890, Hart was seen in public with a hospital attendant, at his wife's funeral. Gertie Granville Hart's life in the post-Harrigan years was also short and difficult. No doubt, the frightening symptoms of Hart's syphilis were difficult to bear; Hart was even rumored to have hit Gertie while in the grip of

disoriented rage.⁴⁸ But Hart's friends were concerned to learn that Gertie had spent most of the Harts' resources and left no provision for her husband in her will. In May, the friends of Anthony Cannon, Jr., began legal proceedings to contest the will, claiming Mrs. Hart to have been "of unsound mind" due to "an excessive use of stimulants."⁴⁹ The court battle was briefly followed in the press, but was apparently ongoing at the time of Hart's death on November 4, 1891.⁵⁰ Hart's *New York Times* obituary captures both the apologetic tone and the association with a dubious sexual identity that often colored accounts of his life: "As a man he was generous to a fault, and always exhibited a tenderness of heart that was almost womanly."⁵¹

Although his writing and production styles developed in partnership with Tony Hart, Edward Harrigan continued to create characters and plots after the dissolution of the partnership, in what came to be seen as his signature style. Although certain actors, like Johnny Wild and Dan Collyer, would replace Hart in the Mulligan series, Harrigan did not try to recreate the chemistry he had shared with his former partner. Instead, he kept his eyes and ears open for new "types" to people his stages. One of his greatest successes was a character named Kitty Lynch. Her grimy brown jacket was too tight and her equally drab skirt was too short. Her stringy hair was mashed down by a non-descript black hat, under which her pale face was smudged with dirt. Kitty's elbows poked from frayed sleeves

and her toes pushed out of her torn shoes. With a marked stoop in her posture, canting slightly to one side, she shuffled onstage for the first time and threw out her hand, demanding of the neighborhood pawnbroker: "Say, Reilly, gimme me shoes!" And so, on December 29, 1890, at the New Harrigan Theatre in New York, America's own Tough Girl was born, a good twenty-four years before Shaw's cockney flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, who would resemble Kitty Lynch so closely.⁵²

The Tough Girl was portrayed by a seventeen-year old fish-cannery worker from San Francisco named Ada Lewis, who found her way to the stage through a unique combination of talent and timing. Beginning as a member of Edward Harrigan's company, Lewis would move on to success under her own power. Contemporary interviewers of Ada Lewis, as well as Harrigan's biographers, described the Tough Girl as an entirely new type on the American stage. Throughout Harrigan's career, his focus was characterization and he required actors who were also skilled at detailed observation and mimicry. Actresses such as Annie Yeamans and Annie Mack were pillars of Harrigan's company; and after his separation from Hart, he sought out actresses to portray character types that might previously have been played by Hart. Ada Lewis would fill his requirements perfectly.

Although she was born in New York, Lewis moved to San Francisco with her family when she was a child. Living in the "unfashionable district South of

Market,” she loved her family but not the neighborhood.⁵³ Her diversions consisted of watching the teenage girls who worked at the fish cannery come and go on their way to work, and practicing “spoken pieces” assigned at the convent school she attended. She developed impersonations and taught herself to sing and dance. At the age of twelve, she approached the manager of a local resort who permitted her to entertain his guests. Emboldened by this, she marched to the Alcazar Theater and presented herself as an extra. She would spend the next several years observing theatre from the wings, although her family’s meager finances required her to work at the fish cannery once she was old enough to earn a wage. When Harrigan’s company arrived to play the Alcazar, Lewis was engaged as a supernumerary for crowd scenes. Backstage, Harrigan overheard Lewis imitating the tough accent and peculiar slang of the cannery workers, accompanied by abrupt, angular gestures. Recognizing a new type to populate his character-driven plays, Harrigan invited Lewis to join his company and wrote her a tiny speaking role in *Reilly and the 400*. Harrigan’s text incorporated the slang and dialect of the Bowery, but Ada easily adapted her San Francisco cannery girl to reflect her new surroundings by doing her own research.

I became acquainted with scores of Tenth Ward,
Mulberry Bend and Rivington Street girls. I met
some of the toughest girls—and by tough I don’t
mean bad—that existed in the City of New York. I

have seen these girls go to dances night after night,
getting home at 2, 3, or 4 in the morning; and going
to work at 6 o'clock that same morning . . . To not a
few of them I became sincerely attached, for I soon
saw that beneath that rough exterior there were
hidden many of the noble and lovely qualities of
womanhood.⁵⁴

Harrigan is said to have influenced the costume for the Kitty Lynch character, choosing an ensemble that suggested careless physicality while remaining decorous enough for a family audience. Specifically, the Tough Girl wore no corset, her jacket cinched in tightly at the waist to display her natural figure and her skirt fell short of her ankles. E.J. Kahn described Lewis in this get-up as “the sweater girl of her day.”⁵⁵ Unsure of the Tough Girl’s reception, Harrigan did not advertise Lewis’s debut. But from the moment the Kitty Lynch character appeared, the audience went wild with adulation, which reviewers attributed to recognition of a beloved local type. As the *Dramatic Mirror* reported,

[Lewis] had so sunk her identity in the part she was
playing that she became at once associated
conclusively and exclusively with the character of a
tough girl from the slums. From the peak of her

“Nellie Bly” cap to the holes in her one-dollar shoes
she seemed a living example of that type of female
whose avenue is the Bowery and whose vocabulary
is a thesaurus of Bleecker Street . . . ⁵⁶

The comparison of Ada Lewis’s Tough Girl to the ground-breaking, stereotype-annihilating journalist Elizabeth Cochrane Seaman, who wrote under the name Nellie Bly, attests to the regard given to this young actress mere months after her New York debut.

Harrigan had been writing male and female characters for twenty years when he overheard Lewis’s patter and incorporated it into his work. Certainly, other variety artists had also presented rough, working-class women. Perhaps what made the Tough Girl seem so new was the actress portraying her—for she was filling the shoes of many male actors who preceded her, particularly those of Tony Hart. Harrigan had always shared the stage with actresses, most notably a tall, masculine-faced comedienne named Annie Yeamans who came from a family of circus performers and usually played the Irish matriarchal figure, such as Cordelia Mulligan. There were also ingénues who played the simpler girl characters, the clean-faced singing and dancing daughters of the main characters. Gertie Granville Hart fell into that category. But the more complex, youthful female characters were written for Tony Hart. As in the case of many other variety acts, the actor, not the actress, had presented young, energetic females

with rough speech, eccentric mannerisms, and often an inappropriately strong sex drive.

What Harrigan saw in Lewis's impromptu antics was something relatively rare on the stage of his day: a young, attractive actress playing an aggressive, socially transgressive character. While many have theorized that such a character, when played by a man, served to criticize women who were aggressive, Kitty Lynch seemed to validate and endorse the verbal and gestural aggression of modern tough girls by proving as lovable as she was gruff. She chewed gum incessantly and ferociously, speaking her Bowery dialect around it in a gesture of defiance. Said one commentator, "[h]er manner is combative and her general aspect that of the outcast, already embittered against society without knowing why."⁵⁷ Within months, newspapers attested to the popularity of the girl rebel by reporting on her many imitators: ". . . at the present time there is scarcely a single well regulated farce comedy on the road without its tough girl, who is in every case a very poor imitation of the original . . ."⁵⁸ While the Tough Girl was being assimilated into the larger vaudeville character menagerie, Lewis continued to work with the Harrigan company, eventually moving on to star in productions by Weber and Fields and David Belasco, among others.

As Lewis matured, she was described as lovely of face and figure, although slightly tall for a leading lady. In photographs of the actress off stage, her hair appears dark blonde and smooth. Her dark brows contrast well with her

pale, clear complexion, and her eyes and lips turn slightly downwards, lending her face a soft expression. Lewis played her share of middle-class and society ladies as well as so-called “slum” characters, and her off-stage persona was described as particularly gracious, kind and generous to all her colleagues. Several reviews printed during the 1910s and ‘20s note Ada’s talent, which all too often exceeded the tired material supplied by her producers. In an undated clipping concerning Lew Fields’s musical comedy “Old Dutch,” which appeared around 1910, the reviewer notes,

Ada Lewis, a woman who has a laugh at the tip of each of her fingers and countless more if she is furnished with the proper material . . . is quite wasted on a role calling for the use of none of the exquisite capability for burlesque which she possesses so generously. That Miss Lewis is able to get even the small humor that she does from the part . . . is the best proof of her power to make fun out of little.⁵⁹

Unlike those actresses who strove for a consistent image of elegance and composure on and off the stage, Lewis sought out and triumphed in a series of character roles that required her to disguise her beauty. These characters were invariably hailed as true-to-life types, such as the “dope kid,” “the matinée girl,”

“the dashing widow,” and “to-day’s mother.” By the 1910s, Lewis’s experience at observing and recreating human behavior had won her a kind of expert status on a variety of issues, including the derivation of slang and the acting process.

