Paper Money Men

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Banking on Emotion

Debt and Male Submission in the Urban Gothic

"[I]t is notorious that he was a very exacting man with regard to his dues—that he had a sort of mania for making his debtors do just right."

— The Extraordinary Confession of Dr. John White Webster, of the Murder of Dr. George Parkman (1850)

Male Panic: A Structure of Feeling

In a popular antebellum murder pamphlet titled The Extraordinary Confession of Dr. John White Webster, of the Murder of Dr. George Parkman, an apparently repentant John White Webster explains that his crime—the murder of his colleague at Harvard University, George Parkman—was motivated by his status as much-persecuted debtor. “He had become of late very importunate for his pay,” Webster writes. “He had threatened me with a suit, to put an officer into my house, and to drive me from my professorship if I did not pay him. I cannot tell how long the torrent of threats and invectives continued, and I can now recall to memory but a small portion of what he said. At first I kept interposing, trying to pacify him. . . . But I could not stop him, and soon my own temper was up. . . . I was excited to the highest degree of passion” (Confession 6).¹ In what follows Webster relates his gruesome efforts to dispose of Parkman’s body and conceal the crime, details that included dismembering Parkman’s body and dissolving portions of it in buckets of acid (Webster and Parkman were professors of chemistry). The narrative both shocked and gripped a readership not yet saturated with the lurid aesthetics of the true-crime, tabloid gothic. Yet what predominates in this text—and antebellum readers seem to have been quite responsive to this as well—are the politics of masculine sensibility. Thus at his sentencing,
Webster—described in one newspaper as frequently suffering from a “frantic excitement” and “paroxysm of sudden frenzy” brought on by financial embarrassment—was able to bring judge and jury to tears of sympathy with accounts of the persecution he and his family endured because of his debt to Parkman (New York Tribune 12-3-1849). Similarly, several petitions—one with 1,700 signatures and another with almost 1,000—were sent to the governor of Massachusetts, requesting that Webster’s life be spared (Boston Evening Transcript 7-1-1850). The day of Webster’s sentencing, the streets outside the courtroom were so filled with Webster supporters that local residents rented out standing space on their balconies and rooftops (New York Tribune 6-28-1850).

How was Webster able to garner such sympathy? One answer is that in his published Confession Webster positioned himself as the unfortunate victim of a sensibility too highly refined for the world of commerce, an image that had the paradoxical effect of transforming his status as self-indulgent and transgressive debtor into a form of subjectivity at once deeply feeling and irrevocably middle class. “I was an only child, much indulged,” Webster explains, “and I have never acquired the control over my passions that I ought to have acquired early—and the consequence is—all this” (Confession 8). Webster’s attorney concurred, suggesting that his client’s great fault was his tendency to sympathize “to rather an unusual degree, in the tastes and recreations of a domestic circle exclusively feminine” (10). Webster’s daughter, meanwhile, described him in a public letter as “timid, yet irritable, hasty, and sometimes passionate” (Manchester Messenger 4-14-1850). Local newspapers built on this logic, in particular by casting Parkman as a greedy oppressor who deserved his gruesome fate. In March, for example, the New York Herald suggested that “the character of Parkman . . . his association as a money-lender, his intimacy with tenants of every grade, high and low, render it possible that something may be revealed . . . which may exonerate Professor Webster” (NYH 3-21-50). Similarly, following Webster’s conviction in April, the New York Sun denounced Parkman, stating, “[W]e want no other evidence than that afforded in Dr. Webster’s trial, to prove that Dr. Parkman was a money-lover; that he worshipped wealth for its own sake, that he was selfish, grasping, and . . . not capable of judging kindly an unfortunate debtor.” Had Parkman been more generous, the Sun concluded, “he would be alive at this moment, and the wretched murderer, who may expiate on a scaffold for the crime of his murder, might be in the midst of his innocent wife and daughter” (NYS 4-1-1850).

Thus despite—or perhaps because of—his guilt, Webster provides what I will be arguing here is an exemplary form of male victimage, one constructed around the sentimental rhetoric of domestic innocence and
vulnerability. Indeed, for anyone refusing the stance of debtor passivity assumed by the likes of Webster, the consequences could be dire. For example, in the equally well-publicized 1842 trial of clerk and textbook author John Colt for the murder of Samuel Adams, a printer to whom he owed money (Colt gained fame for hiding his victim's body in a printer's crate and mailing it to St. Louis via New Orleans), Colt refused to admit that he had been truly vulnerable, either economically or physically. “I could have paid his two-penny debt any day of the week,” the adamantly self-reliant Colt proclaimed in one of a series of letters he published from prison before committing suicide the morning of his planned execution (Trial 18). The irony here is that Colt was forced to publish these letters himself because none of the tabloid editors would write up his side of the story, a fact that seems to have turned public sentiment away from him, and that may have helped to seal his fate. Unlike Webster, Colt the struggling professional did not understand the value of marketing oneself as vulnerable, both physically and economically.

Tabloid figures such as Webster and Colt are but two of countless examples of the indebted professional male as staged within the sensational public sphere. Whether weeping and prostrate with guilt, or fleeing, eyes bulging and hair standing on end, from the persecutions of a malevolent creditor, this figure is a mainstay of the seemingly limitless production during this period of pulpy newspaper, pamphlet, and novel-length narratives that revolve around financial hardship and betrayal. But while easily dismissed as the debased and silly product of an incipient mass culture, this ubiquitous presence and the narratives of submission and terror to which it is linked should in fact be understood as signaling a profound response to the period’s perilously unstable economy. Indeed, while sensational narratives of financial failure became increasingly common in the years following the devastating Panic of 1837, perhaps none registered so fully the social trauma brought about by the boom-and-bust economy as those depicting masculine crises of debt. The most famous of these scenes is perhaps the encounter between the slave trader Haley and Mr. Shelby in Stowe’s 1852 Uncle Tom’s Cabin. “So much for being in debt,—heigho!” Mr. Shelby says after selling Uncle Tom to pay off the notes of credit held against him by the slave trader Haley. “The fellow sees his advantage and means to push it” (50). But there are dozens of other such examples in urban stage melodramas and urban sensation novels, all of them depicting panicked debtors and persecutory creditors, and all of them reflecting the emergence of a new form of professional masculinity, one increasingly enmeshed within a bewildering chain of random and often anonymous economic relations. As Mihm puts it in characterizing the contingent nature of economic security during this
period, “Each person’s fate was increasingly tied to individuals and institutions that he or she did not know and could not comprehend. New paper instruments—bills of exchange and bills of credit—function as proxies for distant financial forces” (Counterfeitors 11). Karen Sánchez-Eppler provides a similar perspective in her discussion of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s debtor insecurities. “What the boom and bust cycles of the 1830s amply illustrate,” she writes, “is the insecurity of possession: how easily beautiful estates may be lost; how—in the figure of the debtor whose bankruptcy incurs losses for others—possession is not singular but rather forges flexible and multiple links” (“Clutch Hardest” 79).

