Theater Figures

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Published by The Ohio State University Press


Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/28456.
ERE MARY ELIZABETH Braddon the only British novelist of the nine-
ten century to rewrite and anglicize Madame Bovary. The Doctor’s Wife would still be remarkable for the way it restages Flaubert’s “divine drama” as authorial melodrama. But Braddon was not alone in rewriting Bovary or in rewriting it as a more explicitly theatrical novel. On the matter of explicitness—theatrical and otherwise—Braddon would need to cede the stage to George Moore, the Irish novelist and playwright who famously took up the cause of French realism with his “naturalist” novel, A Mummer’s Wife, and in numerous essays and pamphlets. A Mummer’s Wife, which owes as much to Zola as to Flaubert, is a partial retelling of the Bovary story, replete with voracious female reading and misguided romanticism, adultery, and the spectacle of its main character’s horrible death. However, Moore’s main character, Kate Ede, is not a petit bourgeois doctor’s wife, but the wife of an actor. She is a professional actress herself, which allows Moore a different purchase on the questions of literary distinction that Madame Bovary and The Doctor’s Wife so dissimilarly raise. With his focus on the muck of theatrical life, Moore is able, somewhat perversely, to rearticulate a very Flaubertian idea of the literary high ground.

Written in 1885, at the height of the debate surrounding lending-library censorship (or “the young-girl standard,” as it was called), A Mummer’s Wife recasts Madame Bovary as a censor-baiting exercise in theatricalized abjection,
which is to say that it remains faithful to the “morbid” flavor of the original. Whereas Braddon rewrote *Bovary* with the goal of defending middle-class reading (and writing) practices, elevating the popular novel, and raising her own cultural stock, Moore rewrote both Flaubert’s novel and Braddon’s to stake out a cultural position high above the middle-class mainstream. This vantage point—the authorial remove of disinterested formalism—would transcend the materiality of middle-class consumption by positioning itself against the mass market it thematized as a matter of vulgar, vested interests. Like Flaubert before him, Moore constructed singular taste against crass appetite and elevated the man of distinction over the indistinct and feminized masses. What is fascinating about Moore’s construction of high culture is how it took part in a fin de siècle movement to appropriate the strategies of abjection that had previously elevated the bourgeoisie and to use those strategies to discredit bourgeois culture altogether. By the end of the nineteenth century, the appetitive figure that had so often enabled by negative example the construction of middle-class individuality and interiority came to represent the middle classes themselves: cerebral high culture reconfigured the middle-class body as the body of unregulated mass culture. The artistic vanguard of the fin de siècle toppled the decorous Victorian social body, and it did so by violating certain standards of bodily representation. By directly representing the abject, the grotesque, and the obscene, fin de siècle writers were able to supercede bourgeois values and aesthetics in two ways: formally (by offering a formalism so pure it could not be tainted by content) and thematically (delivering a mature content not intended for women and girls). High culture, in other words, incorporated the low to define itself against the middle. George Moore, a champion of high culture and an enemy of everything middling, was bent on taking the *haute* out of the *bourgeoisie*.

At its own insistence, *A Mummer’s Wife* needs to be read as a blow in the culture wars of the 1880s, when the future status, cultural role, and gender of literature—particularly the novel—were hotly contested. Moore’s target in this novel is not professional theater or acting, as many critics have claimed, but rather the romance novels that form the unhappy Kate Ede’s expectations and condition her behavior. In vilifying the sentimental novel—and particularly Kate’s favorite read, a thinly veiled *The Doctor’s Wife*—Moore stresses the similarities between the sentimental novel and the sentimental drama and distinguishes between the escapist of dramatic illusion and the realities of backstage theatrical life. It is important to note that Moore is spectacularly unconcerned with the novelistic distinctions that occupy Braddon in *The Doctor’s Wife* and that occupied critical attention during the “sensational ’60s.” For Moore, a “legitimate” and realistic triple-decker is as indistinguishable
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from a serialized sensation novel as it is from a sentimental penny romance. All of these forms are equally illegitimate in a novelistic field in which complexity is reduced to high realism (Naturalism) versus low popularism. *A Mummer’s Wife*, therefore, completely erases its predecessor’s attempt to construct an elevated popular novel, which for Moore is a grotesque contradiction in terms.

Moore’s 1885 *Bovary* therefore sets itself apart from both sentimental pulp fiction and popular drama, which it lumps together as the opiates of the middle classes. The figure of Kate Ede—wife, middle-class reader, actress, alcoholic, and prostitute—brings together in one wretched English body the issues of grotesque female consumption and reviled production that were at the heart of Flaubert’s original. By going outside of the literary sphere to the world of cheap theatrical productions, Moore is able to cement a cultural hierarchy that separates high artistic endeavor from the low and middling tastes of what he characterizes as the nursing hoards. Like *Madame Bovary*, Moore’s attempt at “digging a dagger into the heart of the sentimental school,” as he wrote to Zola of *A Mummer’s Wife*, requires a body: the abject female body—tied to working-class theater and middle-class fiction—against which Moore constructs the realm of “high art,” presided over not by the female reader or the feminized librarian, but by the male artistic genius (Mitchell, “A New Perspective,” 160). In his attempt to free the literary market and the literary artist from the chokehold of “triple-decker” morality, Moore uses the figure of theater to usher in a new fictional aesthetic and a new (or at least renewed) literary-cultural imperative.

**Making a/the Critical Scene**

Although particularly vociferous in his attacks, Moore was hardly alone in his stance against the monopoly of the lending libraries. His novels and essays from the 1880s joined a growing chorus of male voices against the effeminizing effects of popular and polite fiction. What is especially interesting to me about fin de siècle calls for a masculine literary art is not only how they echo the Romantic discourse about “vigor” and “manliness” that I addressed in chapter 2 in reference to Walter Scott, but also how they repeat key elements of the antisensation discourse that I examined in chapter 4. Indeed, late-nineteenth-century calls for a high literature that holds itself distinct from mass publishing and from female writers and readers can be seen, strangely enough, to grow directly out of both attacks and defenses of sensation fiction. Attacks on sensation fiction set up a rhetoric of diseased female consumption that tied appetitive female readers to mass production and to the working
classes. (It was in fact Mary Elizabeth Braddon herself who was charged with “making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing room” [Rae, 204].) This rhetoric contrasted diseased appetite to “taste,” and demanded a fiction that might both please and educate the palates of young female readers. Fin de siècle writers picked up on the connection between female consumption and mass tastelessness, but they pressed this connection into the service of a new version of the elevated cultural palate: not middle-class, but high taste. Whereas the “refined” palate had in the 1860s indicated a certain delicacy—a female delicacy that could not and should not bear the carrion taint of sensation—by the 1880s the refined palate was a male one that could handle its flavors strong. This language of strength was also a legacy of the sensation debates: sensation’s few critical supporters countered their brethren’s outcry against the moral iniquity of sensation by claiming a sphere for literature that did not take as its standard the polite morality and sheltered ignorance of the nation’s young women. George Augustus Sala, for example, published an 1867 article on “The Cant of Modern Criticism,” in which he defended Braddon (in whose journal, Belgravia, the essay appeared), challenged the keepers of the “domestic Index Expurgatorious,” and argued that “novels are written for grown people and not for babes and sucklings. . . . We men and women who live in the world, and have, many of us, lived pretty hard lives too, want novels about That which Is, and not about That which never Was and never Will be. We don’t want pap, or spoon-meat, or milk-and-water, or curds-and-whey, or Robb’s biscuits, or boiled whiting, or cold boiled veal without salt. We want meat; and this is a strong age, and we can digest it” (54). Never mind that sensation fiction was most often attacked for its preposterous romanticism: Sala claims that what “canting” critics find disagreeable is sensation’s focus on the darker aspects of reality—the “meat” of real life. Sala, furthermore, argues that it is the priggish critics who are the true hack writers, who “affect a lofty air when they are only writing so much spiteful drivel for a couple of pounds a week” (55).

