

MARKETING FICTIONS: PRODUCT BRANDING IN AMERICAN LITERATURE
AND CULTURE, 1890-1915

By

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To Amy, for your love and support.

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INTRODUCTION

MARKETING FICTIONS

This dissertation is a study of the relationship between product branding and American literature and culture. In recent years, representations and analyses of this relationship have proliferated. Colson Whitehead's novel *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006), for example, begins with a description of what its protagonist, a "nomenclature consultant," does for a living: "He came up with the names. They were good times. He came up with the names and like any good parent he knocked them around to teach them life lessons" (22, 3). Whitehead's protagonist has reached the pinnacle of his profession by subjecting his "names"—for individual products and stores, retail chains, entire corporations—to rigorous scrutiny in various signifying contexts. "He bent them to see if they'd break, he dragged them behind cars by heavy metal chains, he exposed them to high temperatures for extended periods of time," Whitehead writes. "How else was he to know if they were ready for what the world had in store for them?" (3). By "what the world had in store for them," Whitehead means, essentially, a cultural life. Are the names ready to face the celebration, transformation, or disfigurement that will greet them in different cultural settings? In his naming of Apex, the bandage available in colors that match every skin tone, Whitehead's protagonist has demonstrated his skill in negotiating these cultural settings. Nevertheless, renaming a town with a hidden racial legacy, the assignment that occupies him during the novel, proves nearly impossible. For

Whitehead, the relationship between branding and culture remains shifting and elusive, a subject of persistent, absorbing interest.

Other contemporary novelists, as well as journalists, clearly share this interest.¹ Branding has already surfaced as perhaps the defining epistemological structure of the twenty-first century, crossing race, class, and gender lines, bridging old and new media, and fueling economic globalization. While it remains most commonly a business strategy for selling consumer products—Captain Crunch cereal, Birkenstock shoes, the iPhone—the forms, techniques, and organizational arrangements that constitute this strategy have been appropriated for marketing in a wide variety of other contexts. Cities, politicians, universities, and even everyday individuals have all been discussed as having brands.² If, therefore, it seems easier at times to approach the subject of branding in a negative sense (i.e., is there anything that does *not* have a brand?), its current profusion makes one fact clear: branding always functions in excess of its prescribed business purposes. This is why Whitehead’s protagonist focuses so intently on “what the world had in store” for his brands. They are both products of cultural formation and apparatuses through which culture is formed. Furthermore, though Whitehead does not say so, they always have been. Branding originated in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century as a business practice responding to, among other things, manufacturing standardization, widening distribution and communication networks, and increased competition. But even in its earliest years, I will demonstrate, branding was as much a cultural as a business concern.

This dissertation examines the relationship between branding and culture by tracing its development in American literature from 1890 to 1915, dates that roughly

approximate, in the first instance, branding's emergence as a generally recognized business practice and the peaking of American literary realism, and in the second, the widespread adoption of sophisticated market research techniques along with the arrival of modernism. My goal in pairing these two constantly intersecting historical trajectories, one business and one literary, is to reveal their mutual constitution. An example of a moment in which this mutual constitution becomes clear can be found in Harold Frederic's *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896), a novel about a simple, sincere young minister, Theron Ware, whose posting to a village in upstate New York brings him into contact with several decidedly modern figures. When one of these figures, the seductive aesthete Celia Madden, faults Theron for misconstruing the meaning of a kiss she had given him earlier, he replies accusingly: "You should have had pity on my inexperience and told me just what brand of kiss it was I was getting. Probably I ought to have been able to distinguish, but you see I was brought up in the country—on a farm. They don't have kisses in assorted varieties there" (Frederic 329). Stunned by Celia's rejection of his advances, Theron expresses his frustration and anger in terms that reveal branding's power to alter the way experiences are perceived and described.

His doing so is significant in two different respects. Perhaps most obviously, Theron's explanation of the different meanings a kiss can convey in terms of the "assorted varieties" of, say, soap or crackers that readers might encounter in an advertisement, catalog, or department store suggests that novels from the period helped explain branding to literary audiences. Whether by naming specific brands directly, as do William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court* (1889), and Edith Wharton's *The House of*

Mirth (1905), or by referring to them more generally as a class or category, as *Damnation* does here, novels kept branding in the public eye, consistently serving up this new phenomenon for readers' identification and inspection. As the social and sexual contexts of Theron's rejoinder suggest, however, novels did more than simply announce branding as a subject of possible interest. By virtue of their psychological depth, cultural cachet, and social and educational functions, novels offered instruction in the complex uses to which branding could be put. They placed brands in diverse fictional settings that helped to explain their social, economic, racial, and sexual significance, gradually acculturating readers to an emerging era in which branding commonly supplied new formal and thematic structures for thought, feeling, and sociality. As a result, novels proved instrumental in the successful growth and development of branding as both business practice and cultural phenomenon.

Converse effects—branding's influence on the growth and development of the novel—are less immediately apparent. Understanding this influence is crucial to constructing an account of the relationship between branding and culture at the turn of the twentieth century, however, and consequently the primary aim of this dissertation will be to uncover the ways in which authors shaped their work in response to the rise of branding. Put broadly, I will argue first that changes in narrative form around the turn of the century can be described at least partly as adaptations to a consumer marketplace transformed by branding. Second, I will argue that these adaptive moments can themselves be read as theorizations of branding's impact on American culture. Varying attitudes toward branding, I will suggest, helped motivate the conception and implementation of three narrative forms—realism, naturalism, and modernism—

identifiable in this period. Uncovering a new cultural context for studying these forms, as I am, does not necessarily change our identification of the specific narrative properties associated with them. But it does change our understanding of how these properties originated and what cultural functions they were thought to serve.

In Frederic's case, branding serves as an impetus toward naturalism. Theron's reply to Celia characterizes branding as a meaning-making system that thwarts attempts at individual self-assertion. It is possible to read his sarcasm as stemming from the notion that, if "getting" a kiss actually means receiving a particular "brand of kiss," Theron is merely angry at having received what he thinks is the wrong brand. But his pointed reference to growing up "on a farm" and never learning "to distinguish" between "assorted varieties" seems less apologetic in tone than simply frustrated. And what frustrates Theron is not receiving a misleading "brand of kiss," but rather the larger fact of a society in which kisses have brands. For Frederic, branding is ubiquitous and coercive; resolutely cultural, it nevertheless acts with the incontrovertible power of a natural force. Insofar as it contributes to the deterministic form of the novel, then, branding at least partly motivates this instantiation of American literary naturalism.

Theron's brief display of awareness of a burgeoning consumer culture that shapes his thoughts and actions is in many ways typical of literature's engagement with branding and other aspects of this culture in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century period. Though it emerges directly only occasionally in Frederic's novel, consumer culture and its web of connections to other social and economic developments—from urbanization to scientific management to the suffragist movement—seem always to lurk just beneath the surface. My effort to expose and explore these connections in the context of the

development of narrative form places this project within what Susan Strasser notes is “variously called the study of ‘consumer culture,’ ‘consumerism,’ or ‘consumption,’ which comprehends all of these” (“Making” 756). As recently as 1997, Don Slater claimed that “[c]onsumer culture is probably less a field . . . and more a spaghetti junction of intersecting disciplines, methodologies, [and] politics” (2). While celebrating this heterogeneity, more recent state-of-the-field essays have maintained that, though its status as a field remains contested, the study of consumption has emerged as a more or less identifiable, and certainly influential, intellectual endeavor. Strasser suggested in 2002 that “[o]perating with neither the benefits nor the strictures of scholarly tradition, consumption is becoming a player in the master narrative, a topic in the textbook” (“Making” 756). And in 2006, David Steigerwald argued that “consumer interpretations of American history have come of age” and that “consumption . . . might well be the defining thread of American life” (385). This dissertation adds both to the heterogeneous condition of studies in consumption history and to the intellectual momentum these studies have recently gained.

Surprisingly, given this momentum, no comprehensive account of the origins and early years of product branding in the United States has yet been produced. The historical narrative of branding’s growth and development informing my literary analysis consequently derives from a variety of sources addressing the cultural history of business organizations, manufacturing, distribution, sales, advertising, publishing, and public relations.³ These studies generally point to widespread industrialization allowing a rapid increase in production of consumer goods following the Civil War as a source for several important business innovations, including branding. According to Rob Schorman, this

increase in “newly standardized” and “almost infinitely replicable” goods created a mass market in which “consumers no longer knew the producer, met the seller face to face, or had firsthand knowledge of an object’s history or construction.” In these conditions, “advertising assumed a new importance in communicating information and attitudes about the world of goods. The result was a culture distinguished not simply by an emphasis on ‘consumption’ but by the high-intensity, high-volume circulation of symbolic goods” (Schorman 7). Faced with competitors capable of producing nearly identical goods at nearly identical prices, large manufacturers began inventing ways to perceptually differentiate their products—to transform their goods into “symbolic goods.”