This insecurity saturates the popular subgenre of the “Wall Street” novel, a form that was overt in staging masculine economic crisis and anxiety. Thus in Frederick Jackson’s The Victim of Chancery: or a Debtor’s Experience (1841), a debtor named Mr. Adams, described as “one among the great number who in the year 1837 were fated, by means not within their control, to meet a reverse in their worldly circumstances” (30), is thrown into debtors’ prison for money owed to a network of often unknown creditors, including the aptly named Mr. Gouge and Mr. Heartless. Similarly, in Timothy Shay Arthur’s Debtor and Creditor; A Tale of the Times (1847), the scheming financier Turner buys up the debts that the honest Coleman owes to a creditor named Everton, and thus obtains the legal right to persecute him and his family mercilessly. As Arthur’s narrator puts it at one point, “When a man is in debt beyond his ability to pay, he no longer possesses, of right, a free control to what he calls his own.” Instead, he explains, the creditor has “carte-blanche . . . for all manner of indignity and insult” (60; 36). Popular writer Catherine Sedgwick offers a related narrative in “Wilton Harvey,” a long story serialized in Godey’s Lady’s Book in 1842. Here Sedgwick provides sentimental gloss on the sensational and widely publicized true-crime story of Peter Robinson, a debtor who, much like Webster, murdered his creditor and sought unsuccessfully to hide his crime by burying his victim in his basement. “I thought this wa’nt fair play,” writes the repentant Robinson character in a deathbed confession to the murdered man’s son. “I saw your father making money, hand over hand, his very words turned into gold. . . . I thought it had all been a plan of his from the beginning to snarl me up in that mortgage, and heap interest on interest, and so to take away my little to pour into his cup that was already running over” (“Harvey” 243). Sedgwick extends the thematic of masculine failure by following the career of the title character Harvey, who loses everything in the 1837 Panic, and who—as a sign of his poor judgment—finds himself hoping that his daughter will marry the greedy son of the guilty Robinson. “[H]e has been inveigled into joint-stock companies,” we are told, “deluded into buying stock here
and there, and lots everywhere, in city, forest, and morass . . . . He dwells continually on his folly and madness, and on the risks and losses in which he has involved others” (326).

Such narratives were so commonplace that a novel such as J. B. Jones’s *The City Merchant; or, The Mysterious Failure* (1851) seems intended to provide corrective commentary on tales of masculine disempowerment. Opening on the eve of the 1837 Panic, the narrative tells the story of a businessman named Edgar Saxon savvy enough to outsmart his creditors—in particular a “cunning Jew” named Abraham Ulmar who has purchased a note held against him at a large discount (66)—by selling all of his shares in the U.S. Bank and refusing to deal in any currency other than specie. Ignoring even the entreaties of Bank president Biddle to repurchase his Bank stock, Saxon endures rumors of his “mysterious failure” in order to achieve a rare escape from the trammels of debtor dependency—an escape perhaps available only in a retrospective narrative such as Jones’s.

The vexed gender formation I am describing—which I will term here a “debtor masculinity”—began taking shape during the financial revolutions of the 1790s, and cohered in the interval between the 1837 Panic and the 1857 Panic. Characterized chiefly by excessive affective states of panic and hysteria and by postures of submission and humiliation, the debtor male embodied anxieties over an economy based increasingly on the ephemeral foundation of credit, speculation, and paper money. More specifically, much like the “corrupt new men of paper and place” Smith-Rosenberg describes, the debtor male threatened to undermine the stable forms of self-possession and embodiment so crucial to ideologies of individualism and middle-class manhood emerging during this period. The inverse of Melville’s infamous Bartleby, whose mantra of “I would prefer not to” seems to reflect a radical form of market renunciation, this emergent gender category came to represent, for many, an insatiable form of market desire that threatened to render the private sphere of domestic enclosure vulnerable to the vitiating effects of the paper economy. According to Timothy Shay Arthur in *Advice to young men* (1848), for example, “The habit of spending money too freely in the gratification of a host of imaginary wants, is one into which young men of generous minds are too apt to fall. . . . The young man who spends his salary of four or five hundred dollars, is almost sure to run through every thing he receives when that salary is doubled. The gratification of one desire only makes way for another still more exacting” (31). The victim of his ever-increasing desire (a condition Henry Ward Beecher describes in a similar advice manual as a “rigorous servitude” [*Lectures* 58]), the debtor male depicted by Arthur poses a threat to the social fabric, but he is also, tellingly, held in a kind of bondage by market forces far beyond his own
control. The infamous John White Webster quoted in the above passages might thus be thought of less as an aberration than as a representative of this new masculine sensibility. For while Webster’s actions—in particular the gothic efforts to dispose of Parkman’s corpse—certainly had to do with fear of detection and public exposure, they can also be understood as the hysterical attempt to repress the humiliating and uncanny mirror image of his own failed financial self, one split by the very dispossession he has suffered at the hands of the economic market.