The sensation debates of the 1860s called for two things: a proper and decorous literature that could be read by women without fear of unhealthy contagion, and a literature suitable for an adult (which came to mean male) audience. We can see both of these positions, apparently contradictory but in fact quite compatible, in the critical rhetoric of the 1870s. For example, “E. B.” writing in Argosy on “The Sensation Novel” in 1874 could bewail the “feminine influence that pervades” sensation fiction, connect women to the mass market (“the great bales of fiction which are constantly being manufactured owe their chief proportions and bulk to female talent and diligence”), and recommend that something be done to shield young female readers (138).
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Not surprisingly, the desire to defend women (from themselves, mainly) and the desire to defend male culture from effeminization turned out to be mutually supportive. Both positions landed women back in the home and both required new forms of literary distinctions. The 1874 *Temple Bar* review of sensation writer Rhoda Broughton’s work (“The Novels of Miss Broughton”) lamented that “our novelists strive to load the palate rather than to stimulate its tasting and discriminating power” (198) and blamed the novel for making England weak and insular (which is to say, feminine): “it is this quality of narrow curiosity which is the paralysis of all wide and noble interest, which the novel stimulates and feeds” (199). “Let us hasten to recognise the fact that there are novels and novels,” the reviewer writes, “and that there exists the widest distinction between them” (199). This need to distinguish is especially evident in an 1879 the *Fortnightly Review* piece, “On the choice of Books,” in which the author writes that “For myself I am inclined to think that the most useful part of reading is to know what we should not read. . . . We know all is not of equal value” (497). The author, who sadly contemplates the “nausea which idle culture seems to produce for all that is manly and pure” (500), characterizes the literary market as a fair or carnival: “We read nowadays in the market-place—I would rather say in some large steam factory of letter-press, where damp sheets of new print whirl round us perpetually—if it be not rather some noisy book-fair where literary showmen tempt us with performing dolls, and the gongs of rival booths are stunning our ears from morn till night” (496).

A *Blackwood’s* piece from the same year, “Contemporary Literature,” likewise finds something both unmanly and bizarrely *performative* about popular literature. The author writes that “in the miscellaneous hosts of the novel-writers, the fair sex very largely predominates” (322), and offers a portrait of the effeminate and sickly men who are also drawn to write novels. He goes on to explain why a woman is particularly suited to fiction writing: “from her babyhood she has been living in ideal worlds and peopling them with all kinds of happy fancies. She was acting fiction in embryo when she first played with her doll, and lavished maternal tenderness over the damage she had done to its features” (322). The exception that proves the rule of fiction-as-feminine-play-acting is George Eliot—who delivers nothing less than “literally nature itself” (336).

George Eliot’s high realism not only provided an intellectual and high cultural antidote to light female writing but also paved the way for an even *higher* realism in the work of that other George—Moore. Moore’s French naturalism represented the antithesis of popular female fiction in a number of ways: it was strong, meaty, antiromantic, and avowedly unmarketable. Its photographic realism, moreover, superceded polite female fiction on its most hallowed
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ground: verisimilitude. Whereas female authors had long been lauded for their powers of observation and attention to minute detail (a trivializing of domestic realism discussed in chapter 2), Moore offered something more real than realism. In order to understand Moore's attack on domestic fiction, it is instructive to look at the opinions of conservative critic (and future poet laureate) Alfred Austin, who offered in his 1870 defense of middle-class morals and women's writing an example of what Moore hated and wanted to overthrow. In “Our Novels: The Simple School,” the third in a series of articles appearing in *Temple Bar,* Austin claims that the novels England can best be proud of are those “native” to its shores: “[T]he Simple School,—the school whose domain is the hearth, whose machinery the affections,—the school which talks to the heart without quickening its beat, yet not without moistening the eye,—the school to which home is sacred, and all bad things are available only as contrasts” (489). Including Richardson, Burney, and Austen, the Simple School owes its “virtue and value . . . [to its] fidelity to nature [and] accurate reproduction of the thing seen” (500). And yet, Austin claims (in a passage that assures us how utterly compatible the pro-domesticity argument is with the masculine-culture argument) that,

If we except George Eliot, there is, perhaps, no writer of the Simple School that impresses us with the notion of surprising or even remarkable intellectual power. But then novels, *qua* novels, are not peculiarly an intellectual exercise, either for the reader or the writer. To write a novel, at once simple and interesting, may possibly demand no dazzling accomplishments, no keen literary spirit and no finished literary style, no profundity of reflection, no philosophical temper, no high imagination; but it at least imperatively requires warm and supple sympathies, a tender love of human nature, absence of distraction from the particular task in hand, vigilant powers of observation, mastery of detail, the talent of amplification, and a steady devotion to what is good, and right, and true. (492–93)

Novels *qua* novels are not intellectual, profound, or high; they are not, in short, particularly manly, and Austin warns: “Let no man think that the best Simple Novel that ever was written, or ever could be written, is a really great thing” (500). Austin then goes on to ask himself if it is possible that the novel could ever be great and lofty and “fulfill the conditions of high art” (501). He responds: “Our answer to this must be, not a ready and absolute yes or no, but rather, in scholastic language, ‘we distinguish’” (501, my emphasis). Austin’s ultimate goal was to distinguish the novel from poetry, which he considered the truly high and masculine art (just how high and how manly can be seen
in his hysterically masculinist diatribe about effeminate male poets in “The Poetry of the Period”). For Austin, then, the Simple School may be good and true, but it is not eternal, like true art: “Will the time ever come when novels will be a dead form of literature? We think it quite possible” (503).

Moore was not ready to sign the novel’s death certificate, although he was happy enough to deal the killing blow to the Simple School and its major outlet, the circulating library. Moore did believe that the novel could “fulfill the conditions of high art,” and in his efforts to elevate the novel from its degraded position as feminized entertainment, Moore echoes Flaubert’s politics of the “the brain against the womb.” *A Mummer’s Wife* represents Moore’s famous first strike against the monopoly of the “select” lending libraries that coincided with a blistering essay on “A New Censorship in Literature” in the *Pall Mall Gazette* and was quickly followed up by *Literature At Nurse, or Circulating Morals*, a polemical pamphlet condemning Mudie’s feminizing influence on English fiction. In *Literature at Nurse*, Moore attacks the lending libraries for sacrificing English literature “to the altar of Hymen” and characterizes Mudie as a monstrous mother at nurse to a hideous brood: “Literature is now rocked to an ignoble rest in the motherly arms of the librarian. That of which he approves is fed with gold; that from which he turns the breast dies like a vagrant’s child; while in and out of his voluminous skirts run a motley and monstrous progeny, a callow, a whining, a puking brood of bastard bantlings, a race of Aztecs that disgrace the intelligence of the English nation” (18). With national security and identity so clearly at stake, Moore challenges the ability of Mudie (“the British Matron”) to dictate the country’s literary standards and calls for a defense of “the character for strength, virility, and purpose, which our literature has always held, the old literary tradition coming down to us through a long line of ancestors” (*Literature at Nurse*, 18). As Annette Federico has written of this manifesto, Moore’s “exasperation is directed not only at Mr. Mudie, but is grounded in women’s real or imagined encroachment into the realm of letters, and not only as readers but as writers. The cultural construction is that women are bad for art since they are more concerned with morality than aesthetics” (142). Moore rides a wave of male anxiety over the feminization of literary culture to the conclusion that English “artists” (the male heirs to the country’s true literary tradition) must “renounce the effort to reconcile those two irreconcilable things—art and young girls” (*Literature at Nurse*, 21). As an explicit attack on lending-library sentiment, *A Mummer’s Wife* is just such an act of renunciation; Moore chose the topic, in fact, with the direct intention of shocking the Victorian reading public.

While it was intended to shake up both its critics and readers, *A Mummer’s Wife* was also designed to put certain literary hierarchies in place. Indeed, its
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purpose as stated in *Literature at Nurse* is to enforce an essentially conservative
distinction between the low fictions of sentiment and the high calling of the
artist. The maintenance of this distinction is also behind Moore’s attacks on
contemporary playwrights and their attempts to branch out into non-dramatic
literature. In “Our Dramatists and their Literature,” Moore writes that drama-
tists inhabit the “unclean straw of melodrama and farce,” and that they would
have remained “unmolested” there “if, by a series of unwise attempts to follow
us into book literature, they had not proven that they are no better than we
expected—third, fourth, and fifth-rate men of letters” (139). The language of
impurity here suggests that, for Moore, popular drama operates as a low,
abject other to high literature. Moore’s criteria for distinguishing literary filth,
of course, are wholly aesthetic and strictly opposed to the moral grounds on
which the lending libraries and popular journals condemned impropriety and
impurity. (*A Mummer’s Wife* was in fact singled out as a very dirty book by *The
Saturday Review*: “It is, we know, a foolish thing to wash one’s foul linen in
public. How much more foolish it is to spread out and sort one’s foul linen in
public, not to wash it, but merely to demonstrate how foul it is” [214].) As in
*Literature at Nurse*, Moore is less interested in moral divisions than he is in
artistic hierarchy, in the sacred privilege of the men of letters.