Lewis’s portrayal of the “dope kid” as the stuff of light musical comedy is particularly intriguing. By the time of Lewis’s debut, abuse of opium and laudanum, especially as the foundational ingredients for many patent medicines, was well established; this trend may have contributed to the death of Gertie Granville Hart in 1890.⁶⁰

“Slang in Evolution,” published on February 14, 1925, is a lengthy discussion by Ada Lewis of the early beginnings of slang. In her view, slang was street language, often coming “up from the underworld,” which then developed into fashionable code-words used by the wealthy college set. Lewis pointed out that slang is a proliferation of words which all describe the same limited ideas. For example, what Lewis described as “the thought or emotion of hearty endorsement (sic) or unqualified approval” of a particular female might variously be expressed by the phrases, “she’s there,” “she’s all to the mustard,” “she’s the real goods,” “she’s the real cheese,” “she’s a peach,” etc. Continuing on, Lewis complains with amusement about “an avalanche from the zoo” of phrases like, “the mosquito’s eyebrows,” “the bee’s knee’s,” and “the caterpillar’s kimono,” all of which she traces back to the “original” saying, “the cat’s pajamas.” She concludes, not unkindly, that all of this slang demonstrates, the “[v]ersatility but

not especially the originality on the part of the younger generation.” Her qualifications to make such an analysis are demonstrated by a quote from an earlier interviewer for *The Washington Post*, who claimed, “What Ada Lewis doesn’t know about what people say and do and why they do it probably isn’t to be known outside of a college course in psychology.”⁶¹

“Slang in Evolution” provides a colorful portrait of Ada Lewis herself. She was intelligent, articulate, and possessed a great sense of humor as well as a sense of propriety, all of which show in her careful, grammatically-correct pronouncements about the American language. Other interviews demonstrate more serious concerns facing actors and actresses of Lewis’s day. In “Those Poor Actors are Mistreated,” Lewis laments, “It is a positive crime the way dramatic talent—and by that I mean every branch of theatrical work—is buried or allowed to lie dormant on our stage today.” She describes the twentieth century trend of “sentencing” actors, “by a narrow and almost inexorable managerial decree, to play similar roles during the rest of their careers on the stage. The question no longer is, ‘Are they good actors?’ but ‘Have they played similar roles before?’” Harkening back to her early days with Harrigan, Lewis explains that actors used to familiarize themselves with the works of various playwrights and players, preparing themselves to “show multiple phases of the dramatic art.” She concludes sadly, “Today it is all types, and ding-bust versatility!” Her use of the word “types,” which Harrigan had used decades before to suggest true-to-life

depictions, here suggests the shallow and demeaning caricatures that had become the staple of comedy fare on both vaudeville and “legitimate” stages. Lewis’s lament is not further documented; presumably she did not crusade on the parts of the players or of the caricatured masses, who had begun to revolt against racial or ethnic stereotyping. But her concern was expressed loudly enough to warrant space in print, and reflects her passionate interest in the real people she admired on stage and off.⁶²

Although Ada Lewis did not center her life around social activism, she thrived in the theatre business on her own terms and used her success to encourage understanding and compassion for young people, especially young women. Her love for humanity in all its variations won her the admiration of audiences and her colleagues. In the last year of her life she still shared her love of language and character with the public through her performances and interviews. When she died, in 1925 at the young age of 52, she was mourned by many of the great luminaries of Broadway, including David Belasco. At her funeral, Belasco spoke for many when he said, “Good-bye old pal, we’ll never forget you!”⁶³ Lewis’s debut as Tough Girl Kitty Lynch signaled a rich, new era of physical comedy for actresses; by the time of her death, “funny girls” such as Sophie Tucker, Fanny Brice, and Kate Elinore regularly inhabited the vaudeville stage in roles that recalled the male actor as Funny Old Gal. Had Hart lived, he would have faced heavy competition from women.

One additional story associated with Hart underlines the bizarre assertions and evasions which comprise Harts “history.” The *New York Times* column of August 7, 1887 that attempted to explain Harrigan and Hart’s breakup begins with this strange claim:

But for a death that occurred in Second Avenue nearly a half dozen years ago, Harrigan and Hart might be together yet. That event led ultimately to the discovery that with all his cleverness as a comedian, his true goodness to his parents . . . lavish generosity to acquaintances who were going downhill, Tony lacked the mental stamina to resist his natural impulsiveness when to yield to it seemed to be imprudence--and with that discovery the social tie between the two old associates began to crack.⁶⁴

Moody follows this quote with the statement that “[t]he secret of the death on Second Avenue has never been revealed.”⁶⁵ This gossipy tale appears to be an accusation of murder—or involuntary manslaughter, or abortion, or a role in a suicide. But we will never know what Hart did to incite such an accusation. He might have simply cheated at cards and inspired the losing player to poison his

reputation. In the absence of corroboration or explanation, I see the accusation as evidence that Hart's life and behaviors caused anxiety and rumor-mongering. The power of such perceptions affected the writing of Tony Hart's history for the next century.

The relationship portrayed in the Little Frauds lithograph, between an aggressive young "woman" and a reluctant young man, may have captured the early manifestations of struggle in the Harrigan and Hart partnership and in Hart's whole life. The circumstances surrounding the creation and publication of this drawing remain unknown. However, the undercurrent of conflict in the image foreshadowed the contested history of the Harrigan and Hart partnership that later generations would write, and which is the subject of my next chapter.

Notes to Chapter Four

All newspaper or magazine articles and fragments used in this chapter are from the Harrigan and Hart Biofiles at the Theatre Arts Collection of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin (HRC); or the Harrigan and Hart Clippings File or the Robinson Locke Scrapbook series in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (NYPL); or the microform edition of *The New York Times*. Some clippings are missing titles, publication name or date; all available data have been supplied. Manuscripts of Edward Harrigan's plays are located in the Harrigan Manuscripts Collection of the NYPL. All photographs referenced in this chapter are from the

HRHRC Biofiles. The “Little Frauds” publicity poster is from the Harrigan and Hart Iconography File at NYPL.

1. Interestingly, history has been more concerned with Hart’s personal sexuality than his work; that issue will be the focus of my next chapter.

2. Richard Moody, *Ned Harrigan: From Corlear's Hook to Herald Square* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1980), 165.

3. *New York Herald*, "Hunting Types in the Slums with Harrigan," July 12, 1891, HRHRC.

4. Moses, Montrose J. "Harrigan, American," *Theatre Guild Magazine*, June 1930, 25. HRHRC.

5. Richard Moody, introduction to "The Mulligan Guard Ball," *Dramas From the American Theatre: 1762- 1909* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1966), 546.

6. E.J. Kahn, *The Merry Partners: The Age and Stage of Harrigan and Hart* (New York: Random House, 1955), 7.

7. James H. Dormon, "Ethnic Cultures of the Mind: The Harrigan-Hart Mosaic," *American Studies* 33, no. 2 (1992): 22.

8. "Mulligan Guards Sing 'My Dad's Dinner Pail,'" n.p., December 16, 1915, HRC.

9. Moody, *Ned Harrigan*, 8.
10. "'Mulligan Guard' of Marine Corps Mauls Hun," n.p., n.d., HRC.
11. Dormon, "Ethnic Cultures," 38.
12. Edward Harrigan, *Cordelia's Aspirations*, Harrigan Manuscript Collection, NYPL.
13. Moody, *Ned Harrigan*, 30-1; Kahn, *Merry Partners*, 135.
14. Kahn, *Merry Partners*, 133-36. According to Kahn, there was no "Madame Rentz," and the "females" were mostly female impersonators. A playbill for the group in the Harvard Theatre Collection appears to feature both actresses and female impersonators.
15. Moody, *Ned Harrigan*, 31-2.
16. Moody, *Ned Harrigan*, 32-34.
17. This photograph appears in the HRC files with the handwritten title, "The German Emigrants." This is an incorrect designation, as that was the name of another sketch performed in the same period. Also reprinted in both Kahn and Moody from a copy in Nedda Harrigan Logan's collection.
18. Dormon, "Ethnic Cultures," 37.

19. Kahn, *Merry Partners*, 125.
20. Alicia Kae Koger, "A Critical Analysis of Edward Harrigan's Comedy" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1984), 24.
21. Nat C. Goodwin, *Nat Goodwin's Book*, (Boston: The Gorham Press, 1914), 83.
22. Koger, "Critical Analysis," 156-7.
23. Edward Harrigan, *Dan's Tribulations*, Harrigan Manuscript Collection, NYPL.
24. Edward Harrigan, *Cordelia's Aspirations*, Harrigan Manuscript Collection, NYPL.
25. Laurence Senelick, "Boys and Girls Together: Subcultural origins of glamour drag and male impersonation on the nineteenth-century stage," *Crossing The Stage: Controversies on Cross-dressing*, ed. Lesley Ferris (New York: Routledge, 1993), 84.
26. Annemarie Bean, "Transgressing the Gender Divide: The Female Impersonator in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy," *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, eds. Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, Brooks McNamara (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 245-56. Annemarie Bean, "Black Minstrelsy and Double Inversion, Circa 1890," *African American Performance and Theater*

History, eds. Harry Elam, Jr. and David Krasner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 191.