As Schorman suggests, advertising played a crucial role in this perceptual differentiation process. But in order to do so, it had to undergo a transformation of its own. In one setting or another—posters, broadsides, pamphlets, newspapers—advertisements had circulated widely in the United States since at least the mid-eighteenth century. Their form, moreover, remained relatively consistent over this period: lots of detailed information, dense black type, occasional crude drawings or woodcuts for illustration. They conveyed pertinent facts clearly and directly without noticeable consideration of the differing readers they might address; advertisements for a specific product tended to convey information about the product’s features, price, location, availability, and other relevant terms of sale using plain text. Pamela Walker Laird calls this form the “announcement-style” (23) of advertising, and notes that it remained the dominant form for both manufacturers and retailers until the Civil War (fig 0-1).

Afterward, however, the growing abundance of mass-manufactured goods caused advertising to shift from an “announcement-style” aimed at communicating information toward a more persuasive style aimed at generating consumer desire. Increasingly vivid and detailed images began to feature more prominently than text as advertisements sought less to facilitate the act of purchase than to imagine for consumers all of the benefits and improvements a product would bring to their lives. Through these advertisements, products began to acquire proper names and personalities as well as stories and histories that made them unique in consumers’ minds (fig. 0-2). A product’s functional equivalence to other products seemed to disappear in the face of such perceptual uniqueness. Similarly, doubts about a product’s quality and suitability arising from its distant origin and unknown conditions of manufacture faded with the personal familiarity born of repeated names, slogans, and images. Laird points to this shift in advertising methods, which accelerated throughout the 1870s and 1880s, as the “emergence of modern product marketing, with brand-name advertising as its primary tool.” Armed with this tool, “[m]anufacturers experimented with introducing their branded products to the public and with generating both general demand for their type of product and specific demand for their brands” (31). By the 1890s, “brands” consistently substituted for individual products in the thinking of both manufacturers and consumers.⁴

Laird’s description of this development is typical of accounts of late nineteenth-century advertising in associating the period with the rise of branding but failing to rigorously distinguish this practice, either in conception or in effect. Brands are tacitly defined as the symbolic meanings that accrued to marks of ownership as a result of a postbellum economic transition from proprietary to corporate capitalism.⁵ Beyond this



Armour's White Soap

is an absolutely pure, snow-white, floating soap. For toilet, bath, nursery and fine laundry work. Cleanses thoroughly and leaves the skin soft as velvet.

Made in two sizes—a 5-cent cake which is most suitable for nursery and toilet, and a larger cake for laundry and bathroom use.



Figure 0-2. Advertisement for Armour's White Soap. *McClure's Magazine*, April 1897. After the Civil War, advertisements began to feature slogans, images, and text that told consumers less about products and more about themselves.

simple definition, however, few distinctions have been drawn. The problem stems partly from a lack of clarity, even in the nineteenth century, concerning what activities counted as branding and what ideas, events, and objects counted as brands. It also stems from a kind of purposeful mystery surrounding branding; according to this logic, defining it too closely, particularly in the case of individual brands, would limit its potency. Thomas Frank has recently satirized this attitude by defining a brand as “a complex thing, not easily understood by the earthbound and the pessimistic . . . a relationship, a thing of nuance and complexity, of irony and coy evasiveness.” In elaborating this definition, however, he hits upon a useful formulation: “Brands,” Frank writes, “are . . . interactive myths that earn our loyalty through endless repetition and constant adjustment by people of learning and subtlety” (“Brand” 74). What is striking about this formulation is its suggestion that brands are essentially simple stories, “myths” that emerge from the “interacti[ons]” of manufacturer and consumer with a given product.

Careful scrutiny of how the development of a consumer culture in the late nineteenth century has been represented by cultural historians reveals an implicit recognition of branding’s narrative construction. Richard Ohmann, for example, describes catalogs produced by Sears and Montgomery Ward as well as advertisements in popular magazines as “social spaces” that “provoked the imagination to new visions of self, family, status, the good life” (79). He notes that increased spending on advertising meant that consumers “had striking visual evidence of a burgeoning cultural practice, and came to participate more often in it” (83). He also notes that advertising agencies, which first appeared in the late 1860s, “brought illustration in to stimulate imagination and desire, and to spin webs of association around the product” for the purpose of creating an

“alternate visual world” (104). Ohmann’s charting of the various mechanisms that together constituted early branding efforts never results in a plainly narrative definition of branding. But his repeated use of what might be seen as narrative proxies—“new visions,” “webs of association,” “alternate visual world”—suggest that such a definition could serve well in explaining the collective effect of these mechanisms in the consciousness of consumers.

Indeed, business historian and media theorist Douglas Holt has recently made explicit the narrative basis of branding that the work of Ohmann and others implies. Holt argues that while “[n]ames, logos, and designs are the material markers of the brand,” the brand as such only forms when these “markers” acquire a known history; it “emerges as various ‘authors’ tell stories that involve the brand.” These “authors” include “companies, the culture industries, intermediaries (such as critics and retail salespeople), and customers.” The “stories” they weave “have plots and characters” and “rely heavily on metaphor,” and though “[s]ometimes a single common story emerges as a consensus view,” usually “several different stories circulate widely in society.” According to Holt, a “brand emerges when these collective understandings become firmly established.” They then “become conventional, and so are continually reinforced because they are treated as truths in everyday interactions” (3). Once a sufficient number of similar stories involving a product accumulate, in other words, their commonalities form the basis of a brand—a shared narrative understanding of the product’s identity and meaning.⁶

In addition to its directness about branding’s narrative basis, including the transformation of multiple entities giving symbolic life to a product into “authors,” Holt’s account of branding is significant in two respects. First, it emphasizes branding’s

fundamentally abstract nature. A brand is not something that may be physically encountered. Rather, it is a collection of aftereffects of physical encounters with various marketing instruments: “[n]ames, logos, and designs,” as Holt observes, but also slogans, songs, advertisements, packaging, endorsements, contests, and giveaways. Second, and following from this point, Holt’s account suggests not only that branding’s most common ontological form—particularly when viewed historically—is the advertisement, but also that advertisements alone cannot fully register the scope, complexity, or cultural impact of the brands they participate in creating. Because brands are substantially defined by the experiences and interactions consumers have with advertisements, studying advertisements is critical to forming an account of the relationship between branding and culture. The bulk of this account, however, must come from analysis of such experiences and interactions, whether arising from encounters with specific advertisements or with the larger fact of advertising as a business practice and cultural phenomenon. This dissertation treats late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature as an especially detailed and suggestive record of these encounters.

While Frederic’s *The Damnation of Theron Ware* and certain other texts from the period refer to branding directly, then, most approach the subject through the more easily represented advertisement. This is the path taken, for example, in “An Advertising Genius,” a vignette appearing in the January 1895 issue of *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*. In this brief piece, Sam Wilson, a salesman, tells some companions about the exploits of his friend, who is a grocer and a “true artist” of advertising. Sam’s friend had become famous for advertising campaigns that involved dropping worms with business cards attached to them into his competitor’s apple barrels as well as printing short prayers

on crackers in order to “do away with the form of saying grace.” After acquiring a massive amount of baking powder, however, the grocer finds himself stuck: “[i]t needed advertising; but he did not feel that he could afford to buy enough space in the newspapers to make himself known; for it was his theory that the name is what folks buy; they don’t care for the article so much” (326). Sam’s friend eventually hits upon a memorable scheme for advertising the baking powder, but the key to his “genius,” a commitment to using advertisements to foster stories about his products, has already been revealed. Advertising provides the language and setting for this vignette’s engagement with emerging consumer culture, but branding—the process by which the “name” comes to suggest a narrative that confers value on consumers—is ultimately its subject of interest.

Branding is also, as the grocer’s outlandish exploits indicate, its satirical target, which suggests not only that turn-of-the-century authors noticed the development of specific conventions coalescing around early branding efforts, but also that they invested a significant amount of time and energy in producing a sophisticated critique of these conventions. Priscilla Leonard’s poem “The Advertising Girl,” for instance, appeared in *The Century* in 1897 and points out the unnaturally consistent beauty and cheerfulness of women featured in advertisements for a wide range of products. “She was a most enchanting girl, / Rosy and plump, yet full of grace,” Leonard writes, pretending to encounter an advertising girl in person. The dialogue that ensues recounts this figure’s “mirthful” life spent donning new clothes, playing with limitless “kodaks” and pianos, and riding bicycles. No worries cloud her view: “Ah! brighter bliss no monarch feels / Than crowns the advertising girl,” Leonard concludes (640). E. Irenæus Stevenson’s “A

Pslam of Art,” a poem appearing in *Harper’s* the preceding year, extends this critique to advertisements’ depictions of nature. “Oh, your rocks must be triangular, your clouds must all be square!” the poem closes, “And a garden must be rank with crazy lilies; / And raw red and blue and yellow must be jostling each his fellow— / And you thus have art for Trade—and Cash—and Sillies” (488). Like Leonard, Stevenson assumes that readers are sensitive enough to the typical forms of this “art” to recognize and appreciate a send-up of its conventions. Each of these authors seems to delight both in the act of critiquing branding and in the witty poetic outcome of this act.