In his defense of literary hierarchy, Moore reveals his belief in the power of
the abject to construct and maintain its opposite—which is what disturbs him
so greatly about “unclean” dramatists crossing over into the pure realm of art.
It is this categorizing impulse that drives his diatribe against dramatic players
crossing the threshold of middle-class drawing rooms. In “Mummer-Worship,”
Moore takes exception to the mutual love affair between theatrical performers
and the respectable middle classes, mocking the mummer’s desire for the trapp-
ings of respectability (“a silk hat, a villa, and above all a visit from the parson
[121]). His concern lies not so much with the immoral effect that mummers
might have on the middle-class household as with the horrible spectacle of social
climbing and moral hypocrisy: “These changed creatures, with hymn-books in
their hands and their pinchbeck virtue oozing through their speech, come up
every staircase shaking the dust of their past careers from their garments” (127).
Moore sees this social mixing as a transgression of the natural order of things, a
dilution of the theater’s power as oppositional space to the domestic realm. “The
dramatic profession has been, is, and always must be,” he writes,

a profession for those to whom social restraints are irksome, and who would
lead the life their instinct dictates. The ideal mother cannot be the great
artist. . . . And since, in the eternal wisdom of things, we must find a place for
vice as well as for virtue, for the Bohemian as well as the housewife, I believe
that little will be gained by emptying the *coulisse* into the drawing-room, and the drawing-room into the *coulisse*. We have no belief in the amalgamation of classes, and still hold by the old distinctions. *We do not prefer vice to virtue, or virtue to vice, but believe both, since both exist, to be necessary; and our morality consists mainly in striving to keep them apart and refraining from experimental mixing.* (137, my italics)

The “experimental mixing” of bourgeois and bohemian, as much the topic of *A Mummer’s Wife* as of “Mummer-Worship,” threatens to dissolve the very distinctions by which culture thinks itself; Moore insists that “the entire removal and abolition of either [virtue or vice] would mean death to the race” (136). In a back-handed way, then, there is something honorable about the mummer’s role as “the refuse of society” (136). Filth has its place, as long as it stays there.

By upholding the necessity of filth, Moore redirects the debate about the propriety of the acting profession (especially the status of the actress) that was being conducted in English drawing rooms and periodicals in the 1880s. Actors and actresses have always been disreputable, he claims, and they should remain that way for the good of the nation. This polarizing project—one that advocates neither a removal nor an embrace of the abject, but a kind of friendly embargo against it—is at the heart of *A Mummer’s Wife*. The title character’s difficulty arises from an “experimental mixing” of her two worlds: Kate Ede’s effort to make the theatrical world over into a middle-class drawing room has disastrous results. While Moore chose the “lowest” form of theatrical life for Kate to enter, his focus on the relationship between theatrical bohemia and the bourgeoisie reflects changes in the fortunes of theater (since the respectability of performers had actually become a debatable issue), as well as changes in the political climate. The middle-class ideal that sustained and was sustained by the novel throughout much of the century had in Moore become tarnished and beyond repair. Indeed, Moore had no interest in maintaining it as an ideal, but in demonstrating its links to the intellectually impoverished realms of sentimental fiction and sentimental drama.

**Scenes of Reading**

The novel’s title sets out the problem: how can the world of middle-class stability and marriage coexist with the bohemian life of the theater? How can the domestic role of wife be played out among a troupe of traveling mummers? One could argue that *A Mummer’s Wife* is an extended meditation on
this titular oxymoron, a constant worrying of the ideological problem posed on its title page: the novel takes the actress out of the house and puts the middle-class woman on stage. The title character, Kate Ede, leaves her husband and her middle-class existence to elope with a traveling mummer, Dick Lennox. The plot follows her rise to theatrical success and her subsequent descent into alcoholism, madness, and prostitution. But *A Mummer's Wife* is not a condemnation of theatrical life, as previous critics have often taken it to be. Kate is not a victim of the “immorality” of stage life, nor even of middle-class moral hypocrisy, but of her own “double life,” a life uneasily (and incompletely) split between Wesleyan respectability and theatrical instability. On one level, Kate’s self-destruction is a symptom and a product of her self-loathing, itself a mourning for an irretrievable middle-class ideal. Yet Kate’s biggest problem, and the point on which the novel is the most interesting for an analysis of theater’s relationship to domestic ideology and domestic fiction, is not the incommensurability of her lives as middle-class subject and traveling player, but the points of connection between the two. “The mummer’s wife” is a creature plagued by hybridity, by binary poles that refuse to stay put.

Kate’s central problem, then, is not, or not simply, that she has internalized a set of bourgeois ideals that drive her to shame and to destroy herself when she abandons her middle-class existence for the stage. Middle-class existence was never very attractive in the first place, and the theatrical life that she assumes will be a permanent escape from life in the linen drapery turns out to replicate certain aspects of her prior life. Much of this is Kate’s own fault, because it is she who tries to make theatrical life conform to her own middle-class ideals; she just wants a *better* middle-class life than the one she had before. But both her prior life in the pottery town of Hanley and her mummer’s life on the road miserably fail to meet her expectations. The villain of this piece is finally neither Kate, nor the mummer who takes her away from her first husband, nor even the backstage life of the traveling players, but the literature that formed Kate’s expectations in the first place: the sentimental novel. In this, *The Mummer’s Wife* reads like *Madame Bovary*—or like *The Doctor’s Wife* gone dreadfully wrong. While Braddon’s Isabel Gilbert *lives* on her reading, Moore’s Kate Ede enters a downward spiral that ends only with her own utter degradation and horrible death. In making the sentimental novel the culprit of this naturalistic novel, George Moore creates a text as self-conscious as any I have examined so far. But his “generic hysteria,” if indeed we can call it that, is provoked not by specularity, performativity, or display but by the nineteenth-century novel’s stock in trade: sentimentality.

*A Mummer’s Wife* opens on the stasis and claustrophobia of Kate’s life in the linen drapery she runs with her invalid husband, Ralph Ede. In the opening
scene, she sleeps by the side of Ralph's sickbed, enclosed in the airless sickroom of the chronic asthmatic:

In default of a screen, a gown and a red petticoat had been thrown over a clothes-horse, and these shaded the glare of the lamp from the eyes of the sick man. In the pale obscurity of the room his bearded cheeks could be seen buried in a heap of tossed pillows. By his bedside sat a young woman. As she dozed, her face drooped until her features were hidden, and the lamplight made the curious curves of a beautiful ear look like a piece of illuminated porcelain. . . . On the corner of the table lay a book, a well-worn volume in faded red paper cover. It was a novel she used to read with delight when she was a girl, but somehow failed to interest her. (1–2) 

With her husband prematurely “buried,” Kate—the nameless and featureless woman of the opening—is similarly inanimate, like a piece of the porcelain made in the nearby Hanley potteries. She is, in fact, a “product” of Hanley, having never left the confines of its factory-lined perimeter or the “pale obscurity” of her life as a hard-working, self-sacrificing wife and nurse. The novel at her side holds no interest. The world of the imagination is dead to her, suffocated by her life of work and duty. Indeed, work and duty have explicitly replaced youthful novel reading in Kate’s account of her own transformation from a sentimental dreamer into a practical worker: “She fancied that it was fully accounted for by the fact that she had no time—‘no time for reading now’—which was no more than the truth” (47). Only an “ample submission to authority” remains from Kate’s younger life, along with “an indifference to the world and its interest” that effectively isolates her from “the world and the flesh” (47).

