Under the pale moon beams:

Tabloid Sensationalism and Political Economy

On April 11, 1836, an enterprising newspaperman named James Gordon Bennett Jr. printed the first of many accounts of the murder of a twenty-three-year-old prostitute named Helen Jewett in his upstart tabloid, the New York Herald. Describing “a sensation in this city never before felt or known,” Bennett explained that early that morning Jewett had been bludgeoned to death with a small hatchet while in a room she occupied in the City Hotel brothel at 41 Thomas Street, New York, and that, in an attempt to conceal the crime, her assailant had set fire to the bed in which she lay. Soon, however, the smoke was detected; Jewett’s partially burned body was discovered, and a search was begun for a nineteen-year-old office clerk named Richard P. Robinson, whom witnesses claimed had visited Jewett that night, and whose cloak was found behind the fence at the rear of the brothel. But as Bennett also explained, upon his arrest the next morning, Robinson, while admitting to frequent visits to Jewett’s, claimed...

CHAPTER FOUR

Tabloid Manhood, Speculative Femininity

Now here is an example worthy of the notice of banks. Public credit—paper credit—like the beautiful Helen Jewett on the green banks of the Penobscot, before her fall, was in youth, beautiful, fair, engaging, virtuous... At last, falling into the hands of several young speculators, who, like Robinson, appeared covered with youth, beauty, and innocence, she became a prey to folly, launched into extravagance, and was soon hurried into the loss of all decency, and all virtue. Like Helen Jewett, running with a love letter in her zone, over Wall street, and up and down Broadway, paper money, arrayed in gaudy habiliments, fine engravings, and beautiful vignettes, has flooded the land till she is a trouble and an annoyance to those who have brought her upon the country.

—The New York Herald, May 9, 1837

“[U]nder the pale moon beams”:
Tabloid Sensationalism and Political Economy

On April 11, 1836, an enterprising newspaperman named James Gordon Bennett Jr. printed the first of many accounts of the murder of a twenty-three-year-old prostitute named Helen Jewett in his upstart tabloid, the New York Herald. Describing “a sensation in this city never before felt or known,” Bennett explained that early that morning Jewett had been bludgeoned to death with a small hatchet while in a room she occupied in the City Hotel brothel at 41 Thomas Street, New York, and that, in an attempt to conceal the crime, her assailant had set fire to the bed in which she lay. Soon, however, the smoke was detected; Jewett’s partially burned body was discovered, and a search was begun for a nineteen-year-old office clerk named Richard P. Robinson, whom witnesses claimed had visited Jewett that night, and whose cloak was found behind the fence at the rear of the brothel. But as Bennett also explained, upon his arrest the next morning, Robinson, while admitting to frequent visits to Jewett’s, claimed...
he had not been to see her the previous evening, and that the cloak did not belong to him. Further, Robinson contended that a blood-stained hatchet found in the brothel’s backyard, identified as stolen from the office where he worked, was unknown to him, and that the whitewash found on his pants, which matched that of the fence behind the brothel, was paint from the store where he worked.

For Bennett, the murder represented an especially opportune chance to generate sensational copy for the *Herald*. The son of an upstanding Connecticut family and the employee of a reputable merchant named Joseph Hoxie, Robinson was not only well connected but handsome and charming; his alleged involvement in the case captivated readers, especially those who saw him as an example of the new breed of young men whose licentious, antidomestic lifestyle had begun to pose a troubling challenge to the city’s middle class—especially by encouraging the growth of the city’s prostitution industry.3 Jewett was a figure of extraordinary fascination as well. The daughter of a poor shoemaker in Maine, Jewett had worked as a servant for the family of a powerful judge there, and was eventually educated at a female academy along with the judge’s daughters. Somewhere along the line, however, Jewett had either rejected or had been unable to maintain the privileges of class and culture, and worked instead as a prostitute in various cities before ending up in New York in 1833, at the age of twenty. Like Robinson, Jewett was thus intriguing to the public for her ability to challenge middle-class definitions of gender and sexuality.

No one seems to have been more aware of this than Bennett, who, having gained entrance to the City Hotel before Jewett’s body was removed from her bedroom, began providing lurid details of the crime scene in the days following the murder. Representing the slain Jewett in Poe-esque fashion as a mix of deathly erotics and aesthetic beauty, Bennett offered Jewett as a figure in whom a variety of fantasies could be exercised by a reading public. Describing her “beautiful female corpse” as a “passionless” object that “surpassed the finest statue in antiquity” (*NYH* 4-11-1836), Bennett seemed to be negotiating between illicit sexual desire and the forms of class and culture by which such desire might be mediated. This was a strategy he would use repeatedly in the days and weeks to follow. Again and again Bennett provided scenarios in which Jewett’s “beautiful” corpse was the central figure. In a story printed several days after the murder, for example, the paper claimed (falsely) that shortly after her burial a team of coroners had exhumed Jewett’s body in order to perform what was presumably a second, more exacting, autopsy: “We learn that no sooner than Jewett was committed to the earth, several medical goths shouldered spade and pick axe—went to her grave under the pale moon beams—dug up her beautiful body—put
it unceremoniously into a bag—and carried it to a certain place, where, after the measure of her lovely lineaments had been accurately taken, it underwent the process of dissection” (NYH 4-16-1836). Again echoing the gothic fascination with the female corpse expressed by Poe, Hawthorne, and others during this period, the passage displays the same ambivalence about how to negotiate between an illicit erotics and aesthetic containment as Bennett’s earlier description of the murder scene.⁴ “Beautiful” and “lovely” even fresh from the earth, Jewett seems nevertheless to require further investigation. According to Bennett, even the grave is suspected of keeping secrets.

Bennett was not alone in his interest in the case. In the ensuing three months the murder was covered relentlessly by the media, eventually becoming one of the most publicized in history. Newspapers from all over the country carried the story on a regular basis, while many of New York’s major papers provided complete transcripts from the five-day trial in early June.⁵ No fewer than six pamphlets devoted to the crime were published in the months following the murder, each attempting to suggest why a woman such as Jewett had chosen a life of prostitution over the available security of domesticity (figure 15).⁶ In addition, local artists circulated various images of Jewett and Robinson throughout the city, most depicting the murdered Jewett on her bed in various states of undress, and Robinson fleeing her room, hatchet in hand.

Such publicity seems to have incited considerable public response. For months after the murder reported sightings of Jewett’s ghost were apparently frequent, and local papers reported on crowds gathering outside the City Hotel and elsewhere after her spectral image had been seen by incredulous witnesses.⁷ More materially, on May 18 The Illuminator reported that a crowd of young women—possibly fellow prostitutes—had gathered to take away the burnt remains of Jewett’s bed frame after it was set outside the brothel as trash (Illuminator 5-18-1836; quoted in Cohen, “The Helen Jewett Murder” 376). Similarly, prior to a sale of the furniture from the City Hotel (which Rosina Townsend, the brothel’s madam, decided to close just after the murder), a group of clerks supposedly entered Jewett’s room and cut small pieces of wood off of her furniture, either as souvenirs or, as Bennett put it ironically, as “relics” of the deceased woman’s life (NYH 4-14-1836). In addition, various groups in the city began taking sides in the case according to allegiances of class and politics: one working-class gang took to wearing a type of white fur hat with black crepe ribbons called the “Helen Jewett mourner,” apparently in opposition to the white-collar clerk class represented by Robinson.⁸ Conversely, in the months before the trial large numbers of the city’s clerks could be seen sporting “Robinson cloaks” and “Robinson caps” in support of the accused clerk.
Figure 15  Cover of The Thomas Street Tragedy. Murder of Ellen Jewett. Trial of Robinson! 1836. Reproduced with permission of Clements Library, University of Michigan.
What then to make of the considerable interest and anxiety the case generated? I want to suggest that while descriptions such as Bennett’s were certainly sensationalist attempts to increase circulation, they also reflect the emergence within the sensational public sphere of the sort of paper money manhood I have been describing. Indeed, as I will discuss, the Jewett case is in many respects the birthplace of the sensational public sphere; it is Bennett’s sensational aesthetic of somewhat campy horror that writers such as Poe, Lippard, Thompson, and many others came to emulate in the early 1840s, and which writers such as Hawthorne and Melville tapped into in more distanced ways in the early 1850s. And this comparison works in reverse historical order as well: we might think of the sensational public sphere as composed almost entirely of moments such as Ichabod Crane’s pursuit by the Headless Horseman, and all but entirely absent of the recognizably Federalist, even Burkean, conservatism reflected in portions of The Sketchbook such as “The Country Church” or “Roscoe.”

