

THE GOOD NEWS ON STAGE:
EVANGELICALISM AND THEATRE PRACTICE IN
ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

Joseph Ronald D'Ambrosi

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Doctoral Committee

Eleanor Owicki, Ph.D. (Chairperson)

Candy Gunther Brown, Ph.D.

Jennifer Goodlander, Ph.D.

Ronald Wainscott, Ph.D.

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For my parents, who supported me fiercely in this crazy dream.

No longer am I a “professional student.”

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Onward.

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“The Good News on Stage: Evangelicalism and Theatre Practice in Antebellum America” contends that although nineteenth-century Christianity and the “sinful” theatre may seem incompatible components of American life, the relationship between the two is more complicated than historians have previously asserted. I argue that a theatrical shift in American evangelical practice began in the nation’s antebellum moment. Throughout this project, I analyze evangelical figures who adopted performance methods into their religious practice despite evangelicalism’s abhorrence for the theatre. To remain relevant within their growing society and to make an impact on the world at large, these figures performed their message through dramatic literature, production value, and contemporary performance styles.

The first three chapters examine evangelicals who adapted theatrical techniques to meet their religious needs on a public scale. Revivalist Charles Grandison Finney encouraged preachers to look to the melodramatic actors of the era for inspiration in engaging their congregants’ emotions. Author Harriet Beecher Stowe adapted her novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* into a dramatic reading entitled *The Christian Slave*, written to be performed by a black woman named Mary E. Webb. To move readers toward anti-slavery sentiments, some evangelical abolitionists published plays that engaged readers’ emotions through melodramatic tactics. In the final chapter, I analyze how theatre was impacted by the presence of evangelicalism in American society. Looking specifically at Indian melodrama, I argue that theatre practitioners used elements of American evangelicalism to perpetuate a nationalistic ideal among audiences. Each chapter debunks the neat separation of the theatre and evangelical Christianity and provides an

entry point to understanding the impact of theatricality on the development of religious expression and vice versa.

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Candy Gunther Brown, Ph.D.

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Ronald Wainscott, Ph.D.

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INTRODUCTION – The Theatricalization of Antebellum Evangelicalism

“So far are plays from being useful to the cause of virtue, that they are one of the most successful engines of vice that Satan ever invented.”¹ – George Burder

Congregants never knew what to expect when they took their seats in the sanctuary of the Angelus Temple in Downtown Los Angeles. In 1925, for instance, churchgoers found Sister Aimee Semple McPherson (1890-1944) dressed as a pilot and flanked by two small airplanes.² ““Right this way! Step up ladies and gentlemen! All aboard for the theatre, the dance hall, card parties, for riches and popularity,”” cried Sister Aimee giving voice to Satan, “pilot” of one of the two small airplanes. She explained to her flock that the devil’s plane uses ““sin as its engine, temptation as its propeller, and self-righteousness and disobedience as wings.””³ Illustrating the inevitable doom of boarding such an aircraft, the plane took off and crashed on the other side of the stage. With the audience engrossed, Sister Aimee turned her attention to the next plane, piloted by Jesus. As opposed to the vice and sin that gives Satan’s plane its strength, the engine of Christ’s plane “was the Holy Spirit, the propeller faith, and the wings obedience and love.” Christ’s airplane of salvation was a vessel that lifts believers to Paradise. Then, on Sister Aimee’s command, the plane began to fly, ascending into heaven right before the congregation’s eyes. Audience members were overwhelmed by the spectacular effect, one they were more accustomed to seeing in a Los Angeles theatre than in their local church.

Sister Aimee’s illustrated sermon—entitled, “The Heavenly Aeroplane”—was one of many that she performed to captivate congregants and emphasize her gospel message. The lesson

¹ Burder, *Non-Conformity to the World. A Sermon, By George Burder*, 104.

² The founder of the Angelus Temple and of the Foursquare Gospel Movement, Sister Aimee (as she was more commonly referred) was famous for her extravagant services, many of which featured spectacular performances and illustrated sermons to draw people into the church, to emphasize her message, and to woo congregants into living Christian lifestyles.

³ Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, 68–69.

was plain as day: if you choose Christ, you will live for eternity with Him in Heaven. Sister Aimee’s method, on the other hand, was less commonly employed by fellow preachers. As many contemporary scholars contend, Protestants using theatre as a pedagogical tool was nearly nonexistent before the twentieth century. Sister Aimee capitalized on a new method of audience engagement, employing theatricality and performance for the glory of God—a practice vehemently rejected by Christians less than a century before. As historian Matthew Avery Sutton writes in the biography *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (2009), Sister Aimee’s “[c]alling on her dramatic talents and making use of props and costumes in theatrical displays . . . brought the gospel to life for her audience.”⁴ The use of set, props, and special effects made for a spectacular, theatrical experience for churchgoers. Sister Aimee brought theatre to church and performed religion theatrically. As a result, preaching in the twentieth century has never been the same; to this day, the use of theatricality and performance as a theological tool has become commonplace in many evangelical churches around the world.

This opening image of a preacher embracing the theatre for theological means presents an interesting dichotomy that questions when such a theatrical turn began in evangelical history. In “The Good News on Stage: Evangelicalism and Theatre Practice in Antebellum America,” I contend that the shift in American evangelical practice began in the nation’s antebellum moment. Though many contemporary scholars argue in favor of a clear separation between church and stage at this time, I contend that the development and success of evangelical identity in antebellum America was heavily influenced by the presence of the theatre and its practices. This dissertation traces instances of evangelical appropriation of theatricality—including dramatic literature, production value, and performance style—to debunk such a neat separation of

⁴ Sutton, 69.

evangelical Christianity and the theatre. This distinction does not fully encapsulate what was happening in antebellum Christianity, particularly as it continued to develop throughout the century, much as how the theatre and the nation itself continued to grow. Instead, I find it more useful to argue that evangelicals performed religion theatrically. Such an understanding allows one to see the impact of theatre on religious development on both conscious and subconscious levels. Furthermore, it shows that it was necessary for evangelicals to adapt their religious practice using “secular” tools in order to remain relevant in their evolving world.

I should note that I am not interested in maintaining the dichotomy between *sacred* and *secular*, particularly as I demonstrate how Christians—people who would consider their practice sacred—performed their rites using theatrical influences. Instead, I am more interested in understanding how the existence of the theatre influenced the development and success of evangelicalism and how Christians adapted their own practice to find new relevance in the world. Nevertheless, since I am engaging with subcultures that many scholars argue were dichotomous in the nineteenth century, I occasionally call upon the classifiers of “sacred” and “secular” to better illustrate the impact of one upon the other. By secular, I mean something unconnected to a religious body or organization, a practice or component of society unaffiliated with a supreme being. Antebellum evangelicals considered their practice sacred since it was connected to God’s will and fulfills a higher purpose. Though these classifications seem to uphold the separated nature of evangelicalism and the theatre, they will at times help to demonstrate how despite their differences, the sacred and the secular informed one another.

It certainly makes sense that sacred and secular entities would be separated in antebellum America, however, and evidence exists to affirm that there was a schism between such entities. For example, Christianity and the theatre functioned in different spheres of American society and

often for different audiences, though certainly many theatregoers went to church (and vice versa). Generally, religious practice took place in a church or at a revival meeting, seemingly devoid of what Christians would deem trivial, even “sinful” entertainments such as the theatre or music halls that might be located just down the street. Even in the early twentieth century, many Christians did not fully embrace the theatre as a means of entertainment. For instance, in “The Heavenly Aeroplane,” Sister Aimee shamed theatre as a sinful place where one can be transported by the devil to hell— “All aboard for the theatre,” the devil cries. Ironically, Sister Aimee used theatricality to spread her message while stating that the theatre is the first place Satan uses to lure people into sin. Evangelical distaste for the theatre in the last two centuries was a result of centuries of Puritan and Protestant rejection of the art form. As historian Edmund S. Morgan asserts, “Hostility to the theatre” particularly from religious sources, “is as old as the theatre itself.”⁵ Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, notable American evangelicals—clergy and laypeople alike—vocally rejected the theatre for its ability to sway even the most pious into sin. Congregationalist minister Joseph Parrish Thompson (1819-1879) called it “*a place of vain amusement, unfriendly to piety, injurious to good morals, and to the general welfare of the community.*”⁶ This was a common argument against the theatre; it represented everything wrong with the world.

Even contemporary scholars recognize the polarity between the theatre and American Christianity, arguing that Protestants did not embrace the theatre until well after the Civil War. In his landmark study *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800-1850* (1987), David Grimsted notes that across Christian denominations, “The religious attack on the stage

⁵ Morgan, “Puritan Hostility to the Theatre,” 340.

⁶ Thompson, *Theatrical Amusements. A Discourse on the Character and Influence of the Theater. By Joseph P. Thompson, Pastor of the Broadway Tabernacle Church, New York*, 6. Emphasis original.

was made with essentially one voice.”⁷ Similarly, in *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820-1870* (1992) Bruce A. McConachie argues that many elite members of Protestant circles rejected the “immorality” of the plays presented in theatres, as well as “the amount of money and time wasted in playhouses, the presence of prostitutes, and the occasional scantiness of female costumes on stage.”⁸ These book-length examples of contemporary scholarship agree that the relationship between the theatre and American Christianity was contentious, to say the least.

Yet, as this dissertation demonstrates, despite evidence of evangelical rejection of the stage in antebellum society, there were many instances where evangelicals employed theatricality as a means of evangelism. Revivalist minister Charles Grandison Finney, for example, studied actors to become more emotionally exciting in his own preaching. Author Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote a dramatic adaptation of her world-famous novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Evangelical abolitionists wrote melodramatic plays to sensationalize their texts for readers from the comfort of their own parlors. This project traces the above figures who performed religion using techniques of the playhouse. Thus, I argue that antebellum evangelicals were aware of the impact of the theatre on society, for better or worse, and that they incorporated theatrical techniques for two major purposes: to compete with the theatre, and to use theatricality as a tactic to lead people toward conversion and sanctification. These practices would come to influence how Christians utilize theatricality for evangelical means moving forward.

Very few projects exist that explore the intersection of theatre and religion in the nineteenth century. Most recently, Heather S. Nathans’ *Hideous Characters and Beautiful Pagans: Performing Jewish Identity on the Antebellum American Stage* (2017) looks at how

⁷ Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 25.

⁸ McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 6.

Jews in the nineteenth century used theatre to (re)figure images of their own identities through theatrical archetypes for gentile audiences. In *Performing American Identity in Anti-Mormon Melodrama* (2009), Megan Sanborn Jones looks at mainstream melodramas that constructed Mormons as villains in American society, thus exemplifying for audiences that Christianity and whiteness were the qualifiers of proper Americanness. The only book-length study on the intersection of Christian faith and theatre in the nineteenth century is Claudia Durst Johnson's *Church and Stage: The Theatre as Target of Religions Condemnation in Nineteenth Century America* (2008). In this sweeping history of the century, Johnson claims that throughout the nineteenth century there were "clashes between church and stage" based on sexual immorality and the edification of violence on stage.⁹ However, no scholarly work has yet addressed how evangelicals were in conversation with performance. This dissertation attempts to fill that gap and provides a glimpse into when the shift from sheer abhorrence to eventual acceptance of theatricality in the church began. Before this attempt, however, it is necessary to define evangelicalism and the theatre and to situate their presence, relevance, and impact in American society.

Defining Nineteenth-Century Evangelicalism

Many Christian people in antebellum America would have considered themselves *evangelical*. Long before the term categorized a highly politicized religious right in contemporary American politics, to be evangelical was less of a religious determiner—the way *Protestant* and *Catholic* differentiate versions of Christian practice and belief—and more a means of describing one's relationship with God, with each other, and with the world. The roots

⁹ Johnson, *Church and Stage*, 4.

of evangelicalism stretch back at least to the eighteenth century, though many scholars argue that evangelicalism was born directly out of the Protestant Reformation. Before the twentieth century, evangelicalism was a practice of belief, a frame of mind that described the heart of most Protestant sects, as well as some Christian denominations that did not neatly fall into the Protestant spectrum. It was not an organized religion, though most evangelical denominations did maintain a system of governance and belief. Evangelicalism was instead more of an *ethos*, “a set of convictions, attitudes, beliefs, and practices,”¹⁰ to borrow from contemporary theologian Roger E. Olson. Understanding evangelicalism as an ethos helps to identify the underlying thread of beliefs and practices that united the nascent denominations that emerged during the antebellum period.

While evangelicalism has evolved over time, there exists a set of theological common denominators that have linked it throughout the centuries. In his groundbreaking study *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (1989), historian David Bebbington most closely captures the ethos of evangelical belief in what he calls four “special marks”—*conversionism*, *activism*, *biblicism*, and *crucicentrism*.¹¹ Evangelicals then and now believe that in order to be saved, they must change their lifestyle to gain salvation (conversionism); they must spread the Gospel so that others can have salvation (activism); that the Bible is divinely inspired and is the blueprint by which they should live their lives (biblicism); and that Christ’s sacrifice on the cross is the sole reason why one can attain salvation (crucicentrism).¹² Within Bebbington’s quadrilateral, it is evident that an evangelical ethos was rooted in religious understanding. The belief in Christ as savior, the Bible as authority, the need

¹⁰ Olson, “The Emerging Divide in Evangelical Theology,” 93.

¹¹ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 1–2.

¹² For more details on Bebbington’s “quadrilateral,” see Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, chapter 1.

to be saved, and the need to spread the gospel were all aspects of Christian life that defined how nineteenth-century evangelical Americans should live their lives on Earth to solidify a place in Heaven. The means of practicing such belief varied by denominational tradition.

From the advent of the Great Awakening in the eighteenth century, many American Christians advocated for a personal relationship with God as opposed to one mediated by religious authority. Much of this shift came from a desire for what historian Nathan O. Hatch calls in *The Democratization of American Christianity* (1989) an individualization of conscience, or the belief that one's "own interpretation of Scripture should not be mediated by any other authority, historical or ecclesiastical," but by one's encounter with the Holy Spirit.¹³ With the dawning of a new nation forming its own political and social identity between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, American Christians began to practice their faith differently from England's Anglican tradition. This was especially true when the United States removed state authority over religion. As Jon Butler describes in his influential *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (1992), out of the shift away from the state-sanctioned religion and toward private systems of religion "came an extraordinary expansion of denominational institutions, new means to reach great numbers of individuals and groups, and a new confidence to shape society and its values."¹⁴ The nineteenth century saw a major boom in the development of large Protestant denominations, such as Methodists and Baptists. This, according to Hatch, was a result of the "common people who molded [evangelical Christianity] in their own image and who

¹³ Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 41.

¹⁴ Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 262.

threw themselves into expanding its influence.”¹⁵ The desire for individual experiences with the Holy Spirit that led to spiritual clarity became the norm for many believers.¹⁶

Evangelicals have always done what they can to remain relevant in the world—especially adapting secular culture for evangelistic means. This is not a new phenomenon, as historian Mark A. Noll explains in *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (2001). Noll aptly classifies this evangelical trend as *culturally adaptive biblical experientialism*. He argues that “evangelical movements in America have also always been adaptive to broad trends in national culture,” creating a presence within a nation of consumers.¹⁷ Using popular media such as music, fiction, and film, evangelicals throughout history have consciously and subconsciously reformulated successful forms of expression consumed by the common American to remain relevant to a large body of believers and to attract non-believers.

In the nineteenth century, some evangelicals turned to fiction as a means of evangelism, as demonstrated by Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In her work exploring evangelicalism’s presence in secular print culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (2004), Candy Gunther Brown posits that those who have adapted literature for their own needs “envisioned their secular work as fundamentally sacred because it was useful in communicating the gospel.”¹⁸ Thus, it did not matter if the origin of this work was rooted in secular practice. Using a non-Christian form to spread their message in turn made the practice sacred. Clearly,

¹⁵ Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 9.

¹⁶ While there are major differences between Protestant denominations that consider themselves “evangelical,” for the most part these differences are not relevant to this project. Based on my research, there is no major trend for some denominations performing religion more theatrically than others. Additionally, all denominations have rejected the theatre at some point in the nineteenth century. Therefore, I am more concerned with understanding the ethos of evangelicalism and how evangelicals generally sought performance to make their religious practice and belief more culturally visible and impactful in their society.

¹⁷ Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity*, 2.

¹⁸ Brown, *The Word in the World*, 46.

evangelicals knew how to sell themselves to a broad audience, appropriating mass media and communication, arts, and ideological and political frames of mind to make themselves more culturally relevant to the American public. Ironically, they continued to openly abhor the theatre. While contemporary scholarship exists that charts the evangelical appropriation of music and literature in the nineteenth century, specifically from a Religious Studies lens,¹⁹ none exists to secure theatre as a viable means of Christian evangelism. For some reason, the theatre was deemed more obscene than any other art form.²⁰

Yet, through its popularity, theatre held more potential to advance biblical experientialism perhaps than any other art form in the antebellum moment. The goal of cultural adaptation was to spread the gospel so that more people can experience Christianity. Most antebellum evangelicals aimed to have a religious experience as a result of their practice, one that manifested in physical and emotional ways, common responses for antebellum audience members at the theatre. Two major goals of the antebellum evangelical, as demonstrated in Bebbington's quadrilateral, was to save souls and promote a sanctified lifestyle. These ideas superseded denominational doctrine and served as connecting factors among all evangelical sects. One had to feel the presence of the Holy Spirit in her or his life, formulating a personal relationship with God as opposed to one sanctioned and dictated by the state or by traditional theology. Thus, to adapt areas of secular culture was to ensure more of an experience for current evangelicals and potential converts. Arguably no other art form created similar emotional and physical experiences than the theatre in antebellum America.

¹⁹ In addition to Brown's *The Word in the World*, Lynn S. Neal's *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction* (2006) explores the function of the evangelical love story and its role in the lives of women throughout history. The edited collection *Music in American Religious Experience* (2005) edited by Philip V. Bohlman, Edith L. Blumhofer, and Maria Chow charts how music has served as a major player in the development of religious practice and belief in early America.

²⁰ This idea will be explored more in chapter 3.

The key to adapting culture for the Kingdom of God and remaining pure while performing religion theatrically was to maintain a balance of morality within the work itself. As Michael S. Hamilton notes in “American Evangelicalism: Character, Function, and Trajectories of Change” (2016), evangelicals throughout history have distinguished themselves from the rest of the world, despite their incorporation of worldly arts. He writes, “Evangelicals firmly believe that to be a ‘Christian’ is to be different from everyone else, especially in morals—Christian morality is superior to ‘worldly’ morality, and Christian moral living ought to distinguish Christians from non-Christians.”²¹ Because culture is always adapting, he argues, evangelicalism “remains distinctive from the rest of society.”²² This distinction from the world allowed evangelicals to rationalize their adapting of worldly practices: already they are superior to worldliness in the eyes of God and therefore can dwell within such worldliness without fear of corruption. Instead, evangelicals saw cultural adaption not only as a tool for evangelism, but as an opportunity to save the world from itself. To claim the world’s practices for God’s work is an opportunity to rid the world of vice. To save the world, evangelicalism borrowed from the world and adapted what they took to spread the gospel. The next section begins to illuminate why using theatre was and continues to be a productive means of engaging with the masses.

Situating Theatre and Performance in Antebellum Society

Western theatre theorists have argued over theatre’s impact on audiences and society for centuries, but many agree that the power of theatre is the manipulation of the spectator through feeling. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle (384 BC-322 BC) advocated that the drama should instill in spectators a feeling of pity and fear so they may purge their emotions, an experience called

²¹ Hamilton, “American Evangelicalism: Character, Function, and Trajectories of Change,” 43.

²² Hamilton, 43.

catharsis. “The tragic pleasure,” he writes, “is that of pity and fear, and the poet has to produce it by a work of imitation.”²³ The actor, though of little importance in Aristotle’s hierarchy of dramatic importance, was responsible through his portrayal of the tragic hero for inspiring in audience members this cathartic experience. Between the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, the Neoclassicists maintained a similar opinion of theatre’s power. They reinforced that theatre must provide for the audience a moral lesson at the end, which the audience could learn and apply to their own lives. Though theatre theory has certainly developed over time, most agreed that theatre should impart moral virtue to its audiences. As one antebellum periodical noted, for instance, “Next to the sacred institution of religion, and the almost as sacred establishments of a free press, the theatre possesses the greatest influence over the mind and manners of men.”²⁴ Melodrama in the antebellum American playhouse had emotional and moral sway over its audience. Using spectacle, exuberant rhetorical acting styles, and sensationalized plots, players intended to evoke sympathy from the audience and to move them toward an emotional response. Emotion caused the audience member to feel pity for the protagonist, hate the antagonist, and hopefully, work to create social change as a result of the production. American melodrama—especially in the mid-nineteenth century—was a call to action.

Theatre historian John W. Frick convincingly deems melodrama an “affective vehicle.” He contends in *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America* (2008) that “With its symbolical characterization, its either/or morality, its didactic rhetoric and its resolutions that reward hard work and virtue, the melodrama was the perfect fictional system for making sense of everyday experience.”²⁵ Indeed, melodrama was intended to make the audience

²³ Aristotle, “The Poetics,” 56.

²⁴ Quoted in Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 34.

²⁵ Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America*, 6.

see themselves on stage in even the most unlikely circumstances, and as a result, work to avoid such a fate and change the society that would allow that fate to become a reality in the first place. As Jeffrey D. Mason contends in *Melodrama and the Myth of America* (1993), “The ideological substructure of melodrama is the sentimental vision of humanity, one based on a high regard for emotions, especially sympathy for others, and fraught with profound contradictions that became increasingly debilitating as the nineteenth century unfolded.”²⁶ Order is restored at the end of the play, an ideological vision for the romanticized stasis that could one day be in place in the world. Some theatre makers believed that through a performance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, for instance, more people would join the abolitionist cause.

When theatre manager and actor George C. Howard (1818-1887) produced and starred in George Aiken’s adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* at the Troy Museum in New York in 1852, he did so because he believed the play would make as big an impact on American society as the novel—perhaps, even more of an impact. While the myth that Howard saw a dramatic adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s famous abolitionist novel as a vehicle to launch his daughter, Cordelia, into stardom may be true—Cordelia was praised for originating the role of “Little Eva”—according to his son, Walter, Howard saw *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as morally stimulating. As Walter Howard explains in an unpublished memoir, his father “believed the theatre to be one of the greatest mediums in forming public opinion; and that a moral play could prove the strongest sort of sermon to reach the public.” With *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Howard “saw the possibility of placing before the public the greatest moral drama of the age: a sermon against slavery.”²⁷

To argue that Aiken’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a sermon against slavery is to suggest that it has religious properties. Stowe certainly noted these elements in her novel, and a bounty of

²⁶ Mason, *Melodrama and the Myth of America*, 12.

²⁷ Howard, “From Slavery to Prohibition,” 1–5.

contemporary scholarship analyzes its Christian nature, as well.²⁸ However, not everyone agreed with Howard that dramatic adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* upheld the same Christian ideals, as evidenced by Stowe's rejections of the theatre and especially of adaptations of her novel for the stage, as I will discuss in chapter 2. As Walter Howard writes, though the novel had "been gladly welcomed by the abolitionists as well as most of the religious orders of the North," there was some "question of doubt as to how some of the churches might receive it."²⁹ Yet, as argued by Cordelia Howard in an unpublished memoir recalling her youth, her father's "warm sympathies were enlisted in the Anti-slavery cause, and he felt that the play would be as powerful as the novel in forwarding that movement."³⁰ Even surrounded by criticism from Stowe and her evangelical contemporaries, and in spite of the arguments by many contemporary scholars that the play secularized Stowe's religious text, Howard and Aiken viewed their *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a sermonic tool to reach the masses and sway audiences toward a particular view against slavery.³¹

Howard's intention for his production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is significant in that it provides for the contemporary reader an understanding of what he thought his art could (and should) do at this time. Certainly, Howard was not alone in his musings on the theatre. Moral reform melodrama appealed to middling class Protestant families and sought to teach moral lessons through sensational melodramatic productions. Showman P.T. Barnum's (1810-1891)

²⁸ See, for example, Coleman, *Preaching and the Rise of the American Novel* (2013); Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* (1985); and Hochman, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Reading Revolution: Race, Literacy, Childhood, and Fiction, 1851-1911* (2011).

²⁹ Howard, "From Slavery to Prohibition," 27.

³⁰ Howard, "Memoirs of the Original Little Eva."

³¹ Cordelia Howard includes a humorous anecdote in her memoir. In it, a rumor leaked that members of a Baptist church attended the Troy production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and in response, the minister held a meeting to reprimand those that attended. Howard writes, "To his astonishment, it turned out that fully two-thirds of the congregation has seen the play! This was so overwhelming that no reprimanding was done about it, and in the end the remaining third followed the example of the culprits." (Howard, "Memoirs of the Original Little Eva).

American Museum was one of several in American metropolises that sought to transform the theatre into a viable means of moral family entertainment. Calling his theatre a “lecture room,”

Barnum wrote in a widely circulated letter in 1850:

My whole aim and effort is to make my museums totally unobjectionable to the religious and moral community, and at the same time combine sufficient amusement with instruction to please all proper tastes and to train the mind of youth to reject as repugnant anything inconsistent with moral and refined taste.³²

In addition to moral lessons, reform melodrama sought to contribute to social activism of the day, especially regarding abolition and temperance. Such productions relied on spectacle to create in audience members a distinct emotional experience that would lead them to see the error of the characters’ ways and inspire in them a desire to create social change. For example, the sensation within the story and theatrical effects of temperance plays such as Smith’s *The Drunkard, or, The Fallen Saved* (1844) encouraged audience members to practice temperance, offering them the opportunity to take a pledge of sobriety before they left the theatre. Barnum, who struggled with alcoholism, produced Smith’s *The Drunkard, or, The Fallen Saved* (1844) at his American Museum in New York in 1850.³³ These examples provide a small window into understanding the impact of theatre in the mid-nineteenth century.

Ironically, social issues that were featured on the antebellum stage—abolition and temperance, for instance—began as movements in American evangelical churches that eventually moved into social prominence outside of evangelical institutions. Megan Sanborn Jones contends that moral reform plays based on once evangelical movements reveal “the ways in which the melodramatic genre intersected with the spiritual articulation of the Second Great

³² Quoted in McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 164.

³³ For more information on Barnum’s production of *The Drunkard*, including textual changes to make the play more relevant to his New York clientele, see D’Alessandro, “The *Drunkard*’s Directions: Mapping Urban Space in the Antebellum Temperance Drama.”

Awakening in what might be considered the Christian melodramatic mode.”³⁴ Describing these kinds of plays as emulating a Christian melodramatic mode articulates that the theatre responded to major discourses in American culture, including religion. Jones explains in her examination of poetic justice, reform, moral polarity, and conversion that the structure and very genre of moral reform melodrama mimicked the major lessons taught within the revivals of the Second Great Awakening: that one should always strive to be a good person in society, at home, and in the church.³⁵ Just as nineteenth-century religion claimed never to be connected to the theatre and nevertheless incorporated theatricality, I argue that while the theatre never claimed to be religious, it certainly was influenced by the presence of American evangelicalism. Ultimately, both theatre and evangelicalism held useful tools for the other.

Chapter Breakdown

This dissertation contains four chapters, three of which feature an instance of evangelicals adapting culture in order to perform religion theatrically. I begin by exploring the role of theatre and performance within the homiletics of the revivalist preacher Charles Grandison Finney. While Finney was one of many preachers of the Second Great Awakening, he was the first to openly declare that theatricality was necessary for the preacher to be successful. Finney looked to the melodramatic actors of his day for inspiration in causing his congregation to feel. I contend that Finney’s treatment of sermonizing as a mode of theatrical performance was the catalyst that aroused in his congregations emotional and physical responses that led them toward conversion and sanctification. Throughout chapter 1, I analyze the theatricality inherent

³⁴ Jones, *Performing American Identity in Anti-Mormon Melodrama*, 25.

³⁵ For more of the examination of the Christian melodramatic mode at work, see Jones, *Performing American Identity in Anti-Mormon Melodrama*, pages 23-47. Additionally, I engage more with this form in chapter 3.

in Finney's extemporaneous and emotional delivery, his use of narrative storytelling, and his use of props and space. While Finney was not popular among his preacher contemporaries, his theatrical style influenced the trajectory of preaching moving forward, especially in the twentieth century.

In 1854, Harriet Beecher Stowe adapted a portion *Uncle Tom's Cabin* into a one-woman dramatic reading entitled *The Christian Slave*, despite her clear abhorrence for the theatre and for the unauthorized melodramatic adaptations of her best-selling novel. In chapter 2, I analyze the form and function of *The Christian Slave* and argue that although Stowe outwardly rejected secular theatre practice—she vocally abhorred even moral reform melodrama—her dramatic reading is a representation of how she engaged with theatre in order to spread her anti-slavery message to a broader audience. Throughout this chapter, I illuminate the play's innate use of theatricality and sensation, its structural form compared to secular adaptations of the novel, and its critical and popular reception. I also profile the actress for whom Stowe wrote the play—a black woman named Mary E. Webb and argue that Webb's black body was a tool to give Stowe's words an added layer of authenticity. Not only was Stowe aware of the popular theatrical form of her day, but she also engaged with these forms to appeal to an audience outside of her readership, thereby furthering her message that slavery should be abolished.

In chapter 3, I look at an unproduced form of theatrical expression: closet dramas and staged readings with slave or ex-slave narratives. Although abolitionists did not often write for the mainstream theatre, there are several instances where they wrote for popular abolitionist publications, such as William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*. Many of these abolitionists openly identified themselves as evangelical, while others demonstrated a deep knowledge of evangelical practice within their publications. Some evangelical abolitionists even criticized anti-

abolitionist Christians' desire to protect slavery as an American institution. In this chapter, I look at several of these closet dramas—meant to be read, not staged—to understand why some evangelical abolitionist writers used melodrama to combat slavery. Melodrama both on and off stage allowed the sentiment and sensation inherent within the form to be used as a tool to advocate for abolition.

In the first three chapters, I analyze evangelical figures who performed religion theatrically, adapting culture to best reach their audience and to remain relevant in the world. Just as evangelicals were impacted by the presence and practice of theatre, however, the theatre was influenced by the ethos of evangelicalism that proliferated in American society throughout the antebellum moment. In chapter 4, I switch focus from evangelicals to the theatre itself. Highlighting productions of Indian melodramas in the first half of the nineteenth century, I argue that theatre performed religiously—not for religious purposes, but to sway its audience toward a nationalist justification for Indian removal. I argue that the message of so-called Indian melodramas—a subgenre popular on the antebellum American stage—was influenced by evangelical Christian theology and practice, which permeated American society at the time. The narrative of the “noble savage” in the theatre served as a romantic model for proper, submissive behavior that all people, especially people of color, should strive to emulate. While this trope was certainly built into the fabric of most Indian melodramas, many plays that premiered during the Second Great Awakening featured white characters evangelizing to Native Americans. I argue that the presence of evangelicalism as a major ideological force within American society seeped into the mainstream theatre; Indian melodramas reinforced the common evangelical assertion that Native Americans must be saved in order to recognize the authority of the white man.

A Note on Terminology

Though this project is rooted in theatre and religious history and will certainly intersect with the work of dominant contemporary scholars, it is not necessarily a study of “the theatre” of the era. While I will certainly engage with the practices within the theatre, I am more interested in how different subcultures of American life—in this case, evangelicalism and the theatre—inform one another. Therefore, when I talk about “the theatre,” I am referring to the mainstream playhouse that performed theatrical productions for monetary gain in front of a live audience. “Theatre” is the art those artists made within the playhouse; “drama” is the work of literature that theatre artists performed. Though I may argue that an evangelical figure was inspired by the theatre or may have written a dramatic piece, I am not arguing that they were part of the theatre.

Similarly, when I point out the theatrical nature or the theatricality of a particular practice, or qualify someone’s use of theatrics, I am describing the practice itself as spectacle-driven and sensational, or acts that relied on various roles in the theatre, such as performance, playwrighting, design, etc., in order to manipulate an audience to respond in visceral ways. The theatricality expressed by evangelicals, though inspired by the theatre, was indeed autonomous from the playhouse. Evangelicals were not participating or even contributing to what we consider the study of the theatre but were instead performing religion with theatrical influences to better engage with a wider audience. In other words, they performed religion theatrically as a means to evangelize, to spread the good news to a wider audience using a medium they knew would draw the masses to their holy cause.

CHAPTER 1 – “It is Objected That This Preaching is Theatrical”¹: Charles Grandison Finney’s Homiletical Theatre

In a lecture entitled “How to Preach the Gospel,” the Presbyterian minister and revivalist Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875) detailed an interaction between the Bishop of London and the celebrated English actor-manager David Garrick (1717-1779). The Bishop asked Garrick why actors, “in representing a mere fiction, should move an assembly, even to tears, while ministers, in representing the most solemn realities, could scarcely obtain a hearing.” To the Bishop’s query, Garrick cheekily replied, “It is because we represent fiction as reality, and you represent reality as a fiction.”² Finney aligned himself with Garrick in this instance, seeking to represent reality behind the pulpit, preaching in a way that many of his contemporaries criticized for its likeness to stage acting. These critics were not wrong in their assessment. Indeed, Finney borrowed tactics from the actors of his day to engage with his audience members more directly, thus complicating the relationship between Christianity and performance and combating antitheatrical sentiments that many American Christians expressed in the antebellum era.

Finney saw merit in the theatre, perhaps not for its content, but certainly for its influence, and saw theatrical presence behind the pulpit as a necessary means of maintaining influence. “If by ‘theatrical’ be meant the strongest possible representation of the sentiments expressed,” he writes scathingly, “then the more theatrical a sermon is, the better.”³ The term “theatrical” in this instance could lead to myriad interpretation, from Aristotelian spectacle to mere flamboyance. However, these definitions do not quite capture the “strongest possible representation of the sentiments expressed.” In Finney’s day, one of the most popular and accessible forms of

¹ Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 257. Original emphasis.

² Finney, 247.

³ Finney, 247.

theatrical entertainment was melodrama. He openly praised the melodramatic actor's craft—training, methodology, and results—and borrowed such tactics in his own preaching to enrapture his congregations and woo them toward salvation. The actor's rhetorical acting style was, in a way, bigger than himself, portraying an overflow of human emotion through both voice and body—and in no way was this kind of acting “realistic” from a non-theatrical point of view. Finney was inspired by melodramatic actors and encouraged fellow preachers to adopt their practices in their sermonizing. Thus, Finney's use of the word “theatrical” highlights a similar means of larger-than-life production value applied to his homiletics, hence the criticism he received from his contemporaries who believed theatre and actors to be degraded.

In this chapter, I map Finney's theatrical trajectory and argue that through his borrowing of and subsequent dependency upon theatricality and performance, the preacher intended to produce notable emotion within spectators and therefore strengthen the preacher's initiative to win souls and sway people away from vice. I begin by providing a brief overview of revivalist practice in the nineteenth century and the shift in homiletical style as a result of revival meetings. I situate Finney within this movement, known later as the Second Great Awakening, and differentiate him from both his contemporaries and from revival figures who came before him. I then chart the sway theatre had over American audiences at this time in order to illuminate why Finney chose to draw from what many of his contemporaries would deem immoral practice. From there, I move to his homiletical practice in action, charting how his use of extemporaneity, colloquial language, and narrative storytelling were inherently theatrical, and how these practices drew from the theatre specifically. Finally, I analyze the theatrical space, casting, and spectatorship that Finney created in order for his preaching to have more of a personal impact on the lives of his congregants.

“What a Revival of Religion Is”⁴: Revival Preaching in Antebellum America

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the United States encountered a series of religious meetings, fueled by emotion and a desire to renew one’s relationship with God, secure salvation, and become inspired to live a sanctified, or purified, lifestyle. These meetings, known as revivals, swept the nation and included as their participants people of many religious traditions, creeds, and cultures. In this section, I explain what a revival entails, and how Finney participated in such a phenomenon. The revival meeting was the perfect forum for Finney, who focused on engaging human emotion in his conquest toward saving the masses.

Revivals in early American history are usually linked with the two Great Awakenings—both of which served different purposes focusing on religious renewal in an attempt to identify an American religion. The first Awakening, led by preachers such as Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), John Wesley (1703-1791), and George Whitefield (1714-1770) consisted of a series of revival meetings that emphasized a renewal in individual piety at a time when secular rationalism and politics became the societal norm. After the Awakening, however, the nation saw a decrease in the once-ignited religious fervor, the result of both an increase in rationalism from the Enlightenment and political interest as the United States formed its own national identity. Eventually, the nation saw a Second Great Awakening at the end of the eighteenth century in direct opposition to the Enlightenment. These later revival meetings manifested in more visceral ways. Literary critic David S. Reynolds writes in his essay “From Doctrine to Narrative: The Rise of Storytelling in America” (1980) that during the Second Great Awakening “the religious frenzy at camp meetings—which was manifested in such ‘exercises’ as dancing, barking,

⁴ “What a Revival of Religion Is” is a lecture given by Finney, published in his *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*.

shouting, and running—was sparked in large part by emotional, illustrative sermons preached by unlearned ministers to frontier congregations who had little interest in theological niceties.”⁵

Through an appeal to the emotions, religious figures in newer denominations began to adopt a more individualized way of thinking about faith, one where a personal, not clinical, relationship with Christ was at the forefront.

Finney was a major player in this theological shift in the first half of the nineteenth century. A century before, Calvinist belief reigned supreme and declared that divine grace and salvation was predestined for a select few. Finney’s own conversion experience inspired him to question the Calvinist doctrine of Predestination. He eventually advocated the idea that sin was the will of the individual and that God’s divine grace extended to all who asked for it. Finney admits in his memoir that as a result of the common beliefs about the Bible and salvation, he intellectually understood Christianity, “but never has the truth been in my mind that faith was a *voluntary trust* instead of an *intellectual state*.”⁶ As he notes in the memoir, working as a lawyer, Finney felt a divine conviction that pulled him toward salvation. Having considered himself unworthy of such a gift, he tried to conceal this experience from others: “What!” he writes, “Such a degraded sinner as I am, on my knees confessing my sins to the great and holy God, and ashamed to have any human being, and a sinner like myself, know it, and find me on my knees endeavoring to make peace with my offended God!”⁷ Finney’s despair prevented him from accepting the conviction that he encountered. Eventually, after begging God for clarity, he felt a divine intervention from the Holy Spirit “in a manner that seemed *to go through me*, body and soul. I could feel the impression, *like a wave of electricity*, going through and through me. Indeed

⁵ Reynolds, “From Doctrine to Narrative: The Rise of Pulpit Storytelling in America,” 487.

⁶ Finney, *The Original Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, 13.

⁷ Finney, 13.

it seemed to come in *waves*, and *waves of liquid love*—for I could not express it in any other way.”⁸ Finney’s conversion experience inspired his call to ministry. He was ordained in 1824, preaching in upper New York in a region known as the “burned-over district.” Beginning his ministry with the Female Missionary Society of the Western District, he eventually became itinerant, preaching from town to town and gaining the attention of the press in the process. After cultivating a substantial following, Finney chose to build a permanent space in New York City after the success of his revivals in the city. He led the Free Presbyterian Chatham Street Chapel, housed in a former theatre, and eventually the Broadway Tabernacle before leaving to teach at Oberlin College. He was appointed president of Oberlin in 1851.⁹

Finney wrote his memoir, *The Original Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, during his later years. While one cannot assume the accounts from Finney’s memoirs are completely factual, I find significance in Finney’s recollections as they offer to contemporary readers his version of “truth” and his understanding of the effects of his ministry. While in actuality these effects may have manifested differently for his congregants, his recollections allow us to assume the impact he *expected* his preaching to have over his congregation. This is especially important in his ideas about the theatre versus his use of theatricality. As I will later show, Finney was cautious about adapting a theatre into a holy sanctuary. Though he never rejected the theatre outright in his memoir or elsewhere, he expressed his reservations about turning the Chatham Garden Theatre into a church. His memoir, then, offers to contemporary readers the story that Finney wanted to tell about himself. He did not want to be deemed a theatre sympathizer, though he did recognize the value of performance in his ministry.