The world and the flesh, however, intrude upon Kate’s airtight life in the worldly and corpulent form of Richard Lennox, manager of the Morton and Cox’s Operatic Company. Dick’s appearance, or rather the anticipation of his appearance as a paying lodger, stimulates the narrative of A Mummer’s Wife into action by troubling the domestic status quo of the Ede household. Indeed, the very thought of having an actor in the house simply scandalizes Mrs. Ede, Ralph’s mother and the text’s representative of the Methodist rectitude that the novel pits against the temptations of theater. Mrs. Ede is convinced of the mundane evil of theater and warns Kate that opening their home to a “theatrical connection” will certainly mean their ruin. Kate, however, does not share her mother-in-law’s antitheatricalism, but awaits the mummer’s arrival with curiosity and something akin to eagerness. The end of the first chapter finds her crossing over to a new life, if only symbolically, in a passage that links novel reading
to her approaching elopement: “Kate lingered a moment on the threshold [of
the stranger’s apartment], and then, with the hand in which she held the novel
she had been reading, she picked up her skirt and stepped across the way” (14).

The theatrical influence that Mrs. Ede fears begins immediately, even
before Dick Lennox shows up to claim his room. Kate’s assistant, Miss Hen-
der, secretly takes a job as a dresser for the opera company—a “moonlighting”
that means she cannot help Kate complete an important order—and the shop’s
two young apprentices, Lizzie and Annie, cannot work because of their excite-
ment over the theatrical company’s arrival. With the work space thus compro-
mised by the lure of the stage, a huge theatrical poster is put up across the
street from the linen drapery to advertise the coming production. In its odd
hybridity, indeed its illegible tangle of signifiers, the poster operates as a cen-
tral *mise en abyme* for Kate’s own story. Significantly, we come to “see” the
poster through two competing (but finally complementary) generic expecta-
tions, Lizzie’s passion for sensation and Annie’s desire for domestic romance:
“Lizzie preferred exciting scenes of murder and arson, while Annie was moved
more by leavetakings and declarations of unalterable affection” (20). When the
poster is put up, Kate asks the girls, “Well, dears, is it a robber or a sweet-
heart?” but her apprentices respond disappointedly, “We’re not sure . . . we
can’t make the picture out. . . . It isn’t a nice picture at all; it’s all mixed up”
(20). The life-sized figures of the poster seem engaged in some kind of
anachronistic carnival scene: “It showed a young girl in a bridal dress and
wreath struggling between two police agents, who were arresting her in a mar-
ketplace of old time, in a strangely costumed crowd, which was clamouring
violently. The poor bridegroom was held back by his friends; a handsome
young man in knee-breeches and a cocked hat watched the proceedings cyni-
cally in the right-hand corner, whilst on the left a big fat man frantically
endeavoured to recover his wig, which had been lost in the mêlée” (21). While
this mêlée means little to Lizzie and Annie, we can read it as a kind of strange,
symbolic collage of the various elements of Kate’s narrative: the bourgeois
domestic scene interrupted by a return of the carnivalesque; the bride stolen
from her groom; the transgression of authority and the inevitability of pun-
ishment; the big fat man. The poster seems overly cryptic to the young
apprentices, who want either clear-cut tragedy or unalloyed sentiment, but it
introduces us to the mixed genre of Kate’s downfall: the tragedy of sentiment,
a domestic sensation.

The mummer’s arrival, in fact, precipitates Kate’s retreat to the culture of
sentiment, which returns with all the force of the forcibly repressed. As though
part of this sentimental wellspring, the novel offers up a history of Kate’s sen-
timentality, itself a history of her reading practices. The child Kate, we learn,
“was dreamy not to say imaginative... She loved fairies, and took a vivid interest in goblins” (44). With her brain “intoxicat[ed]... with sentiment” from the autobiographical stories told by the landlady, Kate is ripe for the excesses of sentimental fiction, and when “the London Journal came for the first time across her way, with the story of a broken heart, her own melted with sympathy; the more sentimental and unnatural the romance, the more it fevered and enraptured her” (44). Kate’s “sentimental education” takes place in two phases; the second begins when she “passed from the authors who deal exclusively with knights, princesses, and kings to those who interest themselves in the love fortunes of doctors and curates” (44).

Like the quixotic heroines before her, Kate lacks a critical sense that would allow her to distinguish between fact and fiction, but unlike most of her English predecessors (and exactly like her French ancestor) she never develops one. Her favorite novel relates a story of sentimental reading, middle-class monogamy, and class mobility, and provides the central model for Kate’s romantic ideals, the ideals against which she compares her own life. The spookily familiar narrative concerns “a beautiful young woman with a lovely oval face, who was married to a very tiresome country doctor. This lady was in the habit of reading Byron and Shelley in a rich, sweet-scented meadow [which] belonged to a squire, a young man with grand, broad shoulders, who day after day used to watch these readings by the river” (45). When the fair reader slips into the water while engrossed in a book, the strapping squire rescues her and the couple falls in love. Because his lady will not leave her husband, however, the squire departs the country until he hears of the husband’s death, at which time he returns and the two live happily ever after. Kate so completely identifies with the heroine of this tale (and who could it be but Braddon’s Isabel?) that she believes “had she been the heroine of the book she would have acted the same way” (45). Of course, Kate is the heroine of another sort of novel altogether, and when faced with a similar situation—substitute a tiresome invalid for the tiresome doctor and a traveling player for the dashing squire—she does nothing of the kind. But this previous novel’s treatment of romantic passion, a passion conceived in a scene of reading and erotic voyeurism, so forms Kate’s ideals of undying romantic love that it becomes the sentimental haven to which she returns whenever she most requires escape into romance and from the realities of her own more sordid tale.

Kate first returns to the fictions of sentiment after she meets “the big man,” Dick Lennox. His fleshiness and “animalism” both irritate and please Kate, and they set her thinking about her own divorce from the world of pleasure in a passage that enacts the very process by which fiction acts as an opiate for Kate’s troubles and a model for experience:
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She saw that she knew nothing of pleasure, or even happiness; and in a very simple way she wondered what were really the ends of life. If she were good and religious like her mother or her mother-in-law—but somehow she could never feel as they did. Heaven seemed so far away. Of course it was a consolation to think there was a happier and better world; still—still—Not being able to pursue the thread any further, she stopped, puzzled, and a few moments after she was thinking of the lady who used to read Byron and Shelley and who resisted her lover’s entreaties so bravely. Every part of the forgotten story came back to her. Then as the vision became more personal and she identified herself with the heroine of the book, she thought about the wealth of love she had to give, and it seemed to her unutterably sad that it should bloom like a rose in a desert unknown and unappreciated. (56)

In her dissatisfaction, Kate first turns to thoughts of religion—the opiate of choice among women in her family—but, frustrated by the delayed gratification of heaven, moves on to a “happier and better world” closer to hand: the haven of fiction. Where Christianity fails, fiction rushes in with its own version of the “ends of life” that identifies romantic love as both the goal and the inevitable closure of a life lived as sentimental narrative. While Kate cannot identify with her pious mother and mother-in-law, fiction offers her nothing but sympathetic identification—Kate not only feels as her favorite heroine does, she feels as though she is that heroine. Her own dissatisfaction comes back to her transformed and ennobled through the mediating agency of literature. Even her sense of neglected potential is a reworking of well-worn literary sentiment: “Full many a flower’s born to blush unseen / and waste its sweetness on the desert air.” These lines, from Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard” (1751), are in fact among those memorized by Jane Austen’s quixotic heroine, Catherine Morland, when she embarks upon her “training for a heroine.” As Austen writes of her own Kate, “She read all such books as heroines must read to supply their memories with those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their eventful lives” (Northanger Abbey, 39).