27. Harrigan, *Cordelia's Aspirations*.

28. Moody, *Ned Harrigan*, 148.

29. *New York Spirit of the Times*, January 30, 1875, Robinson Locke Scrapbook #236, NYPL.

30. In fact, Hart's heritage was more closely allied to Ireland than Harrigan's, since both of his parents were immigrants from County Mayo, Ireland. Harrigan's father was Canadian and his mother an American who had lived much of her life in Virginia. Harrigan's closest Irish ancestor was his paternal grandfather from Cork. This did not prevent fans from equating Harrigan with Irishness itself, an impression firmly imprinted by George M. Cohan's laudatory 1908 hit song, "H-A-double-R-I-G-A-N," which claimed Harrigan to be "proud of all the Irish blood that's in me." See Moody, *Ned Harrigan*, 4-8; Kahn, *Merry Partners*, 133; and Dormon, "Ethnic Cultures," 24-5.

31. Moody, *Ned Harrigan*, 46.

32. Harrigan, Edward. "The Blue and the Grey, A Dramatic Sketch in Two Scenes," New York: 1875. Available through the Center for Research Libraries, Chicago.

33. Moody, *Ned Harrigan*, 57.

34. Moody, *Ned Harrigan*, 69, 79.

35. *New York Spirit of the Times*, September 3, 1881, Robinson Locke Scrapbook #236, NYPL.

36. *New York Spirit of the Times*, January 14, 1882, Robinson Locke Scrapbook #236, NYPL.

37. Moody, *Ned Harrigan*, 125.

38. *New York Spirit of the Times*, June 10, 1882, Robinson Locke Scrapbook #236, NYPL.

39. Moody, *Ned Harrigan*, 150.

40. Moody, *Ned Harrigan*, 145.

41. *New York Times*, August 7, 1887.

42. *New York Times*, September 12, 1887.

43. *New York Times*, March 9, 1888.

44. *New York Times*, June 25, 1888.

45. "Were Stage Favorites in Days Gone By," n.p., n.d., HRC.

46. "Our Gallery of Players," *Illustrated American* (?), n.d., HRC.
47. Moody, "Mulligan" Introduction, 546.
48. Moody, *Ned Harrigan*, 177.
49. *New York Times*, May 27, 1890.
50. *New York Times*, June 5, 1890 and November 11, 1890.
51. *New York Times*, November 5, 1891.
52. Moody, *Ned Harrigan*, 189-90.
53. Ada Lewis, "My Beginnings," *Theatre* (September 1906): 251-2.
Clippings File, NYPL.
54. "Ada Lewis Made Tough Girl Live," *New York Evening World*,
September 25, 1925. Clippings File, NYPL.
55. Kahn, *Merry Partners*, 275.
56. *New York Dramatic Mirror*, May 7, 1892. Clippings File, NYPL.
57. N.p., n.d. Clippings File, NYPL.

58. N.p., n.d. Clippings File, NYPL.
59. N.p., n.d., circa. 1910. Clippings File, NYPL.
60. "Slang in Evolution," February 14, 1925. HRC.
61. "Slang in Evolution."
62. "Those Poor Actors are Mistreated," *Cincinnati Times*, March 4, 1917.
Clippings File, NYPL.
63. N.p., n.d. Clippings File, NYPL.
64. *New York Times*, August 7, 1887.
65. Moody, *Ned Harrigan*, 149.

V

WRITING HART:

Anxiety and Homophobia in the “Nedda Trilogy”

This was an abused kid . . . he was brash and
overconfident and obnoxious and suddenly he
hooked up with Harrigan, and Harrigan gave him a
place in which he could be brilliant.—William Wesbrooks¹

As discussed in previous chapters, two published biographies have been written about Harrigan and Hart: *The Merry Partners* (1955), by E.J. Kahn; and *Ned Harrigan: From Corlear's Hook to Herald Square* (1980), by Richard Moody, which focuses on Harrigan but necessarily documents the life and career of Hart as well. Both biographies were written with the assistance of Harrigan's family, most notably his daughter, Nedda Harrigan Logan. These two books gather together most of the known anecdotes and biographical data concerning the duo, and so have provided a standard narrative of their careers, to which later researchers have referred. These texts were followed up by *Harrigan 'n Hart* (1985), a musical adaptation of Kahn's book written by Michael Stewart which

included original songs by Harrigan and David Braham as well as new music by Max Showalter with lyrics by Peter Walker. Nedda Harrigan Logan served as "Production Consultant" for the show. Mark Hamill was cast in the role of Tony Hart. After a lukewarm reception at Connecticut's Goodspeed Opera House, an unsuccessful Broadway run opened on January 31, 1985, only to close after five performances.

What fascinates me about what I call the "Nedda Trilogy" is the enormous emphasis on the textual work of Edward Harrigan, who, in addition to his plays, wrote essays and gave numerous interviews about his approach to theatre work. Slight attention is given to the bodily characterizations of the two performers—in particular, those of Tony Hart, best known for his female impersonations. I believe that this emphasis reflects, not only the tendency by scholars to elevate textual evidence over the non-textual, but also the strong influence of Harrigan's family in the writing of the Harrigan and Hart history. Certainly, contemporary descriptions and evaluations of Hart's performance did emphasize his relationship (and artistic and financial debt) to Harrigan. For example, in "Transgressing the Gender Divide," Bean quotes Harrigan himself on Hart's power as a female impersonator. The quote is from an interview in *Pearson's Magazine* and is recounted in both the Kahn and Moody volumes as well. Harrigan tells the story of Hart's examination by "Bill" Pinkerton, the detective, who watched the duo perform, did not believe Hart was a man, and came back to the dressing room

where Hart partially undressed to prove his biological masculinity to him. A disturbing element of this story is Harrigan's contention that "I had great trouble at first in persuading him to make a trial of these female characters."² Harrigan depicts Hart as grudgingly consenting to experiment in female roles; yet we know that Hart was performing his "Little Bed" girl routine on the minstrel circuit before he met Harrigan. In Harrigan's language, Hart is granted little agency in his own development as a performer. Harrigan takes credit for "discovering" Hart's talent as a female impersonator; and the task of female impersonation itself seems "troublesome," and perhaps was viewed as a potential stigma by the Hart evoked in this story. This brief comment illustrates the paternal, and patronizing, role that Harrigan played in Hart's professional life.

Harrigan gave the largest number of interviews and received the greatest attention throughout the years of the partnership. Due to his managerial leadership, his prolific outpouring of sketches and plays, his generous descriptions of his working method, and his ability to write his own essays concerning his work and his opinions of the theatre of his day, Harrigan was the natural spokesperson for the duo. The greatest media interest in Hart's activities developed after the partners split; even then, Harrigan is generally consulted as to the nature of the quarrel which separated the duo and the plans each actor had made for the future. I have discovered only one instance of an interviewer seeking out and securing a statement from Hart; this is appended to a longer interview

with Harrigan entitled "Harrigan and Hart Part." The interviewer describes his journey from the Hart's home to the theatre to track down the actor, who merely "confirms Harrigan's statement" about the simplicity and amicability of the decision to separate. Apparently finding little to describe in this encounter, the interviewer focuses much of the brief paragraph on the insistent yapping of Hart's dog.³ Too often, Hart's position within his theatrical and social community must be gleaned through similar anecdotes which foreground the artistic fluency and managerial success of Harrigan.

But while the unbalanced dynamic may have developed throughout the partnership and was depicted by Harrigan himself in his anecdotes, this history was advanced by a family devoted to documenting Harrigan's career and promoting his memory. In contrast, Hart died early at the age of thirty-six and left little family behind. One could argue, too, that the comparative absence of descriptive or analytical information concerning Tony Hart is due to the difficulty of capturing on paper the essence of live performance. But, from the available material, an image emerges of both a man and a performance mode at once delightful and inexplicable, perhaps even unacceptable to twentieth century audiences according to changing notions of propriety. Apparent omissions and ambiguity in the extant history seem to cluster, not only around the exact nature of Hart's cross-gendered performances, but also around the more disreputable

aspects of his off-stage life, including his childless marriage to a woman accused of drug abuse and his untimely death from syphilis.

While the sexual preferences of Harrigan and Hart will never be truly "solved" (nor should they necessarily be), their story reveals a great deal about the overlay of anecdote, innuendo and wishful thinking upon such primary source materials as correspondence, play scripts and photographs. The interests of family members, estate representatives and even emotionally-invested collectors may limit, define or color a researcher's access to biographical materials. In this chapter, I will examine certain historical events as they are depicted by Kahn and Moody, and then show how these historiographical choices have played out in *Harrigan 'n Hart*. In 1998, I had the opportunity to interview William Wesbrooks, an off-Broadway director, at length about his experiences as he attempted to unravel the mysteries surrounding these performers. His interests are not primarily historical, but theatrical: he wants to rework and mount *Harrigan 'n Hart*, which he believes to be a potentially compelling and entertaining show. Wesbrooks's work on Michael Stewart's book for the musical exposes instances of family bias that have completely blocked theatrical recreation of Harrigan and Hart's story.