⁸ Finney, 16. Emphasis original.

⁹ For a more detailed account of Finney’s life, refer to Håmbrick-Stowe’s *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*.

Finney believed salvation was a voluntary gift given by God to all who wanted it, not a privilege given to a chosen few as was seen in previous faith traditions. Likewise, he believed one's relationship with God was individual and did not depend upon human intervention by Church clergy or other religious officials.¹⁰ "Salvation," muses Finney, "instead of being a thing to be wrought out by my own works, was a thing to be found entirely in the Lord Jesus Christ, who presented Himself before me to be *accepted* as my God and Savior."¹¹ During his despair in the search for salvation, Finney made a pact with God that if he ever converted, he would dedicate his life to preaching the Gospel. So, never having gone to seminary and leaning on the oratory skills he had learned as a lawyer, Finney made it his mission to stress the importance of conversion and the divine gift of salvation throughout his career as a preacher. More importantly, Finney's lack of ministerial training inspired him to seek inspiration from sources unknown in an attempt to revolutionize his practice. Such searching eventually led him to understand the merit of the actors' skill upon the stage, practices he adopted in his own homiletics.

Unlike the majority of revivalists, Finney did not consider a revival a sovereign act of God. Instead, he classified them as events formulated by a preacher to give individuals the opportunity to come in contact with the Holy Spirit—in essence, they were staged. This contradicts the opinion of revivals shared by the majority of his contemporaries, who argued that the events that occur at a revival were moves of the Holy Spirit. Instead, Finney argued that "men are so sluggish" that it became "necessary to raise an excitement among them, till the tide rises so high as to sweep away the opposing obstacles. They must be so aroused that they will break over these counteracting influences, before they will obey God."¹² In other words "great

¹⁰ This slowly became the standard way of thinking about God's grace in Methodist and Unitarian doctrines. For more, see McKanan, *Identifying the Image of God*, 55.

¹¹ Finney, *The Original Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, 11.

¹² Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 2.

political and other worldly excitements” distracted people from the truth that Christianity tried to spread, social elements that can only be overcome by a divine act. Therefore, revivals were organized to reinvigorate people away from vice and toward religious truth. Thus, a revival was a work of man carefully curated to do God’s will, an opportunity formulated and carried out so that God might make an appearance through the Holy Spirit.

Revivals were not like normal church services. They often appealed to the congregants’ senses, inspiring in them an emotional response that might inspire a conversion experience. In 1830, the *New York Evangelist* described what one might experience at a revival meeting,¹³ defining a revival as “the first excitement of holy affections and holy actions in sinners; and the increase of those affections and actions in saints. This excitement, which constitutes a revival, is effected *invariably* by the Holy Spirit, through the instrumentality of gospel motives.” Once a revival began, the Holy Spirit moved and affected the emotions of the congregant. A successful revival, according to the article, “is the excitement of *high* and *holy* affections” where “Religion is *revived* in any and every heart, so far as holy affections are excited or revived; and it is self-evident, from the very nature of the case, that there can be no revival in any heart any further than there is an excitement of holy feeling.”¹⁴ Finney certainly recognized this appeal to the affections and mastered ways to tap into the congregants’ emotions in hopes of creating a sensational experience that might woo them toward conversion and sanctification. As sociologist Michael P. Young confirms in *Bearing Witness Against Sin: The Evangelical Birth of the American Social Movement* (2006), “Finney, like the upstarts and the converted ministers of the mid-eighteenth century, challenged settled educated ministers with accusations that their religion

¹³ Many of Finney’s lectures were originally published in *The New York Evangelist* before they were collected and published as a series.

¹⁴ *New York Evangelist*, 9. Emphases original.

had grown cold, and he used the instruments of enthusiasm to overwhelm them with popular and insurgent revivals.”¹⁵ Through emotion and theatricality, Finney sought to reimagine how to preach and how to revitalize expressions of faith.

Part of this revitalization included developing new ways to inspire people toward sanctification through emotion. Evangelicals rejected worldliness and encouraged followers to avoid sin. Finney, in particular, believed that all Christians could practice perfectionism, or the ability to avoid sin and carry out a life of sanctification. As historian Roger Joseph Green writes in his essay “Charles Grandison Finney: The Social Implications of his Ministry” (1993), “Finney’s understanding of perfection was grounded in his beliefs on sin and free will. Sin consists of actions, of transgressions; and free will demands that we can choose for or against God.”¹⁶ In other words, one has the ability to avoid sin and as a result, avoid the wrath of God; revivals were opportunities to remind congregants to maintain such a sinless, sanctified lifestyle.

Finney was revolutionary in the theatrical ways he tapped into his congregants’ emotions at revival meetings. While he did not engage with the theatre directly (there is no evidence to support his regular attendance at the theatre), it was not uncommon for revival preachers at this time to engage their congregations through theatricality. In the eighteenth century, preachers of the first Great Awakening such as Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) and George Whitefield (1714-1770) delivered their sermons in relatively theatrical ways. Before entering the clergy, Whitefield was an actor, having been given leading roles in plays throughout his boyhood in school. Deemed an “actor-preacher” by his biographer Harry S. Stout in *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (1991),¹⁷ Whitefield was interested in

¹⁵ Young, *Bearing Witness against Sin*, 111.

¹⁶ Green, “Charles Grandison Finney: The Social Implications of His Ministry,” 12.

¹⁷ Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, xix.

written drama before his road to ministry. In his young adulthood, Whitefield studied acting, with particular attention to understanding the passions, or how to manipulate emotion through the human body in ways that viscerally affected the audience.¹⁸ Eventually, when he took on the mantle of preacher, he denounced the theatre openly. As Stout describes, “Unable to reconcile the theater with his religious passion and sense of destiny, he resolved not simply to abandon the theater but to declare war on it.”¹⁹ And yet, Whitefield continually adapted theatrics into his homiletical practice, using his body and voice to recreate a passage of scripture, for example. Although in Whitefield’s ministry there was an intentional separation of church and stage, it was not as neat as Whitefield would have liked.

The difference between Whitefield and Finney, however, is that the latter never denounced the theatre, whereas Whitefield famously does so. Finney’s significance lies in the fact that he not only failed to denounce theatre—though at times he alluded to his discomfort with it—but that he openly encouraged preachers to look to theatre practitioners in their pursuit to remain relevant and influential in their own homiletics. In other words, Finney never truly argued for or against the theatre as an activity of leisure or entertainment, but certainly encouraged Christian leaders to take what they could from the theatre. Though not all of his contemporaries—particularly those serving behind more traditional pulpits—agreed with his style of preaching and his support toward the art of acting, Finney invigorated how the preacher interacts with the congregant’s emotions for a specific purpose—to win souls for the Kingdom of God.

¹⁸ Stout, 8–9.

¹⁹ Stout, 22.

“An instrument of spiritual improvement”²⁰: Theatre as a Tool Toward Feeling

In this section, I analyze the function of theatre within antebellum society to illuminate the many elements of melodrama that Finney sought to capture in his preaching. As I have described in my introduction, most evangelicals abhorred the theatre in antebellum America, deeming it a breeding ground for sinful behaviors, such as lust and financial waste. As Stout explains, the theatre was looked at by many evangelicals as a competing church, a place that lured people to vice.²¹ Recently, Lisa A. Freeman charted the history of antitheatrical behavior throughout history in her book *Antitheatricality and the Body Public* (2017). She states that at the heart of antitheatricality—from both religious and non-religious standpoints—is the cultural sway that theatre has over its audiences. “Theater has ever been located at the center of, and as a site of magnification for, broad cultural movements and conflicts,” Freeman explains.²² In other words, theatre is a powerful tool for influence. In general, theatre provides a glimpse of real life the way that other artistic mediums cannot—the presence of human bodies creates a sense of connection between audience member and performer. This impactful relationship did not go unnoticed by antebellum evangelicals; not only did they believe the playhouse to invite people into drunkenness and prostitution, but the way actors manipulated their own and their audiences’ emotions to the point of convincing them it was truth was dangerous. Thus, many evangelical leaders in antebellum America urged that Christians avoid theatre and theatricality entirely.

With evangelical antitheatricality in mind, then, Finney’s embrace of theatricality—more specifically, his support of the practice of actors and the passions—is significant. He spoke to the actor’s skill, writing that “It requires the utmost stretch of art on the stage for the actors to make

²⁰ Monod, *The Soul of Pleasure*, 36.

²¹ Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, 23.

²² Freeman, *Antitheatricality and the Body Public*, 2.

their hearers feel. The design of elocution is to teach this skill.”²³ Finney encouraged preachers to look to the actors’ skills to emotionally tap into his sermon and thereby, to connect more deeply to his audience. As theatre historian Peter G. Buckley asserts in his essay “Paratheatricals and Popular Stage Entertainment” (2006), unlike many of his evangelical contemporaries, Finney rejected the “traditional ministerial denial of theatre and politics but rather sought their direct incorporation in the business of salvation.”²⁴ What follows in this section profiles Finney’s admiration for the actors’ craft and charts how his own revivalist preaching mirrored what actors did on stage.

Finney admired how actors embodied the words they spoke in a way that caused the audience to be moved with emotion. He noted that the design of the actor was “to throw himself into the spirit and meaning of the writer, as to adopt his sentiments, make them his own, feel them, embody them, throw them out upon the audience as living reality.”²⁵ If actors found success in this endeavor, if they were able to aptly *feel* the content of the words and thereby cause the audience to feel, then this practice should be adopted in one’s preaching. Paraphrasing Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Finney contends that “The actor suits the action to the word, and the word to the action. His looks, his hands, his attitudes, and everything are designed to express the full meaning of the writer. Now this should be the aim of the preacher.”²⁶ In other words, the actors tapped into their characters through an overflow of emotion that, in turn, caused the audience to have some kind of visceral response. The actor’s embodiment of the playwright’s intent can (and perhaps should) be compared to the preacher’s divine authority of his sermons. Additionally, if this embodiment of feeling is the reason why an audience could connect with the

²³ Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 237.

²⁴ Buckley, “Paratheatricals and Popular Stage Entertainment,” 444.

²⁵ Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 247.

²⁶ Finney, 247.

actor on a personal and emotional basis, then according to Finney, the preacher should certainly capitalize on this style.

Sentimentalism affected most aspects of American expression in the nineteenth century, including the theatre and revivalist preaching. American melodrama, arguably the most popular form of dramatic work at this time, was a result of sentimentalist trends that permeated the United States throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Sentimentalism in the theatre linked those consuming the art through a shared empathy, one that could teach people more about life than any national laws or social customs. According to David Monod in *The Soul of Pleasure: Sentiment and Sensation in Nineteenth-Century American Mass Entertainment* (2016), melodrama was a sentimental form that only acted on feeling and morality, not social status quo. Additionally, sentimentalists believed that empathy was a guiding light that connected humans to one another. Theatre allowed audience members to feel empathy because they could witness others' situations firsthand and see the true intentions of the characters. Finally, many at this time believed that emotions and moral virtue were connected and therefore, God used emotions for good.²⁷ Finney's preaching, too, fell within this sentimentalist camp. Revivalism, especially the Second Great Awakening, was based on emotional response because as Monod writes, "Emotional release was the trigger that empowered people to renounce sin and overturn vice."²⁸ It is not surprising, then, that Finney looked to the melodramatic actors of his day for inspiration in capturing such a sentimental means of expression. Additionally, as the most dominant mode of theatrical expression, melodrama itself inspired Finney's ministry.

Antebellum melodrama worked systematically to inspire in audience members an emotional, affective experience. The typical plot structure of the melodrama was familiar to

²⁷ Monod, *The Soul of Pleasure*, 33.

²⁸ Monod, 36.

audiences: a hero is plagued by the evil actions of a villain who works hard throughout the entirety of the production to undermine the hero. Though it appears the villain is winning until the final act, good always conquers evil. By the end of a melodrama, the villain is punished, good prevails, and order is restored. While it may not seem as though melodrama's recycled plot structure and stock characters would have much of a social impact, the influence of this style is in its rhetorical acting style and reliance upon spectacle and sensation. As Erin Hurley argues in *Theatre and Feeling* (2010), "melodrama cultivates a close, provocative relationship to feeling in a formal apparatus that invokes physical responses in predictable, formulaic, familiar—and therefore reassuring—patterns."²⁹ It is exactly these familiar patterns that caused antebellum audiences to feel. Without having to understand the plot structure, the audience member was unburdened in her or his endeavor to heed the message of the plot.

William Hedley Smith's temperance melodrama *The Drunkard, or the Fallen Saved*, which premiered at the Boston Museum on February 12th, 1844, is an excellent example of melodramatic plot and sensational acting opportunity at work to cause the audience to feel.³⁰ Such a play also illuminates melodrama's impact and why Finney would want to tap into this particular art form in his preaching. In Smith's play, Edward Middleton, an upstanding middle-class member of society, is swindled by a corrupt lawyer, Cribbs, in his attempt to sell Edward's property for profit. His plan is set in motion when he lures Edward to drink excessively at a bar. Intoxicated, Edward loses all sense of self-worth and respectability, abandons his family, and moves to the city, where he begs local innkeepers for alcohol. Eventually, he is found, repents, and is forgiven by his family, who welcome him back home. In most temperance melodramas,

²⁹ Hurley, *Theatre and Feeling*, 44.

³⁰ *The Drunkard's* true authorship remains a mystery. There is a strong possibility that Moses Kimball, proprietor of the Boston Museum, asked Smith to finish the play, which was originally written by an anonymous clergy man (believed by many to be the Unitarian preacher John Pierpont, though this has not been proven).

the moment of highest sensation is the scene where the play's hero loses himself completely to alcohol, exhibiting insanity—the *delirium tremens* scene (DTs). In *The Drunkard*, the DTs opens the fourth act. In it, Edward wakes up in a “wretched outhouse or shed,” in tattered clothing, eyes sunk. When he encounters the landlord of a nearby bar, he begs for a drink. The landlord refuses, and Edward chokes him in response. After letting go, Edward enters a state of delirium:

Here, here, friend, take it off, will you – these snakes, how they coil round me. Oh! how strong they are – there, don't kill it, no, no, don't kill it, give it brandy, poison it with rum, that will be a judicious punishment, that would be justice, ha, ha! justice! ha, ha!³¹

In his despair, Edward takes out a phial of poison with which he plans to commit suicide. In this moment an old friend, William, finds Edward in his state of delirium, seizes the phial, and convinces him that he should be given a second chance. He eventually helps restore Edward to his family and to society.

When performed for an audience, the DTs was the most sensational scene in the temperance melodrama because it provided for the audience a viable possibility for those addicted to alcohol—the audience saw Edward hit rock bottom and attempt to commit suicide in his delirium right before their eyes. In order to obtain such an emotionally stimulating response, the actor had to perform in a manner that a contemporary audience member might describe as over-the-top. As theatre historian George R. Kernodle writes in a 1960 essay analyzing acting style, “The nineteenth-century actor used elaborate inflections, rich voice tones, and large round gestures, which could add dimensions and subtleties only suggested in the printed words.” It was through such an “intensification” that the audience fully understood the intention of the playwright.³² In *The Drunkard*, acting the DTs in such a manner was a kind of fear tactic to convince a mass group of people that drinking alcohol only led to depression and despair and one

³¹ Smith, “The Drunkard, or the Fallen Saved!,” 301.

³² Kernodle, “Style, Stylization, and Styles of Acting,” 252, 254.

should avoid a fate such as this. Ultimately, productions of *The Drunkard* captured the kind of visceral emotion Finney sought to inspire in his own congregations—an emotion that presumably caused people to respond in positive ways.

Finney, too, relied on a familiar structure within his homiletics, as well as opportunities for an “intensification of delivery,” securing more opportunities for his congregants to feel. One of Finney’s most famous sermons, “Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts,” offers an illustration of how Finney used melodrama-like plot to appeal to his congregation. A response to Ezekiel 18:30—“Make you a new heart and a new spirit, for why will ye die, O House of Israel?”³³—the moral of the sermon is that the individual congregant, not the preacher, is in charge of her or his actions and must choose to change her or his heart toward righteousness. Finney began the sermon by breaking down the basics of the verse from Ezekiel, beginning with a definition of a “new heart” and what it means to change from an old heart to a new one. Finney’s conversational approach in disseminating this information in the beginning of the sermon invited his congregants to heed his words and to fully understand the conflict at hand. Furthermore, as theologian Eugene L. Lowry states in *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form* (2001), such narrative preaching catches people “in the depths of the awful discrepancies of their world—social and personal. It is to these very real discrepancies that the gospel of Jesus Christ is addressed.”³⁴ While it may seem that Finney told the congregation they were all sinners who needed to change their hearts, in the remainder of the sermon he broke down how one makes this transformation. With this, he introduced the conflict of the sermon’s theatrical plot.

³³ “Bible Hub.”

³⁴ Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 25.

Finney continued the sermon with a binary that provided options for a person in her or his journey toward salvation: one can either choose to have a heart that puts God first and avoids sin, or one can choose the ways of Satan, enjoy the vices of this world, and ultimately burn in Hell. Finney's use of allegory was effective in three ways: first, it emphasized the seriousness of the matter; second, it instituted fear within the congregant; third, it instilled a sense of urgency within the individual to apply the principles to her or his life. Herein lies the dramatic climax of the sermon: Finney offered the congregant the necessary information to understand the nature of her or his sin. The choice to act accordingly was left with the congregant.

Like melodrama, this sermon drew from issues of contemporary life to allow the audience to contextualize the subject matter in a way they can understand more directly. "Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts" was effective because it appealed to the audience's emotions through fear mongering within the plot itself and through theatrical delivery. Finney put the authority in determining whether or not people will change their hearts in the hands of the individual, not the collective nor in the hands of the preacher himself. Therefore, the individual congregant was forced to make a choice. This was a scary notion for the congregant, as the wrong choice would inevitably lead to damnation. Finney's sensational fear tactic fed on emotion similar to the way the impact of the DTs relied on audience emotion in *The Drunkard*.

Finney's role performing this sermon was similar to the melodramatic actor's role. The actors who played Edward were the vehicles that caused sensation within the spectator, hopefully causing them to see the consequences of drinking. According to the preface to the 1847 acting edition of the play, William Hedley Smith, who also starred as Edward in the original production, "was at times terribly real, particularly the scene of delirium tremens." His performance was, according to the preface, "true to the letter, and universally acknowledged to

be the most naturally effective acting ever seen in this city.”³⁵ Similarly, in his debut in the role, Harry Watkins (1825-1894), wrote in his memoir that as a result of his performance, he “*had the audience with me.*” He continues:

I was discovered lying in the streets, a ragged drunken miserable wretch—with the *delirium tremens*—the scene progressed—*the audience still with me*—applauded every speech—until, through my ravings I fell upon the stage in convulsions—*then*—they *shouted*—at the fall of the curtain I was called out—received *nine cheers*—made a speech—and went off. Congratulations poured in upon me from every side—*friends and enemies*—it was pronounced a great piece of acting.³⁶

As a result of his performance, Watkins reported in his memoir several instances of people physically responding in the auditorium. One woman, he wrote, “fell from her seat, fainting, and had to be conveyed home.”³⁷ He later found out that her husband was a drunkard and her reaction was out of fear that her husband would have a fate similar to Edward’s. While these accounts are personal and may not reflect true audience response, they provide for us a glimpse of how spectators may have responded. More importantly, they offer us an understanding of how actors believed their acting represented truthfulness on stage.

Finney argued that his preaching elicited similar responses from congregants, according to his memoir. He contended that if congregants cannot understand the content of a sermon, if they are not made to see how the content affects their lives, then they will disregard the content or merely consider it optional. It should seem as though the preacher is not preaching at all, but instead, as Finney recalls one congregant believing of his preaching, as if he “had taken me alone, and were conversing with me face to face.”³⁸ Similar to Smith and Watkins, Finney’s recollection is representative of the impact he believed his preaching to have.

³⁵ Smith, *The Drunkard, or the Fallen Saved!*, 5.

³⁶ Quoted in Hughes, *Spectacles of Reform*, 66. Emphasis original.

³⁷ Quoted in Hughes, 66.

³⁸ Finney, *The Original Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, 73.

Both Finney and the theatre received criticism for engaging the individual's emotions within their performance. In his memoir, Finney wrote of the arguments against him. He recalls,

They used to complain that I let down the dignity of the pulpit; that I was a disgrace to the ministerial position . . . that I talked to the people in a colloquial manner; that I *said you*, instead of preaching *about* sin and sinners, and saying *they*; that I said *hell*, and with such an emphasis as often to shock the people. Furthermore, that I urged the people with such vehemence, as if they might not have a moment to live; and sometimes they complained that I *blamed* the people too much.³⁹

And yet, Finney rejected such criticisms, saying that stressing the necessity of moving from sin is more important to him than the opinion of his critics. Similarly, many contemporary theatre theorists denounce melodramatic acting rooted in sensation as truthful, especially after the rise of Realism at the end of the nineteenth century. To this, Kernodle defends nineteenth-century style, arguing that “All style, all theatre, is conventional, and in all ages the conventions that are thoroughly familiar to the audience are accepted as a real life.”⁴⁰ Melodrama, melodramatic actors, and Finney were similar in creating affective moments for audiences and congregations for several reasons: they drew from real-life, recognizable human events and interactions; the outcomes and consequences were palpable and detrimental; and the audience and congregation experienced the performance in community with the actor or preacher, creating collective experiences that imagine a utopian outcome. Whereas audiences at this time were used to such acting styles and adopted what they saw as truth, Finney's followers accepted the message of his sermons as urgent and morally important.

Following the sentimental trends occurring in popular culture in antebellum America, Finney took a sentimental turn in his witnessing, appealing to his congregants' emotions to ensure a conversion experience and to promote a sanctified lifestyle—a revolutionary means of

³⁹ Finney, 65. Emphasis original.

⁴⁰ Kernodle, “Style, Stylization, and Styles of Acting,” 255.

approaching the art of preaching using theatricality as a model. Both in this evangelical culture and the theatre, the use of feeling was a positive occurrence, a teaching tool for life on Earth and in heaven. The shift toward sentimentalism and the appeal to emotions as a tactic indicate a shared belief that the passions had sway over people and ultimately, were used to change the world for various intents—be it social injustices or the state of one’s soul. While many of Finney’s contemporaries saw the theatre as a place of sin and its practice as a means of swaying people toward evil, Finney saw it at the very least as a means of inspiration—while he was not public about whether he embraced the theatre for its entertainment value, he must have seen some merit in its ability to emphasize ideas. In other words, Finney used theatricality as a means to intensify truth, whereas the actor’s own theatricality merely insinuated truth. Thus, in Finney’s homiletics, theatricality was a positive tool in spreading the Gospel of Christ.

**“If I did not preach from inspiration, I don’t know how I did preach”⁴¹: Preaching as a
Pathway to Feeling**

Finney’s homiletics indicate that formulaic theatre practice—specifically melodrama—was influential in the development of preaching practice, particularly because revival preaching relied on engaging with the congregant’s emotions in order to inspire a conversion experience. As historian William Gerald McLoughlin describes in *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (1959), “Finney said that it was often necessary in revivals to appeal to the emotions or ‘religious affection,’ especially when the regular ministry was ‘at ease in Zion’ and preaching only dull, formal sermons not calculated to arouse any concern for salvation.”⁴² However, Finney argued that a preacher bound to the page would prohibit his audience member

⁴¹ Finney, *The Original Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, 76.

⁴² McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham*, 35.

from feeling his own passion and thereby would risk their own emotional overflow. In this section, I chart how Finney became a master of emotional manipulation through various performance methods, including extemporaneity, individualization of the congregant, and heightened sensation.

While feeling may not have come naturally for ministers as they were preaching, Finney encouraged his contemporaries to summon emotions as the actor would upon the stage. He argued that one must be able to tap into his own emotions—as an actor does—in order to garner the desired response from his congregants. He believed if the preacher performs emotional meaning behind the sermon, the message will seem more authentic and urgent for the congregation. According to the common understanding of acting the passions at this time, when the actor feels, her or his body responds appropriately with physicality. Finney used this knowledge to his advantage. For example, he used eye contact and gesture to single congregants out. He stressed that the preacher cannot maintain this natural portrayal if he is tied to the written sermon. He argues, “Let a minister, then, only feel what he says, and not be tied to his notes, to read an essay, or to speak a piece, like a school-boy, first on one foot and then on the other, put out first one hand and then the other. Let him speak as he feels, and act as he feels, and he will be eloquent.”⁴³ In other words, reading from one’s notes leads to a lack of feeling. An absence of feeling leads to a lack of connection with the preacher’s own body. Therefore, feeling is not transferred to the congregant, a conversion experience is risked, and the congregant is enticed back into sin. Since the preacher needs to feel in order for his congregation to feel, then like the actor, he should stress, not suppress, theatrics.

⁴³ Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 202.

It is important to note that while Finney compared his own extemporaneity to the actor's, actors in the nineteenth century were not necessarily extemporaneous. Extemporaneity is the practice of preaching organically without the use of a written sermon. Finney prepared as much as possible beforehand through Bible reading and prayer, but ultimately relied on improvisation and inspiration from the Holy Spirit. In his own words, "It seemed that I could see with intuitive clearness just what I ought to say, and whole platoons of thoughts, words, and illustrations, came to me as fast as I could deliver them."⁴⁴ Thus, while it may seem like the preacher had his text memorized, he relied mostly on improvisation in his methods. The actor, in contrast, is expected to have his lines completely memorized. While actors were able to more fully tap into the emotion of the piece because they were not bound to the script, they followed a set text. The successful actor memorized his lines and stuck to the script so that he could focus on the emotion of the words. This was the only way to sway an audience without distraction. Though not perfectly comparable, such practice inspired Finney's extemporaneity; the preacher should not be bound by the page so that he can access his own emotions. Additionally, extemporaneity provided for the preacher the flexibility to move his body in more of a presentational way, as opposed to reading at the audience. Without the hindrance of a written sermon—the script—Finney was able to exude his message in a way that seemed organic, even real, for the congregation.

Finney was revolutionary in his craft in that he actively thought about the preacher's presentational style as a necessary component of his success. He compared the preacher's role to that of a physician. Naturally, if a person is sick, a physician will come take care of him. Though God is the ultimate healer, He sends an agent of healing to save the patient using medicine. "It is

⁴⁴ Finney, *The Original Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, 76. Emphasis original.

true then,” Finney writes, “that the physician saved him, and it is also true that God saved him.”⁴⁵ The same principle applied to the preacher’s role, according to Finney; God sends the preacher to lead his congregants toward conversion and sanctified lifestyles. But in order to successfully fulfil his mission, Finney argues, the preacher must be both doctrinal *and* practical—he *must* think about how he presents doctrine. He writes, “A loose, exhortatory style of preaching may affect the passions, and may produce excitement, but will never sufficiently instruct the people to secure sound conversions. On the other hand, preaching doctrine in an abstract manner, may fill the head with *notions*, but will never sanctify the heart or life.”⁴⁶ In other words, in order for God’s agent to find success in his evangelical responsibilities he must fully rely on spiritual authority, as well as an effective method of disseminating this authority. Finney found his effective method in theatre practice.

In *Charles G. Finney: Revivalistic Rhetoric* (2002), Religious Studies scholar David B. Chesebrough argues that Finney’s style of preaching was dependent upon two modes: *ethos* and *pathos*. Where *ethos* refers to the legitimacy of the preacher’s performance and is usually enforced by biblical authority, *pathos* is representative of persuasion through the audience’s emotions.⁴⁷ Finney’s “How to Preach the Gospel” lecture offers a guide for his readers that exemplifies *ethos* and *pathos* in action. For example, he contended that preaching should be conducted directly to, not about, the congregant.⁴⁸ In other words, the congregant must have a personal relationship with the preacher and more importantly, with what the preacher is preaching. This connection should make the congregant “*feel his guilt*” and not be “left to the

⁴⁵ Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 218.

⁴⁶ Finney, 223. Emphasis original.

⁴⁷ For more on Chesebrough’s use of *ethos* and *pathos* as they relate to Finney, refer to *Charles G. Finney*, pages 97-100.

⁴⁸ Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 223.

impression that he is *unfortunate*.”⁴⁹ These so-called sinners should ultimately recognize that their actions are criminal in the eyes of God, not pardonable, and should therefore be swayed away from a sinful lifestyle, else risk eternal damnation. Many times, this manifests through fear instilled in the congregant by the preacher. Thus, Finney created a personal connection between the congregant and himself in order to ensure a conversion experience and persuade the congregant out of sin. In his lecture, Finney advocated strongly for extemporaneous preaching in order to create this connection and most accurately disseminate the content of the lectures with urgency.⁵⁰

Extemporaneous preaching allowed for a more direct relationship between preacher and congregant. Since he was not bound to the page, the minister was able to make and keep eye contact with individual congregants. In *Preaching and the Rise of the American Novel* (2013), literary critic Dawn Coleman affirms that one of the major benefits of extemporaneous preaching is the production of “a unique sympathy between a minister and his hearers” and “a more kinetic, mesmerizing performance” than could ever be created by reading a text.⁵¹ By removing the barrier between preacher and congregant, the preacher was better equipped in his mission to save souls and inspire sanctification. Finney became famous for this mode of sermonizing, as it allowed him to stress the urgency of his message through body language and vocal choices.

Though extemporaneity was a popular mode of preaching for many revivalist ministers, some Protestant and evangelical leaders of the period were skeptical of the form, denouncing its closeness to the theatrics of the playhouse. As David Monod writes, “Not unlike those who today

⁴⁹ Finney, 231. Emphasis original.

⁵⁰ I should note that Finney is not the first preacher to stress extemporaneity. In eighteenth-century England, for instance, Methodist preachers John Wesley and George Whitefield adopted an extemporaneous mode before the style eventually reached the United States. Finney was the first, however, to attribute extemporaneity to a connection with the Passions.

⁵¹ Coleman, *Preaching and the Rise of the American Novel*, 37.

maintain that video games inure people to violence, religious leaders were concerned that the affective experiences audiences enjoyed in a playhouse could spill over and damage social proprieties.”⁵² Thus, the argument against extemporaneity is another argument that situated theatre practice as an evil component of antebellum American society. Finney shamed those who made the critique that extemporaneous preaching is too theatrical, as well as those who were unable to see how borrowing acting methods could be useful for preachers. He writes, rather scathingly, “If ministers are too stiff, and the people too fastidious, to learn even from an actor, or from the stage, the best method of swaying mind, of enforcing sentiment, and diffusing the warmth of burning thought over a congregation, then they must go on with their prosing, and reading, and sanctimonious starch.” He reminds his critics that “while they are thus turning away and decrying the art of the actor, and attempting to support ‘the dignity of the pulpit,’ the theatres can be thronged every night. The common-sense people will be entertained with that manner of speaking, and sinners will go down to hell.”⁵³ In other words, no matter what, the theatre will attract an audience. Actors have mastered a craft that continually draws a crowd. Preachers have the opportunity to learn from performers and entice theatre audiences away from the sinful playhouse. If preachers refuse to adopt cultural norms, however, this possibility is fruitless, and people will continue to find pleasure at the theatre. Similar to the practices employed by Sister Aimee Semple McPherson almost a century later, Finney did whatever it took to win souls, including borrowing from the subcultures that fellow evangelicals deemed too profane.

Nineteenth-century church leaders’ critiques of extemporaneous preaching did not stop at its reliance upon theatricality, however. Many argued that extemporaneity would lead to staleness in instruction for the congregation in that, without the text, the preacher cannot fully

⁵² Monod, *The Soul of Pleasure*, 16.

⁵³ Finney, 247-248.

drive home the crux of his message. Finney addressed this criticism in his memoir, arguing, “The man who writes least may, if he pleases, *think most*, and will say what he does think in a manner that will be better understood than if it were written; and that, just in the proportion that he lays aside the labor of writing, his body will be left free to exercise, and his mind to vigorous and consecutive *thought*.”⁵⁴ In other words, to preach organically is to draw deeper, more meaningful connections with the message of the sermon, thereby stressing the urgency of the matter to the congregation. Finney countered this argument against extemporaneous preaching, saying that, “It is impossible for a man who writes his sermons to arrange his matter, and turn and choose his thoughts, so as to produce the same effect as when he addresses the people directly, and makes them feel that he means *them*.”⁵⁵ Thus, in Finney’s view, it was not possible to have a direct connection with a congregant when trapped behind the page and therefore, the preacher risked the congregant’s conversion experience as a result of this bondage.

Indeed, extemporaneity allowed Finney to address the individual directly, theatrically engaging with specific members of the congregation throughout his sermons. For example, when sharing an important part of his message, he called the congregant, “Sinner!” , as opposed to “Sinners”: “Sinner! Your obligation to love God is equal to the excellence of his character, and your guilt in not obeying him is of course equal to your obligation. You cannot therefore for an hour or a moment defer obedience to the commandment in the text, without deserving damnation.”⁵⁶ By singling out the individual congregant and giving her the choice of right and wrong, Finney manipulated the congregant’s emotions. No one wanted to be the person to fail on the path toward sanctification. Presumably, no one wanted to be damned for all eternity.

⁵⁴ Finney, 244. Emphasis original.

⁵⁵ Finney, 242. Emphasis original.

⁵⁶ Finney, “Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts,” 84.

Near the end of “Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts,” Finney asked the congregant directly: “And now, sinner, while the subject is before you, will you yield?”⁵⁷ At that moment, he gave the individual a choice to act favorably or accept damnation. Such a final benediction is a familiar practice in nineteenth-century theatre practice. Often, melodramas with political or social messages ended by directly addressing the audience and convicting them of inaction. While these moments of separation from the action of the play were indeed scripted, they were performed as if they are improvised, allowing the audience member to connect with the actor, not the character. Playwright Dion Boucicault’s (1820-1890) *The Poor of New York* (1857), for example, is a play that comments on the effect of poverty on people after the Financial Panic of 1857. At the end of the play, the characters turn to the audience:

PAUL. [*To the public.*] Have the sufferings we have depicted in this mimic scene, touched your hearts, and caused a tear of sympathy to fill your eyes? If so, extend to us your hands.

MRS. FAIRWEATHER. No, not to us—but when you leave this place, as you return to your homes, should you see some poor creatures, extend your hands to them, and the blessings that will follow you on your way will be the most grateful tribute you can pay to the POOR OF NEW YORK.⁵⁸

Throughout *The Poor of New York*, the audience witnessed the rich taking advantage of those affected by the financial crisis and, through spectacle (including a burning apartment building) the problematic nature of ignoring such abuse. For audience members watching the play, the characters’ challenge to them to extend their hands to the poor was a final call to action. This is similar to Finney’s calling out of the individual sinner and asking if they will yield—in both the theatre and the revival service, the audience member was given a choice and was expected to respond favorably.

⁵⁷ Finney, 84.

⁵⁸ Boucicault, *The Poor of New York: A Drama in Five Acts*, 44–45.

Finney, understanding the utter importance of salvation and sanctified lives, stressed the urgency of these matters. He wrote of his shock when many people said they had “*never before felt* the pressure of present obligation.”⁵⁹ He argued that it is imperative for preachers to “Make the sinner see that *all* pleas in excuse for not submitting to God, are an act of rebellion against him.” He writes, “Until ministers learn how to preach so as to make *the right* impression,” until they perfect an extemporaneous mode of preaching, “the world never can be converted.”⁶⁰ He contended that a preacher free from the bonds of the page who, like an actor, was able to connect directly to his congregation to express the urgency of his content, was apt to initiate this all-important conversion experience for the congregant. In his words, “We can never have the full meaning of the Gospel, till we throw away our notes.”⁶¹ Finney’s theatricality flowed once he was no longer bound to his notes, suggesting that Word and delivery—*ethos* and *pathos*—must work symbiotically, else risk the salvation of the congregant.

“The sensation that will be produced by converting the place”⁶²: Creating Holy Sites of Performance

In the previous sections, I have discussed the theatrical and performance-based elements of Finney’s preaching itself. While his means of performing is a major piece of evidence for the influence of theatre practice on his sacred ministry, his creation of performance space and his use of props were also reminiscent of the theatrical performance of his day. In this section, I illuminate how Finney created sites of performance within his services, specifically in his use of a former playhouse as a permanent church space. I argue that the theatrical ghosts of Finney’s

⁵⁹ Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 231. Emphasis original.

⁶⁰ Finney, 232. Emphasis original.

⁶¹ Finney, 245.

⁶² Tappan, “History of the Free Churches in the City of New-York,” 29.

church space created a kind of Holy Ground, one that could not have existed without the presence of theatre.

In the 1830s, when Finney's New York City revivals seemed to maintain permanent residency, Finney began looking for a home pulpit from which to preach. This is revolutionary because revival preachers were famously itinerant, moving from town to town to win souls, making do with whatever temporary space they could find—from fields to tents.⁶³ The relationship between revival preacher and the audience was unique, however; as I have shown, Finney intended to create an individualized and participatory relationship with his congregation through his narrative preaching style and as I will soon show, with the indoctrination of the anxious bench. After leasing several buildings—including lecture halls, church spaces, and other available locales—Finney and his advisors sought a space big enough to cater to large crowds. In 1832, his benefactors Lewis Tappan and William Green signed a ten-year lease on a former theatre, the Chatham Garden Theatre in lower Manhattan.⁶⁴

Many people, including Finney himself, were apprehensive of this move, however, fearing the criticism that he would receive and nervous that such criticism would detract from his ministry. He asked Tappan, ““Is not the location too filthy, etc. for decent people to go there?””⁶⁵ The Chatham Garden Theatre was located in the Five Points neighborhood in New York, notorious for its gang activity, prostitution, and poverty. The theatre itself had originally been intended to serve all social classes. Built in 1824, the Chatham Garden Theatre, according to Jeanne Halgren Kilde in *When Church Became Theatre: the Transformation of Evangelical*

⁶³ With the rise of “antiformalist” preachers like Finney, the 1830s, New York saw a shift in the intention of religious architecture. Many evangelical denominations argued that Christian morality must be indoctrinated into the world through whatever means necessary—this included the creation of dedicated church spaces in former museums, presses, hotels, and theatres. For more on this shift, see Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre*, chapter 2.

⁶⁴ Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre*, 28.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*, 135.

Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America (2002), “had enjoyed a brief period of respectability, offering well-known actors at moderate prices, but a series of disappointing seasons had reduced its ability to attract respectable patrons, and by 1831 the Chatham’s reputation had suffered irreparable damage.”⁶⁶ The theatre housed a saloon and became a known location for prostitution. It makes sense, then, that Finney would be wary of occupying this space; he was afraid that the space’s history as a place of debauchery, alcoholism, and prostitution would turn the evangelical public off from visiting such a locale. Finney’s apprehension here is notable and verifies that although he was revolutionary in his preaching, he was very much aware of the ill-will against theatre practice that permeated evangelical circles throughout his historical moment.