As a result, “The Advertising Girl” and “A Pslam of Art” can be seen to represent, on a small level, the way culture was formed and literature shaped in dialogue with the early development of branding. In the pages that follow, I will at times make reference to specific events, trends, and figures in this development, as well as to signs, like Leonard’s and Stevenson’s poems, of branding’s deepening cultural life. However, my purpose in doing so is simply to contextualize a larger argument about how and why American literature underwent several complex transformations around the turn of the twentieth century. David Leverenz’s *Paternalism Incorporated: Fables of American Fatherhood, 1865-1940* (2003) has recently analyzed this literature in the context of the rise of corporate capitalism in the United States. In addition, Peter Stoneley’s *Consumerism and American Girl’s Literature, 1860-1940* (2003) and James C. Davis’s *Commerce in Color: Race, Consumer Culture, and American Literature, 1893-1933* (2007) have discussed it more specifically in relation to the emergence of consumer culture. Each of these studies gives relatively little consideration to consumer culture’s influence on narrative form, however, and none treats branding in detail. By formulating

an account of branding's structure and function and demonstrating its integral role in American literary history, this dissertation charts a hitherto unrecognized narrative of cultural production.

The narrative begins, in chapters 1 and 2, with a discussion of the mutual dependence of branding and realism. Whereas realism boosted branding efforts by documenting names, images, signs, and other brand elements, as well as the contexts in which they acquired meaning, branding supplied realism with highly contrived fantasy narratives against which it could constitute itself formally. I argue that realism's "refusal to declare this thing or that thing unworthy of notice," in William Dean Howells's words, developed as a response to the simplistic and often misleading product narratives beginning to engage consumers' attention in the 1880s (*Editor's* 22). In chapter 1, I situate Howells's writings from the 1880s and 1890s as a record of his familiarity with and critical attitude toward branding. Through an extended reading of *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), I reveal his conception of realism's focus on detailed observation and objective reportage as a formal countermeasure to branding's oversimplifications. With this countermeasure, I suggest, Howells hoped to at least partly undo what he saw as representational injustice perpetrated by the rise of consumer marketing. Chapter 2 extends this logic to the later career of Mark Twain, arguing that Twain conceived of realism as a narrative form purposefully incommensurate with the brand he cultivated for himself during his early years as an author. By the early 1890s, my readings of *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court* (1889), *The American Claimant* (1892), and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) show, Twain felt too constrained by what reviewers were calling the "genuine Mark Twain brand" (Alden 215) to fully and accurately

communicate his vision of late nineteenth-century American culture. Realism functioned for Twain as a critique of authorship's increasing abstraction and simplification for branding reasons.

In chapters 3 and 4, I turn to naturalism. Often described either as synonymous with realism, a subset of realism, or simply not a narrative form at all, naturalism becomes in my argument both distinctly separate from realism and uniquely constituted as a form through its relationship to branding. This relationship, I demonstrate, involves naturalism's formal registration of the incontrovertible force many had begun to identify with branding by the turn of the twentieth century. In contrast to realists like Howells and Twain, naturalist authors suggested that efforts to occupy a position outside branding where critique might be possible were ultimately futile, and they shaped their texts accordingly. Chapter 3 traces this sense of futile resistance in the writing of Stephen Crane. Particularly in *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), I argue, Crane's immersion in the brand-saturated world of Manhattan and the Jersey Shore in the early 1890s emerges as a formal commitment to branding's naturalization. In chapter 4, I read Edith Wharton's "The Descent of Man" (1904) and *The House of Mirth* (1905) as accounts of the gender inequality enforced by this naturalization. Close attention to the circulation and consumption of women such as Lily Bart, Wharton suggests, reveals their status as branded persons. I contend that one consequence of this revelation is a necessary reconsideration of arguments that posit the liberatory potential of women's relationship to consumer culture.

Finally, chapters 5 and 6 address modernism. From the view of branding's deterministic power evident in literary naturalism emerged, in the early twentieth century,

a belief in the inutility of organizing narrative form as the expression of this power. This inutility became especially noticeable as branding began to occupy an increasingly central position in the publishing industry and authors began to contemplate strategies for perceptually differentiating their products in the same way that manufacturers of other kinds of consumer products now almost universally differentiated theirs. Modernism's constitutive interest in formal innovation and experimentation, I argue, is at least partly the outcome of an effort by authors to construct product narratives—brands—surrounding their work. Chapter 5 uncovers an explanation as well as example of this account of modernism in Edna Ferber's popular series of stories about the traveling saleswoman Emma McChesney (*Roast Beef, Medium* [1913], *Personality Plus* [1914], *Emma McChesney & Co.* [1915]). And chapter 6 locates this account in early American cinema. By examining cinema's transition in the early 1910s from a discourse of corporate authorship to a discourse emphasizing star authorship, I reveal widespread anxieties in the early film industry about the relative merits of competing forms of branding. The chapter concludes with an explanation of how the visualization of these anxieties in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Cheat* (1915) suggests branding's role in the development of the early film industry and more broadly in the emergence of cinematic modernism.

If it seems a bit odd to end a dissertation on product branding in American literature and culture with a discussion of cinema, this decision is nonetheless a historically fitting one, given that cinema would go on to be more closely associated with branding than perhaps any other art, at least until the advent of television.⁷ This is not to say that branding became any less relevant to the making of literature and literary culture

after 1915. Indeed, my brief discussion of Ernest Hemingway in the epilogue will suggest just the opposite. But what is striking about *The Cheat* is its articulation of the problem of branding's relationship to narrative form not as a question of *whether* films should be formed in accordance with their status as branded consumer products, but rather as a question of *how* this might be done most successfully. Such an articulation would in all likelihood not have been possible without the previous quarter century's frequent and vigorous discussion of branding—its locations, components, protocols, functions, and meanings. By excavating this discussion in the work of Howells, Twain, Crane, Wharton, Ferber, and others, this dissertation demonstrates literature's vital role in preparing consumers to recognize and to understand what would become one of the most important cultural influences of the twentieth century.

INTRODUCTION NOTES

¹ In *Glamorama* (1998), Bret Easton Ellis's characters take brand obsession to absurd levels. The narrator in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) is driven by the pervasiveness of branding, among other things, to promote the experiential authenticity of the fistfight. And the protagonist of William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003) is a business analyst whose sensitivity to certain brands is so strong that they sometimes provoke allergic attacks. Among journalists, too, branding has drawn a great deal of attention. In *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (1997), Thomas Frank identifies the appropriation of anti-establishment sentiments as critical to the perpetuation of the business establishment. Naomi Klein's *No Logo: No Space, No Choice, No Jobs* (2000) describes branding's relationship to globalization and its discontents. In addition, Alissa Quart's *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers* (2003) documents the influence of marketing on teenage social behavior and development. These are only a few of the more prominent examples of this kind of literature.

² In September 2005, for example, Mayor Bill Purcell of Nashville, Tennessee announced a coordinated effort among city agencies and civic groups to promote what was labeled the "Nashville Music City brand" (see Lewis). Just a few months after winning election to the Senate, Barack Obama held a marathon meeting with senior advisers to work out

the key pieces of an “Obama brand” (see Dorning and Parsons). Virginia Tech has been said to face a major challenge in attempting “win back its brand” after the campus shootings of April 2007 (see Mangan). Finally, Tom Peters’s bestselling *The Brand You 50* (1999), a self-help guide, offers fifty pieces of advice on transforming oneself from an individual into a brand.