The debtor male of antebellum sensationalism might thus seem to offer a fairly direct example of an anti-Bank form of class critique. But these stories also reflect the way in which this new gender formation acted as a kind of compensatory rebound ideology. Indeed, the scenarios of masculine panic and disempowerment so central to sensationalism are frequently part of a paradoxical logic whereby the self-possession of the professional male is achieved through the loss of affective and bodily control brought about by debt and financial humiliation. Far from being the crisis that renders the professional male an excessive threat to the social order, in other words, debt is within the antebellum urban gothic productive, precisely because it places the debtor male in possession of a highly emotional, feeling body.

Joseph Fichtelberg describes a similar process in his reading of antebellum sentimentalism. Describing a “sentimental commerce immune to economic change,” Fichtelberg argues that sentimentality was “engaged in a complex cultural dialectic, the goal of which was to humanize economic crisis and make it manageable” (Critical 9). As he puts it, “Sentimental narratives groped toward a morally satisfying solution to this problem [of economic crisis] by reimagining the excesses of the market through limitless feeling and by making sentimental heroines and heroes the only figures who could regulate its excesses. The boundless ability to circulate, negotiate, and sympathize became the mark of a new, more supple morality. . . . The new model individual would need to be as supple and fluid as the market itself” (9). Echoing a similar argument by James Thompson, who suggests that British novels such as Fanny Burney’s Camilla (1796) stage the regulation of female affect as the solution to the wider crisis of an unstable economy (Models 156–84), Fichtelberg reads sentimentalism as a way to balance accounts, as it were, in particular by imagining a middle-class subject whose emotional life can be regulated and contained. Thus, in a provocative reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s anxieties about debt in the years following the 1837 Panic, he contends that the affective expressions of the debtor male, Emerson’s in particular, reflect an effort to “redeem[]” indebtedness through “an imagery of sympathy and sincerity” (Critical 118). Emerson, he explains, “aspired to be a transparent medium, an affectationate general equivalent like
money itself, trading on feeling. It was a capacity, he insisted, that he shared with all true souls. All could rise above contingency in a sincere exchange rooted in the behavior of the marketplace” (118).

I will argue something similar but different here about the exchange value of male affect. For while the postures of debtor masculinity did seem to rely on the inclusive relays of sympathy, this alternate form of male affect was also characterized both by an interior space of affective development, and—crucially—by postures of submission and disempowerment. I thus want to demonstrate how sensational narratives of the sort I am describing operate according to a logic whereby the hysterization and humiliation of the indebted male acts as the means by which to reconceive professional manhood under the sign of a radically unstable economy. The frantic excitement described by Webster should thus also be read as one instance in a “structure of feeling” taking shape in the first half of the nineteenth century, the specific task of which was to provide an adaptive—and compensatory—response to the panic-oriented climate of financial instability. Trading in traditional models of Jacksonian self-possession and self-reliance for the more intangible qualities of deep-feeling sensibility modeled by the panicked and dispossessed debtor John White Webster, the debtor masculinity of antebellum sensationalism provides the outline of a new form of manhood emerging in the first half of the nineteenth century, one that—and again, paradoxically—ends up embracing and utilizing the very submission and disempowerment by which it is threatened.

The masculine disempowerment depicted within the period’s sensationalism found especially complex expression within the various antebellum forms of urban gothic sensationalism. Usually involving elaborate plots centered around confidence men and forged banknotes, disputes over property and inheritance, and violent (often ghostly) encounters between persecutory creditors and paranoid debtors, the urban gothic emphasizes a world given over to the radical immateriality of the paper economy. Simultaneously, it offers as the embodiment of these issues a male subject who, seeking emotional stability and self-possession in fiscal security (a kind of personal gold standard), instead finds himself dispossessed and haunted by the uncanny spectral world of the Jacksonian marketplace. This gothic masculinity is captured usefully in an anti-Jackson lithograph produced by Edward Clay in 1837, in which commerce itself is represented as a ghostly return of the repressed (figure 14). Ironically titled New Edition of Macbeth. Bank-Oh’s! Ghost, the image suggests that although Jackson managed to slay the Bank, his notorious decision to issue the so-called Specie Circular (which attempted to halt a rash of speculation on government-owned western land by requiring that only gold and silver specie be accepted as
Figure 14 New Edition of Macbeth. Bank-Oh's! Ghost. 1837 by Edward Williams Clay. Printed and published by H. R. Robinson. Lithograph on wove paper; 25.2 x 41.5 cm. Reproduced with permission of the American Antiquarian Society.
payment for these properties) continues to haunt him and his horrified successor, Martin Van Buren, in the spectral form of inflation, speculation, and debt. The lithograph also captures the ways in which such sensational commentaries on the economy almost inevitably rely on registers of masculinity and male panic. Depicting Jackson in drag as a kind of ironic “Lady Liberty” and Van Buren in the classic male posture of the antebellum gothic—horrified self-defense, with arms thrown up and eyes wide in terror—the lithograph offers a tableau of masculine disempowerment, one which by extension suggests an entire nation emasculated by the spectral presence of a debtor economy. Indeed, the dynamic here closely echoes the image Irving provides in his 1819 depiction of the encounter between Ichabod Crane and the Headless Horseman in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” which I discuss in chapter 2. In each case, the professional male is haunted by an apparitional figure that embodies the spectral economy, and which thus acts as a return of repressed fears about masculine self-possession and potency.