Tappan eased Finney’s concerns, however, and encouraged the preacher to tap into the theatre’s history and original intention. He wrote,

The *sensation* that will be produced by converting the place, with slight alterations, into a church will be very great; and curiosity will be excited, in the city & out of it, to visit a place thus appropriated. I would preserve the *form* etc. of a theatre as much as possible.⁶⁷

Thus, Finney moved into the old theatre with the hope that “the church would put him back in touch with a class of people who were hungry to hear his message.”⁶⁸ Most likely a “class of people” referred to theatre-going folks who he believed desperately needed salvation. Holding church in a former theatre offered audiences a sense of familiar ease. Tappan’s point that building a church in a theatre would bring about sensation is also notable. Sensational experiences in the antebellum theatre were known facts. Indeed, many plays were billed with such language. Finney’s new home church was an intentional merging of church and theatre with

⁶⁶ Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre*, 28.

⁶⁷ Tappan, “History of the Free Churches in the City of New-York,” 29. Emphasis original.

⁶⁸ Griffin, “From Filth to Faith: Creating Holy Ground in New York’s Five Points,” 43.

the aim of drawing people in a theatrical way. Finney's eventual willingness to convert the old theatre into a holy space, despite the potential for negative press and despite his own misgivings about the Chatham Garden Theatre itself, adds to his revolutionary tendencies and readiness to engage with audience members in ways not yet seen before. It is this mentality—that the church could be used as a means of saving the Five Points—that redeemed the theatre as a holy space for Finney, and so he took a chance on Chatham.

Only slight renovations were made to the Chatham Garden Theatre before Finney opened his church. Finney's team married the needs for a dedicated church space with the former theatre's architectural legacy. Describing the audience-preacher relations within the Chatham Street Chapel, Kilde writes, "While Protestant churches to this point had favored the elevated placement of the minister in a raised pulpit, indicating his authority and proximity to God relative to the assembled audience," Finney's theatre "retained the prominent features of the relationship between the actor and the paying audience in which the performer had use of a large stage to attract the attention of the spectator."⁶⁹ Finney was very much on a stage, as opposed to behind an elevated pulpit, a sight familiar to many congregants had they seen a play at a nearby theatre. The stage of the original theatre was not altered, including its proscenium arch. A portable lectern was added. The only significant change included the addition of a raked house, disrupting the traditional dichotomy between clerical authority and the commonness of the congregant. Since the stage was also raked, audience members could see above the heads of the person in front of them, ensuring that Finney could look in the eyes of his congregants. Additionally, pews were added to the sides of the house in a semi-circle configuration. The house could easily fit 2,000 patrons.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre*, 33.

⁷⁰ Kilde, 32–37.

This new church was “haunted” by ghosts of a theatrical past, to apply theatre historian Marvin Carlson’s theory of ghosting. In his seminal work *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (2003), Carlson posits that memory “is always ghosted by previous experiences and associations while these ghosts are simultaneously shifted and modified by the process of shifting and recollection.”⁷¹ By *ghosting*, Carlson means something identical that an audience may have encountered before, now presented in an alternative context. This is particularly true in the theatre, especially in regard to architecture and to the actor’s presence on the stage. As Carlson writes, “The recycled body of an actor, already a complex bearer of semiotic messages, will almost inevitably in a new role evoke the ghost or ghosts of previous roles if they have made any impressions whatever on the audience.”⁷² The theatre’s architecture haunts performances, as it certainly did at Finney’s church services at Chatham. The combination of the theatre’s physical ghosts—the proscenium, the raked house, the large stage—reinvented the preacher-congregant relationship. As Kilde argues, “Although the visual link to a higher authority was severed, the preacher now had access to the performative authority of the actor.”⁷³ Within such a relationship, the preacher had the attention of the spectator and the ability to move them. Yet, there was still an equity among them, a literal demonstration that all people are worthy of salvation.

The physical space of the Chatham Street Chapel influenced Finney’s services in three significant ways, according to theatre historian Bradley Wright Griffin in his dissertation, “A Faith Performed: A Performance Analysis of the Religious Revivals Conducted by Charles Grandison Finney at the Chatham Street Chapel, 1832-1836” (2006). First of all, the “theatrical

⁷¹ Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, 2.

⁷² Carlson, 8.

⁷³ Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre*, 34.

legacy” made him aware of the audience’s need for a “holy worship space,” a physical locale as opposed to an itinerant, temporary space like those where he held camp meetings. Second, being in a former theatre “influenced his use of dramatic examples drawn from contemporary theatre and art,” growing his need to be relevant in the world and heightening his congregation’s encounter with affectual responses. Finally, “the arrangement of the seating created a custom-made environment that would ensure the success of the altar call.”⁷⁴ It is this altar call that I will next discuss.

“Some public manifestation or demonstration”⁷⁵: Creating Congregational Agency with the Anxious Seat

After the conversion of an upper-class woman at a revival in Rochester, New York, Finney “made a call” that all “that class of persons whose convictions were so ripe that they were willing to renounce their sins and give themselves to God, come forward to certain seats which I requested to be vacated, and offer themselves up to God, while we made them subjects of prayer.” At the end of this service, Finney invited people who were “anxious for their souls” to a reserved bench in the front of the congregation to initiate their conversion experience while he and the rest of the congregation prayed over them.⁷⁶ Additionally, new converts were provided with spiritual guidance and next steps in their journeys as Christians. This ritual experience caused people of all social classes and occupations to physically leave their seats and relocate to the front of the space in order to receive salvation. The anxious bench or anxious seat, as Finney called it, was a means of creating agency in the congregant for the state of her soul. Furthermore,

⁷⁴ Griffin, “A Faith Performed: A Performance Analysis of the Religious Revivals Conducted by Charles Grandison Finney at the Chatham Street Chapel, 1832-1836,” 38.

⁷⁵ Finney, *The Original Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, 237.

⁷⁶ Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*, 108.

the anxious bench as a theatrical prop cast the audience members as both performer and spectator, each role ensuring that souls were saved by the masses.

While salvation is a deeply personal decision, having to sit upon the anxious bench made the experience communal. As a result, Finney's incorporation of the anxious seat as a theatrical means of obtaining salvation has inspired many evangelical preachers today, who utilize the "altar call" as a mass means of (mass) conversion.⁷⁷ In his memoir, Finney recalls how and why he began using the anxious seat as part of his ministry. He writes:

I had never, I believe except in rare instances, until I went to Rochester, used as a means of promoting revivals, what has since been called "the anxious seat." I had sometimes asked persons in the congregation to stand up, but this I had not frequently done. However, in studying upon the subject I had often felt the necessity of some measure that would bring sinners to a stand. From my own experience and observation I had found, that with the higher classes especially, the greatest obstacle to be overcome was their fear of being known as anxious inquirers. There were too proud to take any position that would reveal them to others as anxious for their souls. I had found also that something was needed more than I had practiced to make the impression on them that they were expected then and there to give up their hearts; and something that would call them to act, and act as publicly to the service of Christ.⁷⁸

Finney relied on the anxious seat for several reasons. First of all, the anxious bench was originally his way of encouraging the participation of higher classes of people in his services. Many upper-class people felt anxiety about undergoing religious experiences in public, mainly because they thought an outright emotional response negated social respectability. To avoid this problem, Finney occasionally conducted conversion experiences and prayer meetings at congregants' homes. He eventually rejected this practice, however, and advocated that people be inspired into "some public manifestation or demonstration that would declare to all around them that they abandoned a sinful life then and there, and committed themselves to Jesus Christ."⁷⁹

⁷⁷ The altar call has been used on the public stage by the likes of Billy Graham (1918-2018), Benny Hinn (1952-), and T. D. Jakes (1957-).

⁷⁸ Finney, *The Original Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, 237.

⁷⁹ Finney, 237.

When people sat upon the anxious bench, they became “subjects of prayer,” not just in the gaze of the preacher, but in the vision of the whole congregation. Ideally, the urgency presented in Finney’s sermon would inspire people toward salvation, and since Finney no longer offered private counseling, people participated in the anxious bench to ensure eternal life with Christ. The success of the anxious bench suggests that people were more interested in securing salvation than they were in their own psychological comfort. This is also evident in how often Finney relied on the anxious bench in his preaching moving forward.

Secondly, the anxious bench ritual created “much excitement” for the people who witnessed it, instilling sensation in the audience and inspiring them to participate.⁸⁰ It was a public exaltation of one’s willingness to abandon a sinful lifestyle and live an evangelical life. Finney did not always utilize the anxious bench as a mode of conversion in his revivals, however. Before incorporating this practice, Finney occasionally asked those who wanted a conversion experience to stand so that they might be prayed for at their seats.⁸¹ This act, while still public, was more discreet as congregants were not forced to pass fellow members of their congregation on the way down to the altar, nor did they have to sit within the eyesight of the congregation. Because of this quasi-privacy, most of the congregation did not become excited or emotional and therefore did not desire to participate in the conversion experience themselves. Minimal sensation was created by this practice and as a result, there was not as much participation. The anxious bench was a strategic move, then, to insure more souls for the

⁸⁰ Finney, 237. Sensation, as I use it in this project, refers to the varied bodily responses caused by a moment of spectacle. In this instance, the anxious bench ritual is spectacle because it is a moment of visual and emotional excitement.

⁸¹ Griffin, “A Faith Performed: A Performance Analysis of the Religious Revivals Conducted by Charles Grandison Finney at the Chatham Street Chapel, 1832-1836,” 100.

Kingdom of God. As part of the ritual, congregants became part of the performance, heightening the theatricality for the participant and for the other congregants in the audience.

The anxious bench was eventually incorporated into Finney's services as a regular revivalist tactic to increase participation among all classes. Finney writes in his memoir, "It was soon seen that the Lord was aiming at the conversion of the highest classes of society. My meetings soon became thronged with that class. The lawyers, physicians, merchants, and indeed all the most intelligent class of society, became more and more interested, and more and more easily influenced to give their hearts to God."⁸² Finney was shocked at the high level of participation from people who took advantage of the opportunity to come to the altar for public conversion. His biographer, Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, speaks to the anxious bench's success in *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (1996), writing, "In anti-ritualistic evangelical Protestantism, the anxious bench may be said to have provided a public liturgy of repentance and rebirth that involved individuals together in community."⁸³ This practice served as a communal witnessing of the gift of salvation being bestowed upon fellow congregants. Seeing the event led to excitement, which led to a desire to participate for many in the congregation.

Many of Finney's evangelical contemporaries rejected the anxious bench, comparing it to something that could be seen in the theatre—to cheap spectacle. For example, in his dismissal of the anxious bench as an authentic mode of conversion, one critic argued that "conversion could be hurried along in this 'dramatic' way." He continues saying, "the movement of coming to the Anxious Bench . . . is always more or less theatrical," and therefore, permanent change could not come from it. Instead, it produced only "transient excitement to be renewed from time to time by

⁸² Finney, *The Original Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, 238.

⁸³ Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*, 109.

suitable stimulants presented to the imagination . . . The pulpit is transformed more or less into a stage. Divine things are so popularized, as to be at last shorn of their dignity as well as their mystery.”⁸⁴ While the critic denied the legitimacy of the anxious bench as a form of genuine conversion, his description of the anxious bench as theatrical illuminates how Finney relied on theatricality to emphasize his message. It is indeed ironic that the anxious bench reached the pinnacle of its success at the Chatham Street Chapel, which had previously been a theatre.

Perhaps the most dramatic addition to the Chatham Street Chapel was the anxious bench just below the stage, easily viewable from anywhere in the house. In previous usages at camp meetings, the anxious seat had been merely a makeshift bench. Since many revivals occurred outside or in rented spaces, the anxious bench could not always be seen by the congregants. At Chatham, however, it was central, and since the house was raked and in a semi-circle configuration, everyone could see it. As Griffin contends in “From Filth to Faith: Creating Holy Ground in New York’s Five Points” (2009), “When Finney invited members of the audience to come forward during the altar call, he was literally inviting them into the world of the stage.”⁸⁵ Finney capitalized on the set-up of the proscenium-style theatrical space to create a division between congregation and those congregants coming to the altar to receive salvation. The altar area became a sub-stage, allowing participants to step into the world of the actor and thereby having their own impact on their fellow congregants. The goal was to see the participant have a meaningful conversion experience that would inspire others to do the same. Additionally, as Lincoln A. Mullen explains in *The Chance of Salvation: A History of Conversion in America* (2017), the anxious bench separated believers and nonbelievers. “[Finney] did not equate going

⁸⁴ Quoted in Moore, “Religion, Secularization, and the Shaping of the Culture Industry in Antebellum America,” 229.

⁸⁵ Griffin, “From Filth to Faith: Creating Holy Ground in New York’s Five Points,” 45.

to the anxious bench with faith itself,” writes Mullen, “though he did equate *not* going to the anxious bench with infidelity.”⁸⁶ Thus, there existed an added pressure, as well as urgency, that pushed people toward participating in the ritual.

Participants became living examples of the gift of salvation when they left their seats and came down to the altar. Once again, the barrier of authority between preacher and spectator was deconstructed. When the audience member received salvation on the anxious bench, she or he shared authority with Finney. In this way, Finney exemplified a kind of divine other, a godly man to whom the multitude should look for guidance in Christian living. The spectator’s participation in the action exemplified that all are worthy of salvation and that there is no distinct difference between the preacher and the congregant; all fall short of the glory of God and must constantly work toward sanctification. The placement of the bench between the stage and the audience, as well as the raked house confirm this idea. In other words, there was essentially no escape from attention once one made the pilgrimage to the anxious seat. While previously spectators bestowed their attention on Finney, now they shared their attention with other congregants. By viewing such a practice, congregants would hopefully be moved enough to join their sisters and brothers on the anxious bench. In this way, the anxious bench was a form of sensational performance.

Both the utilization of the anxious bench and the creation of Holy Ground in a former secular space satisfied several of Finney’s methodological practices in his preaching. While those who were converted on the anxious bench were part of a congregation at large, Finney gave individualized attention and prayer to each person, emphasizing the notion that the preacher must appeal to each individual. Additionally, by preaching on a stage for a large audience, he

⁸⁶ Mullen, *The Chance of Salvation*, 31. Emphasis original.

had the freedom to move about the playing space and up the aisles in a way that allowed him to interact with individuals in the rows. Since Finney stressed the urgency of conversion and sanctification, the anxious bench provided a literal platform—a set piece or prop—for conversion to happen immediately, without the risk of a person’s soul remaining unsaved. Finney’s ministerial authority remained intact by using the anxious bench as a preaching tactic and was reinforced by holding church in a theatre. In other words, with the anxious bench located on a raised platform, the ritual of receiving salvation became a kind of performance from which, not unlike melodrama, spectators might internalize and apply a moral lesson to their own lives. The anxious bench is also a physical exercise that instilled in the audience a sense of sensation or excitement that inspired individuals to take advantage of the opportunity for conversion. One could argue, too, that being in a theatre allowed one to imagine the ghosts of such a space, recalling the stagecraft of previous productions during Finney’s sensational, narrative-based sermon.⁸⁷ Finney’s creation of performance space and props was a theatricalized construct on which he relied to further his evangelical message.

Conclusion

Charles Grandison Finney’s homiletical practice is a prime example of how evangelicalism, a counterculture within the United States, engaged with the world. The revivalist’s use of theatricality appropriated from the theatre of his day is evidence of this tension of becoming culturally adaptive for evangelical means. As Religious Studies scholar Lerone A.

⁸⁷ Bradley Griffin makes such an argument in “From Filth to Faith: Creating Holy Ground in New York’s Five Points.” He writes that in Finney’s vivid storytelling, congregants probably recalled the popular panoramas of the day to help them imagine what Finney described. Additionally, he surmises that while Finney’s message was certainly different than the spectacle-based dramas of the day, “his stage presence hailed not only the performers who had plied their trade on the Chatham boards, but also those actors who were currently performing on the stages of the Park and the Bowery.” For more, see Griffin, 43-45.

Martin writes in *Preaching on Wax: The Phonograph and the Shaping of Modern African American Religion* (2014), “In the nineteenth century, Charles Finney argued that God never revitalized Christianity nor advanced the church without the use of ‘new measures’ and new means of proclaiming the gospel. Adopting and copying popular entertainments, commerce, and communication, according to Finney, could and should be employed as the primary means of reviving the church.”⁸⁸ And so, it was. Finney saw the benefit of adapting a popular means of affective culture—theatrical practice—and he capitalized on the medium’s influence despite criticism from his contemporaries.

While performance was a major part of his methodology, Finney was sure to emphasize the fact that one cannot privilege theatricality and presentation over the content of the sermon or the ability to appeal to a specific issue in a person’s life, whether it be conversion or sin. A preacher, Finney argues, “should address the feelings enough to secure attention, and then *deal with the conscience*, and probe to the quick. Appeals to the feelings alone will never convert sinners.”⁸⁹ This balance of performance and content is symbiotic: without performance, the emotions cannot be utilized, and the message will not stick; without the message, the congregation will be “carried away as with a flood,” but this will be in vain, a fleeting moment of false hope.⁹⁰ For Finney, then, the effective preacher used the emotions of his congregant to solidify the very message that he attempted to convey about their lives. Only then will a conversion experience occur; only then will one become sanctified. In the next chapter, I analyze another evangelical figure that emulated a similar balancing of message and method: Harriet Beecher Stowe. Competing with the melodramatic adaptations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* upon the

⁸⁸ Martin, *Preaching on Wax*, 60.

⁸⁹ Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 241. Emphasis original.

⁹⁰ Finney, 241.

commercial stage—performances that she felt defiled her work—Stowe desired a means of engaging the world using a medium that would appeal to a wider audience. Her own dramatic adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, entitled *The Christian Slave*, was the answer to this call.

CHAPTER 2 – On the Stage, but not of the Stage: Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *The Christian Slave*

“It is though, with the present state of theatrical performances in this country,” wrote Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) in a letter to performer and activist Asa Hutchinson, “that any attempt on the part of Christians to identify themselves with [actors] will be productive of danger to the individual character and to the general cause.”¹ In 1852, Hutchinson (1823-1884), like many theatre managers and popular entertainers, sought Stowe’s blessing in the creation of a theatrical adaptation of her best-selling novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly*. Unsurprisingly, Stowe denied Hutchinson’s request, like those of many theatre managers and popular entertainers before him, on the basis that the theatre was a breeding ground for immorality. “If the barrier which now keeps young people of Christian families from theatrical entertainments is once broken down by the induction of respectable and moral plays,” Stowe wrote, “they will then be open to all the temptations of those who are not such.”²

Despite her rejection of the theatre and of adaptations of her novel for the stage, however, Stowe published her own dramatic adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1854, entitled *The Christian Slave*. The play toured on the abolition lecture circuit—or, clusters of platforms around the nation where white and black abolitionists lectured for the cause—in both the United States and England between 1854 and 1856. It was even allegedly performed at a few pro-slavery venues. Stowe wrote *The Christian Slave* in dramatic form, complete with dialogue and stage directions, which is significant since it was meant to be read and never produced by a theatre company. Each role was performed by Mary E. Webb, a free black woman whom Stowe sponsored throughout the 1850s until the performer’s untimely death in 1859. A successful

¹ Stowe, “To {ASA HUTCHINSON, 20 MARCH 1852},” March 20, 1852.

² Stowe.

orator, Webb had made a name for herself as a dramatic reader, lauded by the press for her skill. In 1856, Webb performed the play internationally at Stafford House in England, the home of the Duchess of Sutherland.

The very existence of *The Christian Slave* and its production history begs several questions: Why would Stowe adapt her novel into dramatic form? What impact does this adaptation have on the novel's message? More broadly, what does Stowe's appropriation of theatrical form say about the relationship between nineteenth-century American Christians and the popular theatre that many scholars argue Christians abhorred? This chapter contends that *The Christian Slave* is a representation of how Stowe engaged with and borrowed techniques from secular theatre in order to spread her message of anti-slavery to a broader audience.

Distinguishing her novel from the unauthorized melodramatic adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* famous in her day, *The Christian Slave* functions as a dramatized sermon and emphasizes the highly Christianized message of the novel. The form and function of *The Christian Slave* both read privately and performed by Webb illuminate the influences of the popular theatre layered throughout Stowe's adaptation, complicating the relationship between American Christianity and theatre practice and demonstrating how theatre was used by Christians as a mode of teaching abolition and race relations.

The information that exists on *The Christian Slave*, its performances, and its life beyond its own historical moment include two extant versions of the script, one published in Boston (Phillips, Sampson, and Co., 1855) and the other in London (Sampson, Low, and Co., 1856); both were sold at public readings of the play. Correspondences between Stowe and her sponsors illustrate Stowe's relationship with Webb, as well as Stowe's interpretation of the play's mission and success. Marketing posters, newspaper advertisements, and performance reviews from

abolitionist and evangelical publications reveal information about the play's impact and on Webb's performance. The majority of information on Webb's life, however, comes from a brief biographical sketch written by her husband, Frank J. Webb, published within the London edition of *The Christian Slave*. Very few scholars have studied this play, and those who have focus mainly upon the play's historical value.³ While this chapter certainly situates the play's historical and historiographical heritage, it also analyzes the play's evangelical impact and theorizes that the play and Webb's performance were theatrical agents in Stowe's abolitionist ministry.

Throughout this chapter, I analyze the role and function of Stowe's play, specifically bringing to light moments of theatricality inspired by the theatre, as well as how Stowe used theatricality as a device to emphasize her abolitionist message. I theorize that Stowe's performer, Mary E. Webb elevated Stowe's text, arguing that her black body was the spectacle that inspired in audiences a desire to support abolition. I compare Stowe's text to a secularized melodramatic adaption of Stowe's novel by George L. Aiken to show how Stowe borrowed elements from this play in both form and content. Before I analyze the play and its productions, however, it is necessary to understand more fully Stowe's religious affiliation, as well as her apparent rejection of theatre practice. Only then will the importance of Stowe's theatrical adaptation come to light.

³ See Black, "Abolitionism's Resonant Bodies: The Realization of African American Performance"; Clark, "Solo Black Performance Before the Civil War: Mrs. Stowe, Mrs. Webb, and 'The Christian Slave'"; Gardner, "'A Nobler End': Mary Webb and the Victorian Platform" and "Stowe Takes the Stage: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Christian Slave*"; and Mielke, *Provocative Eloquence: Theater, Violence, and Antislavery Speech in the Antebellum United States*. Additionally, see the digital archive, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture*.

**“A place of vain amusement”:
Situating Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Its Stage
Adaptations**

Stowe’s internationally best-selling novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* demonstrates the terrors of slavery within the United States and urges readers to accept abolition as God’s will for America. The novel offers the “good news” through fiction and was intended for an average, middle class, white female audience. Stowe adapted fiction to remain relevant in the world. As a result, the theatre adapted her work for the stage, which led her to adapt theatre in return with the creation of *The Christian Slave*. In this section, I briefly discuss Stowe’s religious heritage and her relationship with contemporary culture in order to understand how the evangelical author turned to theatre to reach an audience further than her readership. I also explain the theatre’s connection to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and how antebellum political and social norms placed upon these melodramatic adaptations, including minstrelsy, altered Stowe’s intentions for the novel.

Stowe was the daughter of Calvinist preacher Lyman Beecher (1775-1863) and wife to Calvin Ellis Stowe (1802-1886), a Congregationalist professor of Biblical Literature at Lyman Theological Seminary where her father was president. Deemed “America’s most popular evangelical communicator in the mid-nineteenth century” by Mark A. Noll in his landmark study *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (2005),⁴ Stowe developed an international presence with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and became a representative of American evangelicalism’s involvement with the abolitionist movement. Throughout her life, she was interested in ““showing the ways an evil influence is unknowingly exerted and the ways in which each and all can exert a good one,”” a mentality that certainly informed her literary and eventually, her dramatic work.⁵

⁴ Noll, *America’s God*, 232.

⁵ Quoted in Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe*, 60.

Stowe's literary practices—the novel and dramatic adaptation—are examples of the evangelical mentality to be in the world, not of the world. By appropriating secular practices for evangelical use, Stowe shared the Christian message in a way that was familiar, exciting, and appealing for her readership. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a huge success among Christians and non-Christians alike both in the United States and abroad. For instance, Stowe's biographer Joan D. Hedrick writes in *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (1995) that on a tour to Great Britain, those aboard the *Canada* could see as they approached Liverpool “a crowd of English men, women, and children who were straining for their first glimpse of the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.”⁶ “Uncle Tom Mania” swept the world, demonstrating the effectiveness of adapting to culture to make an impact.⁷

Stowe saw the work of the author as an evangelistic means of creation and sentimentalism as her tool to change people's hearts and minds. In other words, she believed the novel could be used to spread the Gospel if it appealed to human emotion. She writes in the preface to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, “The poet, the painter, and the artist now seek out and embellish the common and gentler humanities of life, and, under the allurements of fiction, breathe a humanizing and subduing influence, favorable to the development of the great principles of Christian brotherhood.”⁸ The novel for Stowe, then, was a means of evangelism, a way to present Christianity and its truths in a digestible popular form. Poetry and the fine arts could also be used for evangelism. Additionally, Stowe was a colonizationist, offering a solution in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that involved sending slaves to Liberia as opposed to seeing them freed in America.⁹ Her

⁶ Hedrick, 233.

⁷ For more on “Uncle Tom Mania” and the popularity of Stowe's novel and the theatrical adaptations that followed, see Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s*.

⁸ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, xvii.

⁹ A colonizationist, as Josephine Donovan describes, is a person in favor of returning African Americans to Africa as a means of solving the United States' race issues. For more information that situates Stowe as a colonizationist, see Donovan, “A Source for Stowe's Ideas on Race in ‘Uncle Tom's Cabin.’”

belief was that if white Americans converted former slaves to Christianity, they could go back to Africa and evangelize to other Africans, thus spreading the Gospel globally.

Like Charles Grandison Finney's preaching, Stowe's novel is rooted in sentimentalism, an artistic principle that manipulates readers' feelings in order to create change in their hearts. As Candy Gunther Brown argues, "Stowe's work reflected certain evangelicals' growing appreciation of feeling, as opposed to intellect, as a legitimate, even superior, faculty of religious knowledge that promoted useful action rather than idleness."¹⁰ Feeling served as Stowe's invitation to engage with her predominantly white female audience. For example, in order to convince a mother to feel for Eliza—an enslaved mother whose son, Harry, has recently been sold—Stowe does not focus on Eliza's status as a slave, but rather on the fact that unless Eliza escapes, she will be separated from her child. As Tracy C. Davis and Stefka Mihaylova write in their introduction to *Uncle Tom's Cabins: The Transnational History of America's Most Mutable Book* (2018), "For nineteenth-century readers and theatergoers in general, there was a growing ability to feel the horrors of slavery not only physically but also through physical manifestations of empathy."¹¹ Appealing to the empathy of other mothers inspired much of Stowe's readership to lend their voices to the abolitionist cause, not necessarily because they thought slavery as an institution was bad, but because slavery caused the immoral separation of parent and child.¹² Such is the impact of the sentimental novel as an evangelistic tool.

Ironically, Stowe was also a fierce opponent of the theatre and of participating in theatre practice, despite her embrace of the novel as a viable means of Christian evangelism. While some Christians rejected the novel, many embraced it as a medium ideal for Christian purposes.¹³

¹⁰ Brown, *The Word in the World*, 98.

¹¹ Davis and Mihaylova, *Uncle Tom's Cabins*, 10.

¹² For more on the appeal to the readers' sympathy, see Hendler, *Public Sentiments*, 14–15.

¹³ I discuss this idea more in chapter 3.

Drama, however, caused actors to lie to their audiences—they must pretend to be someone they are not. More importantly, actors deceived audiences by encouraging them to believe their version of “truth.” In 1855, Stowe wrote to the abolitionist attorney Wendell Phillips (1811-1884) that to her mind, “He who fabricates an untruth out of whole cloth, is less repulsive than he who so states true things by artful intermingling of false and effects of *stage lights* as to produce the impression of falsehood—the more particularly when it is done amid the cheerings of a popular audience.”¹⁴ In other words, to lie outright is of course morally reprehensible. However, to intentionally mingle truth telling with theatricality—with pretend—is to defile the truth, God’s truth. To present reality in front of an audience coerces them away from Christianity. Novels, on the other hand, offer truth in a way that allows people to make interpretive decisions for themselves about the plot and about what action to take after they finish the book. Thus, they are agents of Christianity. Stowe’s acceptance of other artistic media and not the theatre was rooted in the fact that the author, poet, and painter can be divinely inspired to create. Though these artists create fiction, they do so in a way that is truthful and does not cause fellow humans to accept lies.

Despite Stowe’s rejection of theatre, the theatre industry certainly embraced her work. As John W. Frick aptly outlines in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin on the American Stage and Screen* (2015), the mid-century theatre sought new works to appeal to the emerging mass audience.¹⁵ *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* appealed to theatre artists—playwrights, managers, and actors alike. Despite the length of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and its multiple subplots, the sheer sentimentalism, action, and storytelling within the novel provided the ingredients of good melodramatic theatre. Because copyright protections did not protect literary works from dramatic adaptations at this time,

¹⁴ Stowe, “To {WENDELL PHILLIPS, AFTER FEBRUARY 1855},” February 1855. Emphasis original.

¹⁵ Frick, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin on the American Stage and Screen*, 30.

several dramatists adapted *Uncle Tom's Cabin* without Stowe's authorization. While many were produced throughout 1852, the first truly successful production was George Aiken's (1830-1876) adaptation for George C. Howard's (1818-1887) Troy Museum in New York, which opened on September 27, 1852, just six months after the novel was published as a book.¹⁶

While many scholars note that Aiken's adaptation is the closest to Stowe's novel in terms of its abolitionist spirit and religious message, the production certainly capitalized on the melodramatic conventions of the day to appeal to the masses. As Frick notes, "Melodrama was what audiences wanted to see and it was what astute theatre managers gave them."¹⁷ Aiken provided the spectacular thrills that melodramatic productions promised. Most famously, "Eliza's flight" provided a sensational experience for audience members. As she is pursued by men and bloodhounds, Eliza, holding her child, crosses the icy Ohio River.¹⁸ This scene became ubiquitous in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* adaptations on stage and screen moving forward. As a result, however, as literary scholar Eric Gardner writes in *Major Voices: The Drama of Slavery* (2005), "Where the novel's clear emphasis was on the subjects of slavery and abolition, dramatizations emphasized spectacle; theater-goers were likely to come away amazed, but certainly *not* radicalized."¹⁹ Though less so than other adaptations, Aiken's production privileged spectacular thrills over religious ideology, much to Stowe's dismay.

Casting, too, was an issue in unauthorized adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for the stage, particularly in regard to race and black-face minstrelsy. Because of the political and social climate of the antebellum American stage, performers were almost exclusively white.²⁰ To

¹⁶ *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was first published serially over 40 weeks in *The National Era* beginning in 1851.

¹⁷ Frick, *Uncle Tom's Cabin on the American Stage and Screen*, 58.

¹⁸ Frick, 58-59.

¹⁹ Gardner, *Major Voices: The Drama of Slavery*, 259. Emphasis original.

²⁰ African Americans were not permitted to perform with white acting troupes or companies. In the 1840s, black performers were permitted to perform in minstrel troupes, but like their white counterparts, they also donned black face. Even still, black performers were not permitted to perform in "legitimate" dramas until deep within the

portray black characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, actors donned black face, rubbing their faces with burnt cork. Minstrelsy has a long, complicated, and deeply political history throughout nineteenth-century America. As Eric Lott outlines in his seminal work *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993), minstrel performance and the wearing of blackface was rooted in fear of the Other—of the male African American in particular—and in the maintaining of “some symbolic control over them.”²¹ Minstrel entertainments were a popular form of theatrics for all classes and those adapting *Uncle Tom's Cabin* took advantage of this theatrical commodity, adding minstrel songs and dances to Stowe's narrative. As Frick argues, “Since Tom on stage was firmly linked in the minds of the theatre going public with minstrelsy—its racial message(s) as well as its theatrical forms and conventions—the ambivalent and contradictory racial politics of the minstrel stage were consequently transmitted to theatrical *Uncle Toms*.”²² Thus, Stowe's characters played by a white actor in blackface were not easily separated from the theatrical devices inherent in the minstrel tradition. Obviously, this casting compromised the seriousness of Stowe's work and message. When *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was adapted for the stage, the message of abolition and Christianity, although present, took a back seat—the politics of race and the frivolity of spectacle took center stage.

On the surface, minstrelsy was rooted in lighthearted silliness, not the serious undertakings of the Christian abolitionist cause. This was certainly the case for the unauthorized melodramatic adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe, on the other hand, focused more on the message of both her novel and dramatic adaptation over the theatricality of race through minstrelsy. She was not innocent of incorporating racial stereotypes into her narrative, however,

nineteenth century. For more information on the history of African Americans on the antebellum stage, see Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors* (1984).

²¹ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 25.

²² Frick, *Uncle Tom's Cabin on the American Stage and Screen*, 17–18.

and evidence of minstrelsy exists in both pieces, most notably in the troublemaking character Topsy, who exemplifies the pickaninny caricature popular within minstrel performance at the time.²³ Whereas Topsy's character most closely suggests a minstrel heritage, Eliza has a different source. In the novel, Stowe makes it a point to emphasize Eliza's status as a mixed-race woman, insinuating that she is different from other slaves because she is partly white. In the novel she writes, "The traveler in the south must often have remarked that peculiar air of refinement, that softness of voice and manner, which seems in many cases to be a particular gift to the quadroon and mulatto women. These natural graces in the quadroon are often united with beauty of the most dazzling kind, and in almost every case with a personal appearance prepossessing and agreeable."²⁴ Stowe intended for readers to root for Eliza because they could see themselves in her—the way she looks, speaks, and acts. This made Eliza more attractive and more sympathetic to white readers.²⁵ Ultimately, though *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a call to end slavery, complicated antebellum racial politics permeate the novel.

Even steeped in spectacle and minstrelsy, unauthorized stage adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were considered "moral reform plays," or as Bruce A. McConachie describes, dramas that "warned the worldly of the entanglements of temptation and preached the bourgeois, Calvinistic virtues of industry, honesty, frugality, and deference to one's superiors."²⁶ These melodramas performed on the secular stage typically spoke to issues related to morality within antebellum society that transcended both Christian and secular spheres—temperance, abolition, and eventually suffrage, to name a few. Moral reform plays were billed as such, emphasizing the

²³ Topsy's minstrel identity is widely discussed in contemporary scholarship. See, for example, Frick, *Uncle Tom's Cabin on the American Stage and Screen* (2015); Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (2013); Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (2005); Nowatzki, *Representing African Americans in Transatlantic Abolitionism and Blackface Minstrelsy* (2010).

²⁴ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 10–11.

²⁵ Hochman, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Reading Revolution*, 49–50.

²⁶ McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 177.

sentimental nature of the piece before audiences even arrived at the theatre. Through her correspondence with Asa Hutchinson, Stowe argued that attending even the moral reform melodrama, people would be led to patronize morally reprehensible performances in the long run. Good Christians should avoid even these plays.²⁷

Stowe and other Christian voices tended to stand against using the stage as a method toward social reform. They argued that attending the theatre invited the spectator to emulate the immoral actions of the actors and characters on stage. For instance, in 1854, the New-York Association of Sunday School Teachers held a special meeting to consider a preamble and resolution against Christians attending the moral plays in the wake of “a dramatic representation of the work of Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe, entitled ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin,’ and other pieces of similar character” being performed within the theatre. With this organization’s views of theatre at the forefront of their decision making—“the Theatre, with all its associations and influences, is evil and pernicious”—the proposed resolution urged “followers of Christ to abstain from lending any countenance whatever to this new attempt to secure the patronage and support of the moral and Christian public for the theatre, and that we appeal to all who are connected with the Sunday School work to discourage every tendency toward such a movement.”²⁸ This example illuminates the general consensus of evangelicals’ opinions of theatre, and of adaptations of Stowe’s novel into melodramatic productions.

Christian organizations and news sources were not alone in rejecting adaptations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for the stage. Secular newspapers and magazines also shared their disapproval of such stage performances. For example, in an 1852 article for *The New York Herald*, James Gordon Bennett writes that anti-slavery narratives “is an improper subject for the drama. It is so

²⁷ Stowe, “To {ASA HUTCHINSON, 20 MARCH 1852},” March 20, 1852.

²⁸ “Theatres and Morals.”

mixed up and connected with the real affairs of society and government, that it is almost too tender and too delicate to be introduced in this way in public theatres.”²⁹ Similarly, in an unsigned article for *The United States Magazine of Science, Art, Manufactures, Agriculture, Commerce and Trade*, the author denounced mixing sensationalism with messages of anti-slavery writing, “If we are to have moral dramas and ‘religious mysteries’ represented on the stage again, as they were in the early days of Christianity, let us have them pure and intact, not mixed up with sickening scenes of vice and depravity.”³⁰ Many Americans agreed—from both Christian and non-Christian viewpoints—that church and stage should be separated. The moral reform melodrama complicated this dichotomy.

Despite myriad ways in which Stowe may have abhorred the theatre and refused to lend her support to those wanting to adapt her novel into a stage play, she allegedly attended the theatre to witness one of these unauthorized adaptations. According to Francis H. Underwood, a co-founder of the magazine *Atlantic Monthly*, he convinced Stowe between 1852 and 1853 to attend a production of Aiken’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* at the National Theatre in Boston. He recalls:

I asked Mrs. Stowe to go with me to see the play. She had some natural reluctance, considering the position her father had taken against the theatre, and considering the position of her husband as a preacher; but she also had some curiosity as a woman and as an author to see in flesh and blood the creations of her imagination. I think she told me she had never been in a theatre in her life. I procured the manager's box, and we entered privately, she being well muffled. She sat in the shade of the curtains of our box, and watched the play attentively. I never saw such delight upon a human face as she displayed when she first comprehended the full power of Mrs. Howard's *Topsy*. She scarcely spoke during the evening; but her expression was eloquent,—smiles and tears succeeding each other through the whole.

It must have been for her a thrilling experience to see her thoughts bodied upon the stage, at a time when any dramatic representation must have been to her so vivid. Drawn along by the threads of her own romance, and inexperienced in the deceptions of the theatre,

²⁹ [Bennett, “Anti-Slavery and Abolitionism in the Theatres.”]

³⁰ “New York Theatres and the ‘Moral Drama.’”

she could not have been keenly sensible of the faults of the piece or the shortcomings of the actors.³¹

This account is one of the few representations of Stowe *at* the theatre. According to theatre historian Thomas F. Gossett, Stowe's visit with Underwood is not the only time she attended the theatre. Gossett argues in *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* (1985) that Stowe attended performances of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at least three times.³² It is significant that Underwood used Topsy to discuss Stowe's positive response to the play since this character is rooted most intentionally in the minstrel tradition—in both Stowe's novel and especially on the stage. Though Stowe's putative visits to the playhouse seem to contradict her harsh opinions of the theatre, as does her appreciation of Topsy's minstrel trope, seeing the melodrama firsthand allowed her to see the impact her work had on an audience.

Stowe's visceral responses to Aiken's adaptation inspire another series of questions: what did Stowe's attendance at the theatre say about her relationship with secular practice from a position of faith? Since she openly fought against the theatre, what caused her to write a dramatic adaptation of her play just two years after the publication of the novel?³³ Additionally, what could she have borrowed from these experiences when writing *The Christian Slave*? Although it may not be possible to answer these questions with any degree of certainty, a careful analysis of the text of *The Christian Slave*, its production value, and its critical responses may illuminate how and why Stowe wrote her dramatic reading. First, however, I will analyze the function of the play's performer, Mary E. Webb, in order to capture the impact of Stowe's work on her

³¹ Quoted in McCray, *The Life-Work of the Author of Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 122.

³² Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture*, 262.