But, occurring as it did on the eve of the 1837 Panic, the murder and ensuing trial were also caught up in the heated debates between Democrats and Whigs over the U.S. Bank and the paper economy. Accordingly, I want to show here how the tabloid coverage of the case became a long-running gothic melodrama set quite closely against the backdrop of the period’s concerns over political economy. The quote from the Herald with which I begin this chapter is a useful example of what I am suggesting. Depicting Jewett as a figure for “paper money” and Robinson as a “young speculator” who has stolen the “virtue” of Jewett/public credit, the editorial captures, albeit playfully, the intersecting rhetoric of gender and political economy so central to the antebellum sensational public sphere. Here, of course, “falling into the hands of several young speculators,” Jewett/paper money is represented as the victim of speculative excess and male passion, which is to say that the description relies on the image of the rapacious rake—Smith-Rosenberg’s “corrupt new men of paper and place”—that we see in characters from Major Sanford in Hannah W. Foster’s The Coquette up through Irving’s more comic Ichabod Crane. In this Bennett seems to be offering what was by 1837 a somewhat standard critique of the paper economy and its excesses.

But it’s important to note that this was a stance Bennett took up only in mid-1837, when the Panic itself was in full bloom, and when, perhaps more importantly, the Herald had become the nation’s most successful newspaper. Prior to this, Bennett was a struggling and (often quite literally) embattled entrepreneur. And it was during this period that Bennett provided his extensive coverage of the Jewett murder and Robinson’s trial. And what we find is a richer, more complicated narrative. For prior to the above denunciation of Robinson, Bennett had long insisted that Robinson was the victim of a setup
by financier Whigs, whom he claimed had murdered Jewett. Bennett even suggested that the murder was part of a broad-based Bank conspiracy, and that Whig-oriented mercantile trade papers such as James Watson Webb’s *Courier and Enquirer* were aiding in the cover-up. From this perspective, Jewett represented corrupt spheres of class and privilege that, inhabited largely by Whigs and speculators, had long excluded upwardly mobile men such as Bennett. Indeed, described at another point in the *Herald* as “the goddess of a large race of merchants, dealers, clerks and their instruments” (*NYH* 4-15-1836), and often visible on Wall Street in her trademark green dress and expensive jewelry, the Jewett that Bennett depicts in 1836 is a volatile, mysterious, and finally quite threatening form of femininity, one linked in a variety of ways with the corrupt economic and social world that Bennett, as a staunch Jacksonian Democrat, saw as linked to Nicholas Biddle and other members of the fiscal elite that had steered the economy toward ruin with its reliance on paper money fiscal policies.

Put another way, Jewett became in many ways a figure of sensational Otherness similar to the likes of Irving’s Headless Horseman, the Shylock figure of so many antebellum narratives, or Colonel Fitz-Cowles, the paper money con man in Lippard’s *The Quaker City*. She was, that is to say, a figure through whom the antebellum professional male—here Bennett and his proxy Robinson—sought to negotiate on a psychological level the desires and fantasies of the emergent paper economy. Indeed, Bennett’s coverage of the Jewett case in the *Herald* is especially interesting because it provides a kind of “real time” narrative in which we see his story unfold in almost daily response to actual events. And what we see is a constant, and at times quite dramatic, effort on the part of Bennett to establish imagined control over the threat that Jewett seems to pose to aspiring professional men such as Robinson and himself. For Jewett is in Bennett’s version of her a fascinating but disturbing figure of “theft” and symbolic castration; it is in her, one might say, that the anxieties over the paper economy are located. In this regard, the gothic search for Jewett’s corpse offered in the *Herald* may have been imagined, but it was also significant: at least metaphorically, what the *Herald*’s “medical Goths” were seeking was a site of social and economic affirmation that, as the ghostly Jewett and the excitement surrounding her murder would suggest, did not exist.

But this, again, is something that Bennett struggles against. And in this sense I want to read his coverage of the Jewett affair as an attempt both to retrieve, somehow, the sense of lost potency that Jewett has “stolen” from him, and—simultaneously—to offer a series of compensatory postures in relation to the threat that Jewett poses. For, and as with the various debtor narratives of the 1840s and ’50s that I discuss in chapter 3, Bennett’s
particular brand of sensationalism involves the staging of what we might think of as alternative forms of manhood. Here again, notions such as submission and humiliation are quite central to the formation of a sensational manhood. Indeed, it may be that Bennett provides the testing ground for the submissive debtor masculinity of the following decades. But the representational strategies that Bennett offers are also uneven, for certainly aggression and misogyny remain viable approaches to gender conflict even as Bennett experiments with a less self-possessed form of manhood. What we see in Bennett’s tabloid narrative about Jewett and Robinson is thus an effort—sometimes lurid, sometimes absurd and comic, and occasionally poignant—to negotiate and ultimately to rewrite the growing sense of anxiety that the professional male was feeling in 1836. The irony here, of course, is that Bennett, much like Washington Irving, was able to cash in on the representation of male anxiety by creating and selling a form of sensationalism that proved incredibly popular. But this is perhaps the point. For inasmuch as these writers were offering fantasies for readers in which they might see their own concerns reflected and negotiated—and sometimes solved—they were telling a story that was much in demand.

Indeed, one measure of this demand can be found in a narrative that picks up on and extends many of the issues circulating in Bennett’s coverage of the Jewett murder: Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). As I suggest in a short coda to this chapter, Hawthorne’s novel provides a further exploration of a paper money masculinity that projected many of its anxieties onto figures of female mystery and empowerment. This is true both of the waiflike and ghostly (and at least symbolically prostituted) Pricilla, and the horrific figure of the female corpse that we see in Zenobia at book’s end. In each case, we see depictions of female Otherness that, much like the mysterious Helen Jewett, force a male narrator (and in each case a male writer) to articulate and negotiate the shifting and unstable contours of professional manhood during this period.

**Publicity and Humiliation: Bennett and the *Herald***

The *Herald* was started by Bennett just under a year before Jewett’s murder, on May 6, 1835, for approximately $500. Before this date Bennett had worked as a staunchly Jacksonian “party editor” for a number of the city’s newspapers, including the city’s dominant mercantile trade paper, the *Courier and Enquirer*, and the *Pennsylvanian*, a pro-Jackson daily begun in Philadelphia in 1832. But, and as a result mainly of disputes over the role
of the Bank of the United States, which he vehemently denounced, Bennett inevitably left these positions, usually with hard feelings on both sides. The founding of the *Herald* was Bennett’s opportunity to assert his independence, both financially and in terms of editorial policy. Bennett’s hope was to create a niche for the *Herald* in the penny press market carved out several years earlier by the New York *Sun* and the New York *Daily Transcript.* And to this end he was fairly successful. With its pages devoted to feature materials such as murders, robberies, and advertisements for patent medicines and abortionists such as the notorious Madame Restell, the paper quickly gained a reputation as a sensationalist rag. Sold primarily in the city’s downtown area on the “cash-and-carry” system by young “street urchin” newsboys, the paper went for a penny—one-sixth the cost of trade papers such as the *Courier*—and its four-page, five-column tabloid format was considered by many to be as “ugly” as its contents. As former mayor Philip Hone noted disdainfully in his diary, the *Herald* was published by “an ill-looking, squinting man called Bennett,” and was “one of the penny papers which are hawked about the streets by a gang of troublesome, ragged boys, and in which scandal is retailed to all who delight in it, at that moderate price” (*DPH* 193). Such denunciations of Bennett and his paper were not limited to private asides. Throughout the 1830s and early 1840s Bennett was subjected to a number of efforts either to censure him, or to put him out of business altogether. The most serious attempt came in 1840, in response to an editorial by Bennett challenging the American Catholic church to “come forth from the darkness, folly, and superstition of the tenth century” (*NYH* 5-10-1840). Following this, Bennett found himself the subject of a “Moral War” waged by a committee of many of the city’s most powerful clergymen, news editors, politicians, and businessmen. This committee was often given voice by James Watson Webb in the pages of the *Courier and Enquirer*. For example, describing Bennett as, among other things, “a worthless vagabond” peddling “moral leprosy” (Webb, *CE* 6-3-1840), the group called for a general boycott of the *Herald* and any businesses that carried it. The boycott was temporarily successful, but within a month the *Herald’s* sales began to surge again, probably as a result of the publicity the “War” was generating. As Bennett was proving, sensationalism in whatever form sold newspapers.