³ In addition to those cited parenthetically, these sources include, on business organizations, Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (1977), Lamoreaux, *The Great Merger Movement in American Business, 1895-1904* (1985), Noble, *America by Design: Science, Technology, and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism* (1977), Perrow, *Organizing America: Wealth, Power, and the Origins of Corporate Capitalism* (2002), Roy, *Socializing Capital: The Rise of the Large Industrial Corporation in America* (1997), Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916: The Market, The Law, and Politics* (1988), Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (1967), Tone, *The Business of Benevolence: Industrial Paternalism in Progressive America* (1997), and Zunz, *Making America Corporate, 1870-1920* (1990); on manufacturing, Chandler, *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism* (1990) and Scranton, *Endless Novelty: Specialty Production and American Industrialization, 1865-1925* (1997); on distribution and sales, Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (1986) and Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (1993); on advertising, Davis, *Living Up to the Ads: Gender Fictions of the 1920s* (2000), Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (1976), Fox, *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and Its Creators* (1984); Koehn, *Brand New: How Entrepreneurs Earned Consumers’ Trust from Wedgwood to Dell* (2001); Laird, *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing* (1998); Lears, *Fables of Abundance: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (1993), Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (1985), Norris, *Advertising and the Transformation of American Society, 1865-1920* (1990), Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (1989), Tedlow, *New and Improved: The Story of Mass Marketing in America* (1990), and Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (1982); on publishing, Garvey, *The Adman in the Parlor: Magazines and the Gendering of Consumer Culture, 1880s to 1910s* (1996), Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1885-1905* (1957), and Pendergrast, *Creating the Modern Man: American Magazines and Consumer Culture, 1885-1905* (2000); and on public relations, Galambos, *The Public Image of Big Business in America, 1880-1940: A Quantitative Study in Social Change* (1975), Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (1998), and Tedlow, *Keeping the Corporate Image: Public Relations and Business, 1900-1950* (1979); as well as numerous articles.

⁴ For an older account of this shift in advertising and the emergence of brand names, see Potter 168-72.

⁵ The difference between these two economic systems, simply put, is that in proprietary capitalism, owners are responsible for operating their businesses, while in corporate capitalism, they are not. Corporate capitalism consequently allows greater economies of scale, which in turn both necessitates and facilitates branding. As expected, then, this system will receive significant attention in the chapters that follow, and proprietary capitalism will not. For a detailed study of the workings of proprietary capitalism specifically in relation to nineteenth-century Philadelphia's textile industry, see Scranton, *Proprietary Capitalism*.

⁶ Hence, throughout this dissertation I will use "brand" and "product narrative" interchangeably.

⁷ For an account of the relationship between branding and the film industry focusing largely on the pre-television era, see Staiger.

CHAPTER I

THE MAN OF LETTERS AS A MAN OF BRANDING: *A HAZARD OF NEW FORTUNES* AND THE “CASTORIA OF LITERATURE”

Excited by the modest success of his literary magazine's first few issues, Fulkerson, the tireless promoter of *Every Other Week* in William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), can hardly contain his enthusiasm: “It's the talk of the clubs and the dinner tables; children cry for it; it's the Castoria of literature, and the Pearline of art, the Won't-be-happy-till-he-gets-it of every man, woman, and child in this vast city. I knew we could capture the country; but my goodness!” (199). Castoria, a stomach tonic, and Pearline, a colored glassware collection, were well known brands at the time Howells's novel was published; “children cry for it” was Castoria's slogan and “won't be happy till he gets it” was a jingle associated with the Pears soap brand. Though offered in Fulkerson's voice, this litany of brands and their attendant catchphrases suggests Howells's attentiveness to the way names, characters, settings, plots, designs, and slogans associated with brands had come by the late nineteenth century to influence social relations, altering private discourse and reconstituting collective experience in terms offered by the brands. For Howells, branding generated a proliferating web of product narratives whose components constantly threatened to surface in and transform both literary narratives and the market in which they competed. Fulkerson's likening a successful literary magazine to a marketable stomach tonic, tinted vase, or bar of soap effectively announces a new era in American literary history in which

product narratives and literary narratives have begun to socially, economically, culturally, and formally intersect.

This chapter charts the relationship between branding and realism in Howells's writings from the 1880s and 1890s and in the development of American literary realism more broadly. Howells's consideration of branding and realism is most strongly evident in the generative tensions which build throughout *A Hazard of New Fortunes* between Fulkerson, the brand-obsessed publicity manager, and Basil March, the editor.

Fulkerson's aggressive brand building, I will suggest, is a major factor in March's adoption over the course of the novel of a realist aesthetic. But a preoccupation with branding shapes Howells's thinking about realism not just in *Hazard*, but in several important writings appearing in this period. In "The Man of Letters as a Man of Business" (1893), for example, he concludes that, "strictly speaking," the author is "an artist merely, and is allied to the great mass of wageworkers who are paid for the labor they have put into the thing done or the thing made" (445). Nevertheless, Howells notes that the author must eventually create a "market for his wares," or else "society will leave him to starve" (429). It is this transformative moment, the conversion from "man of letters" (wageworker) to "man of business" (marketer), which, in its "profane," "false," and "vulgar" necessity, continually haunts Howells's "inward vision" (429) in several of the defining novels of American literary realism. Consequently, these novels, and particularly *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, may be read as attempts to negotiate competing late nineteenth-century imperatives of literariness and marketability.

What emerges from these negotiations, I will argue, is an account of Howellsian realism and branding which shows the two to be mutually dependent. Fulkerson's brand-

packed outburst evokes the realist novel's interest in what Howells calls in *Criticism and Fiction* (1891) the "phrase and carriage of every-day life," that is, its predisposition for announcing, describing, and popularizing contemporary brands (10). Readers of *Hazard* are implicitly asked in this particular passage whether Castoria and Pearline are names worth knowing, whether they are acceptable as terms of praise, and finally, whether these terms of praise constitute an idiom more capable than conventional language of molding consensus and generating group enthusiasm. Fulkerson models an affirmative response to these questions by celebrating brands as new forms of shared knowledge and market affiliation. March, on the other hand, models a negative response. That this realist novel represents both positions in a detailed and life-like manner is consistent with Amy Kaplan's influential argument that the realists "engage in an enormous act of construction to organize, reform, and control the social world" (10); allowing characters to talk about and interact with various brands was for Howells and others a useful strategy for managing a social environment increasingly in flux. Moreover, late nineteenth-century brands became a "cultural shorthand," as Ellen Gruber Garvey has pointed out (*Adman* 7), and "when they appeared in fiction, they quickly indicated to readers that the characters inhabited the same universe as their own" (*Adman* 15). For both of these reasons—the need to represent (and thereby control) a changing world, and the need to cultivate a broad readership—realists incorporated brands into their novels. Consequently, realism aided in furthering readers' understanding of and engagement with branding as a business practice.

Scholars have long been interested in this process, but have not directly considered the prospect that, just as realism proved instrumental in the development of

branding, branding proved equally instrumental in the development of realism.¹ My reading of Howells suggests that branding affected realism not merely by enriching the material available to novelists interested in transcribing the “motives and passions” of “men and women as they are” (Howells, *Criticism* 104), but rather more substantively, by supplying the motivation for performing this kind of transcription in the first place. For Howells, realism’s focus on objective renderings of social and economic issues grew out of the need for a formal countermeasure to the simplistic fantasies evident in the brands increasingly saturating late nineteenth-century consumer culture. To the narrow, wholly unselfconscious product narratives authored by Gilded Age corporations and advertising agencies and manifested in such slogans as “children cry for it” and “won’t be happy till he gets it,” Howells opposed complex literary narratives whose broad scope and wholesale cataloguing of objects, events, and emotions proved finally irreducible to a consumerist appeal. In doing so, I will ultimately argue, Howells distinguished himself from contemporaries by crafting a realist form that was unique in its constitutive resistance to branding, and yet, due to its persistence and notoriety, also a highly successful brand.

“Mystic Devices”: Beer, Paint, Patent Medicines

It is no coincidence that in 1890, the year *A Hazard of New Fortunes* appeared, the J. Walter Thompson Company became the first advertising agency in the United States to surpass one million dollars in annual billings (*Emergence*). A milestone for the burgeoning advertising industry, the Thompson Company’s achievement indexes the degree to which businesses in the United States had become increasingly interested in

branding. Correspondingly, Fulkerson's dominating presence in *Hazard* suggests the extent to which branding was also a growing interest of Howells's. By placing Fulkerson, along with the editor of *Every Other Week*, March, at the center of his novel, Howells placed branding under scrutiny in a manner calculated to reveal its particular relationship to the form and function of literary realism.

In many ways, *Hazard* simply develops in more extended and analytical fashion a preoccupation with branding that appears in his fiction as early as *A Modern Instance* (1882). This novel, which chronicles the troubled marriage and eventual divorce of journalist Bartley Hubbard and his young wife, Marcia Gaylord, examines branding through subtly varying descriptions of the beer Bartley habitually consumes.² Having settled into a new house with Marcia and into a new position as editor of the *Boston Events*, Bartley settles also into the habit of washing down both lunch and dinner with several bottles of beer: "He was rather particular about his beer, which he had sent in by the gross—it became cheaper that way; after trying both the Cincinnati and the Milwaukee lagers, and making a cursory test of the Boston brand, he had settled down upon the American Tivoli; it was cheap, and you could drink a couple of bottles without feeling it" (255). Bartley's drinking habit noticeably sets him apart from teetotalers like Ricker, a fellow journalist, and Kinney, a friend from his bachelor days. Even as his drinking begins to harm his career and his friends turn against him, Bartley continues to refer affectionately to his brand of choice: "He joked about the three fingers of fat on his ribs, and frankly guessed it was the beer that did it; at such times he said that perhaps he should have to cut down on his Tivoli" (255).