³³ While the first performance date is unknown, a letter to Elizabeth Stevenson Glaskell in May 1854 reveals that Stowe "recently dramatized Uncle Toms Cabin expressly for [Webb's] reading and her rendering of the various characters of the book has been pronounced unequalled." This is the earliest evidence for the first performance. (Stowe, "To {ELIZABETH CLEGHORN (STEVENSON) (MRS. WILLIAM) GLASKELL, 24 MAY 1854).

audiences, as well as the impact that black bodies had on white audiences in antebellum America.

“Expressly for the Readings of”: The Body Politics of *The Christian Slave*’s Performer

Moments of spectacle and sensation in performances of *The Christian Slave* transcended what is written on the page. One of the most meaningful agents of spectacle within *The Christian Slave* was the play’s only performer: a black woman named Mary E. Webb.³⁴ While it was not uncommon for actors to perform readings of classic plays, such as those by Shakespeare, it was unusual for a dramatic reading to be written “expressly for the readings of” a particular performer, as Stowe wrote *The Christian Slave* for Webb. In this section, I theorize that Webb’s body was a sensational tool that gave legitimacy to Stowe’s message through the presence of her black female body in front of a white audience, as well as her virtuosity, which allowed her to portray characters of various colors and genders. Stowe’s casting of Webb is important in understanding the performer’s effect on the text.

Webb was born in Massachusetts in 1828 to a “fugitive slave” woman and a Spanish father.³⁵ Although born in a free state, her mother was enslaved in Virginia and therefore, Webb, too, would not have been considered free in that state. According to her husband, Frank Webb, in a biographical sketch included in the published version of *The Christian Slave*, as a young girl, Webb developed a “fondness for poetry, and a taste for dramatic literature, quite uncommon in one of her youth—a taste which she cherished until it was developed into a genius for dramatic

³⁴ *The Christian Slave* is a one-woman reading and was not performed by any other dramatic readers or performers. Stowe wrote the play specifically for Webb.

³⁵ In a letter introducing the Webbs to her friend Elizabeth Cleghorn Glaskell, Stowe describes Webb’s mother as a “fugitive slave,” whose “freedom was secured by a heroic effort on the part of her mother a short time previous to her birth.” (Stowe, To {ELIZABETH CLEGHORN (STEVENSON) (MRS. WILLIAM) GLASKELL, 24 MAY 1854.)

reading, the high character of which has been universally conceded in her native country, notwithstanding the strong prejudice which prevails against the unfortunate race with which she is identified.”³⁶ The Webbs were married in 1845 when Mary was seventeen. They lived in Philadelphia where Frank owned an embroidery shop. When her husband had business troubles, Webb took action in order to provide for their family. She received voice lessons from a professor of elocution in Philadelphia and began her career as a performer of dramatic readings. Under the sponsorship of Harriet Beecher Stowe, she studied under Wyzeman Marshall of the Howard Athenaeum in the early 1850s.³⁷ Stowe even tutored her in Shakespeare. Though she eventually found success as a dramatic reader, it is worth noting that Webb adopted this profession as a means to provide for her family, illustrating her respectability.

Webb performed *The Christian Slave* in assembly rooms throughout Philadelphia in April of 1855 “before an audience containing a larger number of professional critics than had ever been before assembled in that city.”³⁸ A testament to her acting capabilities, she was nicknamed “the colored Siddons” by several news sources including the *New York Times*.³⁹ Sarah Kemble Siddons (1755-1831) was one of the most influential actresses of her time known for her classical, graceful acting style and emotional intensity. In regard to her performance in *The Christian Slave*, Stowe writes that Webb’s success was “attested by hundreds of notices from the pens of the most competent critics in this country.”⁴⁰ Stowe’s opinion of Webb’s

³⁶ Webb, “Biographical Sketch.” Frank Webb’s biographical sketch was published in the London version of *The Christian Slave*, which was sold to those who came to the readings. The sketch offered readers the opportunity to get to know the performer on a more intimate level and through her husband’s eyes. This is especially important because Stowe intended to win sponsorships for Webb while in England. Therefore, the sketch reveals that in addition to her blackness, she is married and respectable.

³⁷ Marshall was a respected actor. In addition to the Howard Athenaeum, he also performed at the Boston Theatre. He performed as late as 1883.

³⁸ Webb, “Biographical Sketch.”

³⁹ See “Special Notices” from *The New York Times*.

⁴⁰ Stowe, Harriet Beecher, “To {ELIZABETH CLEGHORN (STEVENSON) (MRS. WILLIAM) GLASKELL, 24 MAY 1854,” May 24, 1854.

abilities was shared by critics who saw her work. For example, in the summer of 1856, Webb performed *The Christian Slave* in London in the great hall of the Stafford House, home of the Duchess of Sutherland. In *The Illustrated London News*, the reviewer notes that although she did not match the exuberance of her melodramatic contemporaries, “Mrs. Webb showed that she possessed considerable and rather peculiar dramatic power. With very little gesticulation, and simply by judicious modulations of the voice, combined with earnest and effective delivery, she gave great effect to the last dark, powerful scenes of the drama.”⁴¹ Simply reading the play with feeling behind a podium, as well as her ability to switch between characters with ease, Webb gave an effective and affective performance. She found relative success with *The Christian Slave* and as a result, she toured around New England and England performing other dramatic readings, including passages from Shakespeare’s works and Henry David Longfellow’s 1855 epic poem “Hiawatha.”⁴²

Webb’s involvement in *The Christian Slave* was widely publicized, her race plastered upon the marketing materials. On a poster advertising Webb’s performance at the Stafford House in London, the text reads in bold, “By permission of Her Grace the Duchess of Sutherland. Mrs. Mary E. Webb (A coloured Native of Philadelphia) will give a Dramatic Reading From the Popular Work of Uncle Tom’s Cabin As arranged for her Reading expressly by Mrs. Beecher Stowe, Which will take place on Monday Afternoon next, July 28, 1856, in the Hall of Stafford House.”⁴³ Not only was the audience aware of Webb’s skin color as she performed, but more strikingly, before they even arrived at the performance. In *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (2010), performance scholar Harvey Young notes

⁴¹ “Dramatic Reading by a Coloured Native of Philadelphia,” 123.

⁴² Clark, “Solo Black Performance before the Civil War,” 324.

⁴³ Railton, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture Archive.”

that within the social constructs built within white society, the black body is inherently meant to be seen. He writes, “[The Black Body] is a projection that is always on display, always on stage, and always in the process of its own exhibition.”⁴⁴ Webb’s blackness was no exception. Her existence was billed as something different and important to see.

Interest in her color did not stop at blackness, though, but at her “exoticism” as a mixed woman of African and Spanish descent. In an 1855 letter to American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882), for instance, Stowe writes that Webb was given the best of both her parent’s traits—her mother’s Mandingo coloring and her father’s Spanish blood. “Indeed as far as appearance goes she might easily pass for a Spanish lady—for which she is generally taken,” she writes. Stowe took great interest in Webb’s color, situating her as mixed, but quick to praise Webb for embracing her blackness. She writes of Webb, “I honor the feeling which dictated her reply to a gentleman who proposed this to her—No—she said with passionate earnestness—what deny my poor old kind mother—no—not if my father was a king—and I could gain all the honours in the world by it—I will *never* disown my mother’s race!”⁴⁵ Stowe’s focus on Webb’s skin color insinuates that Webb was just dark enough to make a sensational impact on her audience and to add a level of authenticity to Stowe’s words. Indeed, her mixedness itself was enough to cause interest in audience members.

Such a focus on Webb’s mixedness, though disturbing, was highly strategic on Stowe’s part. Many contemporary scholars have discussed the aesthetics of the black body, as well as the black female body, in antebellum America.⁴⁶ The majority of scholars agree that, after slaves

⁴⁴ Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 135.

⁴⁵ Stowe, Harriet Beecher, “Harriet Beecher Stowe to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 4 August 1855.,” August 4, 1855.

⁴⁶ See, for instance, Bennett and Dickerson, editors, *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women* (2001); Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (2005); Wallace-Sanders, editor, *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: the Black Female Body in American Culture*; Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (2002).

were brought to North America, the image of the black female body was steeped in hypersexuality and grotesqueness. Nowhere was this more prevalent than in hysteria over “the Hottentot Venus,” or Sara “Saartjie” Baartman (1789-1815), a South African Khoikhoi woman whose protruding buttocks made her the object of the white (male) gaze and scientific study even after her death. In her essay “The ‘Batty’ Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body” (2003), Janell Hobson notes that “the factors of beauty, sexuality, and disability are merely cultural concepts, which are often projected onto particular bodies, viewed and constructed as ‘deviant.’” Baartman was considered deviant simply because she was an African woman with a body different from the typical white female’s. Hobson continues, “In this construction of her sexualized and ‘disabled’ body, Westerners can prescribe racial and cultural differences-and, hence, their ‘superiority’ as Europeans in comparison with African people and cultures.”⁴⁷ Baartman’s grotesque sexuality instilled both fear and sexual desire in the white imagination, particularly in the white male. Othering the black female body was commonplace in antebellum America for similar reasons. Additionally, as Beverly Guy-Sheftall notes in “The Body Politic: Black Female Sexuality and the Nineteenth-Century Euro-American Imagination,” (2002) “Whites felt that notions about the ‘ideal woman’ did not apply to Black women because the circumstances of slavery had prevented them from developing qualities that other women possessed and from devoting their lives to wifhood and motherhood, the proper roles for women.”⁴⁸ Black women were consistently belittled because, in the white imagination, their grotesque sexuality prevented them from meeting the expected responsibilities of women at this time: to run the home.

⁴⁷ Hobson, “The ‘Batty’ Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body,” 90.

⁴⁸ Guy-Sheftall, “The Body Politic: Black Female Sexuality and the Nineteenth-Century Euro-American Imagination,” 23.

Thus, although it was important for Webb to be black because her body legitimized Stowe's words, it was more important to separate Webb from the common understanding of blackness, especially from being considered a black woman. Giving Webb "access" to whiteness allowed her audiences to slip in and out of racial difference. This is especially important because Webb played all of the parts in the dramatic reading, from the titular Uncle Tom, to the fugitive slave Eliza, to the angelic white savior Little Eva, to the menacing slaveholder Legree. Thus, I argue that while readings of *The Christian Slave* may have been devoid of the overtly spectacular moments that were present in stage adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the inclusion of a black actress performing all the roles on stage—black, white, male, and female—was a mode of sensation, especially because Webb's aesthetic (and Stowe's pushing of such aesthetic) allowed for a kind of racial passing in and out of characters.

Reviewers, too, noted Webb's aesthetic difference. *The Illustrated London News* described her as "the daughter indeed of a woman of full African blood; but her father was a European. Her colour is a rich olive, and her features are remarkably delicate and expressive."⁴⁹ It is no coincidence that Webb's skin color was advertised, particularly using adjectives such as "delicate," which certainly referred to her lightness in contrast to the average black woman's. Webb's Afro-European genealogy was not only an audience draw, but her mixed-race status was also necessary in separating her from black people just enough to make a statement without crossing a line. Webb's body read as black because she was not white, but her lightness allowed white people to empathize with her more than they could a dark-skinned woman. In this way, Webb's body *is* spectacle.

⁴⁹ "Dramatic Reading by a Coloured Native of Philadelphia," 122.

In her study of nineteenth-century spectacle as a mode of social reform, *Spectacles of Reform: Theater and Activism in Nineteenth-Century America* (2014), theatre historian Amy E. Hughes defines spectacle as it was used in the nineteenth century as a theatrical construct that could not operate without relationship to the physical body: the body as spectacle (i.e. circus freaks), in spectacle (i.e. actors in melodramas) and at spectacle (i.e. audience members witnessing the spectacle).⁵⁰ This first idea, the body *as* spectacle, is helpful in explaining how Webb's appearance in performances of *The Christian Slave* was itself an act of spectacle. Voyeuristic displays of the human body that were consumed by the general theatre and entertainment-going public in the nineteenth century, as Hughes posits, "invited patrons to *look differently*."⁵¹ Those bodies that were stared at for their differences were commodified and consumed by the general public. It is important to note that Webb was *not* looked at as a "freak" the way Sara Baartman was stared at and studied. In fact, Webb's status as a popular dramatic reader, as a wife, and as someone being sponsored by a figure like Stowe elevated her significantly in terms of respectability. Nevertheless, the billing of her race on *The Christian Slave*'s marketing materials, Stowe's emphasis on her mixedness, and her ability to code switch were consumed by her audience and thus, her body was a form of spectacle.

Webb playing all the roles in the reading further articulated people's desire to see her perform. Remarkably, a reviewer from *The Illustrated London News* argued her most believable portrayal was Uncle Tom. Adopting a "hoarse negro voice, the solemn tones—those of a man living in the world which seems to be a perpetual contradiction to the laws of that God in whom he firmly believes—were very striking." Webb performed Uncle Tom with "piety,"

⁵⁰ For a full explanation of each of these classifiers, see Hughes, *Spectacles of Reform*, chapter 1.

⁵¹ Hughes, *Spectacles of Reform*, 19. Emphasis original.

“resignation,” “humility,” and “the confidence of Tom’s Character.”⁵² Her interpretation of Uncle Tom was rewarded with applause from the nobility gathered in the Duchess of Sutherland’s home. A review from the *London Herald* lauded her ability to change between characters, as well: “The more serious portions of the reading were, we thought the best; but to the nationalities of Sam, Aunt Chloe, and other well known personages, she did not fail to communicate the comic tinge which the graphic dialogue of Mrs. Stowe so immediately suggests.”⁵³ Not only was Webb acting through vocal and occasional physical articulation, but she was a virtuoso, playing all the roles in the piece, both male and female. As Laura L. Mielke confirms in *Provocative Eloquence: Theater, Violence, and Antislavery Speech in the Antebellum United States* (2019), “While Webb presented herself as a respectable and accomplished free woman of color, through the dramatic reading she voiced the traumas of enslaved African Americans and the enabling cynicism and amorality of their white masters.”⁵⁴ Webb offered to her audiences a means of bridging the divide between black and white; her skin color added authenticity to the black characters, and the audience could also see themselves in her representation of white characters. Watching a woman of color perform male and female roles of both black and white skin colors is a moment of spectacle that creates sensation within the spectator. As her husband describes, “the audience lost the mulatto in the artiste,” allowing Webb to transition in and out of race and gender to play various characters.⁵⁵

Even as a virtuoso transitioning between race and gender, though, Webb’s blackness allowed audiences to connect even more deeply to black characters within *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. This reiterates what Alex W. Black calls in her article, “Abolitionism’s Resonant Bodies: The

⁵² “Dramatic Reading by a Coloured Native of Philadelphia,” 123.

⁵³ “Another ‘Uncle Tom’ Speculation in England.”

⁵⁴ Mielke, *Provocative Eloquence*, 60.

⁵⁵ Webb, “Biographical Sketch.”

Realization of African American Performance” (2011), a “spectacle of the body.”⁵⁶ If those attending a reading of *The Christian Slave* were to also watch Aiken’s adaptation, for example, they did not see authentic blackness portrayed on stage and therefore, the message of anti-slavery was lost from its lack of authenticity. As I have discussed earlier, performers in melodramatic adaptations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were white wearing black face. Because of this, they were never able to sensationalize the authentic black experience in a way that Stowe intended for her novel. With the grotesqueness of black face unescapable, audiences could always recognize the white actor performing blackness in a stereotypical, stock manner. Webb’s performance removed the satirical from Stowe’s characters and added a layer of authenticity to the work. A black body performing black suffering legitimized an issue otherwise trivialized through the use of blackface.

Webb’s success transcended the abolitionist lecture circuit. Stowe wrote to Lady Hatherton asking for her patronage in support of Webb and her husband, writing of Webb’s acting, “Her success has been so great that even Pro-Slavery Lyceums have broken through the prejudices of colour so far as to solicit her assistance in their courses.”⁵⁷ Webb performing at pro-slavery houses and to positive, or at least respectful reviews, is significant. A black woman entering a space that intentionally refused to advocate for slaves is itself a form spectacle that people wanted to see. Furthermore, *The Liberator*, a nineteenth-century abolitionist magazine, argued that telling the Uncle Tom story in a “new medium” helped the message of the novel to “find access to thousands of hearts, and so hasten the day when the millions of whom he is representative shall shake off the fetters of cruel bondage, and stand erect in the dignity of that

⁵⁶ Black, “Abolitionism’s Resonant Bodies,” 629.

⁵⁷ Stowe, “Manuscript Letter,” May 24, 1856.

freedom wherewith God has endowed all who bear His image.”⁵⁸ Judging by this published response to the play, it is evident that using Webb as the storyteller of the now-famous *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* narrative was an opportunity to change the hearts and minds of those who were in favor of slavery and to further emphasize what Stowe was trying to do with her novel in the first place. Webb’s creation of sensation through the very presence of her black female body and through her virtuosity in performance served to spread Stowe’s message in an original and powerful way. Situating the play through Webb’s eyes helps contemporary readers to understand more deeply the message and function of Stowe’s text, which I turn to in the next section.

“This is God’s curse on slavery!”⁵⁹: The Function of Text in *The Christian Slave*

The fact that Stowe chose to dramatize her play to be read publicly, not produced, is important in understanding the play’s message. In her study on the function of performance on the antislavery circuit, Mielke analyzes the function of the dramatic reading as a genre of social reform, or moral suasion. She asserts that dramatic readings “represented a genteel compromise between the theatrical production and private or domestic reading in an era when . . . liberal Christian leaders had begun to defend the potential of the dramatic arts for moral instruction, but anti-theatrical prejudice had not quite breathed its last.”⁶⁰ While Stowe certainly was not of the camp that defended the theatre for its moral potential, her focus for *The Christian Slave* was on the text, which emphasized the message of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, particularly in its support of abolition and Christian faith. In this way, the dramatic reading was sermonistic; theatricality did not

⁵⁸ J, “[Review of *The Christian Slave*].”

⁵⁹ Stowe, “To {WENDELL PHILLIPS, AFTER FEBRUARY 1855},” February 1855, 10.

⁶⁰ Mielke, *Provocative Eloquence*, 59.

prevent the audience from receiving the word preached by the preacher, or in this case the performer, Mary E. Webb.

It is important to note that dramatic readings in the nineteenth century did not only involve the performance of plays—professional readers and writers performed selections of novels, short stories, and poetry, as well. Charles Dickens (1812-1870), for instance, read portions of his works in the latter days of his career. Additionally, famous actors of the era toured Europe and the United States reading Shakespearean and other classic plays.⁶¹ Such performances were used as a means of publicity for the artist's work, as well as to build a kind of celebrity for the readers. Thus, dramatic readings manifested in many different ways. However, plays that were meant to be read were inherently more dramatic than fiction, as they were written in a similar format as plays written for production. In other words, these plays still fell under the Aristotelian understanding of drama. Aristotle argued that the major differences between drama and the epic poem is that the latter expresses plot through narrative form while the former does so through action. Thus, drama is arguably more impactful because it is more assertive and truer to life, even if it is only read aloud.⁶² Additionally, unlike Dickens, who read his own work, plays meant to be read often featured an actor or actress as the performer, like Webb in *The Christian Slave*. This, too, added a theatrical element to dramatic readings in the nineteenth century.

The Christian Slave was Stowe's counterpoint to the popular adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for the stage that saturated the narrative in spectacular effects and detracted from the message of Christian social reform. Stowe maintained an anti-slavery mentality throughout *The*

⁶¹ Mielke, 59.

⁶² For more on the Aristotelian differentiation between epic drama and tragedy, see Aristotle's *Poetics*, chapters 23 and 24.

Christian Slave and this message was overt for her audiences without the distraction of theatricality—instead of tricks, Stowe’s characters sermonize. As Mielke concludes, “*The Christian Slave*, as written for and read by Webb and as published in response to the theatrical appropriation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, indicated the kind of performance it was *not* and which performances could serve as a moral resource for all Christians, enslaved and free.”⁶³ The play corrected the secular adaptations’ missteps and was a reminder for Stowe’s audiences of the importance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s message.

Stowe’s play captures moments from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* almost verbatim and reformulates them in dramatic form, privileging message over spectacle. Indeed, no text from a secular adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is as transparent in its anti-slavery and Christian sentiments as *The Christian Slave*. This targeted rhetoric begins early in the first act when George Shelby tells his wife that he must sell both Uncle Tom and Eliza’s child, Harry. After imploring her husband to find another option, reminding him that they love Uncle Tom and have gotten to know all of their slaves well, Mrs. Shelby exclaims:

This is God’s curse on slavery!—a bitter, bitter, most accursed thing!—a curse to the master, a curse to the slave! I was a fool to think I could make anything good out of such a deadly evil. It is a sin to hold a slave under laws like ours. I always felt it was—I always thought so when I was a girl—I thought so still more after I joined the church; but I thought I could gild it over. I thought, by kindness, and care, and instruction, I could make the condition of mind better than freedom—fool that I was!⁶⁴

In this account, Mrs. Shelby admits that slavery is evil and that those who own human lives doom themselves and their slaves. Her pain is palpable and induces sympathy within the audience. In response, Mr. Shelby tells his wife that she is sounding more like an abolitionist every day, chastising his wife for her political and moral beliefs. She responds to his critique,

⁶³ Mielke, *Provocative Eloquence*, 73.

⁶⁴ Stowe, *The Christian Slave, A Drama Founded on a Portion of Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 10.

“Abolitionist! If they knew all I know about slavery they *might* talk. We don’t need them to tell us. You know I never thought slavery was right—never felt willing to own slaves.”⁶⁵ Mrs. Shelby insists she knows more about the horrors of slavery than abolitionists because she sees the practice firsthand. In this scene, *The Christian Slave* functions as a sermon in favor of abolition, contrasting greatly with Aiken’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In Aiken’s version, Eliza overhears her master speaking with the slave trader, Haley, about selling her son and Uncle Tom. The conversation is not rooted in religious or abolitionist rhetoric and the audience does not have time to grieve with the Shelby family. Thus, Mrs. Shelby’s sermonizing in *The Christian Slave*, and more importantly, Webb’s portrayal of this character, allows the audience to feel Mrs. Shelby’s pain resulting from the business of slavery.

Sermonic rhetoric against slavery continues in the second act of *The Christian Slave* which offers multiple perspectives on the slavery debate, representing an old way of thinking and a more forward-thinking approach. Marie St. Clare, Eva’s mother, is a Southern woman holding a conservative point of view regarding slavery, arguing that “there’s no way with servants, but to *put them down*, and keep them down.”⁶⁶ The St. Clares’ cousin Ophelia, a woman with progressive New England sensibilities, challenges Marie’s anti-abolitionist tendencies, insinuating that they are non-Christian. In a conversation about slavery, Ophelia asks her cousin-in-law:

OPHELIA: Don't you believe that the Lord made them of one blood with us?

MARIE: No, indeed, not I! A pretty story, truly! They are a degraded race.

OPHELIA: Don't you think they 've got immortal souls?

MARIE: [*Yawning.*] O, well, that, of course—nobody doubts that. But as to putting them on any sort of equality with us, you know, as if we could be compared, why, it's impossible!⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Stowe, 10. Emphasis original.

⁶⁶ Stowe, 26. Emphasis original.

⁶⁷ Stowe, 27.

Marie's views of slavery are clear: she is pro-slavery, believes her whiteness makes her superior to the African race, and justifies these opinions in the guise of Christian belief. Additionally, in a conversation discussing the pros and cons of slavery, Ophelia asks her cousin St. Clare if he thinks the Bible justifies slavery. He replies that he believes man's interpretation of the scripture supports slavery: "Now, when any one speaks up, like a man, and says slavery is necessary to us, we can't get along without it, we should be beggared if we give it up, and, of course, we mean to hold on to it—this is strong, clear, well-defined language; it has the respectability of truth to it; and, if we may judge by their practice, the majority of the world will bear us out in it."⁶⁸ St. Clare also asks, "Suppose that something should bring down the price of cotton once and forever, and make the whole slave property a drug in the market; don't you think we should soon have another version of the Scripture doctrine?"⁶⁹ Ultimately, St. Clare preaches that slavery is a convenience for those who take part in it but when the need no longer exists for slaves, or if people can no longer afford to maintain slaves, there exists no need to interpret the Bible as they see fit to justify their choices.

Through a performed representation of Little Eva, Stowe offered her audience a new way of thinking about slavery and more specifically, black people. While Marie represents a more traditional view of the South's response to slavery up until this moment, Eva signifies an evangelical hope for her family to rid themselves of their pro-slavery, non-tolerant ways. According to her mother, Eva "always seems to put herself on an equality with every creature that comes near her. It's a strange thing about the child. I never have been able to break her of it."⁷⁰ Despite being taught to see slaves as inferior, Eva sees through slavery and into the heart of

⁶⁸ Stowe, 33.

⁶⁹ Stowe, 33.

⁷⁰ Stowe, 26.

the person—the mark of a compassionate Christian. This manifests in the bonds that Eva forms with everyone in Act Two, particularly Uncle Tom and Topsy. Regarding her relationship with Uncle Tom, St. Clare says to Ophelia, “Tom, now, is a hero to Eva; his stories are wonders in her eyes, his songs and Methodist hymns are better than an opera, and the traps and little bits of trash in his pocket a mine of jewels, and he the most wonderful Tom that ever wore a black skin.”⁷¹ From this passage and through Webb’s performance as Eva, the audience understands that Eva is fascinated by her friend Tom. He is a person from which to learn Christian values and to play, not someone to belittle. When asked by her father if she would like to live without slaves as people do in New England or remain living in her house, Eva chooses stay. This is not because she enjoys being served, but rather, “it makes so many more round you to love, you know.”⁷² Eva, then, is the white face of a new standard of Christian tolerance for slaves. Webb’s performance of the character encouraged audiences to remember their own childhood innocence and to adopt a blind love for people.

The Boston publishing house Phillips, Sampson & Company published *The Christian Slave* in 1855 to be sold at performances. This was not an entirely uncommon practice at dramatic readings; certainly, Dickens sold his work in tandem with the dramatic readings of his work. However, the play was not circulated widely to those who did not see Webb’s reading. Nevertheless, selling copies of the text made Stowe’s words more accessible and more enjoyable to read and perform at home.⁷³ Additionally, as Gardner points out, printing the text “provided an opportunity to circulate the play in a cheap paperback edition, and so to move Stowe’s dramatization of her novel into the land of family/amateur theatricals and reading as closet

⁷¹ Stowe, 30.

⁷² Stowe, 33.

⁷³ As I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, many families read and performed closet dramas and dramatic readings from their home as a mode of family bonding and Christian moralizing.

drama.”⁷⁴ No matter the reason, Stowe’s adaptation provides evidence for the impact of performance on sentimental texts. Seeing, hearing, and reading the words coming directly from a character arguably stirred more sympathy in dramatic form than from reading a novel, and therefore added more urgency to Stowe’s words. By adapting theatrical form, Stowe used a widely accepted mode of entertainment to convince people to become abolitionists, despite her evangelical hesitancy regarding the form.

“Goes to the piano, and plays and sings”⁷⁵: Elements of Performance in *The Christian Slave*

The Christian Slave was never performed in mainstream theatres, however those attending the reading had most likely seen or heard of one of the unauthorized adaptations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. *The Christian Slave* exhibits signs of Stowe’s own theatrical knowledge in the writing, particularly with the use of stage directions and minstrel music.⁷⁶ I argue that *The Christian Slave* was an opportunity to compete with Aiken’s plays by appealing to a theatergoing audience. This final section highlights the moments of theatrical entertainment that were appropriated from theatre and drama within the text and performance of *The Christian Slave* and attempts to identify Stowe’s intentions for her theatrical appropriation.

For those listening to *The Christian Slave* during performance, the most obvious form of theatricality was Webb’s use of dialect as she weaved between characters. Stowe incorporated an intentional use of dialect throughout her novel and its dramatic adaptation to denote both the differences among slave characters and the “authenticity” of slave characters versus white

⁷⁴ Gardner, *Major Voices: The Drama of Slavery*, 6.

⁷⁵ Stowe, *The Christian Slave, A Drama Founded on a Portion of Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 29.

⁷⁶ *The Christian Slave* was performed at religious halls such as the Tabernacle Theatre and the Tremont Temple. According to Stowe, it was also performed at pro-slavery halls, as well as other performance halls around New York and New England, though not much evidence exists to support these readings.

characters. In order to dictate to the performer that a dialect is necessary, however, Stowe wrote the words phonetically. For example, in an early scene in *The Christian Slave*, Aunt Chloe bakes a cake for Uncle Tom and George Shelby who is sharing his reading lessons with Uncle Tom. As she cuts the cake, Aunt Chloe exclaims, “La bless you! Mas’r George wouldn’t be for cuttin’ it wid dat ar great heavy knife? Smash all down—spile all de pretty rise of it. Here, I’ve got a thin old knife I keeps sharp a purpose. Dar now, see!—comes apart light as a feather. Now eat away; you won’t get anything to beat dat ar.”⁷⁷ From this passage, copied directly from the novel, both audience member and reader immediately associate the speaker with a generalized slave dialect. Therefore, Stowe’s audience engaged with these slave characters in a way that then seemed “authentic” but stereotypical and offensive to modern sensibilities. Achieving authenticity was important to Stowe, however. Through Webb’s performance, *The Christian Slave* brought to life Stowe’s characters in a way that the novel could not and therefore compelled audience members to see them not as they envisioned them in their own imaginations, but as they were created and performed.

Analyzing *The Christian Slave* in comparison with secular adaptations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe’s use of theatricality through dialect in this way is overt. Aiken also included a generalized dialect for his slave characters, but in a way less explicit than Stowe. While the actors may have heightened the dialect in performance, those who compared its text to *The Christian Slave* could certainly see the difference in tone.⁷⁸ For instance, in Aiken’s adaptation, when Uncle Tom and Aunt Chloe learn of the Shelby’s plan to sell Uncle Tom, Aunt Chloe says to her husband:

Well, old man, why don’t you run away, too? Will you wait to be toted down the river, where they kill niggers with hard work and starving? I’d a heal rather die than go there,

⁷⁷ Stowe, *The Christian Slave, A Drama Founded on a Portion of Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 6.

⁷⁸ Aiken’s play was published and available to the public for purchase.

any day! There's time for ye, be off with you Lizy—you've got a pass to come and go any time. Come, bustle up, and I'll get your things together.⁷⁹

In this passage readers and audience members were introduced to the character's class but not immersed in dialect as a dramatic construct. Written dialect in Stowe's play, then, is a "realistic" theatrical construct that allowed readers and spectators to understand more fully the characters' demographics. As theatre historian Sarah Meer suggests in *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (2005), with *The Christian Slave*, "Stowe was bidding for cultural authority rather than mass appeal."⁸⁰ This was especially important for the impact of the dramatic reading than for the novel. As I have argued, Webb's performance of these dialects added for the audience a sense of authenticity and offered a sensational experience for white spectators. Therefore, while Stowe dictated the dialect in the text, it is important to remember that these dialects were performed by Webb, who took on voices for each character to differentiate between those she portrayed.

Presenting cultural authority in an authentic way allowed the audience to envision the characters as fully realized and recognizable people, reinforcing the importance of the text's subject matter. Dialect offered audiences a key to understanding the world of the play. As Marvin Carlson offers in *Speaking in Tongues: Languages at Play in the Theatre* (2009), dialect is "one of the codes employed to provide audience members with a sense of the physical and temporal location of the imaginary world being constructed on stage."⁸¹ When Webb performed a slave character with Stowe's prescribed dialect, the performances signified truthfulness in the storytelling based on geographic location and social status since Webb was black and could easily be substituted in the white imagination for one of the enslaved characters. Webb's

⁷⁹ Stowe, *The Christian Slave, A Drama Founded on a Portion of Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 8.

⁸⁰ Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania*, 186.

⁸¹ Carlson, *Speaking in Tongues*, 11.

performance also offered a romantic separation between white and black characters. Dialect attached to Stowe's characters and performed by Webb reveals a kind of Otherness, a stark difference between the members of the white audience and the black characters. In other words, when Webb performed prescribed dialects, she reminded audiences that they should partake in abolitionist causes while remembering their superiority.

The major difference between performances of *The Christian Slave* compared to commercial adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was in its lack of spectacle. The melodramatic form famous throughout the nineteenth century used spectacle as a mode of inspiring sensation in the audience, portraying elaborate scenes such as natural disasters, battles, and—in the case of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its theatrical adaptations for the secular stage—death-defying escapes. In Aiken's production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* specifically, Eliza's crossing of the ice-filled Ohio River in an attempt to flee the Southern United States and find sanctuary with her husband in the North was the most sensational scene for audiences. As indicated by a stage direction in the text of Aiken's adaptation, the stage transforms into the Ohio River “filled with Floating Ice . . . ELIZA appears, with HARRY, R.H., on a cake of ice, and floats slowly across to L.H.”⁸² This spectacular moment, often referred to as “Eliza's Flight” was highly popular among audience members, many of whom responded vocally and erupted in applause at the end of the act.⁸³

The text of *The Christian Slave* fails to provide “spectacular thrills” such as this dramatic escape illustrated in Aiken's play. Instead, as Meer notes, Stowe's play “consistently opted for dialogue over incident, narrating Eliza's escape, placing Tom's whipping offstage, and excising Cassy's tearful reunion with her daughter.”⁸⁴ The moment that caused such a sensational stir in

⁸² Aiken and Howard, *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Or, Life Among the Lowly: A Domestic Drama, in Six Acts*, 14.

⁸³ For more detail on “Eliza's Flight” and its audience response, see Hughes, *Spectacles of Reform*, 90–91.

⁸⁴ Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania*, 186.

audience members during Aiken's piece is merely narrated within a few lines in Stowe's piece.

When Mrs. Shelby asks her slave, Sam, about Eliza's whereabouts, Sam replies:

SAM: Wal, she's 'cross Jordan. As a body may say, in the land o' Canaan.

MRS. SHELBY: Why Sam, what *do* you mean?

SAM: Wal, missis, de Lord he persarves his own. Lizy's done gone over the river into 'Hio, as 'markably as if the Lord too her over in a charrit of fire and two horses.⁸⁵

Stowe featured what Aiken did with physical and scenic spectacle in only three spoken lines.

Therefore, Meer is mostly correct in her reading of *The Christian Slave*, as Stowe did not rely on theatrical spectacle for entertainment, as was expected by theatre audience members of the nineteenth century. I argue, however, that Stowe did not fully neglect the elements of theatricality found in the mainstream playhouses of the era. What performances of *The Christian Slave* lacked in spectacle, they made up in sensation. The play and its performer caused the audience to feel and think.

Stowe's use of music offered audiences these sensational moments throughout *The Christian Slave*, specifically the incorporation of a minstrel song, a device popular in the secular theatre. While minstrelsy was common in the commercial versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it is surprising that Stowe fell into the company of these minstrel Uncle Tom narratives. She included a minstrel song within the play, one also used in Aiken's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* adaptation: "Old Folks at Home," described on the originally-published sheet music in 1851 as an "Ethiopian melody as sung by Christy's Minstrels written and composed by E.P. Christy."⁸⁶ The song lyrics as they are written and as they are performed in Aiken's play are as follows:

Way down upon de Swanee ribber,
Far, far away,
Dere's wha my heart is turning ebber,

⁸⁵ Stowe, *The Christian Slave, A Drama Founded on a Portion of Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 16.

⁸⁶ Aiken and Howard, *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Or, Life Among the Lowly: A Domestic Drama, in Six Acts*, 49. Although Christy is said to be the composer on early published sheet music, Stephen Foster is the true composer to this song. It is currently the official state song of Florida (with adjusted lyrics and known today as "Swanee River").

Dere's wha de old folks stay.

All up and down de whole creation,
Sadly I roam,
Still longing for de old plantation,
And for de old folks at home.

All de world am sad and dreary,
Ebry where I roam,
Oh! darkeys how my heart grows weary,
Far from de old folks at home.⁸⁷

Deemed by contemporary musicologist Thomas Riis a plantation song that inspired a feeling of nostalgia, “Old Folks at Home” is a piece that elicits the longing for a life one once knew.⁸⁸ In Aiken’s play, Uncle Tom begins to sing this song near the end of the play when he is owned by Legree and longing for days gone by serving the Shelbys and the St. Clares. In response to the inclusion of such a minstrel song in Aiken’s adaptation of Stowe’s novel, a writer for the *New York Atlas* describes:

In one of the scenes, Uncle Tom thought fit to sing a song, entitled “Old Folks at Home,” the words and music of which, the play-bills informed us, were composed by the manager of a band of negro minstrels. . . . The giving it, under the circumstances of the case, is an insult to the intelligence of the city, and to those who are the legitimate friends of the objects set forth by the author of Uncle Tom's Cabin.⁸⁹

The reviewer here had a negative reaction to the use of this song within Aiken’s play, presumably because it was unlikely to have an actual slave sing a minstrel song. Surprisingly, however, Stowe included the same song in her own adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.⁹⁰

In a moment similar to the one in Aiken’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe’s Uncle Tom character reflects after being poorly treated by Legree. Alone in the moonlight, Uncle Tom sings, almost prayer-like:

⁸⁷ Aiken and Howard, 93.

⁸⁸ Aiken and Howard, xvi–xvii.

⁸⁹ “[Review of Aiken’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin].”

⁹⁰ This *New York Atlas* writer is reviewing the same production that Stowe saw at the National Theatre in Boston.

*Way down upon the Swanee river,
Far, far away,
Dere's whar my heart is turning, ever,
Dere's whar the old folks stay.*

*All the world am sad and dreary,
Everywhere I roam;
O, Chloe, how my heart grows weary,
Thinkin' of ye all at home!⁹¹*

In Stowe's usage of "Old Folks at Home," the Southern dialect is still utilized, although in a way less dramatic than in the song's original lyrics. The word "darkeys" used in Aiken's play is replaced with Uncle Tom's wife, Chloe, to make the lyrics more intentionally relevant to the narrative of the play, and most likely to separate the song from its minstrel beginnings.

Furthermore, immediately following the last line of this song, Uncle Tom pauses and looks up.

His face brightens and he begins to sing once more:

*When I can read my title clear
To mansions in the skies,
I bid farewell to every fear,
And wipe my weeping eyes.*

*Should earth against my soul engage,
And hellish darts be hurled,
Then I can smile at Satan's rage,
And face a frowning world.*

*Let cares like a wild deluge come,
And storms of sorrow fall,
May I but safely reach my home,
My God, my heaven, my all!⁹²*

This song—a 1707 Methodist hymn by Isaac Watts (1674-1748) entitled, "When I Can Read my Title Clear"—is one that endorses trusting God in terrible circumstances and achieving victory against all odds. Uncle Tom's transition in this moment is telling of his faith; although his body

⁹¹ Stowe, *The Christian Slave, A Drama Founded on a Portion of Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 60–61. Emphasis mine.

⁹² Stowe, 61.

may be frail and his mind tested, he will never give up on his faith. Strikingly, “Old Folks at Home” is not included in the novel. “When I Can Read my Title Clear,” however, is included in both and is utilized in the same context. Except for the addition of “Old Folks at Home,” the dialogue in the novel and the play are almost verbatim in this scene. While the hymn could certainly be recognized by church-going audience members, I suggest that the function of the minstrel song and the hymn together served as a moment of liturgy made accessible for all audiences, including those who did not attend church. Most nineteenth-century theatregoers in antebellum America would have recognized the minstrel heritage of “Old Folks at Home.” Utilizing minstrel music allowed Stowe to teach her audience *through* a form with which they were already familiar. In other words, she engaged her audience with secular music and then transitioned to the religious, keeping them invested to ensure her message was transmitted. This theatrical moment, appropriated from a secular production, is evidence of the value of theatre practice as a mode of evangelism.