In 1992, director Wesbrooks approached composer Max Showalter and lyricist Peter Walker about reworking their musical *Harrigan 'n Hart*, which he felt showed immense potential when he saw one of its few Broadway

performances. Wesbrooks worked with Showalter and Walker on the project for years, and managed to produce a staged reading performed three times in September of 1996 at the York Theatre Company as part of their “Musicals in Mufti” series. But the project never moved beyond this point. He found himself embroiled in a controversy between the descendants of Harrigan and the estate of Michael Stewart, who had apparently felt a kinship with Tony Hart. The key issue of contention, which caused years worth of work by several established Broadway artists to be legally quashed, was Tony Hart’s sexuality. Michael Stewart had written Hart as a tormented, sexually-confused man with a crush on his mentor, Harrigan. Nedda Harrigan Logan held a large, contracted portion of artistic control over the development of Stewart’s musical and she had fought to cleanse the book of any references to homosexuality.

In 1987, Stewart died of pneumonia resulting from AIDS; and then Logan passed away in 1989. Their relatives, as executors of their estates, dug in their heels, refusing to see *Harrigan ‘n Hart* restaged unless the wishes of their respective family members were honored. Max Showalter and Peter Walker, the surviving collaborators on the project, worked with Wesbrooks, not only to develop the show, but to establish their legal rights to the material. Many meetings were held with both Ann Connolly, daughter of Nedda Harrigan Logan, and Francine Pascal, sister of Michael Stewart.⁴ Although the issues surrounding the project were extremely emotional, Wesbrooks, Showalter, and Walker

believed they had the support of Logan and Pascal to continue development. After the 1996 staged reading, they were shocked to receive a cease and desist notice from Pascal's lawyer.

Nedda always was strongly opposed to [the homosexual angle]. According to Ann [Connolly, Nedda's daughter], there is no evidence anywhere that Tony Hart was homosexual. However, Francine [Pascal] says, in my very first conversation with her, she says, do you think Tony Hart was homosexual? I said, well, I have no way of knowing . . . and I'm doing a play. For the purposes of the play, he could sort of be anything. Not that you would just mess around with history in that sense. It certainly made an interesting conflict . . . where, historically, I'm not sure that anybody really knows why this partnership split up.

The *Harrigan 'n Hart* project completely stalled out. Wesbrooks's story illuminates many of the curious statements and omissions in the existing biographies of "the Merry Partners." The dramaturgical questions raised by the artists in creating the musical, to make it dramatically successful and psychologically credible, are analogous to many of the sociological questions

posed by historical recreations of nineteenth-century performance. Certain issues and images resonate throughout the Nedda Trilogy and have proven to be central to the *Harrigan 'n Hart* impasse: Hart's attractiveness to men and women; his "bad boy" reputation beginning in childhood; his apparently stressful marriage to a woman who was also perceived as "bad"; the intensity of the partners' attachment to each other; the paternal role played by Harrigan in Hart's life; the mystery of the ruptured partnership, and the roles that family may have played in that rupture; and the perceived shameful circumstances surrounding Hart's illness and death, as well as that of his wife. I will track these images from Kahn to Moody to Stewart to Wesbrooks and explore the ramifications of each author's interpretation of events.

Both Kahn and Moody agree that the partners met in Chicago while having their shoes shined. Having seen each other's performances on the circuit, they were both in need of new partners when they struck up a conversation and discovered complementary skills that might yield a powerful stage chemistry. Stewart began his play with a different, and more dramatic meeting, in which Harrigan watches from the wings as Hart struggles through his "Little Bed" routine with a partner who is drunk. In a momentary blackout, Harrigan appears on stage to "rescue" Hart's act, after which Hart playfully "allows" Harrigan to become his new partner.⁵

Stewart's scene is overtly paternal and covertly sexual. Hart's partner's job⁶ was to sit in a chair while Hart sang his bedtime prayers, and then scoop him up and tuck him into his bed. Thus, when Harrigan rescues Hart, he literally holds him in his arms like a child. Furthermore, Hart is dressed in a nightgown and a child's, presumably long-haired, wig. It is as if Harrigan carries Hart over the threshold of their new life together. This would be an extremely nostalgic, melodramatic reading if it could be played seriously; but, in the productions with Mark Hamill, the scene became a ridiculous spoof, full of slapstick comedy—unlike the original “Little Bed” routine, but quite like a Harrigan and Hart musical farce. “When Mark Hamill came in,” explained Wesbrooks, “he couldn’t have [played it straight], so they “goofed” it. Suddenly it was silly, with him in the little night dress and the wig falling off him.”

Wesbrooks was disturbed by this rendition of the “Little Bed” act, not so much because of its portrayal of the relationship between the men, but because it failed to capture the sentimental power of the Victorian melodramatic songs that Tony Hart sang so well. “I would guess that the original idea [of the musical] was to do it straight—that was the hope. And in fact, when I did the staged reading, the guy that I had playing Tony could pull that off because he sang so beautifully. And it’s pretty effective.” In the staged reading, Wesbrooks did embrace the paternal overtones of the relationship, which were strengthened by the more serious delivery of “Put Me in My Little Bed.” The song returns later in the

musical in relation to an extremely significant milestone in the partnership, and is even more outrageously campy in its reprise.

That milestone occurred just months after Harrigan and Hart joined forces, when a disgruntled manager, John Stetson, alerted the authorities that young Hart was on the run from the Worcester reform school. A court hearing was held to remand Hart back into the custody of the school. Harrigan, who was twenty-six while Hart was not quite sixteen, went before the judge and argued that Hart was safer and more law-abiding in his present circumstances than at the reform school. Harrigan secured custody of Hart by taking future responsibility for his behavior. According to Kahn, Hart thought he would win over the judge by singing his pathetic song, “Put Me in My Little Bed,” but Harrigan persuaded Hart to let him do the talking. Evoking Harrigan’s stage Irish brogue, Kahn writes, “He told the judge that Tony had always been a dacent boy at heart . . . that the lad would shure never have got into a jam in the first place if it hadn’t been [for] his parents.” Kahn quotes Harrigan as declaring, “I will make a man of him, and the reformatory will not.”⁷

Moody’s version of the tale differs in an important, performative respect. Moody does not mention Hart’s wanting to tug on the judge’s heartstrings with “Little Bed,” but he does state that the duo performed the “Little Fraud” sketch in court to demonstrate the partners’ “dependence” on each other. This rendering emphasizes the mutual needs between the men, economic as well as emotional.

Hart's solo bravado is also underplayed, as Harrigan asserts his own authoritative voice.

This courtroom encounter ended up as a song and dance number with bizarre sexual father-son, and even father-daughter undertones in Stewart's play. Stewart, following Kahn's text, depicts Hart rambunctiously taking over the courtroom for his heart-wrenching performance, donning his night dress and wig, even bringing stage hands and his stage bed. Hart sings to the Judge, who actually tucks Hart into his bed, declaring, "All right, I'll do it. Anything to get him out of here!" With much banging of his gavel, the Judge remands Hart into Harrigan's custody, expressing his wish that God have mercy on Harrigan's soul. Hart responds to this outcome by sticking his tongue out at his partner and new guardian.⁸

This scene caused dramaturgical problems for Wesbrooks, as it seemed to undermine the inherent drama of the original events. "The idea that Ned goes and essentially. . . gets the court to give him custody of Tony. Well, if that's true, that is so much more powerful." Wesbrooks "flipped" the scene of Harrigan heading to court into a rehearsal setting, in which it became clear that the hearing had indeed happened and now furnished material for the act.

Then they have a big argument about what they're doing. Ned says, you didn't sing to the judge, and Tony says, you didn't quote Shakespeare to the

judge either. You get the fact that it was a real event, it did happen, and now they're moving on.

Wesbrooks's solution incorporates the musical number, in keeping with expectations for the form, but acknowledges the gap between historical events and staged representation. The scene is a reminder that the entire show is based on conflicting memories and anecdotes, and suggests that such conflicts are a natural component of historiography as well as theatrical creation.