But even in its early stages the *Herald* manifested aspirations for a rise to “credibility.” Before starting the *Herald*, Bennett had often written on banking news and other financial matters for mercantile trade papers such as the *Courier and Enquirer*. Such work gave him an intimate knowledge of both local and national economic trends, knowledge he sought to make available to a more general readership. As Bennett was aware, many of those purchasing the paper were white-collar clerks who worked in the city’s
downtown area and (like himself) desired upward mobility. This is why the paper included, in addition to its coverage of more sensational events, a common-sense—and for a penny paper, unusual—“Wall Street” column that provided an easy-to-read update on daily stock prices and basic investment advice, as well as a series of mini-editorials about the evils of credit and speculation. As Bennett explained, “The spirit, pith, and philosophy of commercial affairs is [sic] what men of business want. Dull records of facts, without condensation, analysis, or deduction, are utterly useless. The philosophy of commerce is what we aim at, combined with accuracy, brevity, and spirit” (NYH 2-28-1838). Such efforts did not go unnoticed. The Journal of Commerce, for example, noted shortly after Bennett began his new feature that “The number of [Herald] readers is doubled . . . among those classes who have suffered greatly from their want of intelligence [on financial matters]” (JC August 1835; quoted in Crouthamel, Webb 70). Not surprisingly, this was something for which Bennett was willing to praise himself. “Our neighborhood is rapidly becoming a second Wall Street,” Bennett claimed in one issue. “Our [financial] bulletin, which we always keep in fine trim, is drawing crowds to this part of the city. We are rapidly taking the wind out of the big-bellied sales of the Courier and Enquirer and the Journal of Commerce, that pair of unclean speculators and deceivers of public opinion” (NYH 4-21-1836). As usual, Bennett’s main intent here is to generate interest in his product by stirring up public disputes with the city’s other newspapers. But as newspaper historian James Crouthamel suggests, Bennett’s confidence was well founded. As he puts it, “These economic columns, in their accuracy and acute analysis, surpassed anything in the mercantile sheets” (Bennett’s 70). Along with sensationalist headlines, Bennett was also selling class mobility; apparently, he was doing a good job of it.

Bennett was also consistent in his political attacks on the city’s other papers and editors, in particular those who expressed Whig sympathies. This was especially the case with the Courier and its editor, James Watson Webb. Bennett had been employed by Webb several years before starting the Herald, but the two had had a falling out during the 1832 Jackson reelection campaign when Webb abandoned his earlier opposition to the U.S. Bank and came out in favor of recharter. To Bennett, who abhorred the powers and protections the Bank had been granted by the government, and whose support of Jackson was based on the president’s opposition to recharter, such a shift was heresy. Indeed, the Herald was one of New York’s—if not the nation’s—most vociferous anti-Bank voices of the mid-1830s. As he put it in a typical editorial, “Of late years, and particularly since Mr. Van Buren and Mr. Biddle came before the world as the Caesar and Pompey of the age, the banking system has departed from being a humble instrument of
commerce, to be the great element of political power, and of popular government” (NYH 1-30-37). An anonymous poem that Bennett ran on the front page of the Herald in 1837—perhaps in imitation of Peacock’s 1837 Paper Money Lyrics—makes his staunchly bullionist posture even clearer. Warning that “Bank Notes are all deceitful trash / . . . Their faithless word, a promise rash,” the poem concludes with a sentiment that links the paper economy with the spectral world of the gothic: “Poor, worthless dirty rags avaunt! / And may destruction seize ye / Such ‘ghosts of cash’ I do not want / Nor shall ye more my pockets haunt— / There’s nothing safe but specie” (NYH 6-15-1837). Webb’s reversal on the Bank issue thus smelled to Bennett of the very corruption he feared would ensue from the Bank’s control over the nation’s economy. As he put it in an 1836 reference to Webb, “The New York Herald is entirely conducted on the cash system. We never had, and never will have the slightest favor from any bank. We despise incorporated banks and bankers. . . . The chartered banking system has woven this country in a web of credit. It has destroyed the liberty of the press and checked the very thoughts of men” (NYH 9-20-1836). To Bennett the Jacksonian, the “cash system” meant a form of defense against the oppression of Whig interests—interests to which Webb and the Courier seemed to have yielded.

The conflict between Webb and Bennett reached a boiling point in early 1836, when the Herald carried several pieces accusing Webb of a variety of misdeeds, including accepting an illegal loan from the U.S. Bank. An editorial in March of 1836 was typically blunt. Titled “Queries to the editor of the Courier and Enquirer,” the piece poses a series of questions to Webb, including the following: “Did you, or did you not, say that ‘the U.S. Bank and the Courier and Enquirer acting in concert, could always control the money market?’ and also—‘I and Mr. Biddle can give a tone to the stock operations of the country’? . . . Had you, or had you not, a very private conversation with a distinguished broker, on the morning of the first Tuesday in March, at No.— Wall street? If so—did you, or did you not, enter into new contracts for certain other stocks as purchaser on time, under a belief that the Bank and the Courier and Enquirer could still control the market? . . . Are not all of your articles on the money market, in the C and E, written and concocted with a view entirely to effect [sic] your own contracts on time?” (NYH, 3-19-1836).

Webb’s response to such accusations was to seek out Bennett as he was canvassing Wall Street for his economic column, and beat him with his cane. As Bennett described it following an earlier such event, in January of 1836, “The assassin Webb, by coming up behind me, cut a slash in my head of about one and one half inch in length, and through the integuments of the skull. . . . He did not succeed, however, in rifling me of my ideas as he did
the United States Bank and the brokers” \((NYH\ 1-25-1836)\). The metaphors of class struggle could not have been clearer. Caught out on Wall Street, the territory of the city’s more established money, Bennett met with resistance of an extremely violent sort. Wishing to keep Bennett down economically, Webb performed that act physically, with the specific intent of exposing Bennett to a public form of bodily humiliation.

Bennett is even more direct in linking Webb’s assault to Bank politics in a piece he published a short time later. As he puts it, “Who has forgotten the cowardly attempts made upon us by the editor of the Courier and Enquirer, because we dared to tell the truth of certain base stock operations in which he was engaged? And even so mad had the mania become among the speculators, that it was at one time deliberately decided by a class of swindlers in Wall street, and another coterie of scoundrels in Ann street, to maim, break a limb, or so disable me personally that I should never be capable of writing another paragraph or another Wall street report. I knew of all these projects and plans, but never feared the dastardly cowards from the editor of the Courier down to the lowest vagabond” \((NYH\ 4-13-1837)\). As such pieces suggest, physical violence was a central component of professional life for the men involved in the city’s newspaper trade during this period. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, many of the city’s news editors confronted one another, as well as other political enemies, in street fights and even in actual pistol duels.\(^\text{13}\) This was especially true of Bennett, who refused to remit in his attacks on Webb or various other editors. In May Bennett reported that Webb had deliberately published misleading market information so as to benefit from the stock fluctuations. The accusation brought about a grand jury investigation, but it also brought about two more Wall Street brawls between Webb and Bennett, one in early May and another in early July. Each time it was again Webb who came away the victor, once after having kicked Bennett down a flight of stone steps as a crowd of eager onlookers shouted their support for the two combatants. Following the second confrontation, in an item titled “Yet once more,” the Sun ironically termed Bennett “Common flogging property,” adding that “[u]pon calculating the number of public floggings which that miserable scribbler Bennett has received, we have pretty accurately ascertained that there is not a square inch of his body which has not been lacerated somewhere about fifteen times” \((NYS\ 5-5-1836)\). Nor were Bennett’s brawls limited to those with Webb; as “common flogging property,” Bennett and his one-penny Herald suffered assaults from a number of competitors. In addition to his confrontations with Webb, Bennett was also physically beaten by Peter Townsend of the Whig-based Evening Star in October of 1835, and by William Leggett of the staunchly Democratic New York Evening Post in December of the same year.\(^\text{14}\)
Clearly, Bennett had entered into a struggle in which more was at stake simply than the $500 he had invested in the Herald. Having made himself a key player both in the rapidly expanding newspaper world of the mid-1830s and in the emergent world of financial reporting, he had involved himself in a dynamic in which the threats of bodily violence and humiliation—“caning,” “rifling,” “flogging,” “slashing”—were tied to categories of public reputation and economic status. Public attacks upon one’s “honor” (a term Webb often invoked) seem to have signified the need for equally public and often bodily retaliations against one’s challenger. In these instances the public self being circulated in the city’s papers was closely related to the private, bodily self one might inhabit or “possess” individually; the two were not autonomous.

Entrance into this world also seems to have meant intensive challenges to one’s masculinity. As nearly all of the tabloid accounts of the encounters between these men suggest, to be beaten or humiliated in public was to be feminized, which in these cases meant being rendered both physically and economically vulnerable. This is perhaps why Bennett often responded to Webb’s attacks with a show of bravado. Following his second attack, for example, Bennett claimed, “Neither Webb nor any other man shall or can intimidate me. . . . I may be attacked—I may be assailed. . . . but I will never succumb” (NYH 5-10-1836). But this is also why, paradoxically, Bennett’s descriptions of his beatings are such an odd mix of indignation and playfulness. In Bennett’s account of Webb’s January 1836 attack on him, for example, the metaphors of penetration and submission are so brutal and excessive that they seem almost silly. In a similar story following Webb’s second assault, Bennett gives considerable—one might even say “campy”—attention to Webb’s “superior physical strength,” stating finally that Webb was “altogether too powerful for me to contend with” (NYH 5-10-1836). My sense is that by overdetermining his role as victim Bennett was able to recuperate at least a portion of his losses—if not those to his person or his masculinity, then perhaps those to his pocketbook. For if nothing else, the beatings Bennett was taking made for good publicity, which meant increased sales and revenue for the Herald. In other words, by playing up his reputation as a sort of communal whipping boy, Bennett seems to have hit upon a means of competing with his oppressors where it may have hurt most: economically. In fact, one wonders whether Bennett didn’t intentionally provoke some of these encounters, using himself as bait in order to cause a public sensation. Indeed, after Webb’s first attack Bennett sometimes took to announcing in print when he would be appearing on Wall Street. As for example he put it following Webb’s second attack, “Today it is said another attack will be made upon me in Wall st. I shall be there between one and two o’clock to see it”
Tabloid Manhood, Speculative Femininity

Perhaps, like the prostitute Jewett, Bennett found himself forced to compete by whatever means necessary—namely, by selling his body for profit.