Interestingly, a small, but important difference emerges between the way Bartley's beer surfaces in his own consciousness and the way it surfaces in other parts of the novel. As Fulkerson's references to Castoria and Pearline in *Hazard* suggest, successful product branding in Howells' time could be measured by the degree to which elements of the brand—most importantly, product or company name—came to substitute in private discourse for the product category they were intended to suggest. Hence, Bartley's use of the name "Tivoli" as a proper noun substituting for "beer" rather than an adjective qualifying "beer" is significant, as is the fact that this substitution occurs whenever beer drinking comes up in Bartley's speech. When apologizing to Marcia for getting drunk on whiskey, he declares that he will "stick to Tivoli after this, religiously" (282). Later, he invites Ricker to lunch at home with him by directing Ricker to "come round and try my Tivoli on Sunday" (303).

In addition, the substitution of "Tivoli" for "beer" occurs in expository passages marked carefully by Howells as appropriated from Bartley's inner thoughts and feelings. The passage first announcing Bartley's allegiance to the "American Tivoli," as opposed to the unbranded lagers of Cincinnati and Milwaukee, demonstrates such markings in the rationales it supplies for drinking beer at the end of the day (it "freshened you up"), for ordering it by the gross ("it became cheaper that way"), and for choosing Tivoli ("you could drink a couple of bottles without feeling it") (255). Subsequent passages containing the substitution are likewise linked to Bartley's frame of reference, usually by inserting a semicolon either preceded or followed by an independent clause or clauses that forge this link. For example, having grown increasingly stout, Bartley "attributed the fat on his ribs to the Tivoli; perhaps it was also owing in some degree to a good

conscience” (256). And again, “sometimes he thought he might be overdoing the beer; yes, he thought he must cut down on the Tivoli; he was getting ridiculously fat” (329). This pattern varies only in the final instance, when Bartley decides to abandon his brand of choice: “he tried a new kind of beer—Norwegian beer—which he found a little lighter even than Tivoli. It was more expensive, but it was *very* light” (original emphasis, 339). Here, an added emphasis on “very” serves the function earlier served by the semicolon and independent clause: connecting the “Tivoli” substitution with Bartley’s consciousness.

In contrast, when Bartley’s chosen beer is mentioned by or with respect to other characters in the novel, the “Tivoli” substitution is conspicuously absent. After Bartley betrays Kinney’s trust by publishing stories Kinney intended to publish himself, for example, Marcia decides that their infant daughter should no longer wear the gold nugget charm Kinney gave her. “Perhaps you would like to spend it for Tivoli beer,” she tells Bartley (319). Unlike Bartley, Marcia thinks of “Tivoli” not as beer itself, but rather as merely a kind of beer. She is joined in this perception toward the end of the novel by Atherton, the lawyer to whom she desperately turns when Bartley disappears. Glancing down at a piece of paper she has handed him, Atherton recognizes it as the “bill of the threatening creditor, for indefinitely repeated dozens of Tivoli beer” (379). Like Marcia, Atherton does not regard the “Tivoli” label as a substitute for the product it names; in effect, he refuses its invitation to acknowledge and participate in the increasingly brand driven-economy of modern capitalism.

Branding thus emerges, for Howells, as in some senses an index of character; those who find it appealing can expect to face a certain public chastening.³ This holds

true also in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), his subsequent novel about a social-striving paint magnate and his family. During Lapham’s interview with Bartley at the beginning of the novel, Howells describes the “rows and ranks of casks, barrels, and kegs” the men inspect as Lapham leads Bartley on a tour of his warehouse: “They were labeled and branded as containing each so many pounds of Lapham’s Mineral Paint, and each bore the mystic devices, *N. L. f. 1835—S. L. t. 1855*” (12). Though Lapham shrugs off Bartley’s insinuation that these “mystic devices” are derived from the bogus authenticating dates and figures frequently found on patent medicine labels—he tries to distract Bartley by showing off his “fancy brands” (12)—Lapham admits to knowing at least about “Plantation Bitters” and its branding strategy, what Bartley identifies categorically as the “‘S. T.—1860—X.’ business” (10) (fig 1-1). His admission not only forecasts the public lesson in superficial versus “true” value that will be required at the end of the novel, but also serves as a confirmation of Howells’s ready familiarity with brands and their business functions.

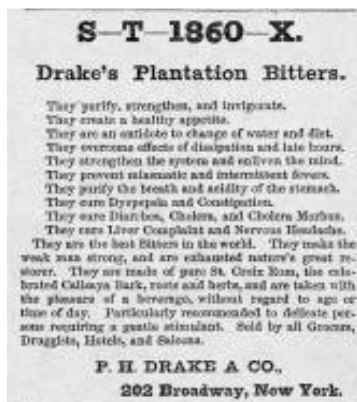


Figure 1-1. Advertisement for Drake’s Plantation Bitters. *Harper’s Weekly*, July 11, 1863.

Howells could hardly have avoided gaining such familiarity; his writing career began at about the time branding started to take hold in the United States, and each became imbricated in the other in the ensuing decades. The same publications that

carried poems, essays, and serialized novels by Howells and others to readers throughout the country via a rapidly expanding and improving communications infrastructure also carried the advertisements of consumer products manufacturers who turned to branding in an effort to surmount stiff competition sparked by an industrializing postbellum economy. Prior to the Civil War, the purchase of such household wares as soap, cereal, and paint had been governed by what Susan Strasser has called “old-fashioned commodity relations,” a system controlled by “human relationships” and centered on bargaining with familiar storekeepers for negotiable quantities carved out of the storekeeper’s bulk supply (26). The postbellum growth of technological advances that standardized production and railroad networks that facilitated distribution to a national consumer base, however, gradually transformed the experience of shopping for basic domestic goods into a choice between identical-seeming products offered in standard packaged sizes at predetermined prices. “Tobacco was tobacco and flour was flour” under the old system, Juliann Sivulka notes, but under the new system, tobacco and flour took the form of packages whose contents were unavailable for inspection and were manufactured by unfamiliar companies often located hundreds of miles away (48).

The challenge facing these companies, then, was to perceptually differentiate products that were often materially indistinguishable while also combating consumers’ anxiety over products with unknown origins. As several cultural historians have demonstrated, companies addressed this challenge by using public announcements, advertisements, packaging, sponsorship, contests, and a wide variety of other tools to build brands centered on particular narratives about their products. According to James Norris, these narratives were effected by a shift in business discourse from “being

basically product oriented, that is, concerned with the virtues and qualities of the product (purity, utility, price, practicality), to being consumer oriented, that is, linked intimately with the individual, affording status or other desirable qualities such as beauty to the user” (60). Alan Trachtenberg describes the result as “small dramas, in word and picture, offering along with their message a vicarious experience of the satisfaction promised by the product,” in other words “a spectacle, in which reading and seeing provided access to a presumed and promised reality” (137). For Jackson Lears, this “spectacle” created a set of associations and expectations through which standardized products could be made to seem vastly different (and therefore preferable for reasons other than material quality and price), and also helped to bridge the gap between the modern “scientifically managed workplace” and the “vernacular artisanal traditions” to which consumers were accustomed (117).

Both of these tasks—increasing product distinctiveness through perceived character or personality attributes, and reconstructing the intimate relationships between consumers and products that mass production had undermined—became increasingly crucial to economic success. Many companies hit upon winning formulas that accomplished each task effectively. The Quaker Mill Company, for example, registered as its trademark the “figure of a man in Quaker garb” in 1877 (Marquette 31) (fig. 1-2). This figure’s appearance soon thereafter on cylindrical paper cartons of Quaker Oats appealed to consumers’ perception of the Quakers as diligent, industrious, wholesome farmers; a Quaker’s oats were to be prized over anonymously packaged or bulk-measured oats. Similarly, Procter and Gamble introduced Ivory soap as “99 and 44/100% Pure” and “The Soap that Floats” in 1881, turning purity, delicacy, and “accidental” discovery

into a product narrative that quickly pushed Ivory to the top of the highly competitive soap industry (fig. 1-3).⁴ Quaker Oats, Ivory, and other new brands appearing in the late 1870s and early 1880s enjoyed immediate success as a result of their images, associations, and incorporation into consumers' daily routines.

FOOD PRODUCTS 35

Quaker Oats

A Healthy Reflection.