Once Hart's legal right to perform was secured, success followed quickly. As the partners became successful managers of the Comique, Hart spent time with friends while Harrigan built a family; he employed many of his own relatives at the theatre as actors and crew people. Both Kahn and Moody recount various expenditures, on horse-drawn carriages, diamond jewelry, and evenings out drinking. Moody takes pains to reconcile this behavior with Hart's angelic, often feminine, stage persona. The conspicuous celebrations, often with his friend Nat Godwin, are used to balance out any "unwholesome" association with Hart's female impersonations:

[they] seemed to come naturally, without any swishy, sissy swing. He walked and danced like a girl, his pudgy dimples made him look like a girl, and his sweet soprano sounded like the voice of a girl. Yet no one questioned his virility, and a good

many ladies found him less safe than they had
imagined.⁹

This last assertion, that Hart was "less safe" than one might have anticipated, equates virility with predatorial behavior, using aggressiveness to negate accusations of "sissiness." The insistence on Hart's "virility" is made in an off-hand manner and does not develop into a discussion of the particular pleasures derived from or threats posed by this kind of cross-gendered performance. The defensive tone also implies a history of defending Hart's work, and/or his contemporaries', against such labels of "swishy" or "sissy." Moody assumes a late-twentieth century homophobic and censorious attitude towards nineteenth-century behavior in order to refute it—without clearly defining that attitude. This murky blend of viewpoints toward Hart's crossed-dressed performances contributes to the theatrical weakness in Stewart's "Little Bed" sequences.

Furthermore, male-female relationships in the play become problematic. The Nedda trilogy continually presents Hart as an incompetent, childlike young man and Harrigan as the benevolent, paternal figure who tried to save Hart from himself. In particular, the marriages of Harrigan to Annie Braham and Hart to Gertie Granville are starkly contrasted. Annie Braham Harrigan was clearly a hard-working, business-minded woman who contributed greatly to Harrigan's ventures while maintaining his home life and bearing several children. Gertie Granville, on the other hand, was a divorcée, enjoyed luxurious clothes and

jewelry as much as her husband did, and was allegedly “uppity” about her the Harts’ positions in the company, which was heavily dominated by Harrigans. Kahn’s account lays much of the fault for the split at the feet of the wives, who were “at odds:”

Annie had given grudging consent to Gertie’s getting juicy parts in the plays, but for this concession she had exacted heavy vengeance; she refused to admit Gertie to her home and would not treat her as a social equal anywhere. Gertie did not take this snub lying down.¹⁰

Kahn claims that Harrigan once remarked, “Well, I suppose it all came about through the women.”¹¹

Moody’s interpretation of events is much more nuanced; as mentioned in my previous chapter, he acknowledges the “Second Avenue” death mystery, but really depicts the separation of the partners as a culmination of many factors. Again, Stewart found Kahn’s reading of the conflict more dramatically useful: in Gertie, named Gerta in the play, he had found a villain. In *Harrigan ‘n Hart*, Hart’s wife is depicted as a manipulative, materialistic shrew, and his marriage not a mature life decision but simply a failed attempt to “become a man.” This version of Gertie Granville even accuses Hart of being “some lovesick little girl who goes running after [Harrigan].”¹² Granville herself is, potentially, an

interesting and even tragic figure. She also died at a young age, predeceasing Hart, possibly physically abused, and rumored to use drugs.

Stewart did not seem sympathetic to Granville. “I think the script is very misogynistic,” says Wesbrooks. “It essentially says that these two very sweet, talented men were driven apart by, essentially, this one hateful woman who entered their lives and began to wreak havoc.” Interestingly, the character Gerta supports Stewart’s vision that Hart was homosexual while also incorporating the father-son dynamic between the men. Wesbrook explains,

Michael Stewart was really writing a story in which the essential problem in the relationship was that Tony Hart was homosexual, [and] was not aware of his own feelings, and that those feelings are what ultimately broke the man apart, and that is sort of the tragedy of this relationship.

This sexually-confused rendering of the character infuses one of Hart’s solo numbers, “If I Could Only Trust Me,” in which the character laments his inability to “reach the man inside” and “waken his pride.”¹³ Stewart tried to explore the aspects of Tony Hart with which identified, while, at least superficially, presenting Harrigan as a family man, oblivious to Hart’s conflict.

But, overall, the musical does not work. The struggle between Michael Stewart and Nedda Harrigan Logan resulted in a Harrigan character which critics

complained was flat and not compelling, while Hart's character was generally viewed as sympathetic, energetic and probably a latent homosexual. This perception prompted Logan to give interviews in which she denied any homosexuality on Harrigan's part, but acknowledged the possibility that Hart was bisexual.¹⁴ Ironically, critics enjoyed Harry Groener's Harrigan, wishing the accomplished singer and dancer had more to do in the play, while Mark Hamill was commended for his effort but clearly miscast:

. . . Mr. Hamill is as eager to please as he is to move
beyond his Star Wars screen image . . . But his
singing voice is thin and his characterization is too
effortful to provide much more than a simulation of
charm.¹⁵

References to Hamill's Luke Skywalker character perhaps reflect the reasoning behind the casting: Hamill is connected in the minds of mainstream audiences with an almost completely sexless hero, whose only romantic quest is foiled when he discovers that his beloved is his sister. This character was virtuous and safe, channeling his energy into conquering evil, rather than pursuing vice. Perhaps Harrigan's family welcomed Hamill's clean image. But there is a parallel at work here. Skywalker couldn't have gotten the girl anyway, since he was locked in a competitive relationship with a conspicuously heterosexual, "real" man (Han Solo, portrayed by a slouching, sneering, heavy-browed Harrison Ford). This

darker, saddening truth—that the heroic ideal of many young girls growing up in the 1970s was a romantic nonevent—links to Stewart’s subtext about sexual confusion, and might have provided Hamill with more depth, could the collaborators have agreed upon it.

Even Nedda Harrigan Logan realized that the play was dramatically flat. Some of her correspondence with Stewart is preserved in the Michael Stewart papers. As early as 1971, after his first attempt at drafting the play through collaboration with Logan, Stewart wrote to her and complained that her suggestions for the script were unworkable. Stewart contended that she wants him to “falsify events inherent to the story.” It is clear that both parties had been working for years on this project, and neither wanted to give up and yield ownership of the material.¹⁶

Through the tremendous passion invested by Logan, Stewart, and Max Showalter and Peter Walker, the show remained alive and was produced at the Goodspeed in 1984 as preparation for a Broadway run. In the months between the Connecticut and New York shows, Logan wrote to Stewart many times. On November 12, she effectively analyzed the structural weaknesses of the show, saying, that any suspense is “immediately dissipated by a comedy scene that has no danger of the future.” She links this lack of conflict to her insistence on the father-son relationship over any other interpretation:

There are some homosexual overtones in the play which . . . have always puzzled me. Jack Kahn says he does not remember indicating anything sexual in his book except that Hart was an insatiable woman chaser . . .there is one particular line that bothers me terribly, and that is the line where Ned replies to Tony when Tony says, "More than Annie and the kids?" and Harrigan replies, "Yes, God help me, I care for you more than Annie and the kids." I suggest that that line be changed . . . As it stands now it suggests homosexuality.¹⁷

Logan is right to object to the dialogue, if only because Stewart is insinuating here that Harrigan feels conflicted about his feelings for Hart, rather than creating a substantive dramatic action for the character. The suggestion is coyly embedded and not supported in other scenes where the depth and nature of Hart's affection seem unrequited. "Michael, I think, was in a way trying to put one over on Nedda," explains Wesbrooks. "In that he would give lip service to everything Nedda was saying, and then would write these scenes that, you know, were clear to everybody." Stewart's interpretation was not lost on reviewers. Carol Brown read the musical to be about, "the homosexual whose life is ironically shattered by a woman who controls him."¹⁸

As Wesbrooks points out, regardless of your opinion on the relationship, such hedging does not help the theatrical story to unfold. In Frank Rich's words,

This is a dull, if dutifully professional, evening in which endless medleys of vintage vaudeville songs and sketches are periodically interrupted by newly composed numbers and scenes . . . it sends us home with a keen appreciation of why that period's melodramas went out of style.¹⁹

In the 1984 letter, Logan clearly identifies Hart as the potential source for dramatic conflict in the play, which she calls "danger," on the basis of his "bad" behavior.

Going back to the judge's scene, can't you show that whatever he has done to go to reform school means there is some danger coming in the second act? As it is, we have no preparation for the drama taking place in the second act, and I feel it is like two different acts, disconnected. Tony should have been a bad boy from the start; that is why his family sent him to the reform school.²⁰

Again, Logan's analysis on the disconnectedness of the acts is well-observed, yet she weaves her anxieties about Hart into her criticisms. She even enclosed a copy

of the 1887 *New York Times* clipping about the Second Avenue death in her letter to Stewart, to confirm her conviction that “history” supported her assertions. Both she and Stewart died without claiming victory in this conflict, and the musical was relegated to the “flop” list. Mel Gussow termed it “the lamentable *Harrigan ‘n Hart*.”²¹ Sadly, Max Showalter died on July 31, 2000, leaving Peter Walker the only surviving original collaborator, further limiting opportunities to resurrect the project.