In this Bennett was offering a rhetoric of masculine submission that, as I suggest in chapter 3, was utilized by Lippard and a number of the male writers producing sensational fiction during the period. And, again, what this rhetoric suggests is that assuming an enfeebled, even masochistic posture was often useful as a means of negotiating the vicissitudes of self-possession and economic advancement. In an 1836 piece titled “Penny Literature versus Loafer Literature,” Bennett lashes out at “trashy publications” such as the New York Mirror and the Knickerbocker, which he claims have “degenerated into vehicles of mere sickly sentimentalism, fit only for the kitchen or the laundry” (NYH 9-30-1836). The antidote to such sentimentality, he explains, can be found in “the daily press and the cheap periodicals,” venues which, because they are “[c]onversant in matters of business,” should be understood as “possess[ing] the only strength—the only nerve—the only real talent and genius” (NYH 9-30-1836). But what are we to make of Bennett’s repeated—and apparently quite intentional—postures of humiliation? I would suggest that, in the highly competitive world of the penny presses—a world echoed in the fiction of Lippard, Poe, and others—violent class rivalry between men seems to have necessitated more fluid forms of gender identity, forms of selfhood in which the personal autonomy of more standard types of self-possessed, middle-class masculinity was undermined. In some cases this was simply because the privilege of being “on top” was not always available. For example, in the tales and poems of Poe (whose personal struggles for distinctions of class and culture were if anything more violent and humiliating than Bennett’s), the infamous subservience of his male characters before hypersanctified or demonic women becomes the means by which masculinity and “self-possession” are reconfigured, thus allowing Poe to critique the landed aristocracy that so long excluded him. In other cases, however, it seems that a rhetoric of physical disempowerment was utilized to affiliate oneself with more effete spheres of class distinction, the cultural capital of which was far more enabling than mere brute force. In eschewing the pose of masculine prowess, in other words, Bennett seems to have been seeking an alternative—and less embattled—form of manhood, one located somewhere between the gothic abjection of Ichabod Crane in his flight from the Headless Horseman, and the more overtly sentimental postures assumed by the infamous John White Webster in his Confession of the Murder of Dr. George Parkman. The question of how successful he would be with such a stance was of course an open one that (again paradoxically) he struggled to answer with sometimes alarming vehemence.
“Cheerings and Huzzas”:
White-Collar Manhood on Trial

Though 1836 found Bennett a struggling and oft-abused newspaper entrepreneur, it was also the year in which, with his coverage of Jewett’s murder, his fortunes changed. What quickly became apparent was that the case provided Bennett an opportunity to champion the scandalous Robinson, and to sell thereby an enormous number of newspapers. In his many editorials on the case from April to June, Bennett suggested that the real killer could likely be found amongst the ranks of the city’s Whig-based “soi-disant fashionable society” (NYH 4-15-1836), who needed Robinson as cover for their own presence at 41 Thomas Street the night of the murder. These people, Bennett claimed, had paid off Rosina Townsend, the brothel’s madam, to maintain silence. According to Bennett, “The affair is to be hushed up. Young Robinson is to be considered guilty. He is young and penniless. To make another search after the murderer might unfrock some of the most respectable men in New York, who were in the City Hotel on that very night. . . . The trial is a juggl—the arrest was a juggl—the whole affair is a juggl. It is a juggl to criminate Robinson, in order to save others, some of them worth $150,000, who were in that house, from public exposure” (NYH 5-10-1836). In the weeks to follow, Bennett elaborated on his conspiracy theory, suggesting that the police were also involved in the cover-up, that competing tabloids such as the Sun were in the pay of the city’s Whig aristocracy, and that the killer might have been Townsend herself, who he claimed owed Jewett a large sum of money.16

Other papers, however, most vocally the Sun and the Transcript, saw Robinson as the murderer and touted him as an example of the new breed of young clerks so threatening to the city’s class structure. Indeed, the Sun eventually claimed that Robinson was guilty of murdering another woman, Emma E. Chancellor, “whom he had seduced from the home of her friends, to become the inmate of a brothel of this city” (NYS 6-14-1836).17 According to these papers, it was Bennett who was himself on the take from Robinson and his supporters. Perhaps the clearest statement of this charge came after the Herald’s publication of an anonymous letter from someone claiming to be the “real” murderer. Describing himself as a fellow clerk, the author explained that a fallout with Robinson and a later rejection by Jewett (“[A]nd for whom? why, for Robinson”) had driven him to kill Jewett and frame Robinson for the deed (NYH 4-15-1836). The next day the Sun denounced Bennett for fabricating the story: “It is scarcely necessary to say that the letter which appeared in a certain loathsome print yesterday, purporting to be written by some unknown person, who is made to confess that he and not
Robinson, was the murderer of Ellen Jewett, the unfortunate cortezan, was a diabolical forgery by James Gordon Bennett, the unprincipled editor. We know it to be a fact that this wretch actually received a bribe of $50 from the friends of the murderer Robinson, to create, by this infamous means, a public rumor of his innocence. . . . We have long known this man to be more unblushingly unprincipled than any other that pollutes the public press, but from so callous, unmanly, and heartless an extent of villainy as this, our charity had hitherto exempted him” (NYS 4-16-1836).

Representing Bennett as “unmanly” for his alleged willingness to sell his public support for cash, the Sun’s editors were tapping into the same issues of self-possession and gender at work in Bennett’s running feud with Webb. According to the Sun, Bennett was nothing more than a hired public voice, and therefore without the integrity even of Jewett or Townsend; to this way of thinking, not only was Bennett’s defense of Robinson outrageous, but his humiliations on Wall Street were well-deserved.

Bennett was of course vehement in his denial of such accusations, stating (somewhat predictably) that the editors of the Sun, Transcript, and various other city papers were themselves in the pay of the aristocracy, and were attempting to frame him along with the unlucky Robinson. Just a few days after the murder, for example, Bennett responded to a Transcript article accusing him of providing “easy access to petit bribery” (Transcript 4-14-1836) by stating that the real question was whether “the owner and editor of the Transcript, has been one of those regular gentlemen at Thomas Street Hotel”—and who, by implication, was involved in a payoff of Townsend and the police (NYH 4-15-1836). Similarly, in June Bennett suggested that the Sun’s Benjamin Day had been paid $450 to “prop up and sustain the character of Rosina Townsend,” and that he had also received sexual favors from Townsend herself (NYH 6-23-1836). Again, the public disputes between the city’s tabloid editors were caught up in the metaphorics of bribery and prostitution; along with issues of class, masculinity, and publicity, the debate over Jewett’s murder had very much to do with issues of economic autonomy and personal integrity.

The positions being assumed by the various tabloids are also telling for the way they reflect the manner in which conflicts between men in the city often had as their site of struggle the city’s brothels. As several historians of antebellum New York have shown, the first four decades of the century were marked by so-called brothel riots, most of which can be seen as struggles between contending classes of men.18 The majority of the men involved in these riots were of the laboring classes, and most of the houses they attacked were high-priced brothels with exclusive clients. In the 1830s alone, more than forty such incidents were recorded in New York City. The
year of Jewett’s murder was especially violent, largely because of the activity of local gang leaders John Chichester and Thomas Hyer. Over the course of the year, Chichester organized attacks on at least three brothel houses, during which several women were beaten and threatened with murder.¹⁹ Hyer—who would later become an influential local politician—led at least four attacks on brothels from 1836 to 1838. In one such incident, a raid on a brothel run by Ellen Holly, the physical threats were realized, as one of the women working in the house was gang-raped.