EAT MORE
Quaker Oats
LESS MEAT

How foolish to keep on eating meat to the exclusion of Quaker Oats when dietary experts agree that Quaker Oats is more nourishing and wholesome. It certainly is more agreeable and appetizing; then, too, it is more economical. Why then?

At all Grocers in 2-pound Packages

QUAKER OATS makes not only the best breakfast porridge in the world, but also delicious and wholesome **bread, muffins, cakes, soups and puddings.** Write for our *Cereal Cook Book, edited by Mrs. Rorer.*

THE AMERICAN CEREAL CO.,

Quaker Oats
WITH FRUIT

Monadnock Building, Chicago, Ill.

PHIL B. FERRICK ADVERTISING

Figure 1-2. Advertisement for Quaker Oats. *Century*, Oct. 1899. An identical advertisement appeared in the 30 Sep. 1899 issue of *Harper's Weekly*, suggesting a concerted branding strategy utilizing multiple publications.



Copyright 1896, by The Procter & Gamble Co., Cin'li.

THE BILL IS TOO LARGE, but there are some articles of substantial merit that are inexpensive. There is Ivory Soap for instance, made from the best materials, strictly pure and delightful to use for the toilet or bath; it will save one half of the outlay for toilet soaps.

25

Figure 1-3. Advertisement for Ivory Soap. *Scribner's Magazine*, June 6, 1896.

Still, they were outperformed in this regard by a class of products, patent medicines, whose makers had pioneered strategies for assigning colorful personalities and exotic histories to their wares, and who had already begun to test the limits of perceptually differentiating products through narrative properties. Originating in England as a term for nostrums that received royal sanction, or “patent,” these potions were ubiquitous in the mid nineteenth-century United States. Botanic Blood Balm, Black Draught, Wine of Cardui: the names alone suggested intriguing narratives, and coordinated advertising and publicity helped to extend and reinforce these narratives. As Lapham’s appropriation of the “mystic devices” on the “Plantation Bitters” label suggests, patent medicines generated the branding model on which later efforts were based.⁵

Among patent medicines, Lydia Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound stands out both for its cultural currency (it was one of the bestselling products of any kind in the nineteenth century) and for the influential example of branding it provided for other companies. According to Robert Collyer Washburn, Pinkham’s biographer, initial attempts in the mid-1870s to sell her natural cure-all outside Lynn, Massachusetts, where she was known and respected fared poorly. Scores of other patent medicines had appeared on drugstore shelves and in peddlers’ carts over the previous few decades. What made Pinkham’s superior? In late 1879, Washburn reveals, an answer was found:

The idea in its perfect state was simple. Dan suggested that his mother’s picture be used in the advertising. What else could carry so powerfully at a glance that cachet of New England that he knew they must put over? What else could express so forcefully to the hasty eye the sense of trustworthiness, reliability and homeyness, as the sadly sweet smile of his mother? Nothing else could. His mother’s face told the whole story more convincingly than a thousand words of copy. (130-31)

Like most patent medicines, Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound consisted mostly of water mixed with a few herbs and a heavy dose of alcohol; nothing in its composition alone acted to cure injury or sickness (Stage 32).⁶ However, with Pinkham's portrait on the label—a portrait featuring Pinkham in homespun dress with spectacles and plain gray hair gathered severely into a bun—the patent medicine acquired a narrative, which, much more than its actual ingredients, became the source of the product's value. Previously indifferent to the compound, consumers' "hasty eye[s]" found the "sadly sweet smile" of Lydia Pinkham and its connotations of "trustworthiness, reliability and homeyness" impossible to resist.

As a result, sales of the compound skyrocketed, fueled not only by the company's careful nurturing of the product narrative Pinkham's portrait helped spawn, but also by consumers' eagerness to play a role in this narrative. Mona Lisa-like, Pinkham's calm pose and steady gaze invited speculation as to her history, opinions, and relationships. Pinkham fit the type of a familiar maternal figure to most consumers, and consequently they had no trouble inventing, debating, and frequently publicizing (in newspaper columns, social gatherings, conversations at the drugstore counter, etc.) their speculations about her. Soon after her portrait first appeared on bottles of the compound, Pinkham began to receive letters from consumers seeking information and advice. She answered them herself until the task became too great, eventually employing a small staff to manage the work. Even after her death in 1883, Washburn relates, the letters continued to arrive, and "legends about Mrs. Pinkham continued to grow; many people had only half believed she was a real person anyway, so her death had not made a great impression" (173) (fig. 1-4). By 1890, sales of Pinkham's compound not only far

outstripped sales of all other competing patent medicines, but also surpassed those of nearly every other consumer product in the United States. As a sales strategy, crafting a product narrative had proven an astounding success. And as a product narrative, the Lydia Pinkham “legends” established a form that dozens of other major companies—the Quaker Oats Mill Company and Procter and Gamble among them—were already deeply engaged in imitating.



Figure 1-4. Advertisement for Lydia E. Pinkham’s Guide to Health and Etiquette. *Scribner’s Magazine*, Dec. 1890.

LADIES YOU CAN GET FREE

this beautiful 88-page Illustrated Book by addressing the undersigned, and enclosing 2 two-cent stamps, to cover postage.

It contains a world of information and rehearses a life's practice.

LYDIA E. PINKHAM MED. CO., LYNN, MASS.

In ordering Mrs. Pinkham's book please mention SCRIBNER'S MAGAZINE.

This form, business historian and media theorist Douglas Holt helps us to understand, operated by identifying a strong cultural anxiety and then positioning the product within a simple narrative that worked to mitigate or eliminate that anxiety. According to Holt, the most powerful brands “perform identity myths: simple fictions

that address cultural anxieties from afar, from imaginary worlds rather than from the worlds that consumers regularly encounter in their everyday lives.” These “simple fictions” serve as “useful fabrications that stitch back together otherwise damaging tears in the cultural fabric of the nation” (8).⁷ Branding functions successfully, then, when it responds to a pervasive and deeply affecting social problem. For Pinkham’s potential consumers, perhaps the biggest social problem in the late nineteenth-century United States was the migration of a large portion of the nation’s population from rural areas to urban centers as a result of rapid industrialization in major sectors of the economy.⁸ In order to build a profitable brand, the product narrative associated with Pinkham’s compound needed to “stitch back together” the “cultural fabric” torn by mass urbanization, offering consumers the opportunity to eliminate their feelings of alienation and uprootedness simply by purchasing a single bottle of the potent remedy.

Through advertising and publicity, the picture on the label, letters written to anxious consumers by Pinkham (or her assistants), and the “legends” crafted by consumers, Pinkham’s product narrative supplied precisely this opportunity. The compound itself promised to heal physical ailments; the product narrative associated with it promised to heal cultural ones. For consumers made anxious by the anonymity of household goods produced in huge quantities by unfamiliar modern machinery, Pinkham’s product narrative suggested a careful combination of simple, local ingredients in an iron pot on a small country stove—the trusted artifact of family lore. For consumers drawn away from their rural homes and families by the rise of the industrial city, moreover, the narrative offered the comforting reassurances of unconditional sympathy and maternal care. Pinkham’s compound restored the wisdom of earlier

generations to an era increasingly dominated by mindless machines while also reconstructing the kind of personal intimacy frequently lost to the facelessness and fragmentation of the modern city.⁹ The compound possessed little or no efficacy in healing physical ailments, but its product narrative worked spectacularly well in healing the cultural wounds of a late nineteenth-century nation undergoing rapid and irreversible transformations.

Howellsian realism also sought to heal these cultural wounds. Just as manufacturers and advertising agencies developed an intense interest in social problems in the decades following the Civil War, Howells became acutely interested in them as well. In addition to *A Modern Instance* and *Silas Lapham*, Howells's *The Undiscovered Country* (1880) and *The Minister's Charge* (1887) also focus on rural New Englanders' migration to Boston. The first novel casts the city as a site of confrontation between spiritual exploration and scientific skepticism, while the latter describes a naïve young man's battle against homelessness, among other threats, after he comes to the city in the belief that he can survive through the sale of his poems. Both novels chronicle their protagonists' difficulties and missteps in attempting to leave their rural lives behind in favor of precarious urban existences, narrating in detail the very cultural anxieties product narratives such as the Pinkham compound's attempted to address.¹⁰

Was Howells aware of branding, its interest in social problems, and the product narratives this interest generated? His representations of branding in *A Modern Instance* and *Silas Lapham* suggest that he was, but additional evidence comes from Howells's professional life. The son of a journalist, editor, and printer, Howells had grown up amidst constant reminders of advertising's form and social role.¹¹ The *Atlantic Monthly*,

which he served as assistant editor from 1866 to 1871 and as editor from 1871 to 1881, began accepting advertising in 1860; its national circulation and moneyed readership positioned it well as a vehicle for brand building during Howells's tenure (Norris 32-33). Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson, Howells's most recent biographers, also point out an instance in 1884 of Howells's thinking of *himself* as possessing a kind of product narrative. Howells was aware that Mark Twain had registered his *nom de plume* as a trademark, which then became the intellectual property of the Mark Twain Company. "Learning from his friend," the biographers write, "Howells told Augustin Daly, owner and manager of Daly's Theater on Broadway and the Fifth Street Theater, that he would rewrite a play for two thousand dollars, unless Daly wanted to use his name, then it would cost him more" (171).