Conclusion

Where does *The Christian Slave* fit within the canon of American dramatic literature and theatre practice in antebellum America? Where does the play fit within the discourse of nineteenth-century evangelicalism? Throughout this chapter, I have analyzed closely the form and function of Stowe’s own adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, specifically looking at text, performance potential, and its performer, Mary E. Webb. I argued that even though Stowe and many of her evangelical contemporaries outwardly rejected the secular theatre of their day, Stowe complicated this common belief by writing and sponsoring a dramatic reading of her famous novel. Stowe adapted theatricality in both text and performance to emphasize her

message. *The Christian Slave* offers a glimpse into how evangelicals adapted culture to find relevancy to a broad audience in antebellum society. The text, rich with Christian anti-slavery rhetoric, encouraged audiences to rethink their own connections to slavery and abolition. The play provided audiences commentary that both supports and rejects abolition with scriptural support, but ultimately admits that biblical interpretation is a human-controlled aspect of Christianity. *The Christian Slave* encouraged audiences to interpret text in a way that supported the abolitionist cause in antebellum America.

Stowe, however, also capitalized on her performer in a way that sensationalized her text to draw viewers. Although some may argue that this is not a negative aspect of her dramatization, it brings up questions of how to successfully be in and not of the world as an evangelical. Christian Smith argues in *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (1998) that “In their efforts to play a decisive role in the world by bringing about the new creation, evangelicals often employ subcultural tools which may work to build subcultural identity strength but which paradoxically can also prove in the end to limit significantly their own effectiveness in social change.”⁹³ Stowe was certainly in this category as she used theatre practice to spread her message. While it is important to spread the message of Christianity, save souls, and change minds on important social implications such as slavery, to what lengths or at what cost did Stowe go to successfully achieve this? Is making “a national audience see the subjectivity of black people,” as Hedrick describes, a good enough reason to exploit the body of a black performer?⁹⁴

While Stowe’s *The Christian Slave* did not stand strong in competition with the secular adaptations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that were wildly successful throughout the nineteenth century,

⁹³ Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 179.

⁹⁴ Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe*, 210.

Stowe's work was a new attempt to engage with people, and more importantly, a secularized way of activating the Christian message. For these reasons, it is important to include the work within the canon of nineteenth-century American drama.

CHAPTER 3 – From Stage to Page: Evangelical Abolitionists and the Christian

Melodramatic Mode

“Men seldom show much sympathy for a class of persons to which they do not belong. It is true we are commanded to love our neighbor’s as ourselves; but we seldom feel the force of this precept, when applied to persons belonging to a difference caste.”¹ – Preface to *The Kidnapped Clergyman*

It is certainly ironic that in order for evangelicals like Charles Grandison Finney and Harriet Beecher Stowe to remain relevant in the world, they adapted secular culture as a means of outreach. Though Finney and Stowe were among the few to have an international following, they were not the only evangelicals who borrowed *from* the world to build a substantial impact *in* the world. From appropriating secular music styles and bar songs in the creation of hymns to using fiction as a means of sensationalizing their messages, antebellum evangelicals continually adapted components of secular entertainments for the kingdom of God. This highlights what Mark A. Noll calls *culturally adaptive biblical experientialism*, or the idea that in order to maintain life-changing Christian experiences for their followers, evangelicals adapted culture to create stages for those experiences to occur.²

The novel in particular was a means of accessible entertainment that appealed to evangelicals like Stowe as a tool for sensational evangelism and social change. Fiction was steeped in the sentimentalism popular in the era and worked to emotionally inspire the typical white female reader toward some kind of religious belief or social action. Whereas the novel was eventually accepted by many evangelicals as a viable source of evangelism and entertainment,

¹ *The Kidnapped Clergyman; or, Experience the Best Teacher*, 3.

² Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity*, 2.

the theatre never stopped being classified as a breeding ground for vice, even though both forms practiced a similar sensationalism. Of course, as a secular form, a fair share of suspicion existed around using the novel for God's work. Despite such misgivings, however, the eventual embrace of fiction as an evangelical missionary tactic, as well as the success of novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, beg the question, why was theatre and drama constantly rejected despite their similarities to the sensational novel?

With evangelicals' nearly universal disdain for theatre at the forefront, it is interesting that some white evangelical abolitionists turned to theatre in aid of their cause, writing plays in the melodramatic form and publishing them in abolitionist magazines or through abolitionist publishing houses. While these plays were occasionally produced in lecture rooms and theatres around the North, most were not. Instead, these plays, written in what Megan Sanborn Jones calls the Christian melodramatic mode, were meant to be read or performed in one's home. In this chapter, I analyze the function of several of these plays to demonstrate how melodrama—even as dramatic literature—made a sensational impact on readers and audience members alike. I argue that even though fiction induced a similar sentimentalism that inspired readers toward social change, some Christian abolitionists opted to write drama in the Christian melodramatic mode so that readers could imagine the characters' plights more directly. These plays, few of which are extant, feature a Christ-like hero who fights for righteousness, use sensational moments that led audience members and readers toward euphoric realizations, and emphasize that even though the hero may die, good always comes from his sacrifice.

In the creation of these dramas, evangelical abolitionists occasionally borrowed from the fugitive slave narrative, a popular literary genre in which former slaves shared the story of their respective escapes from slavery, attributing their freedom through the grace of God alone. The

authors applied the melodramatic form to this genre as a means of tugging at the readers' heartstrings and swaying them toward abolition. I feature three such plays in this chapter—the anonymously written *The Kidnapped Clergyman* and *The Fugitives*, and Unitarian minister Daniel S. Whitney's *Warren: A Tragedy in Five Acts*. While these works never reached international acclaim, especially compared to famous melodramas or novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, they were three of the most accessible and farthest-reaching of these kinds of dramas at the time, published in abolitionist sources or by abolitionist publishing houses. These plays also uncover how evangelical (and in the case of Whitney, non-evangelical) Christian abolitionists used melodramatic tactics to tap into the reader's emotions to convince them that abolition is God's will for America.

There exists a bounty of recent contemporary scholarship that focuses on anti-slavery activism through theatrical practice and performance. For instance, Patrick Rael's *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (2002), Gay Gibson Cima's *Performing Anti-Slavery: Activist Women on Antebellum Stages* (2014), and Laura L. Mielke's *Provocative Eloquence: Theater, Violence, and Antislavery Speech in the Antebellum United States* (2019) each work to uncover the ways slavery was depicted on and off stage through a lens of activism. In contrast to these, scholarship also exists on the work of pro-slavery figures who represented "blackness" in the preservation of slavery in the nation. Douglas A. Jones, Jr.'s *The Captive Stage: Performance and the Proslavery Imagination of the Antebellum North* (2014) analyzes how a pro-slavery ideology was maintained in the North through the sort of theatre that was widely produced at this time. While there exists scholarly work that explores fugitive slave narratives as they exist in dramatic form—most notably Heather Nathans' *Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage, 1787-1861* (2009) and Amy E. Hughes' essay "Defining Faith: Theatrical Reactions to Pro-

Slavery Christianity in Antebellum America”—none of these texts situate the fugitive slave narrative as a mode of evangelism or focus on how theatrical and dramatic expression could make a difference both in society and in the Kingdom of God. This chapter aims to fill that gap.

Adapting Worldly Vices: Remaining Culturally Relevant in a Changing American Society

Though less so with theatre, the relationship between literature—specifically, fiction—and evangelical Christianity was often contentious. In this section, I consider how the novel, although vilified by many evangelicals, was ultimately embraced by a majority of believers as a form of popular evangelism. Theatre, on the other hand, was vehemently rejected until well after the Civil War. Yet, as I demonstrate in this section, there were many similarities between what the theatre and novel could (and did) accomplish in antebellum society. With this in mind, I analyze the form and function of the Christian melodramatic mode to theorize why some evangelical abolitionists opted to use drama over fiction to spread their message, despite the nearly universal opinion of their faithful peers.

Both novels and the theatre were steeped in sentimentalism. While such emotional overflow was inherent in the melodramatic form, many evangelicals argued against the use of sentimentalism in novels because, as Candy Gunther Brown explains, “Sentimentalism purportedly replaced meaningful knowledge and consequent action on behalf of others by stirring up and then releasing emotions in self-absorbed excess.”³ Some called novel reading indulgent, comparing fiction to the consumption of alcohol.⁴ One of the major arguments against reading fiction was its ability to distract the reader from the Kingdom of God. In her 1853 book *Women in Her Various Relations: Containing Practical Rules for American Females*, antebellum

³ Brown, *The Word in the World*, 97.

⁴ Coleman, *Preaching and the Rise of the American Novel*, 56.

advice author Mrs. L. G. Abell, wrote that “*Novel reading* is another undue stimulus to the brain, and is often a fruitful source of evil to the mind. It weakens the mental faculties if habitually practiced, and wastes those energies of the soul in idle sympathies, that were given us for active use and benevolent effort.”⁵ If one were to read, according to Abell, she should privilege nonfiction over fiction.

Nevertheless, fiction was adapted for evangelical causes, especially after the popularity of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.⁶ Stowe’s novel made strides in situating literature as a popular artistic force, many pieces working toward evangelical social change along the way. Itself a sentimental novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* engaged with the senses to inspire readers into an abolitionist mindset. She used her novel to preach the abolitionist gospel to her readership, engaging with their emotions as ammunition. For example, since the majority of those reading her novel were presumably white women who could not identify with Eliza’s struggle with slavery firsthand, the author capitalized on a common bond between them: motherhood. Like Stowe’s ideal target reader—white, female, a mother—Eliza is a mother. Her master sold her son and therefore, she will be separated from him. Since readers felt a kinship with Eliza because of their connection to motherhood, perhaps they saw the evils that slavery imparts on mothers.

Both melodrama and novels, then, engaged the senses and were consumed by an audience on both a financial and emotional level. Melodrama, however, was starkly less accepted by the evangelical majority. Most religious leaders noted that dramatic literature was as tainted as performance, the latter of which caused those on stage to lie and those watching the play to believe the lie and apply it to their own lives. Some evangelical theologians in the nineteenth

⁵ Coleman, 57; Abell, *Women in Her Various Relations: Containing Practical Rules for American Females*, 274. Emphasis original.

⁶ For more on the history of fiction as a tool for radical Christianity, see McKanan, 21-45.

century suggested that all representations of fiction were a danger to the soul, but particularly when embodied by an actor or even a person acting the role in their homes. For instance, in an 1847 sermon entitled “Theatrical Amusements: A Discourse on the Character and Influence of the Theatre,” Congregationalist minister Joseph P. Thompson (1819-1879) made just such an argument:

*The stage inculcates false principles of morality and false views of life and character, thereby corrupting the tastes and habits of society. Its influence in this respect is like that of many works of fiction, only as it is more powerful through the medium of dramatic representation.”*⁷

According to Thompson and those with similar mindsets, because the audience saw humans perform the text, usually in a sensational way that caused them to think and feel an overflow of emotion through manipulation, the theatre “as a place of exhibition” was a place not just of entertainment, but of corruption.⁸ When witnessing the text embodied in the theatre or lecture hall, audience members were never given the opportunity to interpret text for themselves. Instead they were prescribed the players’ immoral interpretation and responded solely to the performance that manifested as a result of that interpretation. Likewise, when readers embodied the text themselves, they performed a lie for their families and themselves.

Unlike other forms of literature that many antebellum evangelicals agreed could be redeeming, one could not separate drama from its intention to be performed. Since the very structure of the written drama could be imagined by the reader to be performed upon the stage, the drama was a poisoned artform. Therefore, evangelical leaders argued that Christians should avoid writing for the stage and should not tempt themselves with works that have the potential to be performed. In a lecture entitled, “A Serious Inquiry into the Nature and Effects of the Stage,”

⁷ Thompson, *Theatrical Amusements. A Discourse on the Character and Influence of the Theater*. By Joseph P. Thompson, Pastor of the Broadway Tabernacle Church, New York, 24. Emphasis original.

⁸ Thompson, 8.

published posthumously in 1812, eighteenth-century Presbyterian minister John Witherspoon (1723-1794) compared adopting theatrical practice or writing to un-Christian behavior:

I will endeavor to shew, that PUBLIC THEATRICAL REPRESENTATIONS, either tragedy or comedy, are, in their general nature or in their best possible state, unlawful, contrary to the purity of our religion; and that writing, acting or attending them, is inconsistent with the character of a Christian.⁹

Witherspoon's reasoning for rejecting the theatre and dramatic literature was rooted in the ability for anything theatrical to agitate the passions "too violently" and "interests too deeply, so as, in some cases, to bring people into a real, while they behold an imaginary distress."¹⁰ Witherspoon and others contended that the ability for theatre to sway its audiences made it an engine of vice that could (and did) manipulate its audience to commit ungodly acts. Thus, one who wrote plays was an agent of such a degraded artform. "I will make bold to affirm," Witherspoon asserts, "that writing plays is an employment wholly foreign to the office and attending theatrical representations an entertainment unbecoming the character of a minister of Christ."¹¹ Yet, it was this sway that some evangelical abolitionists sought to adapt for their cause.

In the secular sphere, however, melodrama in the theatre was certainly used as a means of teaching, particularly for moral reform movements such as abolition. Melodrama's fixed plot was easily recognizable by both its audiences and readers. Those engaging with melodrama knew how the play would end—in a typical plot, good conquers evil and a moral lesson is evident. As I briefly discuss in the introduction to this project, Megan Sanborn Jones notes the similarities between melodrama's fixed plot—as well as its use of moral polarity, spectacle, and

⁹ Witherspoon, *A Serious Inquiry into the Nature and Effects of the Stage: And a Letter Respecting Play Actors. By the Rev. John Witherspoon, DD L.L.D. Late President of the College at Princeton, New-Jersey. Also a Sermon, on the Burning of the Theatre at Richmond, &c. By Samuel Miller, D.D. Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in New York. Together with an Introductory Address, by Several Ministers in New-York, &c.*, 33.

¹⁰ Witherspoon, 53.

¹¹ Witherspoon, 139.

poetic justice—and antebellum evangelical practice, arguing that melodrama of the time exhibited a Christian melodramatic mode. Comparing the melodramatic structure to evangelical Christian belief, Jones writes, “Just as nineteenth-century Christianity taught that mankind’s fate has already been determined by Christ’s sacrifice that allowed grace to save the world, so was the fate of the melodramatic hero predetermined by the structure.”¹² In other words, the hero always wins because he is a stock character with inherent goodness. In this way, melodrama’s form was useful ammunition for the evangelical abolitionist because she or he could utilize a narrative that was recognizable and effective for nineteenth-century audiences and readers. The plays I analyze in this chapter, though separate from the playhouse, illustrate a similar moral suasion as those performed in the theatre.

More than dramatic structure, melodrama’s spectacle and sensationalism were major components in the form’s success. This production value did not go unnoticed by those evangelical abolitionists who turned to the drama to promote their cause. As Nathans explains, abolitionists’ “newly energized mission demanded a change in strategy,” and as a result, particularly in the 1830s, “abolitionists began to wield the tools of sentiment and sympathy in an effort to win new recruits to the cause.”¹³ This included adapting drama, albeit to be read privately or performed in one’s home. Melodrama was inherently rich with sensational and spectacular moments, some of which must be staged in order to function correctly, while others could move the reader to tears due to sheer sentiment. Though spectacle may not manifest in a tangible form as it did for an audience in the theatre, those reading melodrama at the time could imagine the spectacular moments come to life by reading the stage directions.

¹² Jones, *Performing American Identity in Anti-Mormon Melodrama*, 32.

¹³ Nathans, *Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage, 1787-1861*, 73.

Many of these plays by evangelical abolitionists were performed as closet dramas in readers' homes. While scholarship on the closet drama as an artistic medium is scarce, particularly in the case of nineteenth-century closet drama, this was a common practice. In Brander Matthews' "The Legitimacy of the Closet-Drama" (1908), the author argues that in the nineteenth century, the use of closet drama was a safer choice theologically than relying on the playhouse. He writes, "Behind every appearance of the closet-drama we can discover a latent contempt for the actual theatre, and a desire to claim its rewards without the trouble of mastering its methods or the risk of facing its perils."¹⁴ Performing roles in the play, even as amateurs, allowed evangelical "performers" to convey the emotion of sentimental moments, creating a sense of dire urgency, without the need to attend the theatre themselves.

In addition to its inducing of emotion in audiences through spectacle and sensational moments, moral reform drama exhibited aspects of the evangelical ethos that proliferated in the nineteenth century, particularly through its use of poetic justice. Megan Sanborn Jones describes poetic justice as "a social phenomenon, one that confirms an idealized vision of society. The same vision of the possibilities of how things ought to be in the world was fundamental to a Christian worldview."¹⁵ In other words, poetic justice at the end of a melodrama is the major linking point of dramatic expression and evangelical Christian living. Thus, because of its evangelical-like values as evidenced within the Christian melodramatic mode, melodrama was a useful tool to spread the message of abolition in antebellum America, particularly from a religious standpoint.

¹⁴ Matthews, "The Legitimacy of the Closet-Drama.," 222–23.

¹⁵ Jones, *Performing American Identity in Anti-Mormon Melodrama*, 29.

“What a curse slavery is”¹⁶: Evangelical Abolitionist Art and the Fugitive Slave Narrative

While abolitionists certainly fought for their cause throughout much of American history, abolition as a movement picked up steam in the 1830s. The social movement began in response to anti-slavery sentiments linked to the revival meetings of the Second Great Awakening. Figures such as Charles Finney, Lyman Beecher, and Henry Ward Beecher, each of whom had a large following, advocated for the abolition of slavery and included such a stance in their homiletics. Henry Ward Beecher, for instance staged mock slave auctions in his church as a means of raising awareness and raising funds for abolitionist causes.¹⁷ With the anti-slavery movement gaining momentum, abolitionist artistic expression grew, as well. Until the Civil War, religious and non-religious abolitionists, as well as former slaves, wrote novels, short stories, songs, poems, and plays to reveal the plight of the slave and the necessary evil of escape. In this next section, I analyze the function of the fugitive slave narrative—arguably the most popular form of abolitionist artistic expression—to understand why this genre of literature was appropriated by white evangelical abolitionists who dramatized fictionalized slave narratives to sensationalize their readership.

According to Nathans, the launch of evangelical reformer William Lloyd Garrison’s abolitionist publication *The Liberator* in 1831 served as an upward trajectory for the abolitionist movement on the national stage.¹⁸ Before *The Liberator*, Garrison was a staunch advocate for the immediate renunciation of slavery by all American Christians, especially the evangelical Christian, one of the first abolitionists to take on this cause publicly. Based on the argument that slavery is an immoral institution in the eyes of God and unethical in society, immediate

¹⁶ Brown, “The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom,” 415.

¹⁷ For more on these staged slave auctions, see Nathans, *Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage, 1787-1861*, 192-201 and Stupp, “Slavery and the Theatre of History: Ritual Performance on the Auction Block.”

¹⁸ Nathans, *Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage, 1787-1861*, 72–73.

abolitionists called for the instant dismantling of slavery without financial compensation for owners. Garrison and other immediate abolitionists essentially shamed churches and evangelical organizations who delayed in their abolitionist action. Garrison publicized their responses, or lack thereof, in his publication, informing the American public exactly where these organizations fell on the abolitionist spectrum.

Garrison's *The Liberator* served as a major national and widely distributed platform to gather information in all forms on the issue of abolition, from serials to full dramas. For the most part, the pieces included in *The Liberator* worked to create a sense of identification through sentimental feeling between whites and blacks, exposing "white readers to the issues that preoccupied the black community," and using the newspaper as a "forum for African American writers and activists."¹⁹ In other words, the pieces allowed readers to identify with the subjects in ways that produce sympathy. Furthermore, as Hughes explains, the abolitionist newspaper criticized Christian orthodoxy based on rules and religious hierarchy and opted for evangelical ethics rooted in Christ's love.²⁰ Such a distinction made its way to the texts included in *The Liberator*. Nowhere were identification and evangelical ethics more evident than in the fugitive slave narrative, a literary form often published in *The Liberator*, in other abolitionist publications, and by other anti-slavery publishing houses.

The fugitive slave narrative was a popular genre that allowed former slaves to share their stories with white people in an attempt to illuminate the horrors of slavery and the lengths people went to escape them. From the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, former slaves wrote sensationalized novels, memoirs, or short stories depicting their escape from slavery. Often published by independent abolitionist organizations or abolitionist magazines like *The Liberator*,

¹⁹ McKanan, *Identifying the Image of God*, 133, 134.

²⁰ Hughes, "Defining Faith: Theatrical Reactions to Pro-Slavery Christianity in Antebellum America," 35.

the fugitive slave narrative was a far-reaching form of literary expression. While authors occasionally recorded their stories themselves—including the work of abolitionists Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) and William Wells Brown (1814-1884)²¹—most of the time they told their stories to their editors who wrote them on their behalf.

The most important aspect of the fugitive slave narrative was its pushing of faith upon the reader. As historian Dan McKanan defines in *Identifying the Image of God: Radical Christians and Nonviolent Power in the Antebellum United States* (2002), the fugitive slave narrative was a “genre that told the story of a courageous individual who passes through the blood-stained gate of enslavement but then passes back out, revealing the power of God’s image in the act of escape.”²² In other words, the fugitive slave narrative was rooted in God; He is the way maker who led slaves to freedom. The fugitive slave narrative celebrated freedom as a miracle only possible through God’s grace. Additionally, the fugitive slave narrative was a means of sharing the black experience with white people through a buffer of sympathy. In this way, the fugitive slave narrative was a religious text that caused the white reader to feel the subject’s pain. Simultaneously, the genre was written through a lens of Christian virtue to demonstrate that slavery was the enemy of God, and that through His power, slaves could escape. The fugitive slave narrative translated easily into the Christian melodramatic mode, as well: the narrative was filled with spectacle and sensation as slaves dangerously escaped from their masters’ houses; the stories were rooted in moral goodness and argued that slavery was evil in God’s eyes; and poetic justice was established as these fugitive slave subjects successfully escaped through the Grace of God alone.

²¹ Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) and Brown’s *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave* (1847) were both published by the Anti-Slavery Office in Boston and were two of the most famous and widely distributed fugitive slave narrative memoirs of the era.

²² McKanan, *Identifying the Image of God*, 129.

Despite their similarities to components of the Christian melodramatic mode, true fugitive slave narratives were written in works of prose nonfiction. Occasionally, some abolitionists, evangelical and otherwise, fictionalized the fugitive slave narrative as dramatic literature. Arguably the most far-reaching example is William Wells Brown's, *The Escape, or a Leap for Freedom* (1858). Brown admitted freely that he was not a dramatist but he saw the impact of drama on the lecture circuit—as Eric Gardner suggests, with the success of Mary Webb's performances of *The Christian Slave*, which occurred around the same time, Brown may have been inspired to try his hand at writing and performing drama behind the podium.²³ Abolitionist plays like *The Escape* were usually published and accessible to the public. Brown not only illustrated in his play what the fugitive slave narrative did, albeit through a fictionalized comedic lens, but he also used drama to sensationalize his readers through the melodramatic style to which they were already accustomed.²⁴ More importantly, the play emulates elements of the Christian melodramatic mode, including spectacle and poetic justice, to paint the hypocrisy of white Christians and to offer an idealized version of Christian belief in response, themes many evangelical abolitionists highlighted in their dramas. While the following plays pre-date *The Escape*, the evangelical abolitionists who wrote them saw the power of the fugitive slave narrative and combined this style with the Christian melodramatic mode in order to make their message more urgent.

²³ Gardner, *Major Voices: The Drama of Slavery*, 366.

²⁴ Some of these sensational moments include a knife fight between two female characters, as well as a battle scene before the fugitive slaves safely make it aboard a boat taking them to freedom.

**“The negroes are a degraded race, but I am not”²⁵: Exposing Hypocritical Christianity
with the Christian Melodramatic Mode**

Christian faith was a contentious component of the slavery debate, with both sides considering themselves evangelical and using scripture to defend their stances. Christian abolitionists declared that slavery was an abomination against God’s will and that evangelicals must work to abolish this institution. Pro-slavery Christians, on the other hand, argued that the Bible justified slavery. Both sides considered their position on the spectrum to be rooted in God’s absolute truth. Some abolitionists turned to melodrama to debunk the pro-slavery position on its justification of slavery. In this section, I analyze two plays—*The Kidnapped Clergyman; or, Experience the Best Teacher* and Daniel S. Whitney’s *Warren: A Tragedy in Five Acts*—that illustrate the hypocrisy of pro-slavery Christianity. Written in the Christian melodramatic mode, these plays reveal through the journey of the melodramatic hero, sensation, and poetic justice that Christianity was the key to debunk pro-slavery Christians’ justifications of slavery, instilling urgency for religious and social reform in the reader.

The Kidnapped Clergyman turns the fugitive slave narrative genre on its head. Instead of following a black character’s journey to freedom, the play follows an erudite white minister from Boston, albeit swarthy in his complexion, mistaken as a slave as he journeys toward freedom. Though never performed at a public theatre, the anonymously written *The Kidnapped Clergyman* is rich with sensation and spectacular moments, and steeped in evangelical rhetoric throughout.²⁶ The most striking aspect of this play, however, is its deep criticism of people who proclaim themselves to be Christians but use the Bible to justify slavery. The play was published twice, in 1839 and 1840, by Dow and Jackson and G. N. Thomas, both Boston publishing houses

²⁵ Gardner, “The Kidnapped Clergyman; or, Experience the Best Teacher,” 91.

²⁶ Since the gender of the playwright is unknown, I will use he/him/his pronouns for the sake of consistency.

specializing in abolitionist propaganda. Because of its content—motifs of kidnapping, legal jargon, etc.—the author was certainly familiar with the political landscape of his era.

Additionally, the play's main goal to expose the hypocrisy of pro-slavery Christians not only suggests that he was aware of the spectrum of Christian beliefs regarding slavery, but through his championing of the abolition, I argue that the author was an evangelical Christian who used the melodramatic form to spread his message.

The author included a preface in the first published edition of *The Kidnapped Clergyman* with reflections that “furnish the reader with a key to the author’s object.”²⁷ These musings further suggest his evangelical Christian practice and beliefs. The preface critiques a common Southern expectation that those in free states should not busy themselves with the business of the South when it comes to slavery, on the grounds that it does not concern the North, that slavery is supported by Christianity, and that in comparison to other countries’ versions of slavery, the South’s institution is innocuous. The author refutes these claims, spending most of the preface addressing the second point that slavery is upheld by Christianity. Instead, he argues that “in a Christian country, to suffer a state of servitude to exist, which involves in its continuance, the perpetration of acts of cruelty and oppression, wholly at variance with the mild and benignant doctrines of its divine founder, cannot fail to cause Christianity to be scoffed at among the heathen.”²⁸ Perhaps in a “heathen” country, slavery is permissible. However, the author claims in his preface that God does not permit slavery—therefore, it is an un-Christian system that must be broken to uphold God’s will for the nation.

The Kidnapped Clergyman supports the author’s claim, particularly by exposing the double standard of Southern slaveholders and supporters through melodramatic tendencies. In

²⁷ *The Kidnapped Clergyman; or, Experience the Best Teacher*, 3.

²⁸ *The Kidnapped Clergyman; or, Experience the Best Teacher*, 5–6.

the play, the Reverend David Dorsey of Boston praises himself on the success of his recent sermon dismantling abolitionists' argument that slavery is not supported by the Bible. While he argues that slaves are "a degraded, incorrigible race it is to be feared, different from white people, altogether inferior," he does not necessarily support the idea of slavery "in the abstract," though "it does not appear to be forbidden in the New Testament, and seems to be consistent with Christianity."²⁹ Therefore, he defends his sermon and plans to publish it widely, knowing that his followers will be happy as a result. Nevertheless, he is disturbed by recent stories in the press involving the treatment of slaves, particularly fugitive slaves and free slaves kidnapped by Northerners and sold back into slavery for profit.

The kidnapping of free slaves was a common antebellum phenomenon. As Carol Wilson charts in *Freedom at Risk: The Kidnapping of Free Black in America, 1780-1865* (1994), white people in the North and middle states kidnapped black people who were legally free "either by enslaving the freeborn or by reenslaving those who has been manumitted or who had purchased their freedom" with the intent of selling these people back into slavery. According to Wilson, kidnapers "physically abused and psychologically terrorized their captives into stating that they were slaves."³⁰ Abolitionists sought to expose this practice in their written works, as evident from Reverend Dorsey's concerns in *The Kidnapped Clergyman*.

With these stories still on his mind, Dorsey falls asleep—most likely due to overeating cake at a parishioner's house earlier that day—and the spectacular nightmare begins. Inspired by the stories that disturbed him, he and his family are sold into slavery and eventually separated from one another. The remainder of the play follows Dorsey in an attempt to convince his new masters that he is indeed not a slave, but a man of God. His masters, of course, do not believe

²⁹ Gardner, "The Kidnapped Clergyman; or, Experience the Best Teacher," 78.

³⁰ Wilson, *Freedom at Risk*, 6.

him and he is sold and resold on the slave market throughout Maryland, Virginia, and Kentucky. Eventually, he escapes to his home in Massachusetts and is captured by his “master” who appeals to three magistrates to bring Dorsey back to Kentucky. His appeal is approved; the magistrate declares that he is merely free “in the abstract,” mimicking the Reverend’s opinions of slavery earlier in the play.³¹ On the way back to Kentucky, Dorsey is sold to a St. Louis slaveholder who also owns his daughter, Clara. Protecting his daughter from her master’s abuses, he kills his master. Dorsey wakes up as a mob attempts to lynch him for killing a white man. As is typical in most melodramas, Dorsey ends the play with a change of heart. He notes that his previous actions were immoral and vows with the help of God to fight against slavery for the rest of his life—this common trope of the melodramatic hero worked to sway readers toward a particular moral position.

The Kidnapped Clergyman exposes the hypocrisy of pro-slavery Christians who justified slavery based on biblical evidence as opposed to Christ-like ethics. Dorsey is representative of many religious figures throughout the nation who did not agree with slavery on a personal level yet did not actively seek to fight against it. While this system of belief was highly representative of the South, Dorsey—a preacher from Boston—represents Northerners who held similar convictions. Dorsey champions anti-abolition because he knows his supporters will lionize him for doing so. Thus, he makes a living supporting an institution with which he does not agree.

In a moment of melodramatic sensation, a slave character, Dinah, exposes such clerical hypocrisy, risking her life by declaring her argument in front of her overlords. When Dorsey tries to convince his “owners” that he is indeed a Reverend, Dinah reveals the double standard between his faith and his practice:

³¹ *The Kidnapped Clergyman; or, Experience the Best Teacher*, 84.

De white minister, he put on de fine clothes, and he go into pulpit, and he have de white handkerchief in his hand, and de shining ring on his little finger, and he read something dat he has written in a book, and he spreads out his hand, and he turn his face to do right and to de left, and he speak pretty words, and he tink he preach de Gospel, and he call himself ambassador of Christ.

In her critique, Dinah trivializes the preacher's practices, noting his bogus display of righteousness in order to please the rich. She continues, "But Christ preached to de poor man; de white man preach, for please de rich man. Very pleasant to preach sermon, when he get quarter dollar a piece, for dem all; but poor black have work hard all day for nothing."³² Dinah argues that pro-slavery Christianity is a deviation from Christ's teaching and as a result, the preacher's theology is skewed. Instead of loving the slave, pro-slavery Christians dehumanized the slave and excused the heinous treatment committed by white slave owners. Such a hypocritical preacher "tell de negro, not to run away; he never tell masters not be cruel and make poor negro run away. Yet de gospel say, massa, don't treaten your slave: why don't de white minister say, white man, don't beat your slave, don't curse him, don't abuse em; white minister 'fraid to say dat."³³ Dinah's position emulates a common phenomenon in the South where, as a mode of rebellion against their masters, slaves often remarked on the hypocrisy of the religious ideology that their masters forced upon them. As scholar of African American religion Albert J. Raboteau explains in *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (2004), "Slaves distinguished the hypocritical religion of their masters from true Christianity and rejected the slaveholder's gospel of obedience to master and mistress."³⁴ This idea supports Dinah's exposing of clerical hypocrisy in *The Kidnapped Clergyman*; her speech utilizes a slave's view of the world to reveal how pro-slavery Christians operate in contradiction to Christ's teachings.

³² Gardner, "The Kidnapped Clergyman; or, Experience the Best Teacher," 94.

³³ Gardner, "The Fugitives," 96.

³⁴ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 294.

Thinking about Dinah's role in the Christian melodramatic mode, her speech is a prophecy for Dorsey that he must learn his lesson through a literal identification with slavery. The actions that follow in the play—including spectacular moments of escape and murder—are the manifestations of these lessons.

As Dinah's role represents, the author of *The Kidnapped Clergyman* capitalized on a popular mode of featuring black characters in artistic expression as a symbol of righteousness. In his landmark study *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (1987), historian George M. Fredrickson deems such practice *romantic racialism*. Building on the idealism of European and American romantic trends proliferating in the nineteenth century, romantic racialism “was widely espoused by Northern humanitarians who were more or less antislavery. Although romantic racialists acknowledged that blacks were different from whites and probably always would be, they projected an image of the Negro that could be construed as flattering or laudatory in the context of some currently accepted ideals of human behavior.”³⁵ More important than flattering traits, “The idea that the Negro was a natural Christian” was a major element of romantic racialism, and was part of the reason that such view of African Americans was a popular motif in abolitionist writing, the docile righteousness of the titular character in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a major example.³⁶ Presenting the African American, especially the slave, as a symbol of social justice in this way insinuated that white people could not aptly represent true Christianity. Under this framework, it makes sense that Dorsey *must* become a slave. As the subtitle suggests, *Experience the Best Teacher* allows him to recognize the wickedness of his white-based pro-slavery Christian

³⁵ Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, 102–103.

³⁶ Fredrickson, 103. Fredrickson spends ample time applying his lens of romantic racialism to Stowe's novel. See, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, 110-124.

practice. The impact was made stronger for readers in the Christian melodramatic mode as white readers could imagine themselves or their family members in this position if they were to perform the play at home.

Thus, by the end of *The Kidnapped Clergyman*, the author juxtaposed pro-slavery Christian belief with the more righteous—yet radical, from a pro-slavery point of view—abolitionist stance and did so through a lens of melodramatic spectacle. After Dorsey kills his master, he is pursued by a group of people who plan to lynch him in punishment, shouting, “Where is the murdering villain? Shoot him! . . . Cut him to pieces! No, no! burn him alive, over a slow fire, like the mulatto fellow!”³⁷ If the play was staged in the theatre, this scene would certainly cause sensation in the audience in a way similar to Eliza’s flight in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The scene then transitions to Dorsey’s study where the clergyman is still asleep and visibly having a nightmare. When his wife and daughter wake him, Dorsey is a changed man. He sees his family free from bondage and declares:

Next Sunday, my dear, I deliver my solemn recantation, and, as I presume, take leave of my parish forever. My conscience, that worldly prosperity has long deadened, is not roused to life and activity, and, with the blessing of God, ever again shall a regard for the applause of men, the hope of riches and honors, or the fear of poverty and approach, so dull my moral sense, as to induce me to speak complacently of a system of shocking cruelty and injustice, or quiet the caustic but healthful action of penitence and remorse, by crying “*peace, peace, when there is no peace.*”³⁸

Ultimately Dorsey’s revelation, full of emotion for all the characters involved, is a critique on complacent Christians who did not support slavery themselves but did not actively work to abolish it. As I have mentioned, Dorsey does not agree with slavery, per se, but cannot find biblical support for why it should be abolished. This was a common phenomenon among evangelical leadership in both the North and South. According to Christine Leigh Heyrman in

³⁷ Farrison, “The Kidnapped Clergyman and Brown’s Experience,” 103.

³⁸ Gardner, “The Kidnapped Clergyman; or, Experience the Best Teacher,” 107. Emphasis original.

Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt (1997), “All preachers shared the concern that attacks on slavery would alienate both members and prospective converts.”³⁹ Many continued to preach pro-slavery ideologies in order to maintain contentment among their followers. This position became a major critique among evangelicals who pushed against the complacency of the clergy regarding slavery, as evident by the author’s stance in *The Kidnapped Clergyman*.

In the North, not only did there exist white people with the same level of complacency as Dorsey’s, but as Douglas A. Jones, Jr. explains, “Northerners cultivated a proslavery imagination with which to maintain, and over time, widen the gulf between black freedom and full black inclusion.”⁴⁰ Essentially, the Northern pro-slavery imagination furthered racial dichotomy, based on racial distinctions, and most strikingly created black captivity in a free society. In the arts, this racism was most commonly upheld in minstrel performance, including melodramas that featured actors in black face. Plays such as *The Kidnapped Clergyman*, therefore, not only worked to expose hypocritical Christians, but offered a counter to these forms of art, using melodrama to make arguments that deconstruct a pro-slavery imagination instead of furthering one. Analyzing the play through the Christian melodramatic mode, the play makes its case with its commitment to poetic justice; in the end, the good preacher maintains his goodness by denying slavery, thus inspiring readers to dismantle their complacency.

Eleven years after the publication of *The Kidnapped Clergyman*, the Unitarian minister Reverend Daniel S. Whitney (1810-1894) wrote a melodramatic play entitled *Warren: A Tragedy in Five Acts*. Unitarianism in the nineteenth century was not an evangelical organization under Bebbington’s quadrilateral—they did not believe in the divinity of Jesus, but instead in his moral teaching. Evangelicals opposed Unitarianism predominately because Unitarians rejected

³⁹ Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 93.

⁴⁰ Jones, *The Captive Stage*, 2.

any kind of structured doctrine and because it was not a trinity-believing religion.⁴¹ In an essay defending common evangelical arguments against Unitarianism, the Unitarian minister Jared Sparks wrote that some evangelicals accused Unitarians of preaching “that the strictness and seclusion from fashionable amusements, such as the theatre, the ballroom, and the card-table, which some inculcate, are uncommanded austerities, and being ‘righteous overmuch (sic).’”⁴² In other words, this argument assumes that Unitarians preached against the defamation of the theatre on the grounds simply because the theatre is not addressed directly in the Bible. Sparks argues that Unitarians never openly encouraged followers to engage with theatre but instead charged them to avoid vice generally. According to Sparks’ argument and the evangelical assumption that he combats, Unitarians also had a complicated relationship with theatre practice in antebellum America.

Whitney’s Unitarian beliefs notwithstanding, *Warren* exhibits an evangelical ethos, one that corrects misguided pro-slavery Christianity’s treatment of slaves and human beings more broadly. Whitney, then, though not technically an evangelical, is a Christian figure who used theatre to spread his message. *Warren* is an example of a play that furthers a mission supported by Christians, evangelical and nonevangelical alike, and is therefore important in understanding how Christian figures used theatre as a means of social warfare. Originally published by Cornhill Press and later Bela Marsh, both abolitionist publishing houses in Boston, *Warren* was Whitney’s response to the Compromise of 1850, which eliminated the slave trade in Washington but enforced the Fugitive Slave Act.⁴³ Another variation of the fugitive slave narrative, the play

⁴¹ For more on the relationship between evangelicalism and Unitarianism, see Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 233-235.

⁴² Sparks, *An Inquiry into the Comparative Moral Tendency of Trinitarian and Unitarian Doctrines; in a Series of Letters to the Rev. Dr. Miller, of Princeton.*, 44.