Since Kate’s romance with Dick is very much entwined with her taste for fictional romances and sense of her own heroism, it is fitting that their first romantic encounter begins at the scene of Kate’s youthful reading. She meets him on a hill above the town, where she used to tryst with her sentimental fiction: “Kate saw with the eyes and heard with the ears of her youth, and the past became as clear as the landscape before her. She remembered the days when she came to read on this hillside. . . . It was among [the far] slopes that the lovers with whom she sympathized in the pages of her novels lived” (69).
Dick, however, sees the same vista in different terms, demonstrating the ease with which the landscape of sentimental fiction becomes the province of theater: “[These hills] look like the gallery of a theatre. We’re on the stage, the footlights run round here, and the valley is the pit” (70). Kate looks at him with “ravished eyes,” as if this fat mummer could feed her starved imagination, and Dick decides the time is right for a “love scene” while they tour the Hanley potteries. What follows is a comic fiasco, since Kate’s ideas of fictional romance hardly match Dick’s theatrical model of passion. After Kate rebuffs his first rough kiss, Dick tries to woo her with the famous love scene from The Lady of Lyons, “But it was years since he had played the part, and he could only murm eter something about reading no books but lovers’ books, singing no songs but lovers’ songs” (89). They wrestle, and Dick goes down with a crash into a heap of broken porcelain.

The most interesting thing about this encounter is not how “vexed and shamed” Kate is by it to begin with, but how she reconfigures it as a sentimental experience through the agency of memory and (a literary) imagination. After Dick leaves to resume his tour, Kate remembers his kiss in the potteries, “Reliving [it] in the imagination more intensely than while she was actually in his arms. . . . But in imagination she was secure from interruption and hindrance, and could taste over and over again the words that he had spoken: ‘I shall be back in three months, dear one’” (114). Like a favorite novel that she reads and rereads, her memories of passion are much better than the real thing, being infinitely repeatable and lacking the “hindrance” of an actual lover. Indeed these memories give Kate the “secret subject” that D. A. Miller has tied to both novel reading and bourgeois identity: “A great part of her happiness was in the fact that it was all within herself, that none knew of it. . . . It was a life within her life, a voice in her heart that she could hear at any moment” (114). Kate experiences emotion in terms of language (tasting his words, hearing a voice within her heart, etc.), modeling her own feelings on the language of sentiment.

It makes perfect sense, then, that the consummation of her passion for Dick is lexical rather than sexual. Experiencing a complete “return to her sentimental self,” Kate indulges in what can only be described as an orgy of reading. “Seized” by a memory of her favorite novel and “substituting herself for the lady who used to read Byron and Shelley,” Kate is overwhelmed by what she sees as the uncanny similarities between her own love triangle and its textual counterpart (“The coincidence appeared to her as something marvellous, something above nature” [117]). Driven by a desire to reread this book and others, but full of apprehension since she has “learned to feel ashamed” of her sentimentality, Kate tricks her husband into leaving the house and heads
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upstairs to the bedroom, “Determined to enjoy herself to the extent of allowing her thoughts for an hour or so to wander at their own sweet will” (119). The language of an errant autoeroticism is clear here, and Moore exaggerates the well-known connection between novel reading and masturbation to the point of parody as Kate retrieves her trunk of books from their hiding spot under the marriage bed: “The trunk was an oblong box covered with brown hair; to pull it out she had to get under the bed, and it was with trembling and eager fingers that she untied the old twisted cords. Remembrance with Kate was a cult, but her husband’s indifference and her mother-in-law’s hard, determined opposition had forced the past out of sight; but now on the first encouragement it gushed forth like a suppressed fountain that an incautious hand had suddenly liberated. And with what joy she turned over the old books!” (119). Repressed under Kate’s marriage to the bloodless Ralph, the realm of literary sentiment returns like a forgotten erogenous zone. Seated in both the brain and the sexual organs (two readings of Kate’s “box”), sentiment works Kate into a page-turning frenzy: “It appeared to her that she could not go on fast enough; her emotion gained upon her until she became quite hysterical. . . . Her lips quivered, the light seemed to be growing dark, and a sudden sense of misery eclipsed her happiness, and unable to restrain herself any longer, she burst into a tumultuous storm of sobs” (120).

The release that sentimental literature secures for Kate is not only autoerotic but also practical, as she decides to leave her husband. Through her guilty practice of literary indulgence, Kate discovers that “she was tired of the life she was leading; her whole heart was in her novels and poetry” (125). How Kate’s heart gets set on Dick Lennox is another example of the mediating work of literature. While Dick’s appearance reawakens Kate to the pleasures of literature, it is fiction that teaches Kate to cherish an idealized passion for Dick (as she later tells him, “You were so different from all the other men I’ve seen . . . so much more like the heroes of novels” [173]). Through the transfiguring magic of sentiment, the “coarse” and corpulent man whom Kate fought off at the potteries becomes a prince of love by the time he returns to Hanley. This transformation has nothing to do with Dick, but everything to do with Kate’s sentimental conversion. When this conversion is complete, when Kate has come to focus upon Dick as the sole object of her desire, her interest in literature wanes: “She had her novels, but now the most exciting failed to fix her thoughts. The page swam before her eyes, a confusion of white and black dots, the book would fall upon her lap in a few minutes, and she would relapse again into thinking of what Dick would say to her” (135). In a dissolve that enacts the very mental process of reading, the printed word gives birth to the imagined world—the printed text of sentimental fiction becomes the equally fictional
text of Kate’s fantasy. If Dick supplants the novel as the focus of Kate’s romantic hysteria, then, he does so only through the mediating agency of the novel itself; he becomes a living, speaking fiction.

**Scenes of Theater**

Kate’s first taste of theater delights a palate formed by sentimental fiction. In theatrical illusion she finds a parallel to the pleasures of fiction, but while sentimental novels offer the solitary pleasure of escaping into the imagination, theater provides an escape from the confines of the self: the performance “seduced Kate like a sensual dream; and in all she saw and felt there was a mingled sense of nearness and remoteness, an extraordinary concentration, and an absence of her own individuality” (145). It is just this sort of boundary confusion between spectator and spectacle that antitheatrical writers so often identified as one of the greatest dangers that the theater posed to the self-contained subject, and Moore seems well aware of antitheatrical convention when he describes Kate’s theatrical “seduction.” Manipulating the links between theater, drink, and collectivity, he writes that “all her musical sensibilities rushed to her head like wine; it was only by a violent effort, full of acute pain, that she saved herself from raising her voice with those of the singers” (146). If Kate has difficulty distinguishing herself from the performers on stage, it is perhaps because her novel reading has schooled her in the finer points of identification, but not of analysis. When Dick appears on stage as a policeman, Kate closes her eyes “to shut out her dreadful disappointment. Why had he done this thing?” (147). Confusing the actor with the role, she finds it “incongruous” of Dick, her partner in domestic crime, to “exhibit himself to her” as a policeman (147).

It is only when Dick reappears “in the splendour of [martial] uniform” and she “drinks the music of the waltz” that Kate recovers her spirits and becomes “conscious of a deep self-contentment, of dreamy idleness, of sad languor.” Kate gives in to the seductions of theater, and “the charm to which she abandoned herself resembled the enervations of a beautiful climate, the softness of a church; she yearned for her lover and the fanciful life of which he was the centre, as one might for some ideal fatherland” (152). The peculiar mix of metaphors in this passage illustrates the double gesture performed by theater in Kate’s imagination: theater provides an escape from the stifling confines of “home” while it constructs an alternative domestic space. We have in this passage both a reading of theatrical experience in terms of the sexualized affect of exotic travel literature (dreamy idleness, sad languor, self-abandonment, the
enervations of a beautiful climate) and an imposition of domestic ideology (fatherland, church) onto the terra incognita of the stage. Kate wants to go home to elsewhere; she yearns for a husband (an ideal father) who can give her a “fanciful life,” not for the policeman who puts a stop to fantasy and identification. Her turn to theater, and to Dick, is therefore an imaginative return to fantasized origins. While Kate earlier returned to sentimental literature “as instinctively as an awakened child turns to the breast,” she now turns to her “mummer” for the sugar-tit of theatrical sentiment, the succor of an idealized home away from home.