Goodman and Dawson's example is revealing for the distinction Howells makes between his work, on one hand, and the work with which he is publicly identified, on the other. Copyright is not an issue, since Howells will have written the play in either case. What matters to Howells is the manner in which his name functions, like one of Silas Lapham's "mystic devices," as a mark of origin that helps to generate a specific product narrative. Howells would have been particularly sensitive concerning instantiations of this product narrative, given that his literary output, while relying for its cultural purchase on what we might call the Howells brand, nevertheless amounted to a formal critique of branding and its failure in Howells's eyes to take the crises of the late nineteenth century seriously. By approaching "the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women" (99) through knowledgeable, detailed, "truthful treatment of material" (73), he wrote in *Criticism and Fiction*, realism sought to engage and

counteract the “vain shows and shadows and ideals,” the “poor silly toys” (16) of Gilded Age culture which offered simplified, easily resolved representations of current social and economic problems. For Howells, product narratives were paramount among these “toys.”

As my reading of *A Hazard of New Fortunes* will show, branding and realism functioned similarly in seeking to identify and represent important cultural ruptures. Beyond this point, however, they moved in exactly opposite directions. Whereas branding sought through conventional situations and universalizing gestures not to heal such ruptures but rather simply to make them less evident, and to construe consumption as a mechanism for effecting this disappearance, realism sought through complexity, particularity, and exposé to make cultural ruptures *more* evident. If, as even Howells noted, his novels generally refused to offer clear solutions—or sometimes any solutions at all—to their characters’ various trials and entanglements, this refusal stemmed from realism’s function as a formal countermeasure to the deceptively glib and straightforward representations of product narratives, which seemed to offer an unambiguous solution for every problem imaginable.¹² It was precisely realism’s commitment to the ambiguity, uncertainty, and intractability of social problems that made it attractive to Howells. So attractive, in fact, that he aggressively explained, publicized, promoted, and demonstrated this brand-antithetical form, thereby ironically building it into a brand.

Branding and the Making of a Realist

A Hazard of New Fortunes dramatizes the process by which branding came in Howells’s mind to serve as a motivation for the production of specifically realist

narratives. The novel's commentary on branding surfaces immediately, in fact, during the conversation between Fulkerson and March with which *Hazard* begins. Fulkerson has come to Boston in order to persuade March, a mid-level insurance manager and amateur poet, to leave his job and move to New York in order to serve as editor of a new literary magazine. The magazine's distinctive characteristic is to be its method of paying contributors an equal share of revenues rather than a fixed fee. Significantly, both men soon become absorbed in suggesting, parsing, and rejecting various possible titles for the enterprise. "You might call the thing *From Sea to Sea*," March muses in response to Fulkerson's declaration that the magazine should possess relevance and appeal throughout the country (7). "I had thought of *The Syndicate*; but it sounds kind of dry, and it don't seem to cover the ground exactly," Fulkerson responds (7). Titles also suggested but ultimately rejected include "*The Mutual*," which "would express the cooperative character of the thing"; "*The Round Robin*," which "would express the central idea of irresponsibility"; "*The Army of Martyrs*," "*The Fifth Wheel*," and several others (8). As this list suggests, before Fulkerson and March have settled any of the magazine's practical details—indeed, before March has even agreed to serve as editor—they have already become preoccupied with what image, attitude, slogan, and associations—in sum, what product narrative—the magazine will carry. Eventually settling on *Every Other Week*, the two men begin building a brand long before the magazine actually exists as a product.

Fulkerson is presented by Howells as a literary entrepreneur in the vein of Frank Leslie, Frank Munsey, Irving Bacheller, and S. S. McClure, publishers who were well known for their responsiveness to changing public tastes.¹³ Accordingly, the priorities

demonstrated in this first conversation—product narrative first, product second—issue not from March, but from the hucksterish Fulkerson. More specifically, they issue from the new business innovations Fulkerson has enthusiastically embraced. He indirectly reveals to March the depth of his commitment to these innovations by way of introducing, in absentia, the businessman, Dryfoos, who has agreed to finance the launch of the new magazine. Over dinner soon after March has arrived in New York, Fulkerson recounts meeting Dryfoos in the street a few months earlier: “He cocked his little gray eyes at me,” Fulkerson explains, “and says he: ‘Yes, young man. My name *is* Dryfoos, and I’m from Moffitt. But I don’t want no present of Longfellow’s works, illustrated; and I don’t want to taste no fine teas; but I know a policeman that does . . .’” (original emphasis, 76). Fulkerson’s purpose in telling the anecdote is to prepare March for Dryfoos’s gruff, impatient personality, but in doing so he also reveals a split between old and new business philosophies. By hinting that he suffered slight mistreatment during the encounter with Dryfoos, and perhaps continues to do so, moreover, Fulkerson appeals to March to look sympathetically on the new business philosophy with which he has cast his lot—and the magazine’s.

Dryfoos seems conscious of his own traditionalism, at least in Fulkerson’s retelling of events. In addressing Fulkerson as “young man,” though the two are about the same age, he distances his ideals from those of the brash, naive salesman he takes Fulkerson to be. These ideals further emerge in the account Fulkerson provides of how Dryfoos became wealthy. When farmland in the upper Midwest’s “natural-gas country” (70) began to attract speculators’ attention, Dryfoos “hung on to the doctrines as well as the dollars of the dads,” refusing to sell out because in his farm he had “a real thing”

(73)—land, buildings, crops, livestock, and equipment with proven utility. Fulkerson continues: “It made him [Dryfoos] sick to hear the clack that went on about the gas the whole while, and that stirred up the neighborhood and got into his family” (74). Though Dryfoos does eventually sell his farm to the gas speculators (his daughters, who crave urban sophistication, “just *made* him sell” [74]), he remains an enemy of “clack,” or puffery, even to the point of mistaking Fulkerson, whom he previously met in the Midwest, for a peddler or pitchman when he hails him later on the street in New York.¹⁴

This attitude may explain Howells’s choice of “Longfellow’s works, illustrated” as the product Dryfoos supposes Fulkerson is hawking to passersby. In his detailed study of Longfellow’s publication activity and income, William Charvat suggests that “it is doubtful whether any other poet of the century was so resourceful in bringing his work before the public in so many forms and on so many price levels” (157). Though Longfellow, a friend and mentor to Howells, had died nine years earlier, in 1881, and much of his career passed before branding can accurately be said to have emerged, Charvat’s claim identifies the poet’s use of marketing strategies that would later be closely associated with branding.¹⁵ It is therefore unsurprising that Dryfoos would react negatively toward them. His business philosophy remains rooted in materiality, and his money, freed of the family farm, now resides “in railroads . . . in mines and other things” (77). These “things” were actually as invested in the rise of mass marketing as consumer product manufacturers, though Dryfoos shows no sign of acknowledging this fact.¹⁶ For the new phenomenon of product branding, with “clack” at its center, he evinces a deep skepticism.

However, for Fulkerson the “clack” *is* the “real thing,” the true locus of value—social, economic, and otherwise—in late nineteenth-century American culture. During the visit to the Midwest on which he first met Dryfoos, Fulkerson was impressed both by the natural gas demonstrations he witnessed and by those he did not. “They say when they let one of their big wells burn away all winter before they had learned how to control it,” he tells March, “that well kept up a little summer all around it; the grass stayed green, and the flowers bloomed all through the winter. *I* don’t know whether it’s so or not. But I can believe anything of natural gas” (73). Fulkerson has already described the way in which natural gas prospecting has denuded the landscape. Even the tree stumps have been removed by natural gas men using “a little dynamite”; the process instantly produces “a cellar dug and filled up with kindling ready for housekeeping whenever you want it” (70). Disfigurement of the natural environment in the cause of industrialism accelerated greatly in the United States after the Civil War, producing cultural anxiety of the kind that, according to Holt, has created opportunities for palliative product narratives.¹⁷ Fulkerson’s eagerness to credit a story lacking any proof in which natural gas somehow rejuvenates and preserves the landscape its extraction has completely destroyed suggests his faith not merely in natural gas, but in the broader workings of the product narrative of which this natural gas anecdote forms just one example. His account, during dinner with March, of visiting the Midwest, meeting Dryfoos, and learning about his background thereby takes on the character of an appeal to March to embrace branding and its neat, simplistic approach to contemporary cultural concerns.