According to Timothy Gilfoyle, such attacks were often politically motivated and involved gangs hired by local ward politicians to enforce local variations on Jacksonian politics. These were probably not classical republican journeymen, but they may well have been among the group who read or were influenced by the hard money, anti-Whig narratives frequently offered in working-class organs such as Working Man’s Advocate (which featured stock characters such as the villainous speculator “Simon Squeezem” and the carpenter “Peter Plane”).²⁰ Frustrated by the access to high-priced prostitutes which men of the upper classes enjoyed, “gangsters” such as Chichester and Hyer were performing a sort of symbolic violence upon the women themselves. As spaces in which sex was bought and sold, such brothels acted as sites wherein privileges of class could be manifested symbolically, by virtue of an individual’s buying power. Brothels such as the City Hotel were not only expensive; they were also private, frequently operating on an appointment-only basis and allowing patrons to stay the entire night with a single prostitute. Such brothels thus provided patrons with the illusion of intimacy and romance—a privilege not available to those unable to pay for it. Access to such houses therefore translated into issues of both class and masculinity, and the ability to frequent them implied a removal from often degrading concerns of bodily labor. To assault the brothels and the women who worked in them was thus a form of class struggle in which bodily violation of a brothel’s inmates constituted a symbolic violation of the men wishing themselves free of such threats. As with the public confrontations between Webb and Bennett, distinctions of gender and class were being fashioned reciprocally, and considerable emphasis was being put on the symbolic power of violent action. Again, the various forms of “masculinity” available to men in the city were often contingent on registers of class in which the distinction between bodily integrity and bodily violation played a crucial role.

But the city’s gangs were not the only ones resorting to such forms of violence. Several times in the months prior to Robinson’s trial the city’s clerks manifested their support for Robinson with violent assaults on female prostitutes and other women. In April, for example, a meeting at the New York
Moral Reform Society called to discuss the lessons of the Jewett murder was broken up by a group of young men, possibly clerks, who jeered and threw stones, causing the women in attendance to flee (NYH 4-19-1836). Similarly, in the days leading up to the trial, large crowds of clerks began to gather outside the courtroom, causing near-riots on several occasions. The most violent gathering occurred on May 24 following Robinson’s arraignment, when a large gang of Robinson supporters confronted a group of prostitutes as they were leaving the courthouse. As described in a lengthy passage in the Sun,

A number of females, some of whom attended as witnesses, on leaving the Hall, were mobbed by a collection of several hundred vagabonds of all sizes and ages—amongst whom the long lank figure of the notorious Bennett was most conspicuous—who surrounded the women and almost prevented them entirely from reaching the outside of the Park, and which was finally effected by them with great difficulty, if not danger to their persons. . . . The mob, from the Hall steps to the Park gate, kept up a deafening shout of yells and epithets of the most vulgar kind. From the former most unwise and suicidal course which some of the reckless associates of Robinson have practiced in relation to these women . . . for the purpose of frightening them from appearing to testify on the trial of their companion, there can be no doubt that the mobbing of them yesterday was got up by the same clan of reprobates for the same purpose—particularly as their purchased and super-serviceable tool, before mentioned, appeared amongst the foremost of the gang of ruffians, and encouraged them by his presence and approbatory grins. (NYS 5-25-1836)

Led by the seemingly ubiquitous (and “super-serviceable”) Bennett, the clerks assaulting Jewett’s associates were in fact waging a form of class struggle with the city’s Whig-based aristocracy. For Bennett, the attack translated into a form of continued competition with the likes of the Courier’s Webb. Already the victim of several public humiliations out on Wall Street, Bennett was able here to use Jewett’s cohorts as the vehicle through which he might receive an at least imagined form of healing for his abused sense of bodily integrity and masculinity.

At the trial itself, which was presided over by Justice Ogden Edwards, a leading Whig, the clerks were especially demonstrative.21 Attending the trial in large numbers, they overflowed the courtroom, hissing and jeering during the testimony of Rosina Townsend and other prostitutes, and cheering wildly for defense witnesses. According to former mayor and staunch Whig Philip Hone, the atmosphere was overwhelmingly—and disturbingly—pro-
Robinson: “I perceived in court a strong predilection in favor of the prisoner. He is young, good looking, and supported by influential friends. . . . There are good reasons for public sympathy, but there are others, less benevolent. There appears to be a fellow-feeling in the audience; I was surrounded by young men, about his age, apparently clerks like him, who appeared to be thoroughly initiated into the arcana of such houses as Mrs. R. Townsend’s. They knew the wretched women inmates as they were brought up to testify, and joked with each other in a manner illly comporting with the solemnity of the situation” (DPH 210–11). Again, the clerks were engaging in a form of class warfare by appropriating public space at the expense of prostitutes such as Townsend. And in this instance the clerks found themselves on the winning side of a class struggle. Flanked by a team of expensive attorneys and by his employer, Joseph Hoxie, Robinson was able to manifest sufficient connections to property and class to distance himself from the many accusations and alleged evidence against him. Indeed, despite the imposing nature of the case compiled against Robinson, his fortunes began to change when a grocer named Robert Furlong appeared as a surprise witness for the defense. Testifying that Robinson had been in his store smoking cigars from 9:30 to approximately 10:15—exactly the time witnesses claimed he had visited the City Hotel—Furlong provided the clerk with a much-needed alibi.

Furlong’s testimony was crucial. As the jury prepared to leave the courtroom for deliberation following three days of testimony, Justice Edwards instructed them to discount the evidence provided by Rosina Townsend and the other prostitutes from the City Hotel, explaining that “When persons are brought forward who lead such profligate lives their testimony is not to be credited unless corroborated by testimony drawn from more credible sources” (CE 6-7-1836). Without any “credible” witnesses to place Robinson at the scene of the murder, the jury thus returned a verdict of “not guilty.” According to the Herald, the reaction was overwhelming: “The cheerings and huzzas were tremendous—in vain the court assayed to stop them” (NYH 6-9-1836).

Nor was Robinson the only victor in the affair: by the time of Robinson’s acquittal, the Herald’s circulation had quadrupled from 4,000 to 16,000, a figure that did not fall off with the end of the trial. By August of 1836 the Herald was able to double its price and join the ranks of the Courier; a year after the murder and two years after founding the paper, Bennett claimed his own worth at near $100,000, by which time the Herald was without question the leading newspaper in the city. Apparently, despite the many challenges to him on the levels of class, self-possession, and masculinity, Bennett had managed to negotiate his way through the Robinson-Jewett case with extremely advantageous results.
But if Bennett achieved through Jewett’s murder a form of class triumph, the question remains as to how he negotiated his relationship with Jewett herself, especially with respect to class and gender. As the accounts above make clear, the case was caught up in a dynamic of often fierce forms of violence, both representational and actual. I thus want to understand the abuse to which Bennett was subjected as something he deployed not only upon the likes of Rosina Townsend but also upon Jewett herself—who, again, seems to have figured powerfully in Bennett’s desire for economic advancement. This, it seems to me, is what lay behind Bennett’s obsession with Jewett and the City Hotel in the months following the murder. Bennett was seeking a form of social affirmation and self-possession that—at least symbolically—would secure him against the sort of class and gender violence he was experiencing on the city’s streets. “Access” to a high-priced prostitute such as Helen Jewett meant access to the spheres of class, reputation, and masculinity to which Bennett aspired, even as he was critiquing these spheres in his many denunciations of the Bank and its Whig supporters. The trouble, however, was that Jewett proved extremely resistant to such efforts.

In particular I want to focus on the trips to Jewett’s room that Bennett describes in the Herald in the days following her murder. What Bennett encountered there was a scene that frustrated his efforts to classify her. As Bennett reported with seeming surprise on April 11 and April 12, Jewett’s possessions included not only expensive clothing and jewelry—outer manifestations of class that could be put on and taken off—but also objects reflecting her internalization of class status. According to Bennett in an entry titled “A Visit to the Scene,” Jewett’s room was stocked with a range of books, periodicals, and letters, as well as several sketches and paintings—all signs that she had apparently been able to negotiate the boundaries of class and of culture, and perhaps even manipulate them. In describing the letters, Bennett seems particularly struck not only by Jewett’s ability to provide “apt quotations from the Italian, French, and English poets,” and to “satiriz[e] playfully the little incidents of her life,” but also by the “uncommonly beautiful” nature of her handwriting (NYH 4-13-1836). Among the books, Bennett lists Byron’s Don Juan (“in all the elegance of binding that London could afford” [NYH 4-11-1836]), Lady Blessington’s Flowers of Loveliness (1836), and an unnamed novel by Sir Walter Scott; of the periodicals, he lists the Knickerbocker, the New York Mirror, and the Ladies Companion. As Bennett put it, “What an air of elegance and intellectual refinement, without the slightest approach to principles and morals, dispersed itself throughout the
apartment” (*NYH* 4-11-1836). Blessington’s work—which Bennett claims, perhaps dubiously, to have found beneath the sheets of Jewett’s bed —may have had the greatest resonance. As Bennett explained, Blessington, “one of the most unprincipled —yet most enchanting women in the world!” had risen from poor beginnings as a promiscuous vintner’s daughter serving drinks in Ireland to the status of Lady Blessington by concealing her background and eventually marrying a beguiled Lord Blessington; later, she was widely viewed as scandalous for her not-so-covert affair with her stepson, the heir to the recently (and mysteriously) deceased Lord Blessington (*NYH* 4-11-1836). Sitting on Jewett’s bed, in other words, was a narrative whose contents echoed Jewett’s own life of transgression at the levels of class and sex.