The emphasis within these narratives on male panic and humiliation suggests that we read them through the lens of the rapidly growing body of criticism devoted to emphasizing the importance of masculine affect in the formation of liberal subjectivity. Focusing primarily on sentimentalism and the emotional politics of sympathy, critics have begun to revise the standard gendering of affect whereby deep-feeling sensibility is associated with femininity, privacy, and domesticity, while a rational and disembodied public sphere is coded masculine. More importantly, these critics have emphasized the rhetorical and political uses of male affect, making it clear that the performance and manipulation of masculine emotion within the period’s sensationalism is itself bound up with complex negotiations not only of gender but also of class, race, and sexuality. For example, describing the “early cultural prestige of masculine tenderheartedness,” Julie Ellison argues that “[t]he deep-feeling, fragile man of sensibility is thoroughly masculine, for his emotional nature is crucial to the drama of homosocial friendships. The style of his masculinity forces us to rewrite the history of gender” (Cato’s 9; 20). Similarly, in an overview of male sentimentalism in nineteenth-century U.S. culture, Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler suggest that “Rather than see American ‘men of feeling’ as somehow oxymorons—exceptions to the hard and fast gender rules of sentimental culture—we consider them as exemplary of the competing definitions of masculinity available in the pre-twentieth-century United States” (Sentimental Men 8–9). In this chapter I want to outline a “history of gender” that helps explain how the twin rhetorics of male panic and male submission represent a new mode of masculine self-fashioning. For the debtor male of antebellum sensationalism
was himself “thoroughly masculine,” but in a way that reflects an apparently broadly felt need to instantiate an adaptive response to the culture of male panic inherent in an economic system increasingly predicated on the logic of indebtedness, failure, and dependency.

The period’s sensationalism thus represents an attempt to rewrite the affective energies of the debtor male into a structure of feeling that might help manage the frightening instability of the speculative paper economy. This kind of compensatory logic, wherein sensationalism works to transform political anxieties into other, more manageable fears and concerns, is a process Ann Cvetkovich highlights in examining the vogue for British sensationalism in the later nineteenth century. As she explains, “[T]he sensation novel performs the cultural work of representing social problems as affective problems and hence confirming the importance of emotional expression to private life. The middle-class subject . . . is constructed as a feeling subject” (Mixed 7). For Cvetkovich, in other words, a sensational genre such as the antebellum gothic reflects the way in which new modes of emotional expression (such as male panic) are themselves discursive constructions that emerge in response to dramatic social and economic upheavals (such as the economic crises of the early and middle nineteenth century). Further, such narratives and the extreme modes of affect they rely on often act in the service of imperiled categories of class and gender, rather than as somehow radical agents of transgression and change.

Much of the recent work on the representation of male affect in antebellum fiction follows a similar line of thinking. For example, in a reading of “male emotionality” within 1840s temperance narratives such as Walt Whitman’s Franklin Evans (1842), Hendler claims that the intensive embodiment that accompanied the lachrymal scenes of abjection and sympathy so central to these narratives was ultimately a source of great anxiety; accordingly, he suggests that male sentimentality operates through a logic of “identification and disavowal,” wherein affective and bodily excess are generated for the express purpose of taking these qualities away (Public 15; 52). Similarly, in a discussion of Winthrop’s popular Cecil Dreeme, Michael Millner argues that the often excessive sentimentality that informs male friendship in the text is counterbalanced by the felt panic over the sodomitical persecutions of the Jewish financier Densdeth (“Fear” 19–52). The result, Millner suggests, is that the threatened transgressions of the antebellum urban gothic are crucial to the maintenance of a more normative and privatized form of liberal masculinity. “The protagonist’s and the reader’s bodies become first penetrated but then purged of gothic sensation and sympathetic affect,” Millner explains. “In this sense, the novel is a peculiar amalgam of old-world propriety and hemorrhaging urban anxiety” (“Fear” 24). Millner’s
discussion is especially useful in its emphasis on the way affect is deployed and manipulated in sensational texts to delineate the boundaries defining specific masculine categories of class, gender, and race.

Such analyses help us understand that while the debtor male seemed on the one hand to embody a threatening form of desire and transgression, he was in fact being refashioned into a submissive subject, one who inter alia ends up more fully incorporated within the spheres of a genteel and often feminized form of middle-class masculinity. Thus while narratives of male panic produced in relation to the issue of debt frequently involve disciplinary agents (persecutory creditors, debtors’ prison, and various officers of the law), the real “policing” that takes place has to do with masculine categories of class and sensibility. Fears of debt and financial retribution might thus be thought of as undergoing a subtle but significant shift within the antebellum gothic, such that the new and more powerful mode of feeling is a form of panic that is itself the curious but necessary pathway to cultural distinction and advancement.

“Kon siderable better than 'Nited States Bank stock!”:
Policing Class and Manhood in The Quaker City

The text most thoroughly informed by the submissive postures of the anxious professional male post-1837 is George Lippard’s The Quaker City. As critics have shown, Lippard was a committed supporter of labor and anti-Bank policies in general, and sought in his fiction to provide a sensationalized exposé of the financial corruption plaguing Philadelphia, the “Quaker City.” In The Quaker City, this is accomplished by organizing the action around the notorious Monk Hall, a criminal’s den for the most corrupted of the city’s professional men. A three-story structure located on the city’s margins, the building itself is replete with gothic claptrap such as two-way mirrors, trapdoors, and a dungeonlike basement where various unwitting victims are buried—several of them by its deformed and murderous proprietor, Devil-Bug, while they are still alive.

The general state of financial and moral collapse Lippard outlines is suggested midway through the novel in an exchange between Job Joneson, President of “* * * * Bank,” and a mechanic named John Davis, who has lost his life savings after Joneson’s bank has failed (406). Davis has broken into Joneson’s mansion to say that because of the bank failure his wife has died, his daughter is starving, and he is unable to find work. Joneson, “jingling the silver in his pocket with gouty hands,” responds by asking, “Well then,
where’s your credit?” Davis’s reply is telling: “There is no imprisonment for debt,” he says. “No poor man gets ‘trust’ now-a-days” (407). Sounding much like a prolabor writer such as Theophilus Fisk, Davis is pointing to the paradoxical situation whereby in the absence of the threat of debtors’ prison, he is unable to go into debt as a means of giving his family adequate support. The implication, both for Davis and for the novel as a whole, is a crisis of capital. In the world of The Quaker City, it seems, there is no money anywhere—a fact that leaves men such as Davis in various states of humiliation and disempowerment.