Wesbrooks is willing to wait. In our interview, he described his interpretations of the story, and its potential, in great detail. He does not have an opinion on Tony Hart’s sexual orientation, and says he doesn’t particularly care—a historical “truth” doesn’t need to be uncovered in order to find dramaturgical “solutions” for the characters’ conflicts. Wesbrooks does believe that cross-dressing, in the nineteenth century, was perceived completely differently than it is today, especially in the United States, where men are not as comfortable with expressing non-sexual love for other men. He also expressed the hope that someday the issues between the descendants of Harrigan and Stewart can be resolved, at least to the extent that *Harrigan ‘n Hart* could be revived and introduce a new generation to these men and the music and humor of theatrical world they inhabited. The following pages are an abridged transcription of portions of our interview, in which Wesbrooks details his dramaturgical approach

to the *Harrigan 'n Hart* project, his experiences with the original collaborators and their family members, and the logistics of making history into art:

“Certainly there was a tradition then, and it still goes on in England, of men performing in women’s clothes, which has nothing to do, nothing to do with sexuality. I would guess that Michael was wanting to tell a story of personal interest to him. And certainly, as a director, what I was hooking into was the story as it related to the AIDS epidemic in our day and age, where someone is dying of a disease that is considered shameful, that no one really wants to admit is going on, and through his death, he is denied contact with the person that he really cares most about in his life.

“Michael must have known at that time [circa 1984 when the Goodspeed production was developing] that he had AIDS. Because he died not that long after that. Now, in those years, you could be diagnosed and die pretty quickly because a lot of people weren’t being tested, you weren’t diagnosed as early. So I don’t know that Michael knew that. But I think that, as a gay man, he was wanting to make a kind of personal statement about the acceptance, about the theatre family, about the tragedy of someone dying alone by virtue of not being able to say out loud what they were really feeling. I think he had that kind of investment . . . At one point, Ned says to Tony, “You mean more to me than anybody . . . God help me, more than anyone. . .” As a director, or an actor, you’re going to head for

that subtext . . . at that point I would say, well, you have to tell me which it is. If you have this in here, I don't care what the history is at this point, I've got to have a scene that's really about something . . .

"I was using [the homosexuality angle], that was my mandate from Francine when I first set out. And that's the easiest thing to use, it's so immediate. But the other thing that really interested me was the way Tony had been treated by his family, that they had put him in that reform school and that he had turned his back on his family for years and years . . . Harrigan handled the business, wrote the plays, wrote the songs, booked the theatres, and Tony got to do what he did, and was brilliant at it. So I really tried to focus on this father-son thing, where Tony both needed Ned desperately, to provide a home for him, a place where he felt safe and cared for, something that he had never had as a child. And then, in an adolescent way, he was trying to prove that he could be on his own.

"So I felt that, in talking to Ann, when I was legitimately willing to address her concerns, I thought you could take the story in that direction. The definition of how two men love each other is something that our society has a lot of problems with. I think many heterosexual men who have strong feelings for a friend don't quite know how to express that because everybody says it's black or white, it's this way or that way. Certainly, in my version, there was no indication at all—Harrigan didn't have a clue."

Wesbrooks also worked against the misogyny he perceived in Stewarts play. His Annie Harrigan even urges her husband to go to Hart's side when he's dying: "Haven't you figured out after all these years what's going on? He needs you." Granville was also treated in a more balanced manner, no longer bearing the responsibility for Hart's failure. "We really wrote Tony as a very self-destructive man who was looking for something he could never find. And Gerta wasn't really the problem, Gerta was just trying to figure him out and have this marriage . . . one of the things that I was trying to perhaps look into was the idea that [Hart] didn't seek treatment, that it was, in a way, an act of suicide.

Wesbrooks told me, "The other problem, simply as a writer and a dramaturg, is, if you can't hang this story on some kind of essential conflict that resonates with the audience, you don't really know what's going on. It's sort of like these men go along and then they sort of split up and then one gets sick and dies . . . because they couldn't go where Michael wanted to go, that's why Gerta just became more and more of a shrew. . .

"And they were collaborators! They created stuff together. That is, anyone would tell you in any age, those are very close relationships. There are things in that relationship that have nothing to do with your life partner, your children, with any of that kind of stuff. It's a very special thing.

"It seems to me that they had an array of characters that they wanted to bring to life, like John Leguizamo, or Lily Tomlin, or Tracey Ullman. What

they're doing is they're bringing to life people, and their work was so rich, in sort of going to the streets . . . the plays kept bringing these characters back into deal with each other and life . . . the focus doesn't have a whole lot to do with [sexuality]. I don't imagine that people were titillated or greatly amused by the fact that Tony was dressed up as a woman. That wouldn't have been the point.

“One of the things that they encountered is that you're writing a show about a guy that was brilliant—you've got to find the actor who can be brilliant. While Mark Hamill worked his butt off—I mean, I was impressed by how hard he worked—according to Peter [Walker], he did not go off and take dance lessons and voice lessons, he did not go off and do his training . . . to give him more skills. So you were clearly watching someone with a great deal of courage and energy and limited skills. Which I think would be sort of the antithesis of Tony Hart. I think that probably this kid had amazing skills . . .

“I think there is something very simplistic about the idea that these guys started American musical theatre . . . [the song] “Something New, Something Different” kind of bugs me, because I don't think that people who are truly innovative . . . sit around thinking of something by virtue of its being new or different. I think they have an idea of a story they want to tell and a way that they feel is exciting, or powerful, or funny. And then, people, after the fact, look at it and say, my God, this is new, and different, this is just wonderful. Sometimes, when you go back and try to bring history to life, we tend to try to give these

people the knowledge that we have . . . instead of giving them kind of a life force that leads them where we know they ultimately went. When people want to say [Harrigan] was the Dickens of America, people want to overstate—you say, none of this work is producible, or even readable. Even *Merry Partners* says you can't make sense of some of these things.

“We had a powerful piece of theatre going on in that reading and a lot of it was probably totally bogus from a historical point of view. It was, to my way of thinking, totally credible from a psychological point of view . . . when you try to find the psychological truths for human behavior, you have to allow them their language, the sensibility of their period, their consciousness. What you're doing is almost like being a detective . . . to try to string together behaviors that we know happened, to say how would a human being get from this point to this point. That's certainly the work that I was doing.”

I find William Wesbrooks's readings of *Harrigan 'n Hart* to be insightful and theatrically plausible. Additionally, his understanding of the emotional, legal and historical contexts of the play would be extremely valuable to anyone attempting to mount or rework Stewart's play. I also greatly appreciate the emphasis he places on non-sexual aspects of the story and the original performance material. It is remarkable that a select group of family members, theatre artists and audience members are still quite concerned about Harrigan and

Hart's sexual preferences and that this concern can not only shape but actually pre-empt attempts to celebrate their lives and work. The overtness of this concern sheds light on the protectiveness of interested parties in the biographic legacies of their loved ones. These relationships enable biographic research, by providing access to evidence; but protectiveness or manipulation of that access actively *shapes* historiography. The emotional engagement peculiar to biography in turn illuminates the difficulty of filtering protective interests from one's own approach to writing any history. I myself am deeply biased: I have been seduced by Tony Hart's story. I want more people to hear it.

Notes to Chapter Five

Material used in this chapter includes: a telephone interview between the author and William Wesbrooks, July 25, 1998; and clippings and personal letters from the Michael Stewart Papers at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Permission to quote from correspondence between Nedda Harrigan Logan and Michael Stewart which is contained in the Papers was granted by Francine Pascal, sister of Michael Stewart and donor of the collection. Ann Connolly, the representative for Nedda Harrigan Logan's estate, was also contacted concerning the correspondence, but did not respond to written queries.

1. Telephone interview with William Wesbrooks, July 25, 1998.

2. Annemarie Bean, "Transgressing the Gender Divide," *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, ed. Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 253.

3. "Harrigan and Hart Part," n.p., May 4, 1885. HRHRC.

4. Francine Pascal is the author of the *Sweet Valley High* series of young adult fiction and was Stewart's collaborator on *George M!* She also rewrote the book for Stewart's *Mack and Mabel* after his death.

5. Michael Stewart, *Harrigan 'n Hart* (New York: Samuel French, 1986), 13-5.

6. I have seen no documentation that Hart performed his "Put Me in My Little Bed" act with a partner; I believe this to be an artistic liberty on Stewart's part. He also depicts Harrigan as working with a group at this time in history, "The Colleens." Actually, it was Harrigan who had a drunken partner, Sam Rickey, whom he needed to replace. Richard Moody, *Ned Harrigan: From Corlear's Hook to Herald Square* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1980), 28.