The contradictions inherent in Kate’s fantasy of theatrical life become apparent, even to Kate, from the moment she runs away from home to join the players. Entering the theater by the stage door, she finds that life behind the curtain has nothing to do with theatrical illusion or middle-class fantasies. The extraordinary beings who graced the stage, for example, are now a “herd” of “vulgar” actresses who stare at Kate with “every-day eyes” and repulse her with their carnivalesque physicality: “Like animals at the fair, they continued to crush and to crowd in the passage. . . . A tall, fat girl stood close by; her hand was on her sword, which she slapped slowly against her thighs. The odour of hair, cheap scent, necks, bosoms and arms was overpowering, and to Kate’s sense of modesty there was something revolting in this loud display of the body” (165). Like an antitheatrical nightmare, these women represent the teeming, stinking, thigh-slapping masses that Kate as a proper middle-class subject defines herself against. Even after she has slipped into alcoholism and madness, Kate holds herself above this common rabble: “I despise you as the dirt under my feet” she later tells the chorus (428). While the theater’s in-house hierarchy (the “star system”) does something to appease Kate’s horrified class-consciousness, she cannot shake a certain feeling of defilement. When the company contrives to trick a hotel out of an extravagant lunch for fifty, for example, Kate partakes only of middle-class remorse and disgust: “Though love had compensated her for virtue, nothing could make amends for her loss of honesty. . . . The sentiment the most characteristic, and naturally so, of the middle classes is a respect for the property of others; and she had eaten stolen bread. Oppressed and sickened by this idea, she sank back in her corner, and filled with a sordid loathing of herself, she moved instinctively away from Dick” (210). That Kate feels loathing for herself yet moves away from Dick illustrates the mechanism of displacement and projection that will shortly come to characterize their marriage—Kate blames Dick for taking her away from her middle-class roots, and she becomes a physically abusive wife who enacts her own self-loathing on Dick’s flesh. In her early days with the company, however, Kate directs her middle-class loathing at the “common” actors.
and is forced to admit to herself that although “she had done what she had so often read of in novels . . . it did not seem at all the same thing” (194).

Kate reacts to the carnival excesses of theater with her own form of bourgeois hysteria. She embarks upon her “double life,” playing out within one subject the split between “actress” and “proper woman” that in the previous chapters has so often worked to manage gender conflict and generic tension. For Kate, however, this will not turn out to be a very workable strategy, since the abjection of the marked binary can only be accomplished through self-destruction. Yet at first it seems to work rather well. Kate becomes both more bohemian, and, by fits and starts, more reactively middle class. While she learns “to regard locality as a mere nothing, to fix her centre of gravity in the forty human beings who were wandering with her” (237), she also yearns for a home, a fixed center where she and Dick can “settle down.” While she becomes a mummer, the role she most covets is that of respectable wife, a role she rehearses as she and Dick play house in a series of rented rooms: “they dined about four, and when dinner was over it was time to talk about what kind of house they were going to have, to fidget about in search of brushes and combs, the curling-tongs, and to consider what little necessaries she had better bring down to the theatre with her” (247). The contradictions of life on the road take their toll, and not simply because her bohemian life is irreconcilable with her bourgeois life. As I have suggested, it is not merely the doubleness of Kate’s life that presents the biggest problem, but the hybridity. As a middle-class subject, Kate requires a certain zone of abjection (the masses, the body, etc.), and when the binary poles of private life and public stage begin to collapse, Kate struggles to keep them separate. Her frequent bouts of hysteria and jealousy can be read as attempts to resuscitate the private sector, attempts that only succeed in exhibiting Kate herself as the abject.

Bohemianism achieves its first “victory” over Kate when she overcomes her middle-class stage fright and agrees to perform in the chorus. Her horror of the stage is the same fear of display we have come to expect, but this time focused on the fetishized undergarment that signified the sexual degradation of the actress in the middle-class imaginary: red tights.16 “I could never walk about before a whole theatre full of people in those red tights,” Kate declares, and the offending leg-wear remains “a constant subject of discussion” between her and Dick: “All sorts of arguments had been adduced, but none of them had shaken Kate’s unreasoned convictions on this point. A sense of modesty inherited through generations rose to her head, and a feeling of repugnance that seemed almost invincible, forbade her to bare herself thus to the eyes of the gazing public” (242). The argument that finally succeeds appeals to the soft underbelly of middle-class values—economic practicality. Kate is persuaded that she
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and Dick can live much better with an extra thirty shillings a week, and so she
dons a pair of tights and takes to the stage, an act that both recalls the middle-
class credo of self-sacrifice in the name of domestic felicity (“close your eyes
and think of England”) and underscores the connection between acting and
prostitution. Kate’s debut in the leading role of Serpolette, which follows
quickly upon the heels of her appearance in the chorus, further demonstrates
links between acting, pornography, and advertising:

The audience, principally composed of sailors—men home from months of
watery weariness, nights of toil and darkness, maddened by the irritating
charm of the music and the delicious modernity of Kate’s figure and dress,
looked as if they were going to precipitate themselves from the galleries. Was
she not the living reality of figures posted over the hammocks in oil-smelling
cabins, the prototype of the short-skirted damsels that decorated the empty
match-boxes which they preserved and gazed at under the stars? (269)

Kate has been transformed from a proper middle-class subject into a theatric-
cal spectacle, the object of the public’s desires, the “figure” of sexual and con-
sumer fantasies. Like an idealized version of the prostitute she will become,
Kate trades in the business of pleasure. She is filled by “a delicious but almost
incomprehensible notion of contact” when on the stage, “a sensation more del-
icate than the touch of a lover’s breath on your face” (267).

Singing “Look at me here! Look at me there!” Kate appears for a moment
to have overcome her fear of display, to have conquered her bourgeois past
along with her stage fright. However, Kate’s middle-class phobias return in the
form of self-loathing. The very night of her debut as Serpolette, Kate begins
drinking and performs the first of many jealous scenes that escalate into
domestic violence, incarceration, and finally abandonment. Experiencing her
theatrical success as a domestic failure, Kate becomes convinced (irrationally,
at first) of Dick’s unfaithfulness. Mourning her middle-class life in self-
destructive acts of suspicion and revenge, the pregnant Kate attempts to recu-
perate “home” by instituting “strict surveillance” of Dick’s every move. Her
depression and anger, her “violent and unreasoning antipathies,” and her
increasing irritability are all explicitly tied to a brooding longing for domestic
security: “[The company] watched the progress of Kate’s malady without ever
suspecting what was really the matter with her. She was homesick. But not for
the house in Hanley and the dressmaking of yore . . . . Her homesickness was
not to go back to the point from which she started, but to settle down in a
house for a while” (280). Kate, who by this point has been divorced by Ralph
Ede, determines to marry Dick Lennox, convinced that a return to the familiar
structure of marriage—the foundation of middle-class respectability—will cure her ailments. As soon as Dick discovers her pregnancy and agrees to marry her, Kate convinces herself that “eternal happiness” will be hers as mother and wife, but becoming the “mummer’s wife” only cements the contradictions of her hybrid existence. When the company’s composer facetiously suggests giving the pair “a copy of Wesley’s hymns bound up with a book of the *Grand Duchess*” as a wedding gift, the oxymoronic coupling suggests not only the pairing of Kate and Dick, but Kate’s own interior confusion (296).

As though fatally injured by the intrusion of middle-class respectability, the bohemian world of Cox & Morton’s Opera Company immediately falls apart after Kate and Dick are bound together: “The ebb of the company’s prosperity dated from Kate’s marriage. Somehow things did not seem to go well after” (309). The company breaks up, Kate and Dick form a smaller company of four traveling players, and they fall from playing packed theatrical houses to country fairs and drinking houses. Kate, meanwhile, experiences a return of her never-fully-repressed bourgeois self: “She became again in instincts and tastes a middle-class woman longing for a home, a fixed and tangible fireside where she might sit in the evening by her husband’s side, mending his shirts, after the work of the day. A bitter detestation of her wandering life rose to her head, and she longed to beg of her husband to give up theatricals” (314). At no point are Kate’s desires further removed from her actual existence; the players go broke, and Kate gives birth in rented lodgings for which they have no money to pay. Yet motherhood works a certain middle-class magic on Kate, who finds herself “more at peace with the world” than ever before. Indeed, with her nuclear family in place, Kate finds that “the old life that she thought she had left behind in Hanley began to reappear” (355).