Dana Nelson suggests that The Quaker City provides “a cultural thematic of middle-class (or professional) male identity” in early formation (National 142). I would suggest as well that this nascent manhood is represented in terms of a revised model of masculine selfhood, one that has exchanged a labor-based model of self-possession (signaled here by the unfortunate John Davis) for less material notions of sensibility (such as those modeled by Webster). Lippard’s novel, that is to say, enacts a form of affective exchange in which gothic modes of masculine affect such as panic and hysteria are bartered for emotional categories that have the texture and, ultimately, the “cultural prestige” of something resembling a sentimentalized and recognizably middle-class manhood. This movement from gothic to sentimental is also enacted in more canonical gothic narratives from the period, most notably Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The House of the Seven Gables (1851). Here, as critics have observed, the potentially radical working-class male Holgrave ends up marrying the aristocratic Phoebe Pyncheon and establishing what looks very much like a depoliticized and markedly sentimental middle-class future. In pulpier, sensational texts such as The Quaker City, though, such movement is predicated much more overtly on new postures of panic and submission for upwardly aspiring men—postures that signal a compromise with an economic system threatening to leave men such as Holgrave and John Davis far behind.

A paradigmatic example of the affective male display in which Lippard specializes (and which eventually intertwines with John Davis’s debtor humiliation) is offered a short way into The Quaker City, when a libertine named Byrnewood Arlington makes the unhappy discovery that his bet with fellow rake Gus Lorrimer about the seduction and rape of a young girl in Monk Hall actually involves his sister, Mary Arlington. Here is the description of Arlington’s shocking discovery: “Over his entire countenance flashed a mingled expression of surprise, and horror, and woe, that convulsed every feature with a spasmodic movement, and forced his large black eyes from their very sockets. For a moment he looked as if about to fall lifeless on the floor, and then it was evident that he exerted all his energies to control
this most fearful agitation. He pressed both hands nervously against his forehead, as though his brain was tortured by internal flame” (74). Though excessive in its sensational hyperbole, the description of Arlington’s emotional state says much about the politics of masculine humiliation within the period’s gothic sensationalism. On the one hand, such scenes remind us that this material frequently operates according to a logic whereby, as Streeby puts it, “exploited men imaginatively experience the threat of violation by . . . rely[ing] on a set of analogies between imperiled women and oppressed men” (“Story Paper” 202).15 And to be sure, we find that Arlington’s real predicament is that he is himself Lorrimer’s captive. Bound and gagged by the villainous Devil-Bug (Lorrimer’s henchman), Arlington can only sit in silent horror while his sister is raped in a nearby room—a humiliation Lorrimer underscores emphatically. “Sir,” he says, “you are my prisoner” (102).

But while Arlington’s anxiety might be understood as arising from the possibility that he is moving from gothic villain to gothic maiden, the most notable feature of this crisis is the transformative effect it has on his libertine lifestyle. After escaping from Monk Hall, Arlington is found unconscious in the street by two Irish policemen (tellingly, they are engaged in a debate about the effects of Jackson's removal of the deposits from “the Nasshunal Bank” [401]). Upon reviving, he springs to his feet, shouting, “Mary, I will save you, save you yet” (402), and runs off into the night. But in one of the novel’s many melodramatic coincidences, Arlington ends up responding to pleas for help from a friend of the debtor John Davis and his family. Arlington goes to Davis’s home, only to find that Davis’s daughter, Annie, has died of illness and starvation, and that Davis himself has committed suicide. Even worse, at least for Arlington, he discovers that Annie has died just three weeks after giving birth to a child—and that he is himself the child’s father. Linked now both materially and affectively with the fiscally disempowered Davis, Arlington experiences another scene of emotional overload: “Again that wild cry burst from his heaving chest,” we are told. “[H]is hands were pressed madly against his forehead” (410). This time, however, Arlington’s mode of affect is both sentimental and recuperative in form, something Lippard makes clear. Describing Arlington’s “terrible remorse,” Lippard explains that “the better soul of Brynewood awoke within him and plead [sic] for the woman he had wronged” (416; 417).

Such moments are ubiquitous throughout The Quaker City, making it clear that humiliation and disempowerment are the linchpins of affective transformation for the male homosocial community of Lippard’s urban world. Here, though, I want to focus on how postures of male submission and panic intersect with and, indeed, are directly organized by the climate
of financial panic Lippard criticizes in his text. This is particularly true of the narrative involving a con artist calling himself Colonel Fitz-Cowles. Fitz-Cowles is a distant relative of libertine-speculators from early republican fiction such as Thomas Welbeck in Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* (1799–1800) and Dorval in Sara Wood's *Dorval; or The speculator. A novel founded on recent facts* (1801). But he is also the fictional embodiment of real-life counterfeiters such as Stephen Burroughs, Ebenezer Gleason, and Lyman Parkes, whose incredible success highlighted the fraught nature of the paper money system.¹⁶ For again, many—especially Jacksonians—viewed paper money as itself a false representation of value. As Mihm puts it in his study of early-nineteenth-century counterfeiters, “What was the difference between a capitalist banker and a criminal counterfeiter? There were differences, to be sure, but not to the extent that many people would have preferred. Both trafficked in confidence, [and both] captured the ambiguities of an economy based on very little in the way of ‘real’ money” (*Counterfeiters* 51).

Lippard’s Fitz-Cowles captures this ambiguity. Joining forces with the “Jewish dwarf” Gabriel Von Gelt, he manages to procure over $100,000 by forging banknotes up and down the east coast. The trouble for Fitz-Cowles is that although he has managed to convince various businesses to forward him large sums of money, he is unable to spend it for fear of attracting notice. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that he owes money to a large number of creditors: “In debt up to my ears, forced to leave the United States Hotel only a day since, in order to avoid my creditors . . . [A]nd why? Because I can’t use the solid stuff, locked up in that old hair trunk. Can’t use it. Somebody might find out something if I did. Curse the thing but I think the old trunk’s laughing at me—. . . . Half in sovereigns—half in notes! . . . [W]hy couldn’t [I] get it all in American gold? (154). Fitz-Cowles’s notion of his trunkload of money laughing at him is telling. Like the United States itself in the years leading up to and following the 1837 Panic, Fitz-Cowles discovers that the “notes” he has obtained are worthless and that only “American gold” offers a viable form of currency. (It’s worth adding that Lippard may be referring to an 1827 case in which officers working for the U.S. Bank found a trunk containing $100,000 worth of counterfeit notes on the U.S. Bank in a raid on the home of a counterfeit gang connected to the notorious Parkes.¹⁷) The other hoard of accumulated capital in *The Quaker City*, the chest of gold coins and doubloons maintained by the “Widow Becky Smolby” (herself a key player later in the novel), is described in related terms. “How Becky made all her money was a mystery,” we are told. “[E]ven the grand question, ‘what ever became of the funds of the United States Bank,’ [was] nothing to it” (200). Mysteriously acquired, the Widow’s gold represents the
accumulation and saving of specie otherwise absent from America during this period. This is also suggested a short time earlier, when Devil-Bug comments that a robbery of the Widow’s home is a near sure bet, one “kon-sider-able better than ’Nited States Bank stock!” (231).