⁴³ Hughes, “Defining Faith: Theatrical Reactions to Pro-Slavery Christianity in Antebellum America,” 39.

follows Joseph Warren, a free black man from Massachusetts, as he passes through Charleston, South Carolina. Several white men bring him to a justice's office on the grounds that "Free blacks from other States are forbidden to come within the borders of South Carolina at all" and that under this law he is a felon. Unless he is able to secure a "responsible white man" from the North to post his bail, he will be sold at public auction as punishment.⁴⁴ Imprisoned, Warren is unable to secure this payment and is therefore sold into slavery. He is purchased by the Reverend Dr. Smythe who preaches elaborate messages on how slavery is supported by the bible and therefore, slaves must submit to their masters. When Warren refuses to submit to his new master, Smythe orders his overseers to beat him. In a sensational final scene, Warren dies in Christ-like fashion. The play is filled with sensational moments and highlights the key aspects of the Christian melodramatic mode: moral polarity, spectacle and poetic justice.

Practicing Christian hypocrisy, Smythe is the epitome of the immoral melodramatic villain. Using fear and physical violence as a tactic throughout the work, he preaches both to his slaves and to his congregation that slaves must submit in order to gain and keep salvation. He asks his slaves, "Do any of you wish to know how you may escape such a doom,—be translated into the regions of heavenly delight when you die?" He continues,

It is by being faithful to your masters and mistresses here; by serving them faithfully; by being contented and happy in the condition which a wise Providence has assigned you, never thinking or caring about getting away from your present condition. He who seeks to change his present situation, who thinks about freedom, does it at the peril of his precious soul. These thoughts of liberty, which spring up in your minds, are the suggestions of the devil, who is seeking to get your souls to torment in hell forever.⁴⁵

Convincing them that the act of escape is a demonic act, he scares his slaves into remaining in his custody. When the slaves rebel against him, he uses physical violence in the name of

⁴⁴ Whitney, *Warren: A Tragedy in Five Acts, Designed to Illustrate the Protection Which the Federal Union Extends to the Citizens of Massachusetts*, 8.

⁴⁵ Whitney, 44.

Christian justice, all of which would be performed on stage if the play were to be produced. The play includes violent stage directions when a slave is to be reprimanded, allowing the reader to imagine or perform such atrocities. For instance, when Warren attempts to reason with his new master, explaining that he is a free man from Boston wrongly enslaved, Smythe snaps:

DR. SMYTHE: Boy, stop your prating: if you are obedient and attentive to your duties, you shall be well used, as all my servants are. Mr. Peterson show this boy to his quarters.
WARREN: Sir, I am a free man by the laws of Massachusetts, as well as the higher law of Almighty God, and I can never be a slave. . .
DR. SMYTHE: Dawson put up this boy for fifty cats well laid; I can't away with the least impertinence or insubordination. It is our communion season this afternoon, Deacon, and so we will go, and leave this saucy boy with Mr. Dawson till after meeting. It grieves me that unruly servants deprive our managers of the privileges of the sanctuary.⁴⁶

Not only does Smythe resort to physical violence that would be brought to life before an audience, but he insinuates that his overseer, Dawson, is being deprived of his worship because of the insubordination of his slave. The actions of a villain with a warped sense of Christianity resorting to physical violence created sensation in the reader.

Just as Dinah reveals the hypocrisy of white Christianity in *The Kidnapped Clergyman*, Smythe's slaves seem to recognize the falsehood of his doctrine and mock him behind his back, emphasizing the morality inherent within good melodramatic characters. In a moment of comfort for his fellow man, a slave named Sampsy says, "Billy, that massa preacher no good. He no read the word ob God right, Billy . . . De word ob God say—where de spirit of de Lord be, there be liberty, Billy; but dis massa preacher say where de spirit of de debble be dare the lub of liberty. Who tink tell the truth, Billy, massa preacher, or great massa God? . . . Be sure, good Billy, that God will one day make de lying preacher smart in his own brimstone, for de false reading ob his holy word."⁴⁷ Sampsy's analysis here reveals that slaves are aware of their master's ignorance.

⁴⁶ Whitney, 49.

⁴⁷ Whitney, 45–46.

Smythe's overseer, Dawson, illustrates this point, as well. After being ordered to beat Warren to death, Dawson says to his master:

DAWSON: His head lops, sir; I think he's flunked.

Dr. Smythe: Well, give orders to some of the people to bury him during the night, and then come to the parlor; (looking at his watch,) I perceive it is time for evening prayers.

SAWSON: Ay, ay, sir. (aside,) I think the devil will take uncommon delight in your prayers this evening.⁴⁸

Dawson insinuates that his master is not at all fueled by his Christian religion, but instead that the devil inspires his hatred toward and treatment of slaves. These instances further Frederickson's classification of romantic racialism; Sampson and Dawson are more righteous than their abusive slaveowner because they have more of a grasp of Christianity than does Smythe, despite his role as a reverend. In the Christian melodramatic mode, the reader was to learn morality from these characters, especially compared to the evil characters they critique.

These moments of hypocrisy rooted within the doctrine of white Christianity in both *The Kidnapped Clergyman* and *Warren* are examples of how evangelical abolitionists, and in Whitney's case, Christian abolitionists, used the Christian melodramatic mode as a tool for moral enlightenment rooted in romantic idealism. Through the actions of the protagonists, poetic justice is in play. Because the reader journeyed with the protagonists—occasionally literally if the reader were to act out the parts—they learned first-hand the consequences of pro-slavery Christianity.

⁴⁸ Whitney, 60.

“Then shall we be that family which naught may sever”⁴⁹: Sensational Drama as a Mode of Evangelical Recruitment

The mark of the successful melodrama in antebellum America was its ability to move the audience to the point of emotional excess. Sentimentalism was inherent in the fugitive slave narrative literary form—readers were invested in the plight and journey of the fugitive slave and were moved when the slave reached the promised land. Additionally, the fugitive slave narrative brought people to God and situated everyone—even the slave—as worthy of God’s love. As McKanan writes of the form, “Fugitive slave narrators testified that all people, even the most victimized, are able to grow in likeness to God, and that in turn God’s love and power are most clearly manifest in the acts of these godlike humans.”⁵⁰ This idea certainly manifested in dramatized versions of the fugitive slave narrative. In this section, I analyze plays in the Christian melodramatic mode written by white evangelicals that appropriated the fugitive slave narrative form for the drama in order to sensationalize audiences.

With the increase of Northern abolitionists representing various careers, including those in the arts, many enlisted sentiment and sympathy as tools in increasing visibility and winning supporters. As Nathans explains, abolitionist playwrights depicted slaves who fought against their masters, whether actively or by running away.⁵¹ Nathans writes, “Perhaps a form that treated the slave as a *symbol* for the sins and sufferings of the nation by ‘evoking and circulating feeling’ would allow abolitionists to ‘move beyond the material limits of both the body and the page to participate in the representation of selfhood.’”⁵² In other words, slavery, according to evangelical abolitionists, was the sin of the nation. Centering the slave as the protagonist in

⁴⁹ Gardner, “The Fugitives,” 132.

⁵⁰ McKanan, *Identifying the Image of God*, 129.

⁵¹ Nathans, *Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage, 1787-1861*, 73.

⁵² Nathans, 74. Emphasis original.

abolitionist dramas allowed for the reader to identify with the slave's plight through sentimentalism and sensation, and also to witness that the slave was the model of Christianity that fellow evangelicals and the nation itself should strive to capture through a lens of romantic racialism.

Such a play that wields sentimentalism as a weapon and portrays its characters as models of evangelical Christianity is the anonymously written closet drama *The Fugitives*, published in 1841 by the journal *The Star of Emancipation*, curated by the Massachusetts Female Emancipation Society (MFES). The MFES was founded in the late 1830s, the majority of its membership married to men in clerical power. As historian Julie Roy Jeffrey writes in "The Liberty Women of Boston: Evangelicalism and Antislavery the Society" "regarded eliminating slavery as a religious duty," holding regular prayer meetings and encouraging local Boston women to get involved in the mission.⁵³ The women of this organization were forward-thinking evangelical Christians who vowed to "continue to do abolitionist work 'though ministers of Church and State' might instruct them to desist."⁵⁴ *The Star of Emancipation* published a variety of pieces—poetry, short stories, essays, and dramas—that addressed the immediate dismantling of slavery, particularly through the argument that slavery violated God's law for humankind.

While the author of *The Fugitives* is unknown, she was certainly a member of the MFES and most likely an evangelical. The author married the fugitive slave narrative form with sentimental tendencies in order to tug on the heartstrings of her readers. *The Fugitives* tells the story of a slave woman, Malie, her sons, Ghestler and Zongola, and her daughter, Iola, as they attempt to escape a Carolina plantation in hopes of reaching Canada. Their owner, Bandaloz, is

⁵³ Jeffrey, "The Liberty Women of Boston," 44, 45.

⁵⁴ Jeffrey, 46. For more of the Massachusetts Female Emancipation Society's history, see Jeffrey, "The Liberty Women of Boston: Evangelicalism and Antislavery Politics."

sexually attracted to Iola and plans to rape her, making his intentions known to her family who are left with no choice but to escape. Throughout their journey toward freedom, Malie and Ghestler discuss the role of faith in the lives of the slave, attributing their eventual success to God's unfailing faithfulness in the lives of believers.

Though *The Fugitives* was never performed at a commercial theatre, the play is full of theatrical moments. As Gardner explains, the play had much potential as amateur theatre. He writes, "Nineteenth-century literature and history are rife with examples of family and friends doing small, social theatricals in their parlors." Gardner suggests that the play could have been "played" by members of the MFES after a meeting or by "family and friends with abolitionist leanings."⁵⁵ Performing the piece at home allowed for a deeper sense of identification with the characters, literally bringing the sentimental moments to life. Identification, according to McKanan, is a major component of sentimentalism in artistic expression, "a practice that asks one individual to acknowledge the full, equal humanity of another by appealing to common experiences of relationship, bodily pain, or both."⁵⁶ The goal of the sentimental was for the audience member or reader to see oneself in the art, identifying the plight of the character as one's own. Creating identification in the format of a play allowed one to imagine the character coming to life, or physically performing the role oneself.

The Fugitives certainly asked its readers or performers to see themselves in the characters. Malie and her eldest son Ghestler make the decision to leave to protect Iola from the evil Bandaloz. She informs her daughter that "Bandaloz / Will be passing from the revel and you / May then fall a prey to his foul passions." To avoid this, she exclaims: "Iola, darling child! it is

⁵⁵ Gardner, *Major Voices: The Drama of Slavery*, 71–72.

⁵⁶ McKanan, *Identifying the Image of God*, 5.

for thee / That I will brave the dangers that attend / A flight from this vile land of servitude.”⁵⁷ In artistic depictions of slavery, motherhood was a major proponent of identification between the characters and the reader or audience member. As Glenn Hendler discusses in his influential *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2003), motherhood was often seen as “the analogous ground on which a cross-racial sympathetic identification can be based.”⁵⁸ Sensation worked to build connections between parties. This was especially true for women, who were believed to feel more deeply than men. Thus, Malie’s decision to escape the plantation caused feeling on two fronts. First, the reader agreed with her decision and found it the only viable option to protect her daughter. Second, it reminded the reader that slavery forced mothers to make such a decision. *The Fugitives’* dramatic form invited readers to physically put themselves in Malie’s situation in a way that a novel could not, making identification more personal and urgent in the process.

In addition to motherhood, *The Fugitives* offered readers sentimental identification through its discussion of Christianity. Throughout the play, Malie and her eldest son, Ghestler, discuss the role of Christianity in their lives, and more broadly in the life of the slave. Ghestler questions the validity of God, not understanding how a loving and fair God can allow an institution that treats human beings in such a manner. He asks his mother:

If there were any God, or, if a God, where
Dwelt he, or, if he lived, were he aware
Of the affairs of men? Is he righteous,
Mother? If so, how reconcile you all
Of deep, dark, damning sin that hath been witnessed
By the gazing heavens upon that curs’d
Plantation we have left? If God be just
And merciful, as you have often told,
Methinks Bandaloz would less often crave

⁵⁷ Gardner, “The Fugitives,” 114.

⁵⁸ Hendler, *Public Sentiments*, 5.

His supervision!⁵⁹

This exchange is representative of how real Christian slaves often doubted God's goodness. According to Raboteau, in frequent moments of doubt, Christian slaves retold the stories of biblical characters such as Peter, who denied Christ, and Thomas, who doubted His resurrection. Both disciples were shown direct evidence of Christ's existence and love. These figures were "the models, the analogues, reminding slaves to hold on to their faith despite grief, doubt, and fear."⁶⁰ Ghestler's doubt instilled sympathy within the evangelical reader, who most likely experienced her or his own doubt and as a result, rooted for Ghestler's enlightenment. Additionally, if slavery caused people to doubt God's love, then it should be dismantled.

Malie responds to Ghestler's doubt with faith-based enlightenment, reminding her son that Bandaloz is an example of a hypocritical Christian—"Ghestler, not all who cry / Lord, Lord shall enter heaven; many will / Claim affinity with him, to whom he'll / Say, Depart, I know you not." Such an argument mirrors Dinah's critique of pro-slavery Christian belief in *The Kidnapped Clergyman* that many Christians are hypocrites and misinformed and as a result, will not be blessed. Instead, Malie encourages her son to "Cast off that vile suspicion of his justice," for even though life has been unkind, "Yet hath he not been merciful to thee? . . . O Ghestler, he *is merciful*, and much / It pains my heart when my boy dates question / His o'erflowing love."⁶¹ Malie is an example of Frederickson's romantic racialism paradigm, as well, for even in the face of brutal danger, she still upholds the will of God and encourages her children to do the same in the face of adversity.

⁵⁹ Gardner, "The Fugitives," 118.

⁶⁰ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 250.

⁶¹ Gardner, "The Fugitives," 118–19. Emphasis original.

At the end of the play, the family successfully makes it to Canada, securing their freedom and Iola's safety. Malie asks Ghestler, "What think you now, my Ghestler, of his / Mercy? Dare you farther question his kind / Hand, displayed for our deliverance?" Ghestler replies:

Enough,
My mother, 'twas his love, his kindness all,
That turned their feet from this our resting place;
And never shall my lips forget their song,
Or my heart fail to offer unto Him,
Its homage reverent.⁶²

As Ghestler's declaration of God's mercy shows, in terms of its Christian message, the characters, and thereby the reader, attribute their success to the glory and goodness of God. In this way, the fugitive slave narrative was a kind of religious text. McKanan supports this notion, noting that, "In a genuine fugitive slave narrative, the act of escape usurps the narrative function of conversion and becomes a source of ultimate religious meaning."⁶³ The fugitive slave narrative and its dramatic forms as a kind of religious text, then, synonymized the holds of slavery with the evangelical conversion experience. Certainly, evangelical readers celebrated the fugitive slave's fate because it was similar to their own eternal destiny. The notion of undergoing this epiphany in one's home became a testimony that could inspire readers to reaffirm their faith.

In addition to *The Fugitives*, *The Kidnapped Clergyman* also inspired feeling through sentimental moments in the script. Like *The Fugitives*, it was intended to be read, despite its dramatic form and potential for the stage. W. Edward Farrison supports this notion, writing in "*The Kidnapped Clergyman and Brown's Experience*" (1975) that the author did not intend "to produce a great artistic work especially adaptable to the exigencies of the stage, but to dramatize a comprehensive, persuasive argument against slavery, with special reference to the

⁶² Gardner, 122.

⁶³ McKanan, *Identifying the Image of God*, 130 Emphasis original.

pronouncements of preachers and opportunist politicians who pretended to abhor slavery in the abstract but condoned it on specious grounds as a reality.”⁶⁴ So, if the piece’s value was in the reading, as Farrison suggests, why did the author choose to write the piece as drama?

Evidence lies in the fact that if it were staged, there were ample opportunities for spectacular moments. For instance, early in Dorsey’s dream he is visited by a series of ghostlike historical figures. First, the Archbishop John Tillotson (1630-1694), an Anglican clergyman and a staunch opponent of Catholicism presents him with a congratulatory gift of 1,000 pounds and to encourage him to “Pray take care of a life so valuable to the Christian world.”⁶⁵ Next, Dorsey is visited by a London publisher who has “crossed the Atlantic as speedily as possible” to publish his sermon before any American publishing house can.⁶⁶ Eventually, a parade of five politicians enters the room, two of whom hold a long spoon. The “chairman of a Committee of the House of Representatives of the State of Ohio” thanks the reverend for his “most excellent, learned, deep, sublime, interesting, and important discourse against abolitionists, who have so long been the pest of a country, a nation, a people, and a race of men, the wisest, the most warlike, the most ingenious, and the most growing in the world.” The politicians present Dorsey with the giant spoon in hopes that it “may well serve as a type or emblem of the effectual mode which you adopt to fill the greedy mental gapings of your parish, with the intellectual dainties of your imagination.”⁶⁷ These elements of spectacle are magical creatures of Dorsey’s subconscious. Of course, novels like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* also included moments of spectacle that the reader could imagine coming to life. Significantly, however, playwrights eventually adapted these books for the stage for this very reason, as was the case with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In dramatic form, it was

⁶⁴ Farrison, “The Kidnapped Clergyman and Brown’s Experience,” 507–8.

⁶⁵ Gardner, “The Kidnapped Clergyman; or, Experience the Best Teacher,” 80.

⁶⁶ Gardner, 82.

⁶⁷ Gardner, 83.

easier for the reader to imagine this sequence in *The Kidnapped Clergyman* come to life, and perhaps exciting for them to perform the spectacle in their own homes. The opportunity to embody the roles with a blueprint offered more possibilities to physically engage with the characters and the plot than did reading a novel.

Moments of violence also offered sensation for the reader. In *The Kidnapped Clergyman*, after the parade of historical figures, a kidnapper enters Dorsey's room with three accomplices armed with pistols, whips, gags, and handcuffs. "Seize him!" the kidnapper shouts, and the accomplices "*assault the Clergyman, knock him down, and handcuff him.*" As Dorsey shouts for help, the kidnapper orders his men to "Gag the noisy rascal. Choke him," and they seize him by the throat and proceed to whip him with twenty lashes.⁶⁸ This is a graphic scene that, written in dramatic form, invited the reader to imagine the abuse before their eyes. Additionally, if this play was performed, the audience would have been subjected to the abuse more directly. A similar moment of violence occurs when the clergyman attempts to escape in the woods late in the play. Deep in the wood with "*A sound of rifles firing at a distance, and dogs barking,*" Dorsey climbs a tree to hide pursued by an overseer and ten of his men. The overseer shouts:

OVERSEER: The villain must be here. Look up and see if you can discover him. [*the ASSISTANTS step backwards and forwards, looking up, at different distances from the tree.*]

ASSISTANT: Yes, there he is; I see him plainly. Come down, you villain, or I will shoot. Let me fire first, I will bring him down. [*Fires.*]

CLERGYMAN: Don't fire again; I will come down. [*He descends. The ball has cut off half of one ear. The beat him with their whips, and knock him down; then tire and carry him off.*]⁶⁹

While *The Kidnapped Clergyman* precedes *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its dramatic adaptations, this sequence brings to life a scene of escape and the dangers of being caught that is similar to Eliza's

⁶⁸ Gardner, 84.

⁶⁹ Gardner, 101.

flight. Though without the pomp and circumstance of contrived theatrical spectacle, Dorsey's escape provokes in readers a similar anxiety to that provoked in viewers who witnessed Eliza cross the icy Ohio River in Aiken's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* simply because it is written in dramatic form, the escape outlined directly. If *The Kidnapped Clergyman* were staged, the audience would be overcome with sensation, perhaps to tears as they were with Eliza.

Arguably the most sensational moment of *The Kidnapped Clergyman*, and the one that caused the most identification for readers, is when Dorsey murders his master to protect his daughter's virtue. After Colonel Fustian strikes Clara, Dorsey rises against him, shouting, "What do you mean, vile ruffian?" Fustian replies:

COL. FUSTIAN: O. you rise against your master, do you? [*Strikes the CLERGYMAN over the head and face with the cow-hide, till CLERGYMAN wrests it out of his hands.*]
COL. FUSTIAN: [*Drawing out a pistol.*] So you will have it, will you? [*Fires and wounds the CLERGYMAN, who immediately knocks him down, and tramples on him.*]
COL. FUSTIAN: Murder! murder! O I am killed.⁷⁰

While *The Kidnapped Clergyman* predominantly features a narrative of a white man accidentally being swept into the bonds of slavery, this idea may have been farfetched for the reader. Though there are certainly moments of identification that might have occurred between Dorsey and the reader throughout the play, arguably none was more effective than Dorsey's expression of fatherly protection. Similar to Stowe's appeal to her reader's humanity, particularly for women, in her framing of Eliza's motherhood, Dorsey's priority as a father and his willingness to sacrifice his life and rebel against his master for Clara's safety provided a means of identification between the character and the reader. The play's form allowed the reader to imagine such an expression of love coming to life, thereby accentuating this moment's effectiveness.

⁷⁰ Gardner, 103.

Though Dorsey reads as an evil character who must journey through slavery to become enlightened, he is the protagonist, the hero of the drama. Readers and audience members rooted for characters such as these. Presumably they wanted Dorsey to be delivered from slavery—he is white, after all, and is therefore unnaturally enslaved—and once he is freed, to change his stance on slavery. *The Kidnapped Clergyman*'s plot upholds poetic justice because Dorsey is indeed freed at the end of the play. Furthermore, when the reverend wakes up from his nightmare, he immediately amends his position on abolition, supporting the cause despite potentially losing the support of his congregants. He even takes the time to destroy his sermon. "I am well enough now, and entirely awake," he exclaims.

But I have had the most strange, frightful, horrible dream;—it is incredible, almost impossible;—but, whether awake or asleep, whether dreaming or burning alive, as I thought I was, Clara, in St. Louis, for protecting you, when Mrs. Dorsey awaked me, hand me that manuscript sermon, you see on the shelf yonder, tied with a blue ribbon.⁷¹

When his wife hands him the sermon, he "*tears it to atoms*," signifying a literal separation from his original stance on slavery and an opportunity for the reader to celebrate with the reverend, as well as a call to copy the minister's actions. Though not written with intent of production, these moments emulate the Christian melodramatic mode.

Whitney's *Warren*, too, is stocked with sensational, meaningful moments emblematic of the Christian melodramatic mode. For instance, an emotional and brutal slave auction takes place where a mother is separated from her child and a husband from his wife. In what Hughes calls "a spectacle of grief," the auction, where Warren is eventually sold to Dr. Smythe, also features the explicit sexualization of a mixed-race woman.⁷² Though *Warren* predates Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* (1859) which contains a sensational moment where the titular character is sold on the

⁷¹ Gardner, 106–107.

⁷² Hughes, "Defining Faith: Theatrical Reactions to Pro-Slavery Christianity in Antebellum America," 40.

action block, Whitney's auction block scene accomplished a similar moment of sensation where the audience was intended to feel for the slaves who are ripped from their families and forced into slavery.⁷³

Perhaps the most moving sensational moment of the play, though, is Warren's murder. Throughout the play, though wrongly convicted, Warren exhibits a Christ-like character, praying for his owner's eternal soul even while imprisoned. Recognizing that he will not escape his plight, Warren recognizes that he must sacrifice his life for the good of the cause. He declares:

The Christian may love his enemies, he may bless them that curse him, he may do good to them that hate him; nay, he *must* do these things, or he is not Christian; but he may not cover his soul with a mass of hypocrisy; he may not cringe and cower before a fellow worm; he may not deny his God by obeying man, even to save his life.⁷⁴

Warren compares slavery to bowing to men, which is a sin according to the Bible, and he cannot bring himself to perform such blasphemy as it is against his Christian conviction. This was not a typical argument against slavery, but certainly one that Christian readers, particularly evangelicals, would take to heart—blasphemy is the unforgivable sin.

Since Warren decided early on that he will not serve Smythe, his actions are rooted in martyrdom, teaching readers a lesson of grace and convictions. Even while being beaten into submission, Warren reminds Smythe and his overseers that his physical body will die away, but their souls are in danger of hell. "I have no fear of what you or any man can inflict upon me," he says to his torturers. "But it does pain me more than your blows, to think upon the wrong which you do yourselves by inflicting it."⁷⁵ Such begins Warren's Christ-like imagery, which only becomes more accentuated when he is beaten to death. In two moments specifically, he professes

⁷³ Both Nathans and Hughes explore the contents of the slave auctions in *Warren* in their respective works. See Hughes, "Defining Faith," 40-41, and Nathans, *Slavery and Sentiment*, 82-83.

⁷⁴ Whitney, *Warren: A Tragedy in Five Acts, Designed to Illustrate the Protection Which the Federal Union Extends to the Citizens of Massachusetts*, 33.

⁷⁵ Whitney, 51.

Christ's words verbatim. In the first, he forgives his oppressors, praying, "O! my Father! fill my heart with thine own loving spirit, that no feeling of hate or revenge may rise up there against these men, who in their ignorance or sin, put me to death. Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!"⁷⁶ This moment of forgiveness mimics Christ's words in Luke 23:34 as he is crucified. Such was a learning moment for the reader; if Warren can forgive his trespassers and Christ can forgive His, the reader, too, could forgive.

Warren's death itself serves as the final Christ-like image that inspired sensation. Smythe has him tied up and beaten by his overseers until he submits, ordering them not to cease until he does so. On the verge of death, he prays for his oppressors and that slavery would be dismantled: "Forgive, I pray thee, these blinded fellow men. Deliver; and that right quickly, the pining millions from slavery. O! let thy good angels attend me through the moment of darkness! Into thy hand I commit my spirit.—(Dies.)"⁷⁷ These final words are the very ones Christ speaks before his death according to Luke 23:46. Presumably the evangelical reader noticed the biblical allusion and was moved by Warren's similarities to their Lord and Savior. On this subject, Hughes writes, "[T]he hero of this drama wrests God's Word from the hands of literalist Christians who use the Bible for their own selfish ends."⁷⁸ Appropriating the Bible allowed Whitney to cast his black character in a Christ-like light; if a black man—free or otherwise—could exhibit such fierce Christian morality, then so could they. For those who could not recognize the biblical references, the imagery of Warren dying, forgiving his enemy, and praying for the abolition of slavery offered a sensational moment that illuminated the dangers of slavery and the importance of joining such an evangelical cause. Though order is not reestablished—

⁷⁶ Whitney, 54.

⁷⁷ Whitney, 59.

⁷⁸ Hughes, "Defining Faith: Theatrical Reactions to Pro-Slavery Christianity in Antebellum America," 42.

Dorsey is murdered—poetic justice is maintained as the audience was given a moral lesson about the dangers of slavery. Such was the value of reading a dramatic piece in the Christian melodramatic mode for the antebellum American.

Conclusion

As *The Kidnapped Clergyman*, *The Fugitives*, and *Warren* illustrate, the process of winning people's support for the abolitionist cause, particularly from an evangelical standpoint, involved exposing the hypocrisy of pro-slavery Christianity and arguing that religious practice that supports slavery was an affront against God. Sentimental moments and poetic justice, too, were tools that these evangelical writers used to move their readers toward sympathy for the protagonist and to inspire action against the oppressor, slavery. Though not intended to be performed, these melodramas still functioned as a mode of activism. Thus, evangelical abolitionists benefitted from a literary form that was already proven to move the people toward action.

Nathans argues that sentimental slave dramas were a valuable tool in the fight toward social change in antebellum America. Reading them, she argues, “as a response to the ongoing crises of the antebellum era helps the contemporary scholar to recover a sense of both their immediacy and activism.”⁷⁹ These plays were widely accessible and consumed by many in the North and occasionally, the South. Thus, as the drama performed on stage reflected shifts in political and social thought—as illustrated by moral reform pieces like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Drunkard*—so too did the expression of drama off the stage. Slave narrative plays in the Christian melodramatic mode illustrate for the contemporary scholar the power of drama in

⁷⁹ Nathans, *Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage, 1787-1861*, 8.

antebellum society whether performed in a playhouse or in one's parlor, read aloud in a lecture room or individually in one's home.

This chapter and those previous explored how evangelicals enacted their faith theatrically. Notably, this theatrical religious practice operated outside of the theatre, away from a stage in the traditional sense. Finney, Stowe, and evangelical abolitionists certainly engaged with theatre practice on a spectrum, though all of their texts were devoid of stage lights and actors. If theatre shaped religious practice directly or otherwise, did religion shape the theatre? The next chapter engages with this question directly and explores how commercial theatre—an entity antebellum evangelicals classified as immoral—performed religiously. Unlike evangelicals who adapted theatre practice to further their evangelical mission, theatre incorporated elements of evangelical ideology to make a larger political statement. Evangelical religious expression, then, was used as a means of engaging audiences with a common element in their lives. I intentionally juxtapose this next chapter with those previous to illustrate how most elements of American society, whether sacred or secular, were intertwined and in conversation with each other, however strained the relationships might have been.

CHAPTER 4 – Sanctifying the Native: Evangelical Presence in Popular Indian Melodrama

On November 4th, 1813, at the anniversary meeting of the Society for Propagating the Gospel Among the Indians and Others in North America, Reverend Joshua Bates championed Christianity as the universal religion. He boldly declared, “Christianity is designed to become the religion of all mankind; and will ultimately obtain a universal belief and a general practical influence through the whole world.”¹ Those who did not convert, or in Bates’ words, “the wicked, who directly resist its influence and oppose its progress, must either repent, lay down the weapons of their warfare, and voluntarily submit to the dominion of Christ; or be destroyed.”² Founded in 1787, the Society for Propagating the Gospel was comprised of Boston citizens—clergymen and laymen alike—who made it their mission to spread the gospel and convert “savage” Native Americans (and other non-believers) in New England to Christianity. The first Protestant organization of its kind, the society found success in its endeavors and eventually expanded westward. As Bates’ declaration argues, those who did not embrace Christianity as the world religion, nor the national government that he believed Christianity ordained, would “be bound in everlasting chains, and with the angels, who kept not their first estate, reserved under darkness until the judgment of the great day.”³ It was the goal of the Society to inspire Native Americans to accept Christianity as the universal religion, and to avoid an eternity in hell. The Society functioned, then, as an agent of Christian missionary work.⁴

Predating President Andrew Jackson’s Indian Removal Act of 1830, Bates’ message, along with the very existence of the Society for Propagating the Gospel, begins to illuminate the

¹ Bates, *A Sermon Delivered Before the Society for Propagating the Gospel Among the Indians and Others in North America, at Their Anniversary Nov. 4, 1812*, 6. Emphasis original.

² Bates, 19.

³ Bates, 21.

⁴ For a detailed history of the Society, see its published history, “Society for Propagating the Gospel Among the Indians and Others in North America, 1787-1887. Printed for the Society.”

role of Christianity's presence in erasing Native Americans from American society in the antebellum period. The Society's mission to disseminate "Christian knowledge, and the means of religious instruction among all those, in their country, who were destitute of them" demonstrates American citizens' desire to separate Natives from their "primitive" ways and into a more reputable and rational means of practicing faith.⁵ In order to be respectable in American society, one had to be a Christian who exercised evangelical values.

Fourteen years after Bates' sermon, the American actor Edwin Forrest (1806-1872) published a call for new plays featuring a Native American character at the forefront, emblematic of an American drama distinct from its European predecessors. The call read:

To the author of the best Tragedy, in five acts, of which the hero or principal character shall be an aboriginal of this country, the sum of five hundred dollars, and half of the proceeds of the third representation, with my own gratuitous services on that occasion. The award to be made by a committee of literary and theatrical gentlemen.⁶

Forrest's desire for a new play contest served two purposes. It was, of course, a career move; competing with English actors such as William Charles Macready (1793-1873), Forrest desired roles that would boost his standing as a serious actor in the United States. Forrest was among the first American "stars" on the commercial stage, building a fan base of dedicated supporters. When Macready came to the United States to perform *Macbeth* at the Astor Place Opera House in 1849, Forrest's supporters bought tickets and disrupted the performance by throwing rotten food at the English star, causing a riot that killed over thirty people. The Astor Place Riot set immigrants and American citizens against each other and solidified Forrest as an American icon in antebellum society.⁷ In addition to boosting his standing as an actor, Forrest's play contest was

⁵ Quoted in "Society for Propagating the Gospel Among the Indians and Others in North America Records."

⁶ Quoted in Moody, *Edwin Forrest: First Star of the American Stage*, 88.

⁷ Many scholars have written about the Astor Place Riot. For example, Richard Moody does so in detail in his biography on Forrest, *Edwin Forrest: First Star of the American Stage* (1960), 267-283.

a response to the lack of an “American drama.” Until this point, the majority of theatre produced in the mainstream American playhouse was of European origin, with many English actors becoming stars on the North American circuit. Only a small number of plays written by American authors existed at this time; even fewer focused on American life and history.

Forrest—along with “a committee of literary and theatrical men of note”⁸—chose John Augustus Stone’s *Metamora* as the winner of the play contest. *Metamora* premiered at the Park Theatre on December 15, 1829. It was a major success, remaining in Forrest’s repertoire for the rest of his career and confirming the American audience’s desire for a new national drama.⁹ Based on figures and events from King Philip’s War, a bloody conflict between English settlers and Native Americans between 1675 and 1676, *Metamora* takes place in New England and explores the hostile relations between Puritan settlers and the indigenous Wampanoags. Despite the American public’s feelings toward real Native Americans—*Metamora* premiered just five months before the Indian Removal Act of 1830 was signed into law—*Metamora* was written and performed as an honorable man. David Grimsted describes the fictional chief as “an amalgam of melodramatic virtues: he was a rescuer of heroines, a doting husband, a tender father, a brave warrior in the cause of freedom, indeed as the heroine described him, ‘the grandest model of a mighty man.’”¹⁰ I contend, too, that *Metamora* is a Christ-like figure, possessing a sensibility of American evangelicalism that helps define his trajectory throughout the play.

Metamora’s status as a “noble savage” situates his innate moral character and highlights the core traits of the American Christian male: he is a fierce supporter of his nation, a brave

⁸ “The Dramatic Calendar. John Augustus Stone, Actor and Dramatist, Died in Philadelphia.”

⁹ Grose, “Edwin Forrest, *Metamora*, and the Indian Removal Act of 1830,” 185. In his essay “Edwin Forrest’s Redding Up: Elocution, Theater, and the Performance of the Frontier” (2007), Matthew Rebborn discusses in detail the politics behind Forrest’s performance as *Metamora*, particularly as it relates to the actor’s whiteness.

¹⁰ Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 216.

protector of his family, and a loyal contributor to his society. Though to modern sensibilities these appear to be broad American virtues, Mark A. Noll argues that in the nineteenth century, they were deeply linked to the presence of Christianity in the United States. Noll explains that until the Civil War, American evangelicals since the late eighteenth century had synthesized their values with republicanism and commonsense moral reasoning.¹¹ Republicanism, the most prominent political affiliation in antebellum America, was based on virtue for one's nation and society. Evangelicalism taught that one should protect and provide for one's family and live a life based on righteousness. Therefore, evangelical and republican values informed one another and in turn, informed the American consciousness. This evangelical-republican synthesis was rooted in the evangelical belief that America was God's chosen nation and therefore, it was the Christian's responsibility to take care of it. Understanding this marriage of politics, art, and religion, *Metamora* built on the mission of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel: in order to be respectable in American society, one had to be a Christian, submissive to the white man, and supportive of one's nation, no matter the cost. *Metamora* as Christianized noble savage maintained these ideals for the average antebellum American citizen.

The previous chapters of this project explore the various ways that evangelical figures adapted culture—specifically theatrical practices and ideas—to perform religion theatrically, thus maintaining relevancy in their society and spreading their message to a broader audience. Finney preached theatrically, looking to actors for inspiration. Stowe used dramatic text and live performance to bring new life to her prose. Evangelical abolitionists published plays in the Christian melodramatic mode to sensationalize readers. In this chapter, I move away from the ways evangelicals adapted secular culture and instead, analyze how antebellum theatre practice

¹¹ Noll, *America's God*, 11–13.

was affected by the presence of evangelical Christianity. Indian melodrama became a staple in the American theatrical canon in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the Christian-like tropes that these plays perpetuated were deeply linked to the political ideals of the era. In this chapter, I argue that such plays exhibited an evangelical ethos on stage. While Protestant denominations practiced their faith differently, the common beliefs that the Bible is the word of God, that Jesus is the key to atonement, that one must claim salvation through Christ, and that one must spread the good news to nonbelievers linked these denominations together. In other words, an evangelical ethos was not a religion, per se, but an underlying thread that informed most Christian living in the nineteenth century.

An evangelical ethos present in many Indian melodramas contributed to the creation of a new, romanticized American mythos. Playwrights used evangelical tropes—such as missionary work and the Christianized Indian female—as a means to justify colonization and the removal of Native Americans at the national level. As many Indian melodramas premiered during the Second Great Awakening, these plays served as a utopian vision for Christianized Indians and began to illustrate their place in society, especially by spreading the gospel through missionary work and Christ-like behaviors. George Washington Parke Custis' *The Indian Prophecy* (1827), for instance, featured white characters evangelizing to Native Americans who convert to Christianity as a result. Indian melodramas reinforced the common evangelical assertion that Native Americans must be saved in order to recognize the authority of the white man.

Furthermore, the proliferation of the “noble savage” on stage served as a romantic model for proper, submissive behavior that all people, but especially people of color, were expected to emulate. The noble savage trope—steeped in Christian values—convinced audiences that Native Americans were willing to pass away for the good of the nation. Ultimately, just as evangelicals

theatrically urged the Christianization of American society, Indian melodrama represented a theatrical tradition that pushed the subduing and assimilation of Native Americans through a lens of evangelical politics. The content of the plays covered in this chapter promulgates specific evangelical practice and rhetoric, such as the use of prophecy, religious allegory, and the creation of peace between peoples. Though playwrights did not openly include religious rhetoric for evangelical means—in other words, to convert the souls of audience members—I contend that the plays were a form of propaganda in the creation of a new justification for white-Indian relations in the nineteenth century that strengthened American nationalism within the hearts of white audiences. In other words, to see Native Americans saved on stage was to justify the erasure of real Native Americans from respectable American life.

Similar to religion performing theatrically for a specific means, the presence of an evangelical ethos illustrates how theatre performed religiously as a means of engaging with audiences and disseminating a political message more broadly. Throughout this chapter, I look to several Indian melodramas that performed religiously. In other words, playwrights appropriated religious rhetoric and practices for political means and more significantly, did so with the intention of swaying the masses toward a particular way of thinking—specifically, that the erasure of Native lands and culture is justified from a religious point of view. I first look to George Washington Parke Custis' *The Indian Prophecy* to illustrate the contemporary desire to minister to and convert the Native American in order to maintain a more unified, white-controlled American society. Next, I explore two plays that feature the Pocahontas myth to understand how Christianized Indian women characters were presented as moral and sentimental figures that might lead Native American societies toward rational submission to the white man. Finally, I analyze the character of Metamora in order to understand the function of the Noble

Savage as the ideal Christianized model for American nationalism. All of these plays demonstrate how the American theatre performed religiously in order to speak to audiences in a culturally relevant way that secured its status as a white, land-owning powerhouse.

The Native as Converted Christian: Custis' *The Indian Prophecy*

In the majority of antebellum American melodramas about Native Americans, the primary protagonist falls into the trope of noble savage, a paradigm of male goodness willing to sacrifice himself and his tribe for the good of humanity and the nation. In George Washington Parke Custis' Indian melodrama *The Indian Prophecy*, for instance, chief Menawa dies after he nobly declares General Washington the rightful ruler of America. His death symbolizes the sacrificial dying away of the Native American for the benefit of the new nation. In this section, I analyze *The Indian Prophecy* to examine illicit signs of Christian missionary practices and religious allegory that demonstrate how a Native should behave if they were Christianized. The romantic ideal of the Christianized Native within the Indian melodrama stressed the urgency to save Native Americans in order to maintain white authority.