What also reappears, rather ominously, is Kate’s novel reading. Now that she is simply a wife and mother, and no longer a mummer, Kate Lennox begins to resemble the “sentimental workwoman,” Kate Ede: “When Dick came into the room and found her reading a novel by the fire she reminded him of Ralph’s wife rather than his own” (355). While bohemian adventure had weaned Kate off of novelistic thrills and domestic closure, the lonely and house-bound Kate now returns to the sentimental breast, feeding both herself and her child on fiction in a bizarre reworking of the nursing scenario: “A tear of joy fell upon the page, and in the effusion of these sensations she would take her little girl and press [the child] almost wildly to her breast” (356). Instead of nursing her baby, Kate nurses herself on a special formula of fiction and drink, the twinned opiates that numb her to experience and soften her baby’s cries.17

Now that Kate’s “double life” has come together, now that bohemia has remade itself as Hanley, Kate altogether loses her ability to distinguish between
the two halves of her existence, to separate Manchester from Hanley, dream from reality, or Dick from Ralph. Kate’s life seems to her a strange collage of theater, fiction, and memory as she wakes in the night and views the moonlit domestic scene: “It seemed to her very like a fairy tale. The giant snoring, and her baby stirring in her cradle with the limelight upon her, or was she dreaming? It might be a dream out of which she could not rouse herself. But the noise she heard was Dick’s breathing, and she wished that Ralph would breathe more easily. Ralph, Ralph! No, she was with Dick. Dick, not Ralph, was her husband” (359). As Ralph’s labored breath was the figure for Kate’s stifled existence in Hanley, so Dick’s breathing here becomes a kind of soundtrack for the dream from which Kate cannot awake—the “fairy tale” of family life that turns out to be more Grimm than Kate expected. The exotic mummer who was to have taken Kate away from Hanley and Ralph has become instead a kind of giant double of her wizened first husband. While the drunken Kate dreams of the moon as a pantomime witch come to take her baby (the domestic scene reconfigured as Christmas Panto), “little Kate” dies in her crib, a victim of maternal neglect and a figure for the death of Kate’s middle-class dreams.

Scenes of the Grotesque

After the death of her daughter, Kate rapidly declines. Her drinking continues, her jealous scenes return with increasing violence, and she can no longer perform on the stage. Moore savors the scenes of her madness and abjection, and he makes clear the extent to which her violence is ultimately self-directed: “[Dick] was never unkind to her . . . but she would have preferred a blow. It would have been something to have felt the strength of his hand upon her. She wanted an emotion; she longed to be brutalized. . . . Were he to strike her to the ground she might still be saved” (387). Like so much in her life, Kate’s masochism is a mixture of literary and religious convention; her desire for a brutal lover comes straight out of sensational romance, but her desire for punishment and hope of salvation is driven by Wesleyan guilt. As her self-loathing compels her to destroy the object of her love and hate, Kate reaches a point of complete obsession, at which “life seemed to her nothing but a burning and a frenzy. She did not know what she wanted of [Dick], but with a longing that was nearly madness she desired to possess him wholly; she yearned to bury her poor aching body . . . in that peaceful hulk of fat, so calm, so invulnerable” (387). Kate’s fantasy of the embrace as burial, a kind of reverse cannibalism in which her body is swallowed up by the corpulent mass of her husband, takes the dream of romantic union to its fatal extreme.
Chapter 5

While *The Mummer’s Wife* offers scene after scene of domestic violence, the repetitive nature of these attacks makes it possible to examine a single exemplary incident, a star turn in Kate’s career as an enraged wife. This particular episode occurs on a morning after Kate has gashed open Dick’s face in several places. She awakens, sick with a hangover, and sets off to the theater to confront Dick. After vomiting all over her dress, Kate arrives at the theater and forces her way onto the stage: “The long black hair hung in disordered masses; her brown eyes were shot with golden lights; the green tints in her face became, in her excessive pallor, dirty, and abominable in colour, and she seemed more like a demon than a woman as her screams echoed through the empty theater” (427). While she had hoped to become the heroine of her own romantic fiction, Kate has instead come to embody the underside of the domestic dream. As an actor who observes the scene comments, “we ought to put up *Jane Eyre* . . . if she were to play the mad woman like that, we’d be sure to draw full houses” (427). This is not far off the mark, since Kate has in fact become a shut-up wife, hidden by Dick while he pursues his career and other women. She is the avenging wife as homicidal maniac, the sentimental reader as Bertha Rochester, the figure that twentieth-century literary criticism would take to embody the downside of nineteenth-century domestic ideology. 

Even her descent into madness, then, has a literary model, and when Kate gives vent to her anger the heat of her passion recalls Bertha’s fiery vengeance: “Kate’s fury leaped, cracked, and burnt with the fierceness of a house in the throes of conflagration, and in the smoke-cloud of hatred which enveloped her, only fragments of ideas and sensations flashed like falling sparks through her mind” (439).

After performing her rage inside the theater, Kate takes the show out into the street, where she presents herself as a spectacle of abjection to a curious crowd made up of stagehands, chorus girls, “vermin-like children,” and prostitutes. Amidst the rotting “vegetable refuse” of the gutter, Kate restages her debut as Serpolette, singing “Look at me here! look at me there! / Criticize me everywhere! I am so sweet from head to feet, / And most perfect and complete” (431). Like a grotesque parody of the lovely *ingénue* she once was, this “demonic” Kate repeats her performance in a working-class bar, “Flirting with her abominable skirts, amused by the applause of the roughs” (431). It is hard to imagine a more abject scene of self-display than this raving, filthy woman reliving her glory days on the stage in front of a jeering crowd of onlookers, they of the “every-day” eyes that Kate once abhorred. And it is easy to imagine critics reading this scene as a condemnation of theatrical culture; as this reading goes, Kate reaps the rotting fruit of her immoral labor by exposing herself in
the role of degraded spectacle. But this is too simple, since Moore is otherwise sympathetic to the acting life. While the actors and actresses of *The Mummer’s Wife* lack the stiff Wesleyan morals of Kate’s mother and mother-in-law, which is not necessarily a bad thing in this novel, they are a generally kind lot, whose loyalty to one another replicates the close ties of family. Of all of the mummers, Kate alone descends into madness and abjection, and, while it is tempting to read her downfall as antitheatrical morality tale, it is Kate’s difference from the rest of the actors (her middle-class upbringing) that drives her mad. To the extent that Kate’s descent into the gutter can be seen as antitheatrical, then, it is her own internalized antitheatricality that drives her on to self-destruction. The scene of “Serpolette’s” disgrace is in many ways Kate Ede’s revenge on Kate Lennox, as it is the end of sentimental overindulgence and the end result of boundary confusions and transgressions.

While Kate Ede/Lennox internalizes the split between the proper woman and the actress that we have by now come to expect, she is not a consciously performative creature. Even Kate’s “performance” of the madwoman is genuinely sincere, and we never sense that she puts on the characters of lover or lunatic, but that she actually becomes them, the more to her own psychic detriment. Indeed, Kate once offers to play the madwoman in order to gain readmittance to the asylum where Dick had her committed, but Dick doubts that she could pull it off. Kate may be a professional actress, but there is never anything very “theatrical” about her character. This is not the case with Kate’s nemesis, however, the strange, theatrical creature who replaces Kate in Dick’s affections. Like some refugee from the antitheatrical novels of the earlier nineteenth century, the villainous Laura Forrest is every inch the actress and every bit unnatural. She is, in fact, an embodiment of the hybridity that has plagued Kate throughout the novel, and which we have seen operate throughout the century as a sign of female villainy. Laura Forrest is an unwholesome alloy of opposites: a heavily painted woman with a roving eye, she is also the Mother Superior of Yarmouth Convent; a progressive socialist, she is also a reactionary antifeminist, a kind of antiwoman New Woman.19 When she first makes her entrance towards the close of the novel, tottering out of the blue and down the Margate pier, Laura appears as a very spectacle of stylistic confusion, wearing “a hooped and pleated skirt of green silk, surmounted by a bustle, . . . the fag end of some other fashion, but the long draggle-tailed feather boa belonged to the eighties, as did the Marie Stuart bonnet” (390). Like so many of her theatrical “sisters,” this performative creature is marked by both sartorial mix-up and a sort of temporal flux; she is “the fag end” of a line of out-of-place women that began in chapter 1 with Madame Duval’s role as atavistic performer. As we have
come to suspect by now, sartorial disturbance also signals gender disturbance. With her excessive height, her thick ankles, and the dramatic overpainting that makes Dick think immediately of the stage, Laura Forrest is constructed in contradistinction to the petite and ultrafeminine Kate of the first half of the novel. Her coarse skin plastered “flagrantly” with carmine and her eyebrows drawn in rather too high on her forehead, Laura looks like an aging drag queen on the stroll. As Dick puts it, “I think this time I’ve hit upon a strange specimen, one of the strangest I’ve seen, which is saying a great deal” (396).