The result of such financial problems for Fitz-Cowles is what he experiences alternately as a form of bodily retention and bodily vulnerability. Either way, the notorious forger finds that, unable to spend his currency, he is similarly disadvantaged when it comes to his sense of masculine self-possession and embodiment. And to be sure, Fitz-Cowles’s physical problems are reflected by the fact that he has been forging more than banknotes. As the description of him early in the novel preparing for a meeting with his many angry creditors makes clear, the image of masculine prowess he presents to the world is quite literally a performance, one aided by the various pieces of padding that his black servant, Dim, attaches to his body each morning in an elaborate dressing ceremony: “Which hip you want, Massa?” Dim asks. “Big hip or little hip?” (156). Beneath the handsome and confident exterior of the dandyish aristocrat, in other words, Fitz-Cowles is actually a skinny and effeminate wimp. In this Fitz-Cowles is similar to the image of U.S. Bank president Nicholas Biddle provided in William Whiting’s mock-epic on the bank wars, _The Age of Paper; or, the Bank Contest_ (1838). Described as “Cased in paper armor well put on” (4), Biddle is, like the Fitz-Cowles of Lippard’s novel, true to the stereotype of “paper money men”: all exterior and no substance.

The implication of gender trouble attached to Fitz-Cowles is why the narrative of pursuit involving Fitz-Cowles and an investigator named Luke Harvey is so important. Though Harvey is a white-collar merchant-in-training, his private passion is to right the wrongs of the legal system, which he (along with Lippard) sees as a mockery. “Justice in the Quaker City!” Harvey exclaims sarcastically. “One moment it unlocks the doors of the prison, and bids the Bank-Director . . . go forth! The next moment it bolts and seals those very prison doors, upon the poor devil, who has stolen a loaf of bread to save himself from starvation!” (205). Harvey the amateur detective is thus directly linked to a broader fantasy about policing the runaway paper economy—a fantasy about which Fitz-Cowles himself is nervously aware. As he puts it at one point, “[T]o feel an officer’s finger on my shoulder, ’you are my prisoner, Sir’—ugh! I have not seen Harvey to-day—this silence annoys me!” (459). Nor is Harvey the only figure through whom such fantasies are voiced. For example, in Boucicault’s _The Poor of New York_, the previously corrupt bank clerk Badger ends up a sheriff’s deputy, a transition he celebrates by arresting his former employer, the banker Bloodgood, for embezzling funds from his bank during the Panic of 1837. “Congratulate
me,” Badger says in a moment of triumph. “I have been appointed to the
police. The commissioner wanted a special service to lay on to Wall Street’s
savagery” (163). For both of these very popular writers, the fiscally trans-
gressive Jacksonian male is sometimes mirrored by an opposing, disciplin-
ary self, one manifested as a literal agent of the law.

The policing operation staged within The Quaker City involves a compi-
cated mix of gothic-style gender persecution and sentimentalized romantic
intrigue. For it turns out that Harvey himself was once romantically involved
with Fitz-Cowles’s lover, Dora Livingstone (with whom Fitz-Cowles plans to
flee the country), and is in fact still in love with her. To complicate matters,
Dora happens to be the wife of Harvey’s boss at work, a wealthy and corrupt
financier named Albert Livingstone. One of the novel’s central narratives
thus revolves around the game of cat-and-mouse between Harvey and Fitz-
Cowles, in which Harvey seeks to prove that Fitz-Cowles is in fact the paper
money forger he suspects him to be. The key move in this game is the deci-
sion by Fitz-Cowles and Dora to hire the notorious Devil-Bug to kill Harvey,
and thus save themselves from detection. As proof of his success, Dora tells
Devil-Bug that he must retrieve a gold ring that Harvey always wears on the
third finger of his left hand. “This ring was given him by his ladye-love long,
long ago,” she tells Devil-Bug. “[H]e values it, as his life, and will not part
with it save with his life” (280). Needless perhaps to say, the ring was given
to Harvey by Dora, and it continues to represent his undying love for her.