7. E.J. Kahn, *The Merry Partners: The Age and Stage of Harrigan and Hart* (New York: Random House, 1955), 141.

8. Stewart, *Harrigan 'n Hart*, 27.

9. Moody, *Ned Harrigan*, 34.

10. Kahn, *Merry Partners*, 237.

11. Ibid., 238.
12. Stewart, *Harrigan 'n Hart*, 63.
13. Stewart, *Harrigan 'n Hart*, 76-7.
14. *New York Daily News*, February 1, 1985. Michael Stewart Papers.
15. Frank Rich, "*Harrigan 'n Hart* Opens at the Longacre," *New York Times*, February 1, 1985.
16. Letter from Michael Stewart to Nedda Harrigan Logan, December 1, 1971. Michael Stewart Papers.
17. Letter from Nedda Harrigan Logan to Michael Stewart, November 12, 1984. Michael Stewart Papers.
18. Carol Brown, *The Day*, New London, Connecticut, Feb 1, 1985. Michael Stewart Papers.
19. Rich, "Longacre."
20. Logan letter, 1984.
21. Mel Gussow, "Off-Broadway Is Carrying the Tune," *New York Times*, Feb 24, 1985.

VI

CONCLUSION:

Enter the Tough Girls—and Guys

Had Tony Hart lived and performed into the twentieth century, he might have shared the stages, and competed, with female comedians and chorus girls. He would have seen “wench roles” relegated to the margins of respectable theatre, as female impersonation became increasingly associated with the homosexual subculture represented by Mae West’s “Pleasure Men.”¹ Hart might have wondered at the Irish American protestors who egged John and James Russell (and maybe been egged himself). Perhaps he would have enjoyed the slow but perceptible inroads of African American actors onto mainstream stages, first in blackface, and all too often carrying the blackface stereotype with them, even into the new media of radio and silent film.

In this final chapter, I will examine a type of performance that followed in Tony Hart’s wake, and that also echoes images of the Russell Brothers and McIntyre and Heath. The multiply-identified solo or group documentary performance of the 1980s and 90s has gained critical attention and continues to develop new audiences today. Reviews and analyses of the works of Lily Tomlin, Anna Deavere Smith, Danny Hoch, John Leguizamo, Culture Clash and Sarah

Jones all contain language that is remarkably similar to that of contemporary critics of the Russell Brothers, McIntyre and Heath, and Harrigan and Hart. I would argue that, in spite of the racism, chauvinism, homophobia, and prejudice that we may read into late-nineteenth century theatrical performances, these performers each manifested mimetic abilities beyond those of their peers. I would apply Jill Dolan's description of twenty-first century multi-ethnic solo performance to the work, in particular, of quick-change artist Tony Hart: ". . . transformation across multiple identities asks us to suspend out disbelief in particular ways that let us see and hear people with more empathy and understanding."² Although it is important to tease out, recognize, and work against the prejudices of past historical moments, it is just as important not to obfuscate the myriad pleasurable and socially productive expressions of anxiety, confusion, desire and simple joy afforded audiences by nineteenth-century popular theatre. An examination of documentary performance can, I believe, provide a glimpse of such anxieties and pleasures.

In the late-twentieth century, theatre, social activism, and academic inquiry in the forms of identity-conscious history and theory all began to intertwine in mutually fruitful ways. My project has drawn upon race, class, and gender studies, particularly those surrounding blackface minstrelsy, not only for historical and theatrical contexts, but also as models for the complex negotiation

of identity categories at play in the acts I have addressed. In this negotiation, I have repeatedly found myself caught between my horror at the blatant prejudices expressed in nineteenth-century popular theatre, and my self-consciousness about my own prejudices toward these performers and their worlds. Dorinne Kondo cautions against “critiques of essentialism that simply destabilize the signifiers of race, gender, and sexuality,” describing much poststructuralist theoretical discussion of identity as “power-evasive moves.”³ And so, having exposed many of the essentialist elements in the racial, ethnic, and gender impersonations of my subjects, I will embrace my position of narrative power to draw analogies between the nineteenth-century impersonators and some of our most revered, socially-conscious performers.

The performances of Tomlin, Smith, Hoch, Leguizamo, Culture Clash and other artists have each garnered a significant amount of academic and popular attention, and their work will no doubt yield many fresh insights as their various careers continue to unfold. At this moment, my interest is in a common thread running through several reviews and journal articles focused on this type of “documentary” performance, so-called because it documents the artists’ observations of living individuals. Creators of documentary performance may work from transcripts of interviews, using the actual words of living individuals to build a staged representation of that person. Anna Deavere Smith is perhaps the best known practitioner of this style of dramaturgy, although the works of Eve

Ensler and Moises Kaufman have also attracted a following, particularly on university campuses. The incorporation of actual transcripts is an ideal strategy for artists who aim to shine a light on a particular historical moment; Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* addresses the Rodney King riots and Kaufman's *The Laramie Project*, created with members of Tectonic Theatre Project, provides an examination of the aftermath of the Matthew Shepard murder. Both plays draw a sense of authority from their source material: audiences are often familiar with the events conjured by the plays and may be reminded by program notes or lobby displays, as well as the performance texts, that these are "true stories." Therefore, the artists are perceived as theatrical conduits of "truth."

Other documentary performers do not use individuals' language verbatim, but adapt their stories to the performer's own style, or create composite characters that represent cross-sections of the performer's community. Sarah Jones, Danny Hoch, and John Leguizamo incorporate this approach, performing solo monologues in which they transform from one character to the next, and yet shaping their diverse source material to their personal vocal and physical rhythms. In these cases, performers self-authenticate through their intimacy with the vocabularies, idiomatic expressions, gestures, dialects, and espoused values of their community. Often, "their community" is in fact a diverse mix of skin colors, attitudes, lifestyles, and beliefs; Jones, Leguizamo, and Hoch all hail from urban environments, specifically New York City neighborhoods. To speak the voice of

such a community is to speak in many voices, and these artists do, usually with a minimum of costume, makeup or set changes to support their transformations. Their success is dependent on their perceived “street credibility,” their ability to observe and participate at the same time, to strike an attitude and yet not condescend. This elusive balance, between the insider status of a community member and the outsider perspective required to create a piece of art, mirrors the shuffling dance of the Russell Brothers, who began their work inside their Irish American community but ended up excluded.

Although a particular artist may lose or gain credibility more than once throughout their career, the multiple-character performer at the height of their powers elicits a peculiar fascination in any era. Of Smith and Culture Clash, Kondo writes,

There is something astonishing and thought-provoking in seeing a person of one race and gender “don” the characteristics of so many who are “others” along so many different axes. The spectacular display of acting virtuosity and quick-change artistry are sources of amazement and audience pleasure, and their implications are profound.⁴

Speaking of ensemble work as well as monologue, Kondo could be describing the Harrigan and Hart company's effects on audiences, who were dazzled by the "authentic" details they perceived, particularly in Hart's quick-change abilities. As for the "others" conjured in documentary performance, these are generally representatives of the social margins—such as immigrant populations with strong accents and limited knowledge of English; those who are visibly marked as "non-white" by skin color and other physical attributes; members of religious minorities; women; the sexually "deviant"; the poor, the physically infirm, the mentally ill. All of these marginalized populations were represented on the stages of the Russell Brothers, McIntyre and Heath, or Harrigan and Hart, and all of these acts expressed their interest in "faithful" depiction of "their" people, or the people with whom they claimed to live, work and play. For some audience members, the implications of these characterizations may indeed have been "profound," providing feelings of inclusion and self-recognition, or opportunities to explore the unknown. The fact that the characterizations which stimulated these feelings were often distorted and inaccurate does not lessen the validity of the emotional response.

The emotional exchange within documentary performance begins between the artist and the subject. Many documentary artists articulate strong identifications with their characters that echo the sentiments of Edward Harrigan or James McIntyre. Lily Tomlin remarks, "Do you think my characters are not

real? They're out there somewhere. I just imitate them.”⁵ In Dolan's view, based on close readings of Tomlin's performances as well as Jane Wagner's script of *Search for Signs of Intelligent in the Universe*, Tomlin's claims to authenticity are validated by the variety and scope of the detail in her impersonations, as well as her “progressive” reiteration of a humanistic goal. Tomlin and Wagner are actively working to forge community. Part of this community-building process involves humorous commentary upon 1980s culture. In Dolan's reading, “Tomlin and Wagner affectionately parody a generational politic through which they lived . . .”⁶ I agree. But how do we quantify “affectionate parody”? Although, clearly, blackface minstrelsy involved an outrageous projection by one group onto another, deeply oppressed group, the interactions between Irish American actors and their neighbors through their portrayals of Irish immigrant life, are, perhaps, much more analogous to Tomlin's performances. What was the conflict between the Russell Brothers and their protestors, if not a growing generation gap between phases of Irish immigration and assimilation in New York? Is not such a conflict a “generational politic,” one that positively highlights the interpretive power of the Irish Servant Girls characters?