What all of this suggests is that Jewett, who by virtue of her cultural capital seemed far more “self-possessed” than a female prostitute ought to have been, posed a particular threat to Bennett. In an environment already heavily coded by the symbolics of class distinction, gender hierarchy, and sex, Jewett might be said here to possess the “phallus” in ways that are anxiety-producing to one such as Bennett, whose own relation to symbolic power never seems certain. As he put it two days after the murder, in a passage that performs male anxieties in particularly overt ways, “From those who have known her, we have been informed that she was a fascinating woman in conversation, full of intellect and refinement, but at the same time possessed of a very devil, and a species of mortal antipathy to the male race. Her great passion was to seduce young men, and particularly those who most resisted her charms. She seems to have declared war against the sex. ‘Oh,’ she would say, ‘how I despise you all—you are a heartless, unprincipled set. You have ruined me—I’ll ruin you—I delight in your ruin’” (*NYH* 4-12-1836). As with so many of his pieces in the *Herald*, Bennett’s sensationalism is so overstated that it’s difficult to know how seriously to take him. Nevertheless, the passage is telling, especially since Bennett offers such a clear link between “intellect and refinement,” female seduction, and a perceived threat to “the male race.” This linkage also characterizes a letter to the *Herald* signed with the alias “Julius”—which, as the above charge of forgery by the *Sun* suggests, may well have been written by Bennett himself. Titled “FIRST STEP,” the letter is an account of Jewett, some four years before her murder, “playing dominoes with a pretty boy, apparently about fourteen.” When Julius, who “knew Ellen well,” asked what she was doing, Jewett merely “smiled,” the suggestion being that she took open pleasure in seducing “pretty” young boys (*NYH* 6-17-1836). The irony here is that the boy in the scene is Richard P. Robinson; in a cruel if predictable twist, Jewett’s “antipathy to the male
race” turns out to be her undoing, and Robinson becomes Jewett’s victim, rather than the other way around.23

But again, this is the sensational version of Helen Jewett emerging from the unstable fiscal environment of the mid-1830s—an environment in which Bennett was an important player. Seeking very aggressively to back Jackson’s bullionist campaign against the U.S. Bank and the Whig party more generally, Bennett seems to have seen in Jewett the very corruption and capriciousness that he saw in the credit economy itself. Whether decked out in her green dress and expensive jewelry or luxuriating within the raffled world of the City Hotel brothel, Jewett represented a negative zone of fantasy that, supposedly backed by Whig forces, transformed the gold standard of affect (love and romance) into commodities available to anyone with the proper notes in his pocket. Hence Bennett’s overt reference in 1837 to Jewett as a figure for “public credit—paper money” who has “los[t] . . . all decency, and all virtue.” But Bennett’s somewhat playful suggestion (offered later in the same 1837 editorial) that the paper economy be bludgeoned to death in the same way that Jewett was murdered with Robinson’s hatchet suggests that Jewett was fairly anxious-making for the embattled Bennett. Indeed, Bennett’s claim that Jewett’s “great passion was to seduce young men” so as to “delight in [their] ruin” might be understood as a commentary on both Jewett and the paper economy more generally: in each case, the truly fearsome agent is desire itself, especially as it is being created in the unstable fiscal world of 1830s New York. Embodied here in the figure of Jewett, that desire is both titillating and anxious-making for one such as Bennett—and, it seems, for many of his readers as well.

Such anxiety is the reason I find Bennett’s various depictions of Jewett’s corpse so telling. The most provocative such example is the one I quote from briefly earlier, in which Bennett describes Jewett as he found her at the City Hotel. Here is an extended version of this quote:

What a sight burst upon me! . . . On the carpet I saw a piece of linen covering something as if carelessly flung over it. “Here,” said the Police Officer. “Here is the poor creature.” He half uncovered the ghastly corpse. I could scarcely look at it for a second or two . . . It was the most remarkable sight I ever beheld. I never have and never expect to see such another. “My God!” I exclaimed. “How like a statue! I can scarcely conceive that form to be a corpse.” Not a vein was to be seen. The body looked as white, as full, as polished as the purest Parisian marble. . . . The countenance was calm and passionless. Not the slightest appearance of emotion was there. One arm lay over her bosom—the other was inverted and hanging over her head. The
left side down to the waist, where the fire had touched, was bronzed like an antique statue. For a few moments I was lost in admiration of this extraordinary sight—a beautiful female corpse—that surpassed the finest statue in antiquity. (NYH 4-11-36)24

In addition to providing wonderful copy for his newspaper, the passage offers a telling look at the pleasure Bennett takes in viewing Jewett’s dead body. “Beautiful” and “extraordinary,” Jewett seems to offer Bennett an unexpectedly erotic experience—one that, as he himself says, he isn’t likely to get again.

What also seems apparent is that Bennett wants his description to display a certain sense of security. This is why, as the police officer pulls the linen away, Jewett is “slowly” transformed from monstrous Other (a “ghastly corpse”) into aesthetic object (“as polished as the purest Parisian marble”). Jewett not only becomes more pleasurable to view the more we see of her, she also becomes safer. For what Bennett seems to have been implying is that, as a high-priced female prostitute, Jewett’s task was above all to reassure her patron of his dominance and masculinity, most particularly by being fully accessible and unthreatening. More abstractly, she was to reassure her patron that she had nothing to hide—that beneath her clothing and accessories (her green dress, for example), there was nothing that carried the potential for its own signification. Her job, in other words, was to prove that she lacked the cultural power of the phallus at the same time that she reassured men such as Robinson and Bennett that they were indeed secure in their own possession of it. Yet as the many books, periodicals, and letters Bennet encountered in her room imply, Jewett seems—surely—to be hiding something. Much like Poe’s deathly Ligea, whose unmatched intellectual capacity is both terrifying and pleasing to Poe’s narrator, Jewett seems to possess a hidden cultural capital that signifies for Bennett in terms of both class and sexuality. Another way to put this is to say that Jewett seems to be here a figure of “theft” much like that which we see in a character such as the sensational Jew. But this comparison works only in terms of the Shylock figure. For unlike the Jessica character of antebellum sensationalism, Jewett seems resistant to the compensatory strategies we so often see in this material. Hence Bennett’s decision to render Jewett in terms of a safely eroticized aesthetic: threatened, apparently, by the power of a woman such as Jewett, Bennett portrays her aesthetically in order to achieve a safer, more reassuring form of erotic excitement—one that translates into not-so-subtle forms of representational violence.25 In this sense one sees that the problem isn’t Jewett’s relation to the phallus so much as it is Bennett’s panic about his own “lack” thereof.
Nor is this dynamic far removed from that of the lithographs produced by Alfred M. Hoffy, who accompanied Bennett to Jewett’s room the morning of the murder. (The lithographs were offered for sale on the city’s streets on April 16.) One of the images, entitled *The “Innocent Boy”* (figure 16), recreates the moments following Jewett’s murder, including a capped Robinson fleeing, clutching a hatchet and his cloak about to slip from his shoulders. More clearly even than Bennett’s description, *The “Innocent Boy”* manifests—if in comically exaggerated fashion—the castration anxiety associated with Jewett and her possessions. With Jewett’s books and paintings spread threateningly about the room (the middle painting is a recognizable portrait of Byron) and her writing implements ready at her bedside (with pen, paper, and inkwell suggestive of cultural—and thus in this case sexual—empowerment), the hatchet poised over Robinson’s crotch literalizes the castration threat Jewett poses. From this perspective, Robinson is fleeing not only the scene of his crime, but, via Hoffy and Bennett, the scene of masculine disempowerment and panic as well.

But a second lithograph, titled *Ellen Jewett* (figure 17), gives Jewett’s threat its fullest articulation. In contrast to *The “Innocent Boy,”* there is in this second image only Jewett and the bed on view. All items of cultural currency have been removed, and all attention is focused on Jewett as she lies lifeless on the bed. Here we see the same scene of deathly erotics offered by Bennett in his depiction of her corpse. Indeed, with her left arm a marbleized white—Hoffy’s version of the wounds inflicted by the fire—Jewett is very much the aestheticized and pleasingly erotic “antique statue” of Bennett’s description. This is apparent in practically every detail of the picture: with Jewett’s blankets and clothing eaten away by the now extinguished flames, her breasts are partially exposed, her hair is let down around her shoulders, and the curve of her hip is given full accent. Even more than in Bennett’s written description, the viewer is invited to indulge in the pleasure not only of gazing at Jewett’s body but also of gaining an imaginary access to it. For what the image seeks to prove is that—with books, pictures, and other items of cultural currency now removed—there is nothing but Jewett’s body to be found beneath her blankets. There is only the nude and accessible body of a high-priced female prostitute, one that men such as Bennett might represent as a way of vying for self-possession and advantage in the competitive world of New York’s sensational public sphere.