Harvey’s gold ring represents his refusal to let go of his love for Dora,
but it also suggests a more general desire for control and retention at the
level of economic self-possession—exactly what the prolabor Harvey has
had threatened in losing Dora to paper money men such as Livingstone and
Fitz-Cowles. As Harvey complains bitterly to Dora at one point, “One night
you kissed me so sweetly, Dora, so lovingly. . . . The next day you picked
a delightful quarrel with me, and forbade your ‘plighte d love,’ the house.
Why? Because the rich merchant, Livingstone, had called at your mother’s
dwelling. . . . The poor clerk was eclipsed!” (254). Harvey’s ring thus repre-
sents an anxious site of potential vulnerability, an anxiety Lippard exploits
in a violent confrontation between Harvey and Devil-Bug that takes place in
the basement of Monk Hall. Rendered in the seriocomic hyperbole typical
of Lippard’s gothic sensationalism, the fight begins when Harvey surprises
Devil-Bug as he is in the process of burying a semiconscious Byrnewood
Arlington after his earlier encounter with the libertine Gus Lorrimer. Thus
startled, Devil-Bug accidentally falls into the grave he has dug, whereupon
Harvey seizes the moment and strikes him on the head with a shovel. Tempted
by Devil-Bug’s vulnerability, Harvey then begins to bury him: “[T]he spade
rose and fell in his active grasp,” Lippard tells us, “and his face warmed with
excitement” (313). Unfortunately for Harvey, his excitement prevents him from noticing as Devil-Bug crawls to the edge of the grave, grabs Harvey by the ankle, and pulls him into the grave. In a moment, Devil-Bug is above ground, Harvey has been pummeled into unconsciousness, and his “ring” is free for the taking. “Now for the ring!” Devil-Bug cries out. “Ah-ha! Here it is; on the third finger, and a werry purty ring it is! He wouldn’t part with it except with his life—ha, ha! I reether guess that he’ll part with the ring and his life at wonst!” (314). Devil-Bug then attempts to choke Harvey to death: “Bending over the unconscious form of Luke, he extended his hands and fastened the talon-like fingers around his throat, with the grasp of a vice” (314). Before he can finish the job of killing Harvey, however, Devil-Bug is called away, and leaves Harvey unconscious in the grave.

Trading one ring for another (Harvey’s “purty” prize for his own “grasp of a vice”), Devil-Bug wages battle at exactly the level most disturbing to his opponent. For in Lippard’s overwrought narrative, the men’s struggle over Harvey’s ring might be read in terms of the rhetoric of anality. In her discussion of the homosocial violence structuring gothic masculinity, Eve Sedgwick suggests that anal control and its loss is often represented by objects such as rings, vices, and clamps, and that the relative retention and release signaled by such objects parallels a like status of control and self-possession based on class and gender (Between 169–71). Michael Moon offers a similar reading of the masculine politics of Horatio Alger’s many urban narratives about the upward mobility of “ragged” young. For example, Moon suggests that in Paul the Peddler (1868), this dynamic is figured by a ring Paul attempts to sell to an older man who then drugs Paul and steals the ring from the unconscious and helpless boy. According to Moon, such moments represent the major cultural work of the Alger narratives, and vulnerable (and highly sexualized) postures such as Paul’s act as part of the bargain in the “boost” up the homosocial class ladder (“Gentle Boy” 103–5). This vulnerability is exactly the threat faced by Harvey, who experiences the possible loss of his own ring as a form of humiliation and disempowerment in which class and sex are seen as collapsing into a horrific mode of anal submission.

Harvey’s vulnerability, echoing the threat of sexual violation faced by the terrified Ichabod Crane in his flight from Brom Bones—as–Headless Horseman (“he had much ado to maintain his seat,” we are told as the Horseman closes in from behind [294]), is especially disturbing because it is directly connected to the “eclipse” he suffered when Dora jilted him for Harvey’s employer, the “rich merchant” Livingstone. In attempting to bury Devil-Bug—the hired assassin of Dora and Fitz-Cowles—Harvey has been seeking to wipe out his humiliation, which is felt so keenly by “the poor clerk” at
the levels of class and gender. In fact, much the same might be said of the
gothic attempts by Webster and Colt to dispose of the bodies of their vic-
tims. In each case, the motive for concealing the corpse had to do with fear
of detection, but, more important, with shame over financial failure and the
gender-panic that is its almost inevitable result. In erasing the persecutory
Other, all three men seek to conceal the humiliating and uncanny mirror
image of their own failed financial selves—a failure that in Harvey’s case is
underscored by the rhetoric of anal submission.

But if in losing his “ring” Harvey seems to have been the victim of a
sexualized violation similar to that suffered by the hapless Ichabod Crane, it
is notable that Lippard acts quickly to prevent this from being a permanent
state of affairs. For the reprieve Harvey receives when Devil-Bug releases
his choke hold gives him the opportunity to escape the Monk Hall base-
ment and ambush Devil-Bug, who is about to rape Dora Livingstone as
extorted payment for the ring he has brought her. More important than
another conflict between Devil-Bug and Harvey, however, is the fact that
Harvey ends up helping Dora escape from Monk Hall despite her attempts
to have him killed. His gesture has a restorative effect: standing “[t]all and
erect” (363), Harvey tells Dora that he forgives her for her crimes against
both him and her husband; further, he urges her to ditch Fitz-Cowles, return
to Livingstone, and live a virtuous life as his wife. The result is a repentant
Dora, who suddenly feels “the modesty of a wife once more” (365). More
telling still, she returns to him the ring she believed she had purchased with
his blood: “Dora was silent. She bowed her face on her bosom as she knelt
at his feet . . . and veiled her eyes with her hands. The ring dropped from
her finger. Luke knelt silently by her side. He took the ring from the floor”
(364).

“Tall and erect” and in possession once more of his “ring,” Harvey is
transformed from abject gothic male to self-possessed and recognizably
sentimental masculine subject. That this transformation is accomplished
despite his failure to regain Dora is not a contradiction so much as a fit-
ting illustration of the debtor masculinity I am describing. For what Harvey
achieves is a moral superiority, which is the intangible form of self-posses-
sion that lifts him above men more fully linked to the paper economy, such
as Fitz-Cowles and Livingstone. As Harvey puts it to Dora before his Monk
Hall encounter with Devil-Bug, when she attempts to seduce him into aban-
doning his investigation of Fitz-Cowles: “I have still the moral self-denial,
ha, ha, ha! to scorn the embraces of an—Adulteress!” (259). Manifested a
second time, after the loss and subsequent retrieval of his ring, Harvey’s
“moral self-denial” is even more impressive: he truly seems to advocate her
return to a life of domestic sanctity with her husband. Thus, in ways that
say much about the masculine class politics of the period's gothic sensationalism, the police work Harvey conducts is accomplished by losing his ring—temporarily—and getting it back again.