George Washington Parke Custis was born April 30th, 1781, to John Parke Custis, the son of Martha Washington and stepson of then-General George Washington. When his father died, Custis, just six months old, was taken to live at Mount Vernon under the guidance of his grandmother and step-grandfather. He remained there until Martha Washington's death in 1802.¹² Having grown up in the Washington household, Custis developed a deep-seated love and respect for the first President of the United States and eventually dedicated his life to the preservation of his memory. He curated a collection of stories about Washington's life and career

¹² Nelligan, "American Nationalism on the Stage: The Plays of George Washington Parke Custis (1781-1857)," 300.

entitled *Recollections and Private Memoirs of George Washington*, which was published as a serial in the *Alexandria Gazette* in 1826 before it was posthumously printed as a single volume in 1860.

One of the essays in the memoir served as the inspiration for Custis' first dramatic work, *The Indian Prophecy*, which opened in the summer of 1827 at Philadelphia's Chestnut Street Theatre. Custis sought to celebrate Washington's legacy and reverence to nationalism on the popular stage. National and familial pride are just the beginning of what this play accomplished, however. The text perpetuates an evangelical ethos not present in the memoir, which made the story more meaningful for the audience who celebrated the Indian chief's conversion to Christianity at the end of the play, as well as Washington's consensual excavation of indigenous lands. Though not present in the play's main narrative, evangelical missionaries play a major role in Menawa's trajectory. Without their intervention, he would not be willing to die away for Washington's benefit. The missionary elements within the play justified a feeling of national pride for Washington and for the nation at large, signifying that such patriotism is linked to evangelical practices.

The story that inspired *The Indian Prophecy* was originally published as a forward to the printed version of the play in 1828. A summarized version was also published in the play's marketing materials in 1827. According to the tale—originally shared by Washington's long-time friend Dr. James Craik, who apparently was at the scene when it happened—Washington, accompanied by “hunters, woodsmen and others” journeyed toward the Kanawha River in West Virginia to explore the country and “make surveys of extensive and valuable bodies of land.” They came across a Native American settlement and saw a bounty of game, horses, and land. Resting at the camp, they were bombarded by a “party of Indians.” Washington and his men

protected themselves from what they assumed was an attack until “the savage, driven farther and farther back, as the settlements advanced, had sufficiently felt the power of the whites, to view them with fear, as well as hate.”¹³ Courteously, one of the Indians requested that Washington receive their leader, who had set out on a mission to speak with Washington. Washington obliged, and the chieftain, who was of “a lofty stature, and of a dignified and imposing appearance” approached. When Washington tried to shake his hand, the chieftain drew back “with the most impressive marks of awe and respect.” Instead, he bowed his head in submission. After they feasted, Menawa addressed Washington, recalling a time when they were at war. In the recollection, Menawa ordered one of his men to shoot Washington with an arrow but “’twas all in vain, a power mightier far than we, shielded him from harm.” This shocked Menawa, who recognized Washington’s potential as a divinely protected leader of a new nation. In Menawa’s words, “The Great Spirit protects that man, and guides his destinies. He will become the Chief of Nations, and a People yet unborn hail him as the founder of a mighty Empire!!” After his speech, “his prophetic mission fulfilled,” Menawa sat in silence, as did the rest of the party.¹⁴ Unlike the fictional Menawa in *The Indian Prophecy*, he did not die after his prophecy.

Custis adds a fictional narrative to these events and marries it with common evangelical rhetoric throughout. The story primarily revolves around a white man and former soldier, Woodford, on his journey to George Washington’s camp. He is accompanied by his wife, Maiona, an Indian woman, and Manetta, the estranged daughter of the great Indian chief Menawa. Traveling across Virginia, Woodford’s party is assailed by Menawa and his tribe. Fearing for their lives, Menetta begs her father for mercy. The chief surprises the party by announcing that he has given up a life of bloodshed and will not harm them. “Menawa is

¹³ Custis, *The Indian Prophecy: A National Drama in Two Acts*, 4.

¹⁴ Custis, 6.

changed,” he declares. “Good man missionary has been here. (*Pointing to his heart,*) good man has changed Menawa.” The party celebrates Menawa’s fate: “Menawa wars no more,” Maoina exclaims, “he is the man of peace, he is a Christian.” Of her father’s conversion, Manetta cries, “Thanks to the Great Spirit, my aged Father will now be happy in this world, and in that which is beyond the sky.”¹⁵ The role of the Great Spirit transitions from the barbaric God that fueled native savagery to the Christian God who leads Menawa toward compassion and reconciliation with the white man. The Great Spirit’s evolution into the Christian God was a common occurrence when missionaries brought Native peoples to salvation. As Lincoln A. Mullen writes, Native Americans “tended to receive Christianity in their own language, translating the Bible and rituals of Christianity into their own idiom.”¹⁶ Thus, Menawa’s conversion is the crux of Custis’ message of nationalism and white authority in *The Indian Prophecy*.

Evangelical missionaries bringing Natives to conversion was a common North American phenomenon in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. This period—which historian Linford D. Fisher deems the “Indian Great Awakening”—was a period of “renewed attempts of the English to evangelize their Native neighbors and the Indians’ increasing attempts to procure education, literacy, and acceptance in the larger Euroamerican colonial society.”¹⁷ In *The Indian Great Awakening: Religion and the Shaping of Native Cultures in Early America* (2012), Fisher traces the impact of Christianization as colonization on Native groups and more importantly, Native engagement with European Christianity. On converting Native Americans, Fisher notes that the ideal of conversion “presumes a particular narrative, including a religious experience that leads to the rejection of one way of thinking or living and the embrace of another way

¹⁵ Custis, 25.

¹⁶ Mullen, *The Chance of Salvation*, 66.

¹⁷ Fisher, *The Indian Great Awakening*, 67.

altogether.”¹⁸ The conversion ideal, which I have outlined above, fits within this romantic framework that Native Americans would convert to Christianity and leave behind their previous, “pagan” ways of life in exchange for education and protected, albeit smaller, land. In Fisher’s words, “Indians would be loyal, honest, hardworking, sober, and—perhaps most telling—submissive, all of which would make them better neighbors, laborers, and servants.”¹⁹ Such an ideal brings up an unanswerable question: was the push for Indian conversion out of concern for their souls, a desire for land expansion, or both?²⁰

After Menawa reveals that he converted to Christianity, he explains that he is heading to see Washington, as well. He feels that he will soon die—he is ninety years old—and the Great Spirit commands that he speak with the Colonel. Thus, both parties head to Washington’s camp together. When they arrive, Menawa “*goes through the party, examining each, till he comes to the Colonel, when he strikes hard upon his breast, points up to Heaven, then bows his head in reverence.*”²¹ He calls himself a chief, a mighty man since he was born, but admits that he is “no longer the greatest, for there is one greater than Menawa.”²² He continues:

Menawa is old, and soon will be gathered to the Great Council fire of his Fathers in the land of the shades; but ere goes, there is something here, which bids him speak in the voice of Prophecy. Listen! *The Great Spirit protects that man, and guides his destiny.* He will become the Chief of Nations, and a people yet unborn, hail him as the Founder of a mighty Empire! (*After a pause, his arms outstretched to Heaven,*) Fathers! Menawa comes.²³

Menawa provides a prophetic word that signals the dawn of an era free from Native control where white men will create a great empire on indigenous lands. Once again, the Great Spirit

¹⁸ Fisher, 5. Emphasis original.

¹⁹ Fisher, 37.

²⁰ In addition to Fisher’s *The Indian Great Awakening*, Lincoln A. Muller aptly charts the impact of missionary work on the Cherokee tribe. See *The Chance of Salvation: A History of Conversion in America*, chapter 2.

²¹ Custis, *The Indian Prophecy: A National Drama in Two Acts*, 33.

²² Custis, 34.

²³ Custis, 35.

transitions into the Christian God, who appeared to the chief only after he converted to Christianity. The prophecy is a shock to all in the party, white and Native alike. Menawa, then, takes the lead in this symbolic handing over of power and presumably, his Native counterparts will participate.

Menawa's speech is the dawn of a new age where submissive unity is established, but where Native Americans are no longer in control of their own lands. As Laura L. Mielke notes in *Moving Encounters: Sympathy and the Indian Question in Antebellum Literature* (2008), the use of sensational prophecy in this moment of *The Indian Prophecy* "produced a complex vision of a nation that achieves unity through affection but rejects, through displays of tremendous feeling, the representative of Indian sovereignty."²⁴ Menawa's death, though the final action of the play, served as the climactic moment from which the audience could draw a meaningful connection—namely that Native Americans in this instance were tragic heroes who sacrificed for the greater "good." The chief's prophecy, though supposedly drawn from true events, worked to forward the national mythos that Native Americans willingly gave up their lands for the good of the empire, an epiphany that could only manifest through the use of prophecy, thus securing evangelicalism's role in the creation and maintenance of national identity.

Education for Native Americans plays a significant role in *The Indian Prophecy*, specifically through the use of white, Christian curricula. For instance, the play opens with Maiona giving Manetta her regular Christianity lesson. This opening sequence lays a groundwork for the audience of the value of Christian education in an attempt to eradicate savagery. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in negotiations to colonize native land, settlers used education as a means of convincing Native Americans to concede to them. They

²⁴ Mielke, *Moving Encounters*, 178.

believed that if they could teach the next generation about the benefits of civilized living, they would be able to live peacefully together—of course, under the authority of the settlers. Such a romantic ideal is evident in the dialogue between Maiona and Manetta, the former praising the latter for her dedication to her studies:

MAIONA. There Manetta, you are a good girl, you have learned your last lesson very well.—Depend upon it, you will be more and more pleased, as you advance in the knowledge of Christianity and its sublime doctrines.

MANETTA. Indeed, lady, your praise does poor Indian girl much good; but for you, and the kind Captain, I should have been like the other unfortunate females of my tribe, a miserable slave, doomed to carry the pack of some harsh and unfeeling warrior, enduring his blows without comfort, and without hope in the world.²⁵

Maiona stresses to her student the weight of her lessons, reminding her to depend upon them for an understanding of civilization and the importance of distancing herself from her once primitive ways. Manetta's response solidified for audiences a romantic way of looking at Western education: that it brings hope. Such a means of seeing education as the ideal way of engaging with civilization clearly demonstrates how much weight white settlers put on educating Native Americans.

Native Americans at this time indeed found English education useful and interesting, and saw the benefit of literacy and religious instruction instilling in them a “means of empowerment”—of hope—so much so that they sometimes agreed to live on smaller pieces of land in exchange for teachers and missionaries to educate them.²⁶ However, as Fisher notes, while many natives were indeed interested in education, “this interest and utility were almost always filtered through the realities of colonialism and a deep and abiding concern with retaining Native land and preserving community sovereignty and autonomy.”²⁷ In other words, while some

²⁵ Custis, *The Indian Prophecy: A National Drama in Two Acts*, 9.

²⁶ Fisher, *The Indian Great Awakening*, 44, 48.

²⁷ Fisher, 7.

Indians were genuinely curious about the ways of so-called civilization, and while English missionaries associated interest in education as a the first step toward saving Native Americans (and expanding their land mass), many Indians approached education “with an eye toward the building of alliances and a way to create networks of support and practical aid in a rapidly shifting world.”²⁸ Though settlers believed the incorporation of education to be a successful means of indoctrinating Native Americans toward a civilized way of life—one where “truth” is defined as black and white—some Native Americans appropriated the practical components of European education, trying various components of cultural and religious practices and adopting only what proved useful.²⁹ Nevertheless, the incorporation of Western and Christian education as a means of interacting with and overtaking the land of Native Americans was a successful venture, as is demonstrated by the opening scene of *The Indian Prophecy*.

If the interaction between Washington and Menawa actually occurred, it is not likely that the chief would have prophesied Washington’s or the nation’s grandeur simply because prophecy was not linked to Native religious practice.³⁰ However, both of Custis’ narratives allowed audience members to note the righteous nature of the Native for giving up his authority and helped them cement the notion that the Native must remain submissive to white authority. As Mielke notes, prophecy in Indian melodrama instills sympathy within the viewer and proclaims a

²⁸ Fisher, 55.

²⁹ Fisher, 55.

³⁰ While I do not spend too much time analyzing the accuracy of Native portrayals on the stage—in fact, it is inaccuracy that allows playwrights to use the Native figure for their own hegemonic purposes—it is important to note that prophecy was a distinct proponent of European Christianity, not a practice seen in Native cultures until the eighteenth century. As Maria Staton writes in her essay, “‘They Preach, but Practice Not’: The Indian Prophet in Early American Drama, 1800s-1850s” (2014), prophecies were the result of Christian missionary influence on Native Americans. She writes, “The phenomenon of Native American prophecy appeared under direct influence of white American culture—through the acquaintance with the Bible, missionary teachings, enthusiastic conversions, and the Great Awakening.” Unlike visions, or dreams, which have been a part of Native American religious practices for centuries, Natives learned to prophecy, or to declare of an outcome that may come to pass, from their interaction with missionaries and through Christian education.

“national story of ascendance.” She continues, “The knowledge and faith in the converted heart that Menawa again indicates . . . confirm the greatness of Washington and the embryonic nation.”³¹ In other words, prophecy—a Western religious practice—was featured on stage in order to make such a connection clear. Christian practice was used in this instance specifically for nationalistic means. Noll argues that the belief that America was ordained by God was built into the fabric of American identity and that religion “helped create a national culture.” Not only did the majority of Americans believe that America was God’s chosen nation, but evangelicals felt the need to spread the “good news” of this divine favoritism with each other and with the world.³² This patriotism promoted the accepted belief that the white man was destined by God to colonize North America to build the greatest nation in the world.

An example of this patriotism rooted in God’s ordination can be seen in the play when, in Washington’s wigwam camp, the General declares to his confidant, Craig, his plan for the land once they take it from the Indians: “What a vast country is the West,” he says, “when it shall have been rescued from the savage, and become the seat of civilization, it will be a world of itself; its fertile vallies, its streams, and then its access to other countries, by the Father of rivers!”³³ Washington lays out for the audience what is at stake: the Natives prohibit the god-ordained expansion of civilization and once they are civilized, eradicated, or both, the land can live up to its divine potential. Washington and Craig continue their discussion about their necessary land expansion, noting the faults of English rulership. The presence of English government, they argue, is similar to a parent stifling the growth of her children. “We are becoming such well grown children,” Washington laments, “that we shall tire of the trammels of

³¹ Mielke, *Moving Encounters*, 175, 178.

³² Noll, *America’s God*, 15, 194.

³³ Custis, *The Indian Prophecy: A National Drama in Two Acts*, 16.

the nursery, and begin to think and act more for ourselves.”³⁴ The only means of defeating territorial restriction is to declare land autonomous and expand. Such an act justifies the lives that were lost at the expense of war, including those of women and children. As Washington says, “The provincials have indeed shed their blood, and in no stinted stream, for the mother country, whose wars, whether right or wrong, have required a sad sacrifice at our hands, our gallant and aspiring youth.”³⁵ The fictionalized Washington’s sentiments suggest the commonly accepted belief at the time that white ownership of American soil is God-ordained and therefore land was meant to be taken from indigenous peoples.

Finally, in addition to prophecy as a tool for the creation of nationalism, Menawa’s fate is representative of a Christ-like outcome, thus demonstrating a kind of Christian allegory on the stage. Just like Christ’s death—and similar to *Metamora*’s fate—Menawa’s death is a sacrifice. Whereas the crucifixion of Jesus was representative of the reconciliation between God and humankind, Menawa’s sacrifice builds a new world where Natives are no longer a threat to the colonists. Once he gives his prophecy, “*his arms stretched out to Heaven*,” Menawa dies. His death indicates a kind of transfer of power between the Natives and Washington; now that Menawa has given Washington his blessing, the general can form the nation and it will thrive without the hindrance of Native interference. The inclusion of religious images and practices on stage was a tool that cemented the image of the Native American as a submissive being, that illuminated his sacrificial and honorable characteristics, and that fostered nationalism using religion as a justification. If Menawa is Christ-like, and if the Bible commands that one become more Christ-like, than the audience should look to Menawa through a lens of respect.

Furthermore, nationalism was created here through a kind of hierarchal unity between whites and

³⁴ Custis, 17.

³⁵ Custis, 17.

Natives where whites were on top because the Christ-like Menawa allowed it to be so. Therefore, white-based nationalism was permissible because it was framed through a lens of religious justification; if God ordained this hierarchy to be so, then it will be.

The “Friend to the English”³⁶: Female Indian Characters as Models of Morality

Using evangelical imagery and a selfless, yet stern demeanor, the Christianized noble savage on the American stage served a symbolic political purpose in solidifying the white man’s hegemonic control over land and people. This stereotype of the Native male was not the only figure drawn within the Indian Melodrama, however, nor was it the only tool that dramatists used to spread nationalistic propaganda. Several of these plays featured Indian women as their protagonists, in a role that juxtaposed the wild savagery innate within the Indian male with the docile composure of the Christianized female. As demonstrated through Manetta and Maiona’s Christian values in *The Indian Prophecy*, the Native woman—more importantly, the *Christianized* Indian female character—offered to audience members a model of true civility and demonstrated the necessity of “saving” Indians, particularly women and children, from the grasp of savagery in pursuit of a productive nation. Like the noble savage, the Indian female character demonstrated the need for Christian colonization in order to secure white authority. In no other narrative was this more evident on the antebellum stage than in plays inspired by the Pocahontas myth.³⁷

The first known Pocahontas play premiered in Philadelphia on April 6, 1808 at the Chestnut Street Theatre. James Nelson Barker claimed to have extracted information directly

³⁶ Custis, “Pocahontas, or the Settlers of Virginia, A National Drama in Three Acts,” 10.

³⁷ Indian melodramas featuring female protagonists with Christianized traits were very popular on the antebellum American stage. Eugene H. Jones spends ample time analyzing a majority of these pieces, their production history, and their audience reception. See, *Native Americans as Shown on the Stage 1753-1916*, chapter 3.

from Captain John Smith's *General History of Virginia* (1624) in writing *The Indian Princess; or, La Belle Sauvage*, giving as "close an adherence to historic truth . . . as dramatic rules would allow of."³⁸ The play was popular among early nineteenth-century American audiences, having been revived in Philadelphia and New York for years after its premiere. Barker's play featured comic musical interludes in the middle of semi-serious action. Though Barker's Pocahontas play is considered by many contemporary scholars the first play by an American playwright featuring this particular narrative, arguably the most popular Pocahontas play was penned by George Washington Parke Custis. Premiering at Philadelphia's Walnut Street Theatre on January 16, 1830, two years after *The Indian Prophecy*, Custis' *Pocahontas; or, The Settlers of Virginia*, was billed as "A National Drama," and was performed "with great success."³⁹ While Barker promised historical accuracy with his melodrama, Custis relied more on spectacle and dramatic effect. Both plays were well received, however, and more importantly, their titular heroines served similar functions in the creation of a national drama with political purpose.⁴⁰

In Indian melodramas that feature female protagonists, playwrights spent ample time differentiating the righteousness of the female Indian from her savage male counterpart—a phenomenon that folklorist Rayna Green deems in her article of the same name (1975) "the Pocahontas Perplex."⁴¹ In Barker's *The Indian Princess*, Pocahontas exhibits signs of Christianity organically, all of which come to a head when she saves John Smith and becomes a friend to the English. In other words, she never is taught Christian values explicitly but practices them subconsciously, much to the delight of the English. Later in the play, Pocahontas proclaims

³⁸ Barker, *The Indian Princess or, La Belle Sauvage. An Operatic Melo-Drame. In Three Acts.*, 2.

³⁹ Custis, "Pocahontas, or the Settlers of Virginia, A National Drama in Three Acts."

⁴⁰ Moody traces the popularity of both plays, noting that *The Indian Princess* eventually played in New York and London not long after its Philadelphia premiere. Custis' *Pocahontas* "had a remarkable stage life," writes Moody, having a continuous run of twelve performances after it opened. (Moody, *America Takes the Stage*, 89, 96).

⁴¹ For more information, see Green, "The Pocahontas Perplex: The Image of Indian Women in American Culture" (1975).

her newfound Christianity, attributing her salvation from savagery to her relationship with the English:

Thou’st ta’en me from the path of savage error,
Blood-stain’d and rude, where rove my countrymen.
And taught me heavenly truths, and fill’s (sic) my heart
With sentiments sublime, and sweet, and social.⁴²

Pocahontas’ Christianity operates differently in Custis’ play. Similar to his addition of Christian narrative in *The Indian Prophecy*, Custis adds a white clergy-like character to *Pocahontas*.

Barclay—who has been living with the Native Americans—teaches Pocahontas about Christianity and civil life in England. As a result of his evangelizing, she converts to Christianity. “Since the light of the Christian doctrine has shone on my before benighted soul,” she declares, “I have learn’d that mercy is one of the attributes of the divinity I now adore. To good father Barclay I owe the knowledge which I have acquir’d of the only true God, whose worship I in secret perform.”⁴³ It is because Matacoran lacks this Christian virtue that Pocahontas rejects him: “Matacoran is brave, yet he lacks the best attribute of courage—mercy.”⁴⁴ Thus, from the beginning of the play, the titular character in Custis’ *Pocahontas* is a Christian and acts as a result of her faith.

Indian plays with female protagonists juxtapose the actions stemming from primitive Native religion with proper Christian behavior, using the female Indian as the key to converting her tribe toward civility through Christian morality and ethics. This is true in both Barker and Custis’ adaptation of the Pocahontas myth. In fact, in both plays, it is the Native priest who encourages the mighty King Powhatan to kill the invading white man, thus intentionally juxtaposing the white man with the Native. In Barker’s play, for instance, the Indian priest

⁴² Barker, *The Indian Princess or, La Belle Sauvage. An Operatic Melo-Drame. In Three Acts.*, 52.

⁴³ Custis, “Pocahontas, or the Settlers of Virginia, A National Drama in Three Acts,” 11.

⁴⁴ Custis, 11.

Grimosco advises the King away from compassion toward John Smith and his men, despite Pocahontas' pleas. "King, we must destroy the strangers," he implores, "for they are not our God's children; we must take their scalps, and wash out hands in the white man's blood, for he is an enemy to the Great Spirit."⁴⁵ Not only did this exchange separate the two systems of belief for antebellum audiences—Christianity and the Natives' heathen religion—but it also situated Native religion as an animalistic form of religious practice. When Powhatan continues to show the whites kindness, Grimosco asks him:

Can the enemies of your God be your friends? Can the children of another parent be your brethren? You are deaf to the counsellor: 'tis your priest now speaks. I have heard the angry voice of the Spirit you have offended; offended by your mercy to his enemies. Dreadful was his voice; fearful were his words. Avert his wrath, or thou art condemned; and the white men are the ministers of his vengeance.⁴⁶

Such a statement most likely angered the antebellum audience—comprised primarily of white working-class men—and worked to build the image of the Native Americans as evil figures, thus making Pocahontas' actions throughout the play and her eventual assimilation into white, Christian culture even more noble in their eyes. In Barker's play, then, the separation between white and Native religion and sensibilities is defined—Christianity is civilized while Indian religious practice is savage.

Custis' *Pocahontas* exhibits a similar kind of differentiation between Christian and Indian religion. A character similar to Grimosco, King Powhatan's priest and advisor informs the King that child sacrifice is a necessary means toward pleasing the Great Spirit. Early in *Pocahontas*, when the white men come to Powhatan's court, John Smith shares a decree from the King of England that Powhatan should be deemed king of his tribe. This offends Powhatan, who is already king. Thus, in his pursuit to destroy the white man, he asks his priest:

⁴⁵ Barker, *The Indian Princess or, La Belle Sauvage. An Operatic Melo-Drame. In Three Acts.*, 28.

⁴⁶ Barker, 57.

POWHATAN. Now, priest—what says Okee; is he propitious?
PRIEST. Great King, the god will indulge thy prayer, but demands a heavy sacrifice.
POWHATAN. Well, fifteen youths, I suppose, will content the Okee.
PRIEST. Fifteen, my king! Okee demands an hundred.⁴⁷

To the antebellum American audience, the thought of child sacrifice would have been seen as a primitive, sinful act. Thus, including this within the play secured the natives role as savage and more importantly, their religion as barbaric. This helps to alleviate the tension of colonization—indeed, missionary work was needed to save the Indians from their pagan ways.

In both Barker's and Custis' plays, the prince characters represent the pinnacle of savagery and were intended to invoke hatred for these antagonists among the audience. Miami, Barker's antagonist and Pocahontas' intended suitor is a Native prince and Powhatan's mighty warrior. His distrust of the white man is unchanging. He announces to his fellow warriors, "Brothers, this stranger is of a fearful race of beings; their barren hunting grounds lie beneath the world, and they have risen, in monstrous canoes, through the great water, to spoil and ravish from us our fruitful inheritance. Bothers, this stranger must die."⁴⁸ Miami presents the whites as invaders and cannot see past his hatred for them, and thus, he is presented as a primitive figure who must murder to maintain his savage lifestyle. Pocahontas sees such savagery in her intended and refuses to marry him. Her rejection angers the Prince, who performs his fury. As stated in the stage directions, "*Miami stamps furiously; his actions portray the most savage rage of jealousy; he rushes to seize the princess, but, recollecting that her attendants are by, he goes out in agony, by his gestures menacing revenge.*"⁴⁹ Eventually, when Powhatan pardons Smith and begins to build peace with the whites, Miami stabs himself. Such an act situates Miami as a coward, confirming his place as savage in the audience's mind. Even though he can certainly transition to

⁴⁷ Custis, "Pocahontas, or the Settlers of Virginia, A National Drama in Three Acts," 23.

⁴⁸ Barker, *The Indian Princess or, La Belle Sauvage. An Operatic Melo-Drame. In Three Acts.*, 26–27.

⁴⁹ Barker, 41.

the English way of life, as his tribe eventually does (and as is the right thing to do, according to Pocahontas and the settlers), Miami is rooted in his barbarism. In Custis' *Pocahontas*, the warrior Matacoran, also Pocahontas' intended, serves a similar function. In describing his feelings toward the whites, he declares, "Matacoran despises their friendship and disdains their gifts; and swears, by the heroic fame of his fathers, eternal enmity to the invader, and devoted fidelity to his king and country."⁵⁰ He is informed only by his hatred and distrust for the invaders. Similar to Miami's, it is this savagery that Pocahontas fights against throughout the plays.

Princess Pocahontas' protection of the whites and eventual acceptance of their ways and culture works to undermine the savagery of her primitive Native religion and the princes' monstrous hate for the white man. While her actions themselves—primarily saving John Smith from execution—are inherently noble, her Christian demeanor that informs her decision making was more striking to nineteenth-century audiences. Such an innate Christianity affirms why female Native characters were often drawn to the European male settlers. The Princess herself declares in Custis' play that "I know not how it is, but my attachments became fix'd upon the strangers the first moment I beheld them."⁵¹ I contend that her Christian virtue linked her with the white man, who was also Christian. Pocahontas' Christianity is presented differently in Barker and Custis' plays but fulfilled similar purposes.

Pocahontas' Christian nature—whether organic or learned—operates as the crux of Native salvation from savagery in both plays and therefore, served an important function in pushing the idea of hegemonic control over Native Americans within the audience. For audiences, she was the symbol of civilized Natives, a beacon of hope for white superiority, and a

⁵⁰ Custis, "Pocahontas, or the Settlers of Virginia, A National Drama in Three Acts," 20.

⁵¹ Custis, 10.

savior between nations. As Green contends, in order to be good, Pocahontas “must defy her own people, exile herself from them, become white, and perhaps suffer death.”⁵² In a way, she maintains all of these criteria. Although she does not die in either play, she is willing to sacrifice her own life in order to save John Smith’s—as she exclaims in Barker’s play, “White man, thou shalt not die; or I will die with thee!”⁵³ Her act of selflessness moves Powhatan, who presents her with a string of white wampum in a gesture of peace and allows Smith to live. It is Pocahontas’ continual support and attempted sacrifice that brings the King to revere the white man: “Shame ties the tongue of Powhatan,” he laments. “Ask of that fiend-like priest, how, to please the angry Spirit, I was to massacre my friends.”⁵⁴ Powhatan recognizes that his own priest and his own religion would have caused his downfall and the eventual downfall of his kingdom as he would have made enemies of his “friends,” the English.

A similar sacrifice occurs in Custis’ *Pocahontas*. In the Princess’ first attempt to save John Smith, she appeals to Powhatan’s role as her father. She begs, “King—Father, if every thy poor child found favour in thy sight, spare, O spare the noble prisoner; ’tis Pocahontas, thy darling who intreats thee—her, whom from infancy thou hast cherished in thy bosom. Spare, spare; here will I embrace thy feet, till thou shalt forget the king, and once again be the father.”⁵⁵

When this does not work, she disowns her family and religion:

Cruel king, the ties of blood which bound me to thee are dissever’d, as have been long those of thy sanguinary religion; for know that I have abjur’d thy senseless gods, and now worship the Supreme Being, the true Manitou, and the Father of the Universe; ’tis his Almighty hand that sustains me, ’tis his divine spirit that breathes in my soul, and prompts Pocahontas to a deed which future ages well admire.⁵⁶

⁵² Green, “The Pocahontas Perplex: The Image of Indian Women in American Culture,” 704.

⁵³ Barker, *The Indian Princess or, La Belle Sauvage. An Operatic Melo-Drame. In Three Acts.*, 29.

⁵⁴ Barker, 70.

⁵⁵ Custis, “Pocahontas, or the Settlers of Virginia, A National Drama in Three Acts,” 43–44.

⁵⁶ Custis, 44.

She proceeds to throw herself on Smith and calls for the executioners to strike, moving them to drop their weapons and inspiring her father to change his ways. This is a powerful moment where Pocahontas cuts ties with her Native identity, degrades her people's religion (in similar fashion to how Christians would degrade non-Christian religion), and openly declares her own Christian identity. She assimilates herself into English society, accepting her new white brethren over her own people and becoming an ambassador between nations. For the antebellum audience, Pocahontas was a beacon of integrity and the foremost representative of why Christian missionary work was important in American society.

In addition to her rejection of her previous religion, this departure from the savage is evident in Pocahontas' refusal to marry the princes in both plays. Such a distaste for Miami and Matacoran largely stems from their savagery and their willingness to murder the whites. Thus, her rejection stems from morality ("Away, cruel Miami; you would have murdered my brother!"⁵⁷) and civility ("Matacoran is the sworn enemy of the whites, and implacable in his hatred; but sooner shall the sun cease to shine, and the waters to flow, than Pocahontas be the wife of Matacoran"⁵⁸). Whatever the reason, Pocahontas' unwillingness to take a prince as her husband signifies a reluctance to continue propagating her race. In both plays—as in the true story of Pocahontas—Pocahontas is romantically involved with and eventually weds John Rolfe.⁵⁹ Her union with an Englishman solidifies her role as the bridge between nations while making sure that she cannot continue producing within her Native bloodline. Whiteness will eventually make her race clean.

⁵⁷ Barker, *The Indian Princess or, La Belle Sauvage. An Operatic Melo-Drame. In Three Acts.*, 30.

⁵⁸ Custis, "Pocahontas, or the Settlers of Virginia, A National Drama in Three Acts," 10–11.

⁵⁹ Though he is not present in either play, Pocahontas and John Rolfe had one son together. Thomas Rolfe was born in 1615 when Pocahontas was 17 years old.

Pocahontas' disowning of her own kind and her acceptance of the English demonstrates the assimilation of the Indian female character into whiteness, a common motif within antebellum Indian melodramas. As Eugene H. Jones explains in his landmark study on Indian melodrama, *Native Americans as Shown on the Stage 1753-1916* (1988), "Playwrights show [Indian women] to be very much alike in their striving to emulate their white sisters in an assumption of Christian understanding and humility, as well as in their determination to aid white men in the conquest of the continent."⁶⁰ This is evident even in the way characters speak. Jones continues, "Whereas male Indian characters were almost always made to talk with an artificial dialect different from that of white characters, Indian women are, without exception, as eloquent in English as any white. The 'whiter' their speech and fairer their skin, the less offensive, of course, was the taboo of miscegenation."⁶¹ Though many times actors performed Indian roles with a "Native" dialect, occasionally the dialect was included in the text, as is evident by how the chief speaks in Custis' *The Indian Prophecy*—"But Menawa is changed; good missionary has been here. Good man has changed Menawa."⁶² Such a stark difference illuminates how, though a woman of color, Pocahontas performed whiteness in order to emulate righteousness and peace. Performing whiteness in society allowed other whites not to scoff at interracial marriage and simultaneously erased Native heritage. Notably, just as *Metamora* was famously played by Edwin Forrest, a white actor, the Indian female was portrayed by white women, further perpetuating romantic ideals about whiteness as the dominant race. Thus, Pocahontas' intentionally performing whiteness in speech and action—and being played by a

⁶⁰ Jones, *Native Americans as Shown on the Stage, 1753-1916*, 59.

⁶¹ Jones, 59.

⁶² Custis, *The Indian Prophecy: A National Drama in Two Acts*, 25.

white actress—cemented her role as a protagonist for whom the audience might root for and an emblem of Native support of and appreciation for white colonization.

In both Barker and Custis' Pocahontas adaptation, the title character solidifies the white man's God-ordained authority to American lands. It is clear that even though Smith seemingly wants to make peace with Powhatan and his tribe, he and his people believe that they have a right to the New World. As he declares to his men in Custis' *Pocahontas*:

Allons! we will pitch our camp and array our forces, and to-morrow on to the savage court, where we will invest his heathen majesty with the crown and mantle sent to him by the Lord's anointed; then demand, in behalf of our gracious sovereign, dominion in and over the countries from the mountains to the sea, and if denied us—why then—Dieu et mon droit—For God and our right.⁶³

One can deduce that physical action would need to take place to attain what rightfully belongs to the English if the Natives do not comply. The main character's actions secure a bridge between peoples—because of her bond with the English, Powhatan, too, freely gives his trust. At the end of Custis' play, Smith says to Powhatan, "Chief, our wars are ended; thy noble bearing claims all our esteem. Thou hast fought for thy country—we for ours. Let's in future be friends, and join in friendship those hands, which lately wielded the weapons of enmity."⁶⁴ In other words, Smith extends his respect for the Natives love of country and desire to protect it and desires peace between his people and theirs. In Custis' play, the chief agrees and even ends the play by declaring the white man's authority, prophesying that "thro' a long vista of futurity," these "wild regions shall become the ancient and honour'd part of a great and glorious American Empire."⁶⁵ Such a transition of power can only happen because Pocahontas forged a bond with the white man. The female Indian character, then, revealed for audiences a world where the savage could

⁶³ Custis, "Pocahontas, or the Settlers of Virginia, A National Drama in Three Acts," 9.

⁶⁴ Custis, 46.

⁶⁵ Custis, 47.

become civil and the heathen could become Christian. Pocahontas and her dramatic counterparts offered hope within the audience and reinforced the white man's authority in American society.

From Red Devil to Noble Savage: The Native as Ideal American

While the previous plays address the role of Christianity in the assimilation and eventual erasure of Native Americans in American society directly, other plays weave Christian values less explicitly, particularly through the role of the noble savage. The noble savage as an archetype played an important political role in American drama as it worked to separate real Native Americans from their representations on stage. In other words, the representation became the "real," the accepted truth of who a Native American is. In this section I analyze the function of the noble savage in plays without explicit evangelical presence using Stone's *Metamora* as a vehicle to do so. Unlike Menawa in *The Indian Prophecy*, *Metamora* is not a Christian, nor is he converted to Christianity before he dies, and yet, his role as noble savage possesses evangelical qualities. As such, the noble savage became a model of goodness on the antebellum stage, and as such, the Indian hero became a respected, beloved image for audiences. This final section illustrates, then, that although *Metamora* lacks specific evangelical presence, playwrights laced the evangelical ethos in their pieces as a subliminal means of political sway.

The life of the Native as represented on stage has shifted significantly since its early European appearances in the seventeenth century. In Carolinian plays, such as John Dryden's *The Indian Queen* (1664) and Aphra Behn's *The Widow Ranter; or the History of Bacon in Virginia* (1689), the featured Native character was a means of engaging with the exotic, a fantastical look into a spectacular world unknown. As English drama made a sentimental turn in the eighteenth century, so did native representation on stage. In addition to the spectacular

exotic, playwrights began to use savage characters as a teaching tool. In other words, these Native representations, featured in plays such as Robert Rogers' *Ponteach; or, the Savages of America* (1766) and Thomas Morton's *Columbus; or, the Discoverie of America* (1792), demonstrated how a Native figure could be better than the European characters in the play. The "noble savage" was a means of revealing the worst in white people; if a Native is morally better than white characters, then clearly audiences must recognize the corrupt sensibilities of these figures. Such a representation was read as amusing, however, and not necessarily a means of revealing to the audience the power of virtue. Thus, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in both Europe and the Colonies, Native characters were seen either as "amusing exotics" or as noble savages.⁶⁶ Either way, Native representation in popular entertainments was fictionalized and grandiose. As all of these plays were coming out of Europe at this time, there existed a significant remove in Native representation; the characters were entirely foreign and therefore more fictionalized than were eventual depictions of Native Americans by American writers on the American stage.

The American theatre saw a similar representation to Native people on stage until the nineteenth century. In his scholarship, Jones traces the trends of Native American representation in the first fifty years of the nineteenth century. The progression in such representation was dramatic, beginning with a "fanciful, aloof, and quite unrealistic character who might be shown as admirable but naturally subservient to white men" to Indians who "learned to emulate the Americans in the War of 1812 and then became witty and sensible men of great dignity." The majority of plays, however, fell into a third category: the Native American character as the romantic hero, the noble savage "who, because he and his people were an obstacle to the

⁶⁶ Jones, *Native Americans as Shown on the Stage, 1753-1916*, 19.

progress of white civilization, would pass away.”⁶⁷ In other words, the noble savage recognized the power and potential of white men and voluntarily sacrificed himself for their success. The American theatre leaned on the Noble Savage archetype more strongly than the Europeans, particularly in the nineteenth century. Whereas in Europe, the noble savage was used as a means of mocking white characters, the American noble savage demonstrated a kind of respectability that all people might emulate—including white men.⁶⁸

Antebellum American plays capitalized on the noble savage as a means of social hegemony, placing these characters in leading roles to demonstrate to audiences the power of layering a noble, Christ-like sensibility upon an otherwise “savage” human being.⁶⁹ As Richard Moody contends in *America Takes the Stage: Romanticism and American Drama and Theatre, 1750-1900* (1955), “By merely obeying his spontaneous inclinations he attained a higher moral plane than the white man could achieve through the most scrupulous observance of a rigid sense of moral regulations.”⁷⁰ Such a portrayal of the Native character as better than the white man was a reclaiming of history, the creation of what theatre historian Jeffrey D. Mason calls the “myth of America,” or the ways Americans in the nineteenth century “enacted their collective self-concept, or their sense of cultural identity,” even if such representation was false or falsified.⁷¹ Formerly depicted as a primitive people sent by Satan to deter the colonists from achieving their

⁶⁷ Jones, 38.

⁶⁸ Of course, the noble savage was not the only kind of Native representation present on the antebellum stage. For more information on different dramatic stereotypes of the Native American, see Moody, *America Takes the Stage*, 78-110.