The analogies between nineteenth-century impersonation and documentary performance are evident in negative criticism of the artists as well as praise. Jonathan Kalb reports on Hoch's mixed reviews: while many embrace his depiction of life as a Jewish, white rapper “keeping it real,” drawing multiple

characters from his own life in mixed-race, lower-class neighborhoods, some criticize what they perceive as a fantasy of “gangsta chic.”⁷ Kalb quotes Hoch as writing, “This is my world! . . . I think all the hoopla about my work comes from people simply not being accustomed to seeing traditionally peripheral characters placed on the stage.”⁸ In addition to his variety of adult characters, Hoch literally embodies some of the most contested images of the day when he portrays “wannabe teenage rappers” of all skin tones. Many of his characters will resonate for the young audiences he actively seeks out.⁹ Recent scandals involving white rap artist Eminem and his producers at Interscope Records have focused attention on a crisis in hip-hop culture surrounding just this issue: what is “keeping it real?” Are violence, misogyny and racism necessarily parts of hip-hop culture? Who is producing and exchanging this culture now that major white corporations are involved? To whom does hip-hop speak? Can it remain “authentic” in its present format? Hoch founded the New York City Hip-Hop Festival and actively supports the redefinition of theatre to include “peripheral” populations. He is uniquely positioned to explore these questions, because he works in television and film, the media most likely to reach young people, as well as live performance. Furthermore, as he admits, his skin color has opened doors. Like Eminem, or McIntyre and Heath, Hoch can “flip” his appearance and his language to manage the business side of cultural critique.¹⁰

In spite of his success, Hoch also wrestles with the dramaturgical concerns that plague all artists, whether or not they frame their work as social activism: how do you tell a story that resonates with the audiences' experiences of life but is also fresh enough to fascinate? "By and large Mr. Hoch's portrayals are as harsh and authentic as a police photograph, but an occasional touch of sentimentality creeps in," notes a review of the film version of *Jails, Hospitals and Hip-Hop*. In his desire to hold attention, and to entertain, "Mr. Hoch goes for an easy pathos that seems meant to seduce the audience rather than amplify the character."¹¹ Similarly, John Leguizamo's writing does not always ring completely true and would not work without his extraordinary physical evocations of character. Leguizamo's Colombian background "authenticates" his reproductions of various Latino accents, dance moves, and personality traits. But when he attempts to address racism or sexism directly, either narrating during *Freak* or within characterizations in *Mambo Mouth*, "there's something prefabricated about the show's sentimental structure and especially about his finding closure . . ."¹² A review of *Sexaholix . . . A Love Story* notes that Leguizamo is better at portraying others than himself, but that he often tries too hard, resulting in caricatures. "Some of the characterizations of the women in his life . . . verge on misogyny."¹³ To be a character chameleon, and to dare to embody multiple skin colors and genders, does not guarantee consistent artistic achievement nor necessarily inspire positive social change. The dramaturgical

agony of balancing the familiar with the unique can result in diverse critical reception as both “affectionate parody” and pejorative stereotyping.

Not all artists, of course, place social change before entertainment when they slip into character. Tracey Ullman, who is British but has found her greatest success in the United States, is a veteran pop star and stage and film actress. However, she is best-known for her multiple-character television shows. Ullman prefers to think of herself as a “social satirist,” rather than an actress, and she has gone so far as to appear on *The Tracey Ullman Show* as an African American welfare mother, complete with complex makeup effects that won an Emmy award. Although Ullman constantly reminds herself to think like the character and avoid caricature, her critics note that she “walks a fine line between irreverence and condescension,”¹⁴ and that her approach “flirts with preachiness” as she critiques American culture. In a moment reminiscent of James McIntyre’s reflections, Ullman said that,

... one of the most satisfying compliments she ever got was from a black woman who had seen [her] portrayal of a black woman on the old show. “She said, ‘You can do that character because you are not of any color,’” Ms. Ullman recalled.¹⁵

Ullman’s transformations work well on television because editing allows her to play more than one heavily made-up character in the same scene. Her series

Tracey Takes On . . . presented a different theme for each episode and featured Ullman as several characters interacting with each other and with additional performers. For instance, one sketch on the theme of “Romance” featured Ullman as the lesbian lover of a professional golfer, played by Julie Kavner. Ullman’s character gets upset because they cannot embrace publicly on the golf course. Although the technology is advanced, the basic fascination of Ullman’s impersonations is the same as that of her predecessors: she so thoroughly “disappears” into character that the transformation itself can distract from the story or message, especially when the message only skirts the edges of such issues as homophobia, materialism, or grief.¹⁶

Ullman’s work is perhaps most closely analogous to the performances addressed in this study, in that their chief goal was to entertain. Although the performers espoused affinities with certain communities in order to market their acts, they did not otherwise engage in social activism. Is this a cause for negative criticism? Do the goals of the performance, and the intention of the performer, somehow change the nature of an identity impersonation? Is a performer who creates characters from different cultural backgrounds than his or her own background inherently responsible to those diverse cultures for the myriad potential readings of his or her characters by audience members? If so, how can this responsibility be defined and fulfilled? Is racism, or misogyny, or

homophobia in theatre as much a matter of the cultural context of the performance as the performance text?

In this study, I have begun to address these questions by further quantifying the performances of the Russell Brothers, McIntyre and Heath, and Harrigan and Hart, and by enriching the cultural contexts in which we can place their work. I do not think that these performers can be judged for failing to participate actively in socially-progressive movements. They worked hard for a living, they were largely self-educated, and they made many people laugh. When they joined existing stage traditions, they did not perceive themselves as contributing to social problems, as is clearly demonstrated by James Russell's bewildered response to audience protests. I am comforted by this perspective; to contextualize these performers is to put a human face on the demons of racism and misogyny and thereby approach an understanding of our own complex cultural moment.

I believe that the mechanisms of love and prejudice, integration and conflict, provide challenges for any theatrical artist (or theorist, or historian, or critic) regardless of their stated purpose. The relationships between Irish American actors in the nineteenth century and their communities—both on-stage and at home—yield insight into these mechanisms. In particular, I feel there is much yet to be understood about the social, political, and artistic interactions between Irish American and African American communities. Insights into this

particular cultural clash might help us to understand the identity conflicts played out on our stages and in our streets.

The irreducible factor in all of these performances is the natural physical and emotional power of the actor. To close, I will borrow from a review of Leguizamo's *Freak*:

Each representation had a different gait, posture, gesture or tic . . . this is Leguizamo's greatest asset: his ability to commit his entire being to create other selves . . . Despite all the caricatures, *Freak* reflects Leguizamo's search for identity . . . Underlying the *Freak* show were hope and empowerment.¹⁷

Although their first goal was always to entertain, not to inspire specific social change, the Russell Brothers, McIntyre and Heath, and Harrigan and Hart—and the actresses like Ada Lewis who came to share their stages—were all deeply devoted to conceptions and performances of identity. Their stages were arenas of racial conflict, ethnic self-definition, gender play, and contested sexuality.

Today's documentary performers are more directly engaged with social conditions than their predecessors in variety theatre, and they actively strive to inspire the hope and empowerment and political change attributed to works like *Freak* and *The Search for Signs*. But they draw us into the theatre for the same

reasons the Pinkerton detective went backstage chasing after Tony Hart: we love to look at them, and to listen.

Notes to Chapter Six

All newspaper or magazine articles and fragments used in this chapter are from the Ada Lewis Clippings File or the Robinson Locke Scrapbook series in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (NYPL); or from the Harrigan and Hart Biofiles of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin (HRC); or the online edition of the *New York Times*. Some clippings are missing titles, publication name or date; all available data have been supplied.

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2. Jill Dolan, "'Finding Our Feet in the Shoes of (One An) Other': Multiple Character Solo Performers and Utopian Performatives," *Modern Drama* 33, no. 4 (2002): 499.

3. Dorinne Kondo, “(Re)Visions of Race: Contemporary Race theory and the Cultural Politics of Racial Crossover in Documentary Theatre,” *Theatre Journal* 52, no. 1 (March 2000): 82.

4. Ibid.

5. Dolan, “Finding Our Feet,” 500.

6. Ibid., 501.

7. Jonathan Kalb, “Documentary Solo Performance: The Politics of the Mirrored Self,” *Theater* 31, no. 3 (2001): 25.

8 Ibid., 23,

9. Dolan, “Finding Our Feet,” 509.

10. Kalb, “Documentary Solo Performance,” 24.

11. Dave Kehr, review of *Jails, Hospitals And Hip-Hop*, directed by Danny Hoch and Mark Benjamin (film), *New York Times*, October 12, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/>.

12. Ben Brantley, “A One-Man Melting Pot Bubbling Over With Demons,” review of *Freak*, directed by David Bar Katz, Cort Theater, New York, *New York Times*, February 13, 1998, <http://www.nytimes.com/>.

13. Ben Brantley, "Jokes Aside, It's the Hips That do the Job," review of *Sexaholix . . . A Love Story*, directed by Peter Askin, Royale Theater, New York, *New York Times*, December 3, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/>.

14. Jerry Lazar, "Tracey Ullman Makes a Face," *New York Times*, October 15, 1989, <http://www.nytimes.com/>.

15. Peter Marks, "Out of the Bathrobe and Far From Networks and Family Hour," *New York Times*, January 21, 1996, <http://www.nytimes.com/>.

16. Caryn James, "Widowed by a Crocodile and More," *New York Times*, January 23, 1998, <http://www.nytimes.com/>.

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