Lippard's apparent interest in a recuperative form of sentimentalized domesticity and upward mobility is even further underscored by the marriage of Harvey to Livingstone's (supposed) daughter, Mabel. In a convenient shuffling of financial resources, Mabel becomes wealthy when it is discovered that the Widow Becky Smolby is Mabel's grandmother, and that she has willed to Mabel her hoard of gold specie (476); Mabel's fortune increases further when Livingstone kills Dora in a fit of jealous rage over her affair with Fitz-Cowles and then fakes his own suicide, leaving Mabel as his sole heir (501; 571). The marriage between Harvey and Mabel thus almost seamlessly combines the “police” with a vision of financially solvent (and notably specie-based) domestic bliss.

But while the marriage between Harvey and Mabel might seem to signal a sentimental form of middle-class closure very much like that offered in the marriage between Holgrave and Phoebe Pyncheon in *The House of the Seven Gables*, it is important to note that Lippard complicates—and seems resistant to—an unproblematized notion of middle-class security. This position is signaled first in a melodramatic twist that reveals Mabel as the daughter of Devil-Bug, who we learn has decided to hide his parentage to allow the girl to grow up in the spheres of genteel domesticity so different from the radically antidomestic world of Monk Hall. As Devil-Bug explains, “I'll skulk along the street, and see her ridin’ in her carriage; I'll watch in the cold winter nights and see her—all shinin’ with goold and jewels—as she goes into the theatre, with the big folks around her, and the rich merchant by her side. . . . There, I’ll cry to myself—there is old Devil-Bug’s darter among the grandees o’ the Quaker City!” (338). On the one hand, Devil-Bug’s explanation suggests a certain reciprocity between the corrupted world of finance, which he represents, and the cordoned-off space of upper-class enclosure. Taking a servile and highly affective pride in his ability to access the upper classes vicariously (we are told that he is charged with “superhuman emotion!” [333]), Devil-Bug might seem to be modeling a sentimentalized form of class desire that involves abdicating his own form of masculine agency to the “rich merchant” Livingstone—and after Livingstone’s suicide, to the white-collar Luke Harvey. But on the other hand, the insertion of Devil-Bug’s “blood” into the middle classes suggests that sentimental narratives of middle-class stability and purity are themselves a fiction, one especially difficult to maintain in an era when financial panic meant that lines of class and superiority were under almost constant threat of dissolution. In this sense, the affect displayed by Harvey, Devil-Bug, and other financially
strapped men in antebellum sensationalism performs crucial cultural work: standing in for a lost sense of fiscal security or class stability, this form of emotional expression becomes an immaterial form of social capital that works to reinvent the postures of masculine humiliation and disempowerment so endemic to the Jacksonian period.

Perhaps this is what is meant by the fact that Luke Harvey’s efforts to capture and imprison Fitz-Cowles are ultimately unsuccessful. Near novel’s end, Fitz-Cowles is arrested by Harvey and the police, an event that provides Harvey with an initial moment of excitement. “Do your dapper limbs already feel the cheering warmth of the convicts [sic] dress—and then the manacles, and the lash!” he asks Fitz-Cowles mockingly (490). But the elusive, paper money man of this novel is able almost immediately to buy his freedom from “Easy Larkspur,” one of the arresting officers. “In less than a month,” we are told, “Fitz-Cowles walked the streets a free man. The mysteries of the forgery, the hooks and crooks, by which that pliable old gentleman THE LAW was evaded and conciliated, are they not written in the Chronicles of the Courts?” (553). Unlike the libertine-speculator of early republic fiction, then, Fitz-Cowles is not ultimately contained within the walls of a prison. (In both Arthur Mervyn and Dorval, the libertine villains die in debtors’ prison; in Hannah Foster’s The Coquette, the libertine Major Sanford is placed under house arrest pending payment of his debts.) In fact, Fitz-Cowles’s escape suggests that the crisis of debt and financial panic plaguing the country will continue for some time.

Thus the marriage between Harvey and Mabel is not ultimately a guarantee that the postures of disempowerment assumed by the likes of Harvey, Webster, and so many others are no longer necessary in the continuing efforts to establish a stable mode of middle-class masculine self-possession. Quite the contrary, the lurking presence of Fitz-Cowles suggests that such postures are a long-term, perhaps even permanent, component of upwardly mobile masculine selfhood. For while the sensational aesthetics of male panic and debtor masculinity offer an adaptive, and in many ways compensatory, response to the vicissitudes of financial instability and homosocial rivalry, they are not, finally, the same as bank vaults (or personal bank accounts) filled with actual gold specie. What they do offer, smuggled in with the perverse and often silly pleasures of antebellum sensationalism, is a way to make sense of an increasingly common form of cultural disempowerment and embarrassment. This, it seems to me, is the fantasy bribe offered by such texts. Rather than straightforward Jacksonian-versus-Whig narratives of political complaint or class conflict, sensationalist narratives such as The Quaker City and The Extraordinary Confession of Dr. John White Webster provide compensation to a financially anxious and disempowered
readership by instantiating a language of sensibility that works to recode the
gap left by the movement from labor-based to paper-based forms of value.
Indeed, it is the very shift to the new economy that lays the groundwork
for this mode of masculine affect—this structure of feeling—as it emerged
within the period’s sensationalism.

In the sensational category of debtor masculinity, then, we can see the
outlines of a culture’s anxious attempt to deal with the trauma of a perceived
fall away from the supposed wholeness of a reliable and fixed gold standard.
The movement from wide-eyed male hysteria to weeping and abject man-
hood that frequently marks both sensationalism and this gender category—
the movement, that is, from gothic horror to domestic sentimentality and
emotional interiority—is thus deeply ideological; it is one instance of the
gradual but powerful drift into middle-class hegemony. This is the image of
“the police” according to antebellum sensationalism, one much more effec-
tive than that which Luke Harvey, Easy Larkspur, or even the jury in the
Webster trial could provide. We might therefore think of debtor masculinity
as offering the next best thing to a gold standard. To “invest” in this emer-
gent mode of manhood and sensibility did not promise a material form of
fiscal security or self-possession. But, to quote from the villain Devil-Bug,
this form of affective investment was “kon-siderable better” than banking on
the illusory profits of paper money or “‘Nited States Bank stock.”