Bennett’s misogyny is thus complex indeed. For what it reflects is the difficulty men such as Bennett were having negotiating their own social positions during this period. Struggling for economic advancement, Bennett seemed to experience a form of gender “panic” inextricable from insecurities of class and culture as they were evolving in the climate of 1830s fiscal
Figure 16 The “Innocent Boy”. 1836 by Alfred M. Hoffy. Printed and published by H. R. Robinson. Reproduced with permission of the New York Historical Society.
Figure 17  Ellen Jewett. 1836 by Alfred M. Hoffy. Printed and published by H. R. Robinson. Lithograph, hand-colored; image and text 27 x 35 cm. Reproduced with permission of the American Antiquarian Society.
anxiety. Thus while reflecting powerfully the desire to categorize Jewett and provide readers (and perhaps himself) with a compensatory narrative of male dominance, the various depictions Bennett provides of her murdered corpse—from the imagined removal of her from her grave to the murder scene narratives and their accompanying lithograph images—reflect also the considerable anxiety motivating that desire. What had to be proved by representing Jewett as disinterred or murdered was that the ghostly Jewett was actually “there,” so that the category of the female prostitute might offer a reliable referent in the vexed effort to experience oneself publicly as “self-possessed.” Already the victim of a particularly gendered and public form of class violence and humiliation, Bennett was seeking to ensure he did not continue to suffer that fate. Jewett, however, offered him little assurance on this score. Instead, what Bennett saw in the City Hotel was a figure marked in unsettling ways by a culture in which economic competition between men, often violent, could not be evaded—even in the realm of a high-priced prostitute such as Helen Jewett.

Coda:
CAPITALISM AND THE FEMALE CORPSE IN THE BLITHEDALE ROMANCE

The form of sensational masculinity staged by Bennett in the pages of the Herald receives a powerful echo in Hawthorne’s The Blithedale Romance. Indeed, while the novel narrates an attempted return to a life of labor and use value—it is of course famously based on George Ripley’s Brook Farm effort to construct a utopian socialism, an effort in which Hawthorne participated for a short time—the story might in fact be read as an extended allegory of the speculative, paper money masculinity spawned by the 1837 Panic. Various critics have cited Blithedale as a text that operates according to a consumerist logic, but we might also consider it in relation to the period’s debates over political economy and the U.S. Bank. Indeed, Hawthorne’s 1852 narrative actually recounts events that are twelve years in the past, which places the novel’s events at about 1840, a postpanic moment of intense economic depression and uncertainty, and the period just following the Helen Jewett case. And as with Bennett’s tabloid sensationalism, Blithedale stages a market-based masculinity in terms of an obsession with very public women (Zenobia and Priscilla) who act as sites of possible “investment” (both financial and psychic) for the various men of the novel. “It was purely speculative,” Coverdale says of his attraction to Zenobia, “for I should not, under any circumstances, have fallen in love with Zenobia” (48).
The distinction Coverdale makes here is crucial for the economies of both money and gender circulating within this narrative. Though offering “love” as a kind of hard currency—which suggests, somewhat deceptively, that it is the novel’s gold standard of emotional value—Coverdale nevertheless makes it clear that he is antibullionist in orientation, preferring instead the anxious pleasures of playing the market.

Nor is this surprising, for Zenobia is to some extent the very figure of market desire. The eldest daughter of Fauntleroy—once “a man of wealth” and “prodigal expenditure” who ends up losing his fortune so that he can only stand by and watch as “the wreck of his estate was divided among his creditors” (182–83)—Zenobia acts as a figure through whom various dreams of economic prosperity can be played out. As her father, now named Moodie, puts it, “Let the world admire her, and be dazzled by her, the brilliant child of my prosperity! It is Fauntleroy that still shines through her!” (192). Zenobia, that is to say, does an important sort of fantasy work for the various men who take an interest in her. Numerous critics have investigated Coverdale’s penchant for voyeurism (what Zenobia refers to as “eye-shot” [47]), a neurosis that allows him to control his anxieties—especially those related to castration—by means of an object-controlling gaze. Put simply, Coverdale objectifies the people he views and places them within a field of fantasy that allows him the pleasures of visual access without having to make physical contact with them. But the voyeurism Coverdale engages in is also analogous to economic speculation precisely in that, while providing him with a detached (and largely dematerialized) relationship to the present world of real bodily encounter, it also allows him a fantasy about future rewards.

And to be sure, Coverdale is not the only male in the novel who operates according to a logic that conflates speculation and femininity. Indeed, this link is expressed even more clearly in Coverdale’s accusation to Hollingsworth that his romance with Zenobia is driven solely by his interest in her inheritance. According to Coverdale, Hollingsworth’s plan is to use this money to buy up the Blithedale land as the site for his proposed prison. “But whence can you, having no means of your own, derive the enormous capital which is essential to this experiment?” Coverdale asks pointedly. “State-street, I imagine, would not draw its purse-strings very liberally, in aid of such a speculation” (132). Like Coverdale, Hollingsworth is banking on Zenobia in ways that suggest he is uninterested in the gold standard of love; instead, Zenobia is quite literally a source of investment for him.

And certainly this logic pertains to Westervelt, who extends these relations even further. For Westervelt is in many ways the embodiment of the false nature of the credit economy, something Coverdale discovers after
encountering Westervelt lurking in the woods near Blithedale one day. As Coverdale explains with clear distaste, “In the excess of his delight, he opened his mouth wide, and disclosed a gold band around the upper part of his teeth; thereby making it apparent that every one of his brilliant grinders and incisors was a sham. This discovery affected me very oddly. I felt as if the whole man were a moral and physical humbug; his wonderful beauty of face, for aught I knew, might be removable like a mask” (95). Like the depiction of so many paper money men in antebellum sensationalism (Colonel Fitz-Cowles in *The Quaker City*, for example), Westervelt is all exterior and no substance. Or—to pick up on Coverdale’s reference to Westervelt as a “humbug”—the professor is like the spurious “shinplaster” banknotes circulating in the wake of the 1837 suspension of specie by New York banks. The general cynicism about these notes is captured in an 1837 lithograph satire of the shinplaster notes titled *Fifty Cents. Shin Plaster* (figure 18), in which we see a desperate Andrew Jackson riding a pig over a cliff as he chases after a “gold humbug.” As Mihm points out in a short reading of this lithograph, the banknote itself is dated the day the banks suspended specie payments, and, rather than a pledge to redeem the note in gold or silver, it offers a promise to pay “in counterfeit caricatures” (*Counterfeiters* 152). The implied insubstantiality of the lithography note extends to Westervelt, who is a “sham” echo of the often untrustworthy paper economy.

Even the products that Westervelt peddles—the Veiled Lady and mesmerism—resonate with the language of the paper economy. This is especially evident in the scene late in the novel in which Westervelt introduces the Veiled Lady at a “village-hall” performance that Coverdale attends. As Westervelt explains, “That silvery veil is, in one sense, an enchantment, having been dipt, as it were, and essentially imbued, through the potency of my art, with the fluid medium of spirits. Slight and ethereal as it seems, the limitations of time and space have no existence within its folds. . . . She beholds the Absolute!” (*Blithedale* 201). The veil provides the very properties of capital itself: though seemingly ethereal and without real substance, it is able, like the new economy, to perform the seemingly magical feat of accessing what are apparently incredibly distant sites and populations in ways previously unimaginable. In *Worlds Apart* (1986), Jean-Christophe Agnew writes that by the mid-eighteenth century, “The attributes of materiality, reality, and agency ordinarily assigned to the sphere of social relations (or to God) were implicitly reassigned to the sphere of commodity relations, as supply and demand took on a life of their own”; in this sense, he argues, markets became “placeless” in that they were transformed from temporally and spatially specific sites to abstract processes no longer available or accessible to lived experience (56; 202). Understood in this way, the
Figure 18  *Fifty Cents. Shin Plaster*. 1837 printed and published by H. R. Robinson. Lithograph on wove paper; 26.1 x 44.6 cm. Reproduced with permission of the American Antiquarian Society.
act of “behold[ing] the Absolute” implies an almost unthinkable access to the “placeless” space of the free market itself, as it circulates unbounded in mid-century America and beyond. The fact that the veil requires the aid of Westervelt’s “art” to achieve such an astonishing transcendence merely highlights Westervelt’s role as a figure for speculation and paper money men in antebellum America.