As it turns out, Dick is not the only one struck by Laura Forrest’s strangeness. Several critics of the novel, stymied by her last-minute appearance, call her “ludicrous” and “absurd.”20 Richard Allen Cave, for example, finds her “perfunctory introduction into the narrative” to be an “unfortunate fault of construction,” one motivated by “an over-eagerness on Moore’s part to finish the work”; the “sudden intrusion of Mrs. Forest [sic] is casual to the point of absurdity” (247). But her glaring oddity, far from being an authorial slip, is precisely what we are to notice about her. The preposterousness of her situation, the contradictions that are never fully explained, and the lack of information we are given about her all point to Laura’s narrative role as figure, rather than fleshed-out character. For a figure of confusion and hybridity, Laura’s absurdity is all to the good.

Like the mix-up she is, then, Laura Forrest is overtly out of place. In a novel concerned with theatrical professionals and the realities of backstage life, she is a rank amateur and the only truly “theatrical” character. While she aspires to write for the stage and has the money to bankroll a production, her talent is in self-production. Her dramatic flair leads Dick to observe that “she’s more mummer than [him]self or Kate” (497). With the eye of a seasoned theatrical manager, Dick watches her with an uneasy admiration: “It might have been that she was destined by nature for the stage. . . . Her soul seemed to pass back and forwards easily, and Dick did not feel sure which was the real woman and which the fictitious” (497). This unfixed subject is exactly what earlier antitheatrical tracts feared, and it rises up in this naturalistic novel—where characters are driven by fate, instinct, and compulsion to a more or less sealed doom—like a delayed return of some theatrical nemesis. While the business of theater has been center stage throughout the novel, theatricality now makes a rather absurd but transfixing entrance. This “natural” mummer—the figure for the theatricality that has been displaced by the focus on backstage reality, as well as for the “experimental mixing” that has destroyed Kate—presides over Kate’s deathbed. As a kind of “Mummer Superior,” Laura Forrest embodies all the roles Kate has played or failed to play: nurse, mother, religious devotee, actress, prostitute. She is even, we are led to believe, the next “mummer’s wife.”
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While her replacement waits in the wings, then, Kate plays her final scene, which returns to the scenes of her former life with categorical abandon (and returns us to Emma Bovary’s deathbed):

She began to ramble in her speech, and to fancy herself in Hanley. The most diverse scenes were heaped together in the complex confusion of Kate’s nightmare; the most opposed ideas were intermingled. At one moment she told the little girls, Annie and Lizzie, of the immorality of the conversations in the dressing-rooms of theatres; at another she stopped the rehearsal of an opéra bouffe to preach to the mummers—in phrases that were remembrances of the extemporaneous prayers of the Wesleyan Church—of the advantages of an earnest, working religious life. (503)

The poles that structured Kate’s existence have collapsed. On the brink of death, Kate can no longer keep her “two lives” apart, and the figure for this, appropriately enough, is carnival. Kate’s experience of her own death becomes “like a costume ball, where chastity grinned from behind a mask that vice was looking for, while vice hid his nakedness in some of the robes that chastity had let fall” (504). This, indeed, is bourgeois hysteria at its peak. Like the upper-middle-class hysteric examined by Stallybrass and White, who “in the absence of social forms [of the carnivalesque] . . . attempt to produce their own by pastiche and parody in an effort to embody symbolically their distress” (174), Kate creates her “private carnival” out of shreds of lived experience. Her nightmare of random mixing is Moore’s own, recalling his admonition in “Mummer-Worship” that the abolition of either virtue or vice means “death to the race.” Kate’s own death is marked by an unholy synthesis of her two lives, “A point at which . . . the two became one . . . [and] she began to sing her famous song: ‘Look at me here, look at me there,’ alternately with the Wesleyan hymns. Sometimes in her delirium she even fitted the words of one on to the tune of the other” (504). Of course, the rituals of religious devotion and theatrical performance have been linked throughout the novel, but Kate’s final “show” takes this pairing to its macabre extreme. Singing the part of the fetching Serpolette, the chorus now revealed as the statement of her self-division, Kate demands a last look—and displays to us the abject, waxen body of the living corpse.

Kate’s actual death is something of an afterthought, unattended by any but the reader and unmourned by Dick, for whom his wife’s death has been a long time coming. There is, indeed, a feeling of inevitability and exhaustion in the reader’s death watch, which is rewarded by one of the most unsentimental deaths in Victorian fiction. As though to recoup that lost sentiment as moral
value, early critics of the novel were determined to extract a moral from Kate’s
death, either about the evils of drink or the evils of theatrical life. But if \textit{A Mummer’s Wife} has a moral, and even suggesting that it might runs directly
against the grain of its much-discussed naturalism, it concerns the dangers of
fiction and the failure to police cultural boundaries—two related issues, since
sentiment acts as a link between various levels and forms. While Moore’s
attempt at bringing down the mainstream fictional establishment is profoundly
anti–middle class, then, it is not anti-class. Moore abhors what he sees as the
sentimentality, hypocrisy, and prudery of middle-class life, but he is all for keep-
ing the classes distinct. \textit{A Mummer’s Wife} is not, therefore, anti-theater, since the
theater exists as a space of and for labor and as a necessary zone of abjection, but
it is antitheatricality, since theatricality represents the displacement of the the-
ater into other realms. Moore, in other words, is a great defender of theatrical
practice, as long as it stays on the other side of the curtain.

With its deathbed carnival and theatrical mayhem, the final chapter of \textit{A Mummer’s Wife} delivers yet another image of the carnivalesque abjection that
orbited the figure of theater throughout the nineteenth century. While earlier
novels use that image to help construct the private space of fiction, however,
\textit{A Mummer’s Wife} links fictional sentiment to theatricalized abjection in the
wretched figure of Kate Lennox, or “Sentimental Kate” as the prostitutes call
her. Through the spectacle of this degraded female body—tied both to theater
and to popular fiction—Moore constructs a high cultural position like that of
Flaubert’s master anatomist. It is with this scientific, cerebral, and disinterested
male gaze that Moore looks at the dying Kate’s grotesque performance and asks
us to see both the bloated carcass of the Victorian triple-decker novel and the
beginnings of the new novelistic aesthetic that would, at the close of the nine-
teenth century, inform modernism in all its formalism and aesthetic distance.

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I would like to close with what I take to be the moment of conception for \textit{A Mummer’s Wife}—or, rather, Moore’s retroactive construction of it as a myth of
origins. It comes from one of Moore’s autobiographies, \textit{The Confessions of a
Young Man}, in which he chronicles his life as a young aesthete in France and
the birth of his artistic genius. Moore wrote in a later preface that “the book is
a sort of genesis; the seed of everything I have written since will be found therein” (xi). Published in 1888, three years after \textit{A Mummer’s Wife}, \textit{The Con-
fessions} begins not in France but in the Ireland of the early 1860s, when eleven-
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year-old George overhears his parents talking about a scandalous new novel that “the world is reading” (2)—Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Entranced, the child steals the novel and reads it “eagerly, passionately, vehemently” (3). Moore records: “I read its successor and its successor. I read until I came to a book called *The Doctor’s Wife*—a lady who loved Shelley and Byron. There was magic, there was revelation in the name, and Shelley became by soul’s divinity” (3). This is the seminal moment in Moore’s artistic life: from Shelley, Moore goes on to high Romantic poetry, “serious” British novelists, British and Continental philosophers, and then the French writers who would be so crucial to his artistic development. In this early moment of revelation, which Moore calls the first “echo-augury” (2) of his literary calling, we see the consuming love of popular fiction transformed into what would be a lasting worship of male artistry. One could argue that Moore spent his life turning an early identification with the female reader (Isabel Gilbert, no less) into the pursuit of male genius. In the bare outline of Moore’s conversion narrative we can see his construction of genius forming itself out of the raw material of “feminine” popular culture, restaging fictional history and personal genealogy as the stuff of high art.