⁶⁹ It is important to note that the majority of American theatre going people in the first half of the nineteenth century were typically white and male. When it came to plays such as *Metamora* and other popular melodrama at the time the audience was predominantly working class. Indian Melodramas were not intended to be produced for Native audiences; instead they were performed for and by white people. For more information on audience demographics at this time, see Martin, “Interpreting ‘Metamora’: Nationalism, Theater, and Jacksonian Indian Prophecy,” Grimsted’s *Melodrama Unveiled*, McConachie’s *Melodramatic Formations*, and Bank’s *Theatre Culture in America*.

⁷⁰ Moody, *America Takes the Stage: Romanticism in American Drama and Theatre, 1750-1900*, 81.

⁷¹ Mason, *Melodrama and the Myth of America*, 1.

God-given promised land—or, the red devil—the romantic noble savage classification stripped the Indian from his primitivism and praised him as a submissive, Christ-like example of humanity.⁷² In other words, the noble savage did what was right and sacrificed himself for the good of humanity, just as Christ did.

Stone based *Metamora* on the historical Chief Metacom and the events of King Philip's War. Throughout the seventeenth century, Metacom's father, Massasoit, established peace with the Plymouth Colony at the expense of the tribe's freedom of trade and travel. When Massasoit died, Metacom requested English names from the colonists on behalf of himself and his brother. The request was granted, and they were given the names Alexander and Philip. After years of fragile peace, the colonists accused the Wampanoags of conspiring against them and in turn demanded that Metacom sign a document of submission. From that point, the peace between the tribe and the colonists began to dismantle, and war broke out between 1675 and 1676. After a year of fighting, the settlers overtook the tribe's land. Metacom was murdered by a renegade Wampanoag, his body drawn and quartered. It is estimated that up to 6,000 people were killed or sold into slavery as a result of King Philip's War.⁷³ Since the war, Metacom has been portrayed throughout history as a savage, a betrayer of peace, a murderer of the peaceful settlers. Part of this, as Ronald G. Domer explains in his essay "King Philip's Ferocious War" (2004), was that the war instilled fear of Natives in the colonists. Domer writes, "Philip served as a catalyst for the tribes to rise up against the English as a central symbol of resistance."⁷⁴ The colonists'

⁷² For more on the restoration of the noble savage, see Sayre, *The Indian Chief as Tragic Hero: Native Resistance and the Literatures of America, from Moctezuma to Tecumseh* (2005), especially pages 1-41.

⁷³ Mason, *Melodrama and the Myth of America*, 26-28; Lafantasia, "The Long Shadow of King Philip"; Domer, "King Philip's Ferocious War."

⁷⁴ Domer, "King Philip's Ferocious War," 88.

willingness to create peaceful interactions with Native Americans was wounded after the war. From that point on, Native Americans could not be trusted.

Stone's depiction of *Metamora* was the ultimate example of the noble savage paradigm on the American stage, the model of nobility and incorruptibility. The character strives to do good for his family, tribe, and society. Audiences embraced Forrest's portrayal of *Metamora*, sympathizing with his demise and celebrating his virtue. This is important for several reasons: first of all, Stone separated the fictionalized *Metamora* with the historical Metacom who, until this point, was demonized in history.⁷⁵ Second, the political climate regarding Native-White relations was a deeply polarizing issue. Support for Indian removal was nationwide, though especially strong in the American South.⁷⁶ For the most part, Indian removal was a response to land greed expressed by every level of American society. When Andrew Jackson was sworn in as seventh President of the United States, he took the issue up and garnered support from across the country. The Indian Removal Act was signed into law on May 28, 1830 with a 101 to 97 vote for passage.⁷⁷ The Act permitted the President to negotiate with American Indians, giving them federal territory west of the Mississippi river in exchange for white settlement on their native lands. Those who resisted the Act were forcibly moved.⁷⁸ Yet, even with significant support for Indian removal among the American people, the noble savage was a staple in the American theatre. Since the story of the historical Metacom's fate was well-known and adopted into the American mythos, Stone's *Metamora* essentially reinvented the historical figure as a figure of propaganda. In other words, the fictional *Metamora* and thereby, all antebellum Native

⁷⁵ This historical account is the source of two other plays, which played at similar times as *Metamora*, but were less popular: *Philip; or The Aboriginies* (1822, author unknown) and John Montgomery Bird's *King Philip; or The Sagamore* (Grose, "Edwin Forrest, *Metamora*, and the Indian Removal Act of 1830," 185-186.)

⁷⁶ Grose, "Edwin Forrest, *Metamora*, and the Indian Removal Act of 1830," 181.

⁷⁷ Grose, 190.

⁷⁸ The Trail of Tears is considered one of the largest acts of genocide against Native Americans where the Cherokees were forcibly moved west between 1838-1839. Nearly 4,000 Cherokee were killed.

Americans were not evil the way Metacom was evil. They were instead submissive and understanding to the authority of the whites. Such a reimagination helped to soothe the guilt of white Americans regarding the rhetoric around Indian removal at this time, particularly as the Indian Removal Act was signed into law just five months after *Metamora* premiered.

Edwin Forrest's whiteness played a large role in shaping the way audiences interpreted the character Metamora. Forrest curated his play contest with the intention that he would star as the main character of the winning piece. Metamora became one of Forrest's most famous roles and the actor kept it in his repertoire until the end of his career. Gordon M. Sayre explains in *The Indian Chief as Tragic Hero: Native Resistance and the Literatures of America, from Moctezuma to Tecumseh* (2005) that "Playing the starring role in the play that he owned (and never allowed to be printed during his lifetime), Edwin Forrest earned as much as thirty-three thousand dollars in one season (1837), a sum that for its time was as astronomical as those enjoyed by Hollywood stars today."⁷⁹ Though Forrest darkened his skin and allegedly lived with a group of Choctaws in preparation for the role,⁸⁰ his whiteness permitted the audience to simultaneously diffuse fear of the Native—an underlying fear connected to the original myth of Metacom and King Phillip's War—and, as Donald B. Grose contends in "Edwin Forrest, Metamora, and the Indian Removal Act of 1830" (1985) "reaffirmed to white audiences the irrefutable inevitability of white progress and Indian extinction."⁸¹ American actors like Forrest sought to create as realistic a representation of Native Americans as possible in their portrayal. Thus, the presence of a white man playing a Native role created a suspension of disbelief that allowed audiences to accept

⁷⁹ Sayre, *The Indian Chief as Tragic Hero*, 125.

⁸⁰ As Mason notes, in his 1887 biography on Forrest, William Rounseville Alger reported that Forrest "lived with [the Choctaws] as one of them, dressing, eating, and living as a Choctaw and taking part in their hunts and dances" (56). For more, see Mason, *Melodrama and the Myth of America*, 55-56.

⁸¹ Grose, "Edwin Forrest, Metamora, and the Indian Removal Act of 1830," 185.

Forrest as a “true” Native character who further cemented the romantic notions the play propagates.

In addition to Forrest’s whiteness, Metamora’s noble actions in the play situate the character as a mighty warrior in the collective imagination, as opposed to the villain he was painted as in history. When the Puritans attack the Wampanoags, for instance, Metamora and his tribe nobly defend themselves. After the Puritans kill the majority of the tribe and have Metamora surrounded, the chief murders his wife and son to protect them from the oncoming attack. Before committing suicide, he curses the white man:

May your graves and the graves of your children be in the path the red men shall trace!
And may the wolf and the panther howl o’er your fleshless bones, fit banquet for the
destroyers. Spirits of the grace, I come! But the curse of Metamora stays with the white
man!⁸²

Metamora’s suicide is representative of a preference to die nobly at one’s own hand over a forced death at the hands of the enemy. Though Metamora curses the white Puritan man, his sacrifice is a noble act that redeems the Indian figure for antebellum audiences because he removes himself voluntarily instead of being killed by the settlers. Therefore, his primitive savageness dies away, and he is elevated into the stature of noble savage, a figure of nature who upholds virtuous characteristics of protector and family man.

Metamora’s suicide is both moral and sacrificial, elements often connected to Christ. In Christendom, Christ’s crucifixion is considered the ultimate sacrifice; he gave his life so that those on Earth may live an eternal life with Him free from damnation. Metamora sacrificed his own life and the lives of his family in order to spare them from the damnation at the hands of the Puritans; they all died honorably. As McConachie contends, Metamora’s sacrifice is a part of a larger plan, God’s plan, and is in deep connection with “the lesson believed by nearly all

⁸² Stone, “Metamora, or the Last of the Wompanoags,” 226.

nineteenth-century Americans as fundamental to the history of humanity: the lesson of Christ's crucifixion."⁸³ Christ had to die on the cross in order to rid humanity of its sins and ensure the opportunity for eternal life with Him in heaven. Thus, even though *Metamora* falls at the end of the play, he provides for his audience an example of righteous sacrifice for the greater good, just as Christ did for His people. In this way, *Metamora* is a better Christian than the Puritans. *Metamora* as the noble savage served as a model for human behavior, demonstrating how marginalized and minority groups should submit to the authority of the white man, as white Americans believed was God's will for the nation.

While both Christ's crucifixion and *Metamora's* sacrifice are not ideal outcomes in the moment, they were necessary for the good of the collective. In other words, *Metamora* builds an image of the Indian that encourages the audience to vilify the Puritans in order to see him as Christ-like, recognizing his sacrifice for the good of the nation. The Puritans are presented as negative forces in the lives of Native Americans, disrupting their way of life for their own selfish needs. While Puritanism certainly informed the foundation of American Protestant expression, religious pluralism and the formation of various Protestant, evangelical denominations led to an eventual skepticism of these early roots, particularly Puritanism's prescriptive expectations for Christian living and belief.⁸⁴ Thus, as dissenting denominations began to form after the Great Awakening, religious freedom weakened Puritan presence in the United States.⁸⁵ Most likely, many evangelical audience members connected with Stone's depiction of early Puritan settlers as figures separate from them and separate from their contemporary faith.

⁸³ McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 103.

⁸⁴ For more on the rise and fall of Puritanism in early America, see Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*, 55-63

⁸⁵ Bremer, *The Puritan Experiment*, 233.

The noble savage on the American stage allowed audience members to reconcile the government's move to force Native Americans to assimilate or leave. Since Native Americans were represented on stage as good Americans and therefore, good Christians, many white Americans believed that they would submit to the government's requirements. The ethos of evangelicalism within the theatre, then, served to uphold the United States' white hegemonic power at this time. *Metamora's* willingness to destroy himself at the end of the play is also emblematic of his knowledge that he and the white man cannot coexist in a peaceful way. As Grose contends, *Metamora* is given the foresight to see that "white and Indian ways are not compatible and that one must give way to the other."⁸⁶ The noble savage is willing to destroy himself for the greater good. The historical Metacom did not share such a view and was murdered because of it.

The fictional *Metamora's* martyrdom served a political purpose, then; *Metamora* sat in the middle of two conflicting feelings toward Indian removal. On the one hand, most Americans supported the Indian Removal Act. On the other, however, some Americans sympathized with the treatment of Native Americans in visceral ways and found it hard to reconcile such brutal treatment, both in history and in the present moment. *Metamora* offered an opportunity for audience members to empathize with the fate of the Native American, simultaneously understanding the need for such a move through *Metamora's* willingness to die. Whereas Pocahontas was representative of the necessary Christian assimilation of the Native, the noble savage also allowed audiences to reconcile their current political situation, convincing white working-class audiences that Native Americans needed to be removed in order for society to thrive, and that Indians saw this as the necessary outcome, as well. This white-constructed ideal

⁸⁶ Grose, "Edwin Forrest, *Metamora*, and the Indian Removal Act of 1830," 188.

falls into Mason's myth of America paradigm. As he writes, "*Metamora* created a myth, an idealized vision, that permitted its audience to enjoy the beauty of the Indian while abusing the native."⁸⁷ *Metamora* offered antebellum audiences a justification for such abuse past and present. In this case, the myth of America is that God ordained the United States to be the greatest nation in the world, and thereby made colonization and the erasure of Native peoples permissible. The theatre used well-known religious allegory to reconcile white guilt. *Metamora* was an apology letter, not to the Native, but to white people debating on the morality of Native removal.

The noble savage as emblematic of an American hero with Christian virtues helped ease the collective anxiety about Indian Removal. Plays such as *Metamora* allowed Jacksonian audiences to see that not only was it permissible to remove indigenous peoples from their native lands, but that noble savages too saw the importance of their removal. As Mielke notes, "*Metamora*, like many other Indian melodramas, offered audiences an admirable, sympathetic, indigenous, 'ancestor' who predicted the rise of the nation and modeled virtue even as he declared, in word and in death, the inevitable disappearance of American Indians."⁸⁸ *Metamora*'s death was a metaphor for such a prophetic nature in the antebellum imagination. *Metamora* as noble savage represented a figure who gave his life in Christ-like fashion. His sacrificial act reminded audience members that Indian removal was justified from a moral point of view because without it, civilization could not progress and God's plan for America could not come to pass.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Mason, *Melodrama and the Myth of America*, 59.

⁸⁸ Mielke, *Moving Encounters*, 170.

⁸⁹ Grose, "Edwin Forrest, *Metamora*, and the Indian Removal Act of 1830," 191.

Conclusion

Indian Melodrama on the antebellum stage functioned in a way similar to how evangelicalism operated; as evangelicalism performed religion theatrically to spread the Good News, so did theatre perform religiously to spread its hegemonic message of white authority to the masses. For many white Americans in the nineteenth century, the urge to nationalize and assimilate Native Americans into white American culture was just as present as the desire to reconcile the mass destruction of Native lands throughout the country. Throughout this chapter, I have illustrated that through romantic representations of Native-white relations, the theatre offered Americans the opportunity to affirm their place as the authoritative race while reconciling their uneasiness in doing so. Each of the plays that I addressed—*Metamora*, *The Indian Prophecy*, *The Indian Princess*, and *Pocahontas*—reminded audiences that American soil is orchestrated by God to be theirs. Furthermore, the central figures within each of these plays fell into archetypes—the noble savage and the Christianized female—and exemplified Christian values in order to secure a nationalistic agenda. In other words, both character types reminded audiences that Natives *want* to be colonized; the Indians, too, recognized God’s desire for whites to rule the land, or so white Americans believed. Both archetype and plot worked together to illustrate the necessity of Christianization among Native people—the theatre recognized this necessity and capitalized upon it for its nationalistic agenda, demonstrating the influence of evangelical belief on society at large.

This chapter and those that precede it demonstrate an interconnectedness between the various aspects of American life, both “sacred” and “secular.” Whether it was evangelicals performing religion theatrically or the American theatre performing religiously, the very presence of one another’s culture in their respective practice suggests that all things depended

upon the other. Though the majority of this project analyzes the ways evangelicals used theatre as a means of cultural relevance and religious sway, this final chapter reveals that the so-called contentious relationship between the theatre and evangelical Christianity was more complicated than most scholars have given credit on both sides of the spectrum. Though evangelicals never publicly embraced the theatre, they depended upon theatre practice. Though theatre practitioners were not required to make a declaration of faith, the intentional inclusion of religious rhetoric and ideas suggests that not only was Christianity a major component of antebellum life, but that it was an effective means of reaching the audience.

CONCLUSION – From Sin to Doctrine: Surveying the State of Evangelical Theatricality

My family and I recently rediscovered home videos of my acting debut in 1991. At just three months old, I starred as baby Jesus in my church's annual Christmas cantata, entitled *The Night the Angels Sang*. In my scene, a manger sat downstage of a choir of angels who stood upon the choir loft, singing a variation of the Hallelujah Chorus. A processional consisting of shepherds and livestock—real sheep, goats, llamas, camels, and horses—descended the aisle of the 1500-seat sanctuary. When they reached the stage, they bowed to the newborn Savior and took their places stage left or right. Eventually, three Wise Men walked down the aisle in ornate costumes holding their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The king in the center wore a long, metallic train about twenty feet long, followed by two young train bearers. The Wise Men reached the manger and bowed. As the choir sang and the orchestra flourished its final fanfare, the train bearers spread the wise man's cape from one side of the stage to the other, filling the entire space with shimmering fabric before the lights went out on the sanctuary. In darkness, the audience cheered until the next scene began.

As my evangelical church's unapologetic embrace of theatrical performance illustrates, contemporary evangelicals' relationship with theatre looks wildly different from those who performed religion theatrically in the nineteenth century. As I argue throughout "The Good News on Stage: Evangelicalism and Theatre Practice in Antebellum America," however, this evolution was made possible by those antebellum evangelicals who adapted theatricality in their own religious expression, despite how the majority of evangelicals felt about the theatre throughout the nineteenth century. This study demonstrates how theatre informed evangelical expression in the past in an attempt to understand how the relationship between the sacred and the secular operates in the present. Antebellum evangelicals adapted theatrical techniques, such as acting

styles and playwrighting, to emphasize and spread their message and to find relevance in the world. Evangelicalism was and continues to be deeply impacted by the existence of the American theatre.

The case studies housed in this dissertation represent a small group of forward-thinking individuals who saw the merit of theatre practice as a means of spreading the Gospel of Christ. It was these figures who deftly adapted the culture of their day to remain relevant in an evolving American society. Without a willingness to adapt and grow, American Christianity would certainly not have grown into what it is today. Yet, the figures and scenarios in these case studies represent the minority of Christians who showed theatrical promise; most abhorred theatre until at least the twentieth century, fighting to keep the theatre and its practices out of religious expression and inaccessible to fellow Christians. The stark difference in cultural opinion regarding the place of theatrics in Christian piety from the antebellum moment now is jarring. Contemporary evangelicals have shown a certain laxity in its view and use of the theatre over the past century. As Edmund S. Morgan writes in his essay, “Puritan Hostility to the Theatre” (1966), “In our own time church and theatre have both survived and continue to thrive side by side, with relatively little of the old rivalry showing.”¹ Such a claim inspires a new research question: when did the American evangelical majority embrace theatre as a viable means of evangelism?

Perhaps Sister Aimee Semple McPherson was one of the first to inspire this embrace. In practices similar to those in revival meetings of Charles Grandison Finney during the Second Great Awakening, this early twentieth-century minister from Los Angeles incorporated spectacular theatrics within her sermons to emphasize her message. “Remember you have

¹ Morgan, “Puritan Hostility to the Theatre,” 347.

competition,” warned Sister Aimee in her illustrated sermon, “The Heavenly Aeroplane”, the sound of Christ’s propellers buzzing in the background. “There are the movies and the boxing-galleries and the bowling allies. Students, beat the old devil at his game,” using “every means you can at your disposal to get the message over.”² While theatre practice remained a taboo topic within Christian practices during America’s antebellum moment, Sister Aimee complicated this belief in the early twentieth century; though she implored her congregation to recognize sin, she encouraged them to do whatever they could to evangelize, even if that meant engaging with, even participating in, vice as a tool for the cause. Unlike Finney, who worked to engage the congregant’s emotions through performance style alone, Sister Aimee employed overt theatrical spectacle to illuminate the dangers of the theatre, despite Christianity’s previous rejection of theatre and drama half a century before.

By the 1930s, drama ministries had become staples in many churches, producing works such as illustrated sermons and holiday spectaculars in the guise of medieval passion plays—including my church’s production of *The Night the Angels Sang*, which has been remounted every year since the early 1980s. To understand the role of theatre in the church, some practitioners wrote full-length manuscripts that detail how one might produce a church play. In 1938, for instance, playwright Esther Willard Bates published *Church Play and Its Production*, an instruction manual that explains to its readership how to write “religious” drama, how to incorporate performance into the worship service, and how to perform the various roles required in the theatre—from directing and acting, to costume design and props. Interestingly, the book does not show any anxiety about the morality of theatre. Bates holds that “Religious Drama should be a drama of intellectual vitality rather than physical vigor.”³ She writes that theatrical

² Quoted in Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, 76.

³ Bates, *The Church Play and Its Production*, 3.

productions in the church have the power to uplift the congregation, to build community, and to be renewed in one's own faith.⁴ The work of the drama ministry serves an evangelical—an evangelistic—purpose. While Harriet Beecher Stowe and other evangelical abolitionists attempted to make a similar impact in the world, they were unable to release the theatre from its immorality. Thus, contemporary drama ministries are major developments since the days when nineteenth-century evangelicals classified theatre as sinful and irredeemable.

Drama ministries grew in popularity well into the twentieth century and continue to develop to this day. Of course, each ministry's content differs by denomination and even more specifically, by church. Some ministries write and perform realism-based original plays with an overtly Christian message. Since the 1970s, for example, Willow Creek Church, an evangelical megachurch in South Barrington, Illinois, has incorporated theatrical skits and plays into regular worship services.⁵ Steve Pederson, Willow Creek's former Director of Drama, writes in a 1993 article for *Christianity Today* that incorporating drama into the life and ministry of the church's structure allows the audience to see themselves in the characters. "The characters talk, act, and look like normal people," he writes. "The audience then realizes the characters are dealing with the same problems they do at home, at work, or in marriage. Drama in that sense helps satisfy the desire within all of us to be understood. . . . It creates a beginning place for the Holy Spirit to work in people's lives."⁶ Contradicting the arguments of antebellum evangelical theologians regarding truthfulness, Pederson suggests that the benefit to dramatic performance is its ability to illustrate clearly the message of the preacher's sermon and the consequences of ignoring such a message. Additionally, while a sermon may sometimes feel like it may not apply directly to a

⁴ Bates, 3.

⁵ Though its main broadcast campus is located in South Barrington, Illinois, Willow Creek has several satellite campuses around the Chicago area.

⁶ Pederson, "What's Drama Doing in Church?"

person's life, people are able see themselves in the characters on stage and can then discover the message more intentionally.

Eventually, Christian drama—and its evangelical stewards—made its way into the commercial and educational spheres. Perhaps most famously, Sight and Sound Theatres based in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and Branson, Missouri, aims “to present the Gospel of Jesus Christ and sow the Word of God into the lives of customers, guests and fellow workers by visualizing and dramatizing the scriptures, through inspirational productions, encouraging others and seeking always to be dedicated and wise stewards of our God-given talents and resources.”⁷ In its 2000-seat space with a panoramic stage, Sight and Sound Theatres bring bible stories to life, producing plays based on the stories of Noah, Daniel, and Jesus Christ, for example. The company boasts a team of over 600 employees and sold out shows daily. Both locations, which marry theatricality and church, draw thousands of tourists a year. While they aim to appeal to a broad audience, the majority of Sight and Sound's patrons are of Christian faith, emulating what Jill Stevenson calls *evangelical dramaturgy* in her book *Sensational Devotion: Evangelical Performance in Twenty-First-Century America* (2014). Evangelicals build performances that fall under evangelical dramaturgy for other evangelicals in a mission to emphasize faith and make it stronger.⁸

Both emulating and exceeding evangelical dramaturgy, the Still Small Theatre Troupe based in Beverly, Massachusetts, produces minimalist works that “‘translate’ the heart of God into the heart language of our culture—entertainment—so that those who have heard it all before may learn to hear again, and those who have never heard may receive it in a way they can understand.”⁹ The troupe's shows are rooted in Christian ethics based on scripture but are not

⁷ “Sight and Sound Theatres.”

⁸ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 4.

⁹ “Still Small Theatre Troupe.”

necessarily inspired directly by Bible stories, unlike Sight and Sound. Still Small Theatre Troupe works to appeal to all audiences, especially non-Christians, in attempt to share their message with the world. Finally, the non-profit Christians in Theatre Arts (CITA) is an organization that hosts conferences, festivals, and workshops throughout the year for members working in regional theatres, commercial theatre, educational theatre, and church theatre. CITA—whose mission is to cultivate “environments that empower and sustain all Christian in Theatre Arts”—also offers resources for Christian theatre artists that help them incorporate faith and art.¹⁰ These examples offer a glimpse into how Christians openly embrace theatre and its practices as a mode of theological outreach. Today, theatre is a tool for effective missionary work.

Plays with biblical narratives eventually made it to Broadway. These productions were unaffiliated with any Christian organizations, denominations, or churches and as a result, led some devout Christians to take issue once again with the commercial stage. In *Playing God: The Bible on the Broadway Stage* (2015), theatre historian Henry Bial traces twentieth-century Broadway plays and musicals with overt biblical narrative. Not unlike the Indian melodramas I discuss in this dissertation, these commercial productions further blur the line between sacred and secular. Though religious organizations and Christian denominations did not openly support these productions, their presence on the mainstream theatrical circuit suggests that theatre eventually embraced Christianity as a means of entertainment, and as Bial notes, as a means of audience engagement. Perhaps it was this cheapening of the Bible’s impact through Christianity that antebellum evangelicals sought to avoid in their rejection of performance. Nevertheless, similar to antebellum theatre makers weaving religious rhetoric in Indian melodrama for political means, contemporary theatre makers saw the impact of using components of Christian belief on

¹⁰ “Christians in Theatre Arts.”

stage for various purposes including audience draw, social change, and in some cases, religious critique. Ultimately, Bial's work, Sister Aimee Semple McPherson's theatrical homiletics, the advent of drama ministries, and Christian theatre companies are examples that paint a picture of a complicated and beneficial symbiosis between modern evangelical Christianity and the American theatre.

It is clear from the above examples that evangelicalism has come a long way since its zenith in the United States, especially in terms of its relationship with theatre. While my dissertation illuminates what I argue is the beginning of the turn toward an embrace of theatre and performance, the collective acceptance of theatre and its practices within the holy confines of the Church does not occur until after the antebellum period. This dissertation serves as the entry point to a future scholarly endeavor that will chart the earliest instances of evangelicalism's embrace of theatre arts as a means of theological teaching. My next project will explore the function of theatrical spectacles (i.e. Passion Plays, hell houses), evangelical figures and churches that employ theatricality as a means of wooing congregants toward salvation (i.e. Aimee Semple McPherson, Willow Creek Church), and Christian theatre companies who use secular space for sacred means (i.e. Sight and Sound Theatre, Still Small Theatre). It will also note the challenges of such a relationship, including issues such as charging tickets for church productions, for example. Many scholarly works study the way evangelicalism adapts other forms of contemporary popular culture including music and film.¹¹ No project to date does the same for theatre's impact on evangelical expression.

¹¹ For examples of scholarship on evangelical music, see Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community* (2018); Kelman, *Shout to the Lord: Making Worship Music in Evangelical America* (2018); and Stephens, *The Devil's Music: How Christians Inspired, Condemned, and Embraced Rock 'n' Roll* (2018). For examples of scholarship on evangelical film, see Johnston, Detweiler, and Callaway, editors, *Deep Focus: Film and Theology in Dialogue*; Lindvall, *Sanctuary Cinema: Origins of the Christian Film Industry* (2019); Marsh, *Theology Goes to the Movies: An Introduction to Critical Christian Thinking* (2007).

The twentieth and twenty-first-century developments I have surveyed in this conclusion, juxtaposed with the complicated relationship between church and theatre in the nineteenth century I explored in this project suggest a major shift in the timeline of evangelical history. This dissertation serves to uncover the earliest inklings of this shift in Christian culture in an effort to understand how churches could eventually adopt theatrical practice as a commonplace theological teaching tool less than a century later. This project and my next one reiterate perhaps the most important point in understanding the life of evangelical history in the United States: that American evangelical Christianity must remain current to survive. To do so, it must adapt to the very culture that it deems sinful to attract an audience that will always continue to evolve. “The Good News on Stage: Evangelicalism and Theatre Practice in Antebellum America” traces the foundations of evangelical Christianity’s need for relevance through theatre. Evangelicals have proven time and time again that they must be *of* the world to remain a relevant and influential component *in* the world.

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- Young, Michael P. *Bearing Witness Against Sin: The Evangelical Birth of the American Social Movement*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

JOSEPH RONALD D'AMBROSI

EDUCATION

Ph.D. Theatre and Drama; Indiana University 2020
Ph.D. Minor in Religious Studies

Dissertation: "The Good News on Stage: Evangelicalism and Theatre Practice in Antebellum America"

Committee: Dr. Eleanor Owicki, Chair; Dr. Candy Gunther Brown; Dr. Jennifer Goodlander; Dr. Ronald Wainscott

M.A. Theatre Studies; University of Central Florida 2016

Thesis: "Christ on the Postmodern Stage: Debunking Christian Metanarrative Through Contemporary Passion Plays"

Committee: Dr. Julia Listengarten, Chair; Dr. Aaron C. Thomas; Earl D. Weaver, M.F.A.; Vandy Wood, M.F.A.

B.A. Theatre; Messiah College 2014
Minor in Education

Capstone Project: "Bloodlines"

Wrote and performed a one-person show exploring the intersections between Christian faith and LGBTQ+ identity

PUBLICATIONS

Peer-Reviewed Articles and Book Chapters

D'Ambrosi, Joseph R. "The Search for a Great, Big, Beautiful Tomorrow: Performing Utopia with Non-Human Bodies in the Hall of Presidents." *Performance and the Disney Theme Park Experience: The Tourist as Actor*. Ed. by Jennifer A. Kokai and Tom Robson. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

D'Ambrosi, Joseph R. "Teaching *Angels in America, Part 1: Millennium Approaches*." *How to Teach a Play: Essential Exercises for Popular Plays*. Ed. Miriam Chirico and Kelly Younger. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2020.

D'Ambrosi, Joseph R. "High-Heeled Shoes and Bongo Drums: Ritual as a Dramatic Convention in Harold Pinter's *The Lover*." *The Harold Pinter Review*, 2.1, 2018, pp. 82–96.

D'Ambrosi, Joseph R. "You Must Know Theory to Act." *Southern Theatre*, 56.3, 2015, p. 4.

Reviews

D'Ambrosi, Joseph R. Review of Jonathan M. Hess's *Deborah and Her Sisters: How One Nineteenth Century Melodrama and a Host of Celebrated Actresses Put Judaism on the World Stage*. *Theatre History Studies*, 38, 2019.

D'Ambrosi, Joseph R. Review of C.S. Walter's *Dance, Consumerism, and Spirituality*. *PRS: Performance, Religion, and Spirituality*, 1.2, 2018, pp. 194-195.

D'Ambrosi, Joseph R. Review of Henry Bial's *Playing God: The Bible on the Broadway Stage*. *Ecumenica Journal of Theatre and Performance*, 10.2, 2017, pp. 47-49.

Other Publications

D'Ambrosi, Joseph. "O Be Careful, Little Eyes, What You See: Combatting Censorship as a Christian Theatre Artist." *HowlRound: A Knowledge Commons by and for the Theatre Community*, 9 Nov. 2015. Web.

HONORS AND AWARDS

2020-2021 Dissertation Completion Fellowship, College of Arts and Sciences, Indiana University

2019-2020 Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship, College of Arts and Sciences, Indiana University

2019 Graduate Essay Prize – First Place, Association for Research in Theatre at Indiana University

2019 Graduate Student Dissertation Research Grant, Department of Theatre, Drama, and Contemporary Dance, Indiana University

2018 Theatre and Drama Merit Award, Department of Theatre, Drama, and Contemporary Dance, Indiana University

2018 Graduate Student Pre-Dissertation Research Grant, Department of Theatre, Drama, and Contemporary Dance, Indiana University

2016 Thomas Marshall Graduate Student Award, American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR)

2016 Robert Porterfield Graduate Scholar, Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC)

2016 Florida Theatrical Association Scholarship Award, Florida Theatrical Association

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

- 2019 “Sanctifying the Native: Evangelical Influence on ‘Secular’ Indian Melodrama.” American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR). Arlington, VA.
- “Performing the Heart of Antebellum Evangelicalism.” Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE). Orlando, FL.
- 2018 “Preaching the Word, Arousing the Flock: Theatrics in the Preaching of Charles Grandison Finney.” Preaching as Performance Conference. Collectif d’Anthropologie et d’Histoire du Spirituel et des Affects (CAHSA). Calgary, Alberta, Canada.
- “Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *The Christian Slave* and the Appropriation of ‘Secular’ Performance by Nineteenth-Century Evangelicals.” Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE). Boston, MA.
- “On the Stage, but not of the Stage: Exploring Evangelical Appropriation of Secular Theatre in Antebellum America with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *The Christian Slave*.” Indiana University Religious Studies Graduate Student Conference. Bloomington, IN.
- 2017 “Perfecting Human Behavior with Non-Human Bodies: Walt Disney’s Audio-Animatronic and the Search for Utopia.” American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR). Atlanta, GA.
- “Religiosity, Spectacle, and The Magic Kingdom: The Appropriation of ‘Disney Magic’ as a Theatrical ‘Spiritual’ Experience.” Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE). Las Vegas, NV.
- “High-Heeled Shoes and Bongo Drums: Ritual as a Dramatic Convention in Harold Pinter’s *The Lover*.” Comparative Drama Conference. Orlando, FL.
- “Reclaiming Tradition: Girish Karnad’s *Hayavadana* as Evidence for ‘Modern’ Drama in Twentieth-Century India.” Association for Research in Theatre at Indiana University (ART@IU) Graduate Symposium. Bloomington, IN.
- “Directing Interdisciplinarily: Calderón de la Barca’s *Life is a Dream*.” Association for Research in Theatre at Indiana University (ART@IU) Graduate Symposium. Bloomington, IN.
- “Faith and the LGBTQ Theatre Community.” (Invited Panelist) Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC). Lexington, KY.

“Theatrical Censorship: Should My Faith Draw the Line? (Part 3: The Community)” Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC). Lexington, KY.

2016 “Transforming the Gospels: McNally’s *Corpus Christi* and the Debunking of Evangelical Dogma.” American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR). Minneapolis, MN.

“Celebrating the Sacred *Through* the Secular With Sarah Ruhl’s *Passion Play*.” Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE). Chicago, IL.

“Problematic Portrayals: Tensions in Portraying Underrepresented Identities.” Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC). Greensboro, NC.

“Theatrical Censorship: Should My Faith Draw the Line? (Part 2: The Work)” Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC). Greensboro, NC.

2015 “It *Is* a Small World, After All: Walt Disney as an American Avant-Garde Artist.” Midwest Popular Culture Association Conference (MPCA/ACA). Cincinnati, OH.

“Theatrical Censorship: Should My Faith Draw the Line? (Part 1: The Actor)” Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC). Chattanooga, TN.

CONFERENCE PANELS CURATED

2019 “Social Scene Changes: Theatre as a Platform for Religious, Political, and Cultural Shifts.” Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE). Orlando, FL.

“A Problem of Presence: Understanding Changes in Religious Ideology Through Theatre.” Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE). Orlando, FL.

2018 “Religion and Theatre Emerging Scholars Panel.” Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE). Boston, MA.

COURSES TAUGHT

Instructor of Record

- Introduction to Theatre (4 semesters, co-teacher, 1 semester as lead teacher), Indiana University (75-seat class)
- Script Analysis (3 semesters), Indiana University (25-seat class)
- Theatre Survey (2 semesters, co-teacher), University of Central Florida (200-seat class)

Graduate Teaching Assistant

- History of the Theatre II, Indiana University
- Honors Theatre for Social Change, University of Central Florida
- Voice Production III: Shakespeare, University of Central Florida
- Script Analysis, University of Central Florida

Workshops Developed and Facilitated

- “Brave Space, Not Safe Space: Navigating Controversial Topics in the College Classroom,” Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning (CITL), Indiana University
- “Be Careful, Little Eyes, What You See: Exploring Theatrical Censorship in the 21st Century,” University of Central Florida

SERVICE TO THE PROFESSION

- 2018-2020 Conference Planner, Religion and Theatre Focus Group; Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE)
- 2018-2019 Vice President/Representative to the Committee on Conferences, Graduate Student Caucus (GSC), American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR)
- 2018-2019 Co-Chair, Events Planning Committee, Graduate Student Caucus (GSC), American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR)
- 2017-2018 Co-Chair, Inclusion Committee; ASTR Graduate Student Caucus (GSC), American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR)
- 2017-2018 Graduate Student Representative, Religion and Theatre Focus Group; Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE)
- 2016-2017 Chair, Peer Mentorship/Networking Committee; Graduate Student Caucus (GSC), American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR)
- 2016-2017 Secretary-Historian/Representative to the Fundraising Committee, Graduate Student Caucus (GSC); American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR)

SERVICE TO THE UNIVERSITY AND DEPARTMENT

University Service

- 2018-2019 Graduate Student Representative, Search Committee for the Executive Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences; Indiana University

- 2018-2019 Graduate Teaching Ambassador, Graduate and Professional Student Government (GPSG); Indiana University
- 2018-2019 Bloomington Faculty Council (BFC); Indiana University
- 2018-2019 Student Academic Appointee (SAA) Board of Review; Indiana University
- 2018-2019 Educational Policies Committee (EPC); Indiana University
- 2018-2019 Online Course Questionnaire (OCQ) Committee; Indiana University

Departmental Service

- 2018-2019 President, Association for Theatre Research at Indiana University (ART@IU)
- 2018-2019 Programming (Play Selection) Committee; Department of Theatre, Drama, and Contemporary Dance, Indiana University
- 2018-2019 Ph.D. Representative, Student Advisory Board (SAB); Department of Theatre, Drama, and Contemporary Dance, Indiana University
- 2017-2018 Vice President, Association for Theatre Research at Indiana University (ART@IU)
- 2017-2018 Representative of the Department of Theatre, Drama, and Contemporary Dance; Graduate and Professional Student Government (GPSG), Indiana University
- 2017-2018 Student Representative to the Faculty; Department of Theatre, Drama, and Contemporary Dance, Indiana University
- 2016-2017 Secretary, Association for Theatre Research at Indiana University (ART@IU)

CREATIVE WORK

Direction

Haus of Mirth by Kaela Mei-Shing Garvin (World Premiere), directed by Joseph D' Ambrosi, Indiana University, February-March 2019 (2018-2019 mainstage production)

Titus Andronicus (Assistant Director and Dramaturg) by William Shakespeare, directed by James Nelson, Indiana University, January 2019 (2018-2019 mainstage production)

The Wizard of Oz (Co-Director), Stages Bloomington Theatre Company, May 2017

The Life is a Dream Project by Pedro Calderón de la Barca, adapted into modern Spanish by Dr. Martha García, directed by Joseph D'Ambrosi, Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts, April 2016, and the University of Central Florida, December 2015

Dramaturgy

The Glass Menagerie by Tennessee Williams, directed by Kate Galvin, Cardinal Stage Company, March-April 2019

Titus Andronicus by William Shakespeare, directed by James Nelson, Indiana University, January 2019

The Christians by Lucas Hnath, directed by Kate Galvin, Cardinal Stage Company, October-November 2018

Machinal by Sophie Treadwell, directed by James Nelson, Indiana University, February 2018

Cloud 9 by Caryl Churchill, directed by Dr. Julia Listengarten, University of Central Florida, November 2016

(a love story) by Kelly Lusk (new play), directed by Mark Routhier, University of Central Florida, February 2015

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR)

Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE)

Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC)

Midwest Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association (MPCA/ACA)

GRADUATE COURSEWORK

Indiana University:

Theatre History, Theory, and Literature

Four-Part Theatre History Comprehensive Exam (Eastern and Western history)

Introduction to Graduate Studies

Introduction to Historiography

Contemporary Scholarship in Theatre and Performance

Dramaturgy: Theory and Practice

Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline Drama Without Shakespeare

European and American Theatre Between the Wars

Harold Pinter and Caryl Churchill

Making Early Modern Actresses

Modern Drama and Asia

Religious Studies

American Preaching: Word, Performance, and Media
Evangelical America
Evangelical/Pentecostal Christianity in the Americas
Interpretations of Religion

Misc.

Nineteenth-Century American Literature: Thinking the Collective

University of Central Florida:

American Theatre
Contemporary Theatre Practice/Avant-Garde Theatre
Directing
Dramaturgy
Musical Theatre Acting and Voice Production
Research Methods
Theatre Careers
Theatre Management
Theatre for Social Change
Theatre Theory and Criticism