But the figure of the Veiled Lady also reminds us that it is the female body that stands in for the abstract and mysterious nature of the credit economy. Much like Helen Jewett, the Veiled Lady (Priscilla) is a figure of public access, one through whom various fantasies and desires can be played out. This is something we see played out most fully in Zenobia’s “Legend” about the Veiled Lady, a story-within-a-story that acts as the novel’s central exploration of the links between gender and the period’s political economy. Told by Zenobia to a group of listeners at Blithedale, the story revolves around a young man named Theodore. After hearing the “wild stories that were in vogue” (108) among young men about the Veiled Lady (stories we might even read as metaphors for rumors about valuable speculative schemes), Theodore makes what is apparently the crucial mistake of refusing to act on “trust.” Sounding very much like a wary bullionist, he claims boldly that “Nobody, unless his brain be as full of bubbles as this wine, can seriously thinking of crediting that ridiculous rumor” (109). In order to debunk the rumor as a humbug, Theodore proceeds to sneak into the Veiled Lady’s dressing room. As with so much else in the novel, the encounter resonates with the period’s intersecting languages of political economy and gender. Certainly the Veiled Lady’s activity echoes the weightless nature of the paper economy: “so impalpable, so ethereal, so without substance,” we are told, she “floated, and flitted, and hovered about the room;—no sound of a footstep, no perceptible motion of a limb;—it was as if a wandering breeze wafted her before it, at its own wild and gentle pleasure” (111–12). But as a variety of critics have pointed out, the Veiled Lady also acts here as an ideal of Victorian womanhood, in particular as this womanhood conjoins an incorporeal and nonthreatening version of femininity that promises nevertheless (or as a result) a certain amount of erotic appeal. Even off-stage Priscilla is a “ghost-child” with “a lack of human substance in her” (87; 185), but onstage as the Veiled Lady, floating about in a strange sort of bondage to Westervelt, she provides for the (male) viewer a safely eroticized performance of disembodiment. Brown puts it thus: “Both an anonymous apparition and a public performer, she elicits and eludes sexual and epistemological discovery” (Domestic 122). Thus in each case—fiscal and feminine—Priscilla offers an idealized form of insubstantiality, one that promises transcendence over the material constraints of the body, whether laboring or sexual.
But again, Theodore's skepticism about such magical properties—and about the Veiled Lady's promise that in “pledging himself” to her he will ensure that they experience “all the felicity of earth and of the future world” (113)—leads him to insist on peeking beneath the veil before committing to her. Brown argues that Theodore's insistence on peeking before committing aligns him with a consumerist desire: “Taking her on faith . . . would mean aligning desire to a purpose, curiosity to investment” (119). I would argue something similar: that Theodore's skepticism is actually more analogous to that of an investor wishing to read up on the financial reports of a company before purchasing its stock—something a character such as Charles Dickens's Martin Chuzzlewit would have been wise to do, for example, before buying into a phony land scheme in America and becoming what Dickens refers to sarcastically as “a landed proprietor in the thriving city of Eden” (Chuzzlewit 423). Yet this skepticism is also tinged with a certain amount of anxiety, something reflected in Theodore's concerns about kissing the Veiled Lady through her veil. “A delightful idea, truly, that he should salute the lips of a dead girl, or the jaws of a skeleton, or the grinning cavity of a monster's mouth!” (113) we are told in words that capture Theodore's unspoken thoughts. Picking up on the various rumors circulating that the veil conceals “the face of a corpse,” “the head of a skeleton,” or “a monstrous visage, with snaky locks, like Medusa's” (110), Theodore's fears suggest a very real terror of both women and the paper economy—one felt not only by him but also by the class of “young gentlemen” of whom he is a representative (108). And as the reference to Medusa and her “snaky locks” makes clear, his fears are coded by castration anxiety. As Freud puts it in a well-known passage, “To decapitate = to castrate. The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. . . . The hair upon the Medusa's head is frequently represented in works of art in the form of snakes, and these once again are derived from the castration complex” (“Medusa” 273–74). The “sight” that causes Theodore such anxiety (and which he conceals by means of the veil-as-fetish) is thus the sight of his own possible “lack.” And this lack is made doubly terrifying in that it seems to carry with it a particularly ferocious form of female potency—one that, as with Helen Jewett in her brothel room at the City Hotel, threatens to disrupt the fantasy of male viewers such as Theodore and James Gordon Bennett. Here, in fact, it may be that this castration anxiety is what works to absorb or displace a broader complex of concerns about the period's political economy—which, again, is the very force that has sent the novel's various characters to Blithedale in the first place.

Theodore is both right and wrong about what lurks beneath the veil. For what he sees is not “the face of a corpse,” nor of Medusa; rather, he
glimpses what we might think of as the face of desire itself. “[J]ust one momentary glimpse,” we are told, “and then the apparition vanished, and the silvery veil fluttered slowly down, and lay upon the floor . . . His retribution was, to pine, forever and ever, for another sight of that dim, mournful face . . . to desire, and waste life in a feverish quest, and never meet it more!” (114). On one level, then, Zenobia’s story—and, by extension, Hawthorne’s novel—offers here a sentimentalized morality play about romantic trust: the Veiled Lady (Priscilla) demands a pledge of true love in order to receive what Lori Merish describes as an “antidote to [her] bondage” to Westervelt (Sentimental 185). From this perspective, Theodore must suffer the pangs of unrequited love as the penalty for his lack of trust in her unknown identity. But we might also understand Theodore as having entered into the very logic of capital, the result being that, following his glimpse beneath the veil, he is himself thrust into a form of market bondage very similar to that worried over by reformers such as Timothy Shay Arthur and Henry Ward Beecher, whom I discuss in chapter 3. “The gratification of one desire only makes way for another still more exacting,” Arthur warns (Advice 31), words that do much to capture the hapless state into which Theodore has fallen. For what he finds is that he cannot stop his intense desire for the fleeting and quite ghostly residue of fulfillment that he has glimpsed in the image left behind by the Veiled Lady. We might thus say that, while Theodore does not find the terrible figure of a corpse beneath the veil, he does locate something equally horrifying: he finds that there is no hidden hand beneath the veil of the paper economy; rather, it is truly without substance. But, of course, fulfillment and substance are precisely what the speculative, credit economy cannot allow, any more than it can condone the kinds of restraints that a Jackson-style specie policy would impose. In this sense the absence that Theodore views beneath the veil is actually quite similar to the castrating image of Medusa: in each case Theodore faces an image of “lack” and longing that signals his own impotence as a young man in antebellum America.

Nor, perhaps, is this surprising, for the legend of Theodore is after all Zenobia’s story. Coverdale spends a considerable amount of time in this novel critiquing Zenobia’s skill as a writer, but even he concedes that she has real talent as a public speaker (120). The legend she tells at Blithedale reflects this talent, for what she manages is a critique of the speculative masculinity by which she is surrounded, both in town and at Blithedale. But what she also reveals is that the pleasures of speculation embraced by men such as Coverdale, Hollingsworth, and Westervelt are indeed anxious: as Coverdale puts it in reference to that crucial index of Zenobia’s market value, her virginity, “The riddle made me so nervous, however, in my sensi-
tive condition of mind and body, that I most ungratefully began to wish that she would let me alone” (48). The “nervous” condition Coverdale describes is related to that which we have seen in characters such as Ichabod Crane, the Gentile men of the Shylock and Jessica narratives, and so on: it is the nervousness of paper money manhood. And here, as with these other texts, the stakes are apparently high, something reflected in the novel’s climactic scene when Coverdale encounters the horrific sight of Zenobia’s corpse after she is dredged up from the river near Eliot’s Pulpit. “She was the marble image of a death-agony,” Coverdale says. “Ah, that rigidity! It is impossible to bear the terror of it!” (235). Deploying language strikingly similar to Bennett’s description of Jewett’s corpse (“as polished as the purest Parisian marble,” Jewett’s dead body is alternately “ghastly” and “beautiful”), Coverdale’s description suggests that his speculative efforts have failed, giving way to a form of “terror” that seems to conflate gender panic and financial panic.

What is it that Coverdale encounters in the horrific sight of Zenobia’s corpse? Russ Castronovo argues compellingly that Zenobia “practices radical democracy,” by which he means that she, much like the farmer-laborer Silas Foster, insists on a labor-based materiality that runs counter to the market-driven and largely speculative desires of men such as Coverdale and Hollingsworth (Necro-Citizenship 144). We need to add that Zenobia’s corpse also undermines the speculative logic of the paper economy itself, precisely in the sense that it insists on its very solidity and materiality. Thus, in death, Zenobia and Helen Jewett do a similar form of work for men such as Coverdale and James Gordon Bennett. For in each case what we see is a thwarted form of male desire, and thus an anxious form of professional manhood. And, at least in Coverdale’s case, it is a haunted form of manhood. “Tell him he has murdered me!” Zenobia says to Coverdale in bitter reference to Hollingsworth. “Tell him that I’ll haunt him!” (226). Zenobia’s words might also apply to Coverdale, who informs us that the image of Zenobia’s corpse has remained with him “for more than twelve long years,” so forcefully in fact that he is able even in the narrative present to “reproduce it as freshly as if it were still before my eyes” (235). Like Bennett, Coverdale thus represents the difficulties and anxieties faced by the paper money man who, seeking compensation via the figure of the female body, finds himself faced with the very terrors of capital he has sought to repress and deny.