But though Fulkerson makes this appeal, and though both men had earlier speculated enthusiastically about possible product narratives for the magazine, Fulkerson

alone carries on the specific work of brand building and brand management for *Every Other Week*. He pursues this work, moreover, with a zealotry and opportunism frequently disparaged by the other characters. Angus Beaton, the magazine's art editor, warns a socialite friend who has expressed interest in the project that Fulkerson is "preternaturally unscrupulous" about promoting *Every Other Week*, and would not hesitate to use her name without permission (158). He tells another acquaintance that Fulkerson has "an eye single to the main chance all the time" and "would advertise *Every Other Week* on his family vault" (213). Fulkerson's behavior only encourages such comments; "I'll hire a lot of fellows to make mud turtles of themselves, and I'll have a lot of big facsimiles of the title page, and I'll paint the town red!" (161), he announces one afternoon. Another time, he chides Dryfoos and March for "proceeding on something like the old exploded idea that the demand creates the supply, when everybody knows, if he's watched the course of modern events, that it's just as apt to be the other way" (258). Awed by Fulkerson's commitment to developing a mass of images, associations, and personalities linked in the public consciousness to *Every Other Week*, March takes to calling a proposed celebratory dinner "Mr. Fulkerson's advertising orgy" (259) and to calling Fulkerson himself a "pure advertising essence" (293). While Fulkerson clearly considers his promotional fantasies a shrewd response to the "course of modern events," March views them doubtfully, and demonstrates noticeable skepticism concerning the celebratory dinner.

March's wariness toward product narratives comes into particular relief during discussions about the dinner because, in the course of justifying the event, Fulkerson articulates most clearly his firm espousal of them. Reacting to March's assertion that

Every Other Week has achieved the status of “pleasing novelty” but not “fixed fact,” Fulkerson argues that the purpose of the dinner is to “fix the fact” (256). He elaborates: “I contend that we’ve got a real, substantial success to celebrate now; but even if we hadn’t, the celebration would do more than anything else to create the success, if we got it properly before the public” (258). In Fulkerson’s view, a “real, substantial success” is not necessarily the product of actual performance; to create the impression of success and to have achieved it are the same, at least in the narrative either presents to the public. “People will say,” he continues, “‘Those fellows are not fools; they wouldn’t go and rejoice over their magazine unless they had got a big thing in it.’ And the state of feeling we should produce in the public mind would make a boom of perfectly unprecedented grandeur for E. O. W.” (258). What emerges here is the virtual irrelevance of *Every Other Week* itself—its writing, artwork, cover, and binding. Though March remains unconvinced, Fulkerson persists in arguing that in the “public mind” appearances are identical to realities, and consequently that enough deliberately amplified “boom” will successfully convert a tenuous proposition into a “fixed fact.”

Early on, the disjunction between Fulkerson’s commitment to the simplified abstractions of product branding and March’s editorial work on the magazine becomes clear. Regarding the all-important first issue, for example, Fulkerson, who “was perpetually suggesting changes . . . with a view toward its greater vividness of effect” (158-159), exclaims, “I *wish* you could let me have one of those New York things of yours . . . that’s going to be the great card.” They had previously agreed that March would produce a series of occasional pieces on New York life for the magazine. “I couldn’t, Fulkerson,” March replies. “I want to philosophize the material. . . . I don’t

want to do merely superficial sketches” (160). Fulkerson’s desire for a “great card,” something to generate talk about the magazine, bumps up against March’s desire to represent the city and its inhabitants in their full complexity. During the same discussion, Fulkerson announces that the magazine will lack “get up and howl” unless they include an essay “going for Bevans’ novels.” March is perplexed, since Fulkerson has previously expressed admiration for Bevans’ novels. Fulkerson then patiently explains that he does indeed like them, but since the “popular gag is to abuse Bevans,” when “people don’t see it, they’ll think *Every Other Week* is some old thing” (159). Whereas March considers reviewing Bevans’ novels an exercise in critical judgment—a chance to reveal hidden intricacies and make fine distinctions—Fulkerson sees the review as an invaluable opportunity to declare the magazine’s modishness, to “howl” a narrative of its identity in terms that readers both understand and expect. Fidelity to lived experience makes *Every Other Week* “some old thing”; fidelity to the product narrative makes it, as Fulkerson later declares, “the Castoria of literature, and the Pearline of art” (199).

March and Fulkerson’s conflicting viewpoints with regard to *Every Other Week* both shape and are shaped by differing perspectives on the larger social and economic environment in which the magazine operates. March’s move from Boston’s South End to New York’s Greenwich Village exposes him to a kaleidoscope of races, classes, and languages, and he indulges his fascination with them through frequent rambling explorations of Manhattan. From the Bowery to Fifth Avenue to Harlem, March enthusiastically observes and catalogs his surroundings, shrinking from neither poverty nor destitution. In this he differs from Fulkerson, whom Howells describes as “one of those Americans whose habitual conception of life is unalloyed prosperity” and who

“suffered something like physical pain” if “any experience or observation went counter to it” (80). Fulkerson’s penchant for social mythmaking becomes in the magazine office a commitment to product narratives, and it is in the office that March lodges his most direct protests against this commitment—“From time to time I’m thoroughly ashamed of being connected with such a charlatan,” he says (161). But it is outside the office, when hunting for apartments, dining in restaurants, riding the elevated trains, appraising the churches, or merely wandering the streets that March’s reaction to product narratives as a form becomes clearly evident. Turning from the “quackish” (161) manipulation and “heavy lying” (201) of product narratives, March seeks a genuine understanding of his surroundings in all their complicated uniqueness. Turning from charlatanry, he embraces the real. March compulsively searches out the concrete details of New York City life, and so becomes, in effect, a realist.

As a result, his observations of life in the city exhibit a fascination not only with the complex and specific people and scenes he notices, but also with the formal potential of complexity and specificity themselves. This two-pronged interest appears, for example, during March’s occasional trips up and down Manhattan on the elevated train with his wife, often with no particular destination in mind. During one night-time ride, they compare notes as they peer out at the illuminated scenes in the houses and tenements passing by:

She now said that the night transit was even more interesting than the day, and that the fleeting intimacy you formed with people in second- and third-floor interiors, while all the usual street life went on underneath, had a domestic intensity. . . . He said it was better than the theater, of which it reminded him, to see those people through their windows: a family party of workfolk at a late tea; a mother laying her child in its cradle; a man with his head fallen on his hands upon a table; a girl and her lover leaning over the windowsill together. What suggestion! What drama! What infinite interest! (64)

March's pleasure in the variety and individuality of the lighted rooms sliding past the train is joined to an impulse to construct a form through these qualities. The "infinite interest" of the scenes derives not from their conduciveness to abstraction—their conformity to cliché—but rather from their resistance to it. While capable of producing a "fleeting intimacy," the scenes remain discrete, difficult to assemble into a familiar sentimental appeal. And while lending themselves to "domestic intensity," the scenes are free of artifice; the elevated train is "better than the theater," March suggests, because these real-life actors do not know they have an audience. For March, riding the elevated train helps reveal possibilities for a form of narrative premised not on reductive simplicity, but rather on the expansive particularities of day-to-day human experience.

Such particularities, he discovers, are best left unembellished by authorial flourishes. Wandering with his wife down from Greenwich Village to the Battery in search of streets familiar from their honeymoon (which Howells chronicled in *Their Wedding Journey* [1871]), March studies the activities surrounding the immigrant processing center at Castle Garden. "He made note of the looks of the licensed runners and touters waiting for the immigrants outside the government premises; he intended to work them up into a dramatic effect in some sketch," Howells writes. Thinking of his agreement with Fulkerson to supply periodic pieces on New York life for the magazine, March observes the hawkers and peddlers here for the purpose of later crafting a narrative with "dramatic effect". Because they are insufficiently recognizable in their actual features and circumstances, March assumes, he must "work them up" into something more generally familiar. Nevertheless, Howells continues, "they remained mere material in his memorandum book, together with some quaint old houses on the Sixth Avenue

road, which he had noticed on the way down” (274). March’s impulse to transform his observations in order to suit the conventions of the “sketch” seems to falter almost as soon as it is felt. To permit the men to remain “mere material” is to refuse to grant them the status of cliché, and to exercise a realist sensibility; March can no more simplify their individuality than he can lift the “quaint old houses” nearby off the “Sixth Avenue road” and set them down elsewhere.

This evident attraction to realism generates social as well as aesthetic commitments. Engaging with the irreducible particularity of his surroundings, especially during his rambles through unfamiliar parts of the city, does not alienate March, but rather makes him feel a closer concern for and connection with them. Reflecting on his meanderings, March tells his wife that he “liked now and then to feel his personality in that state of solution” produced when he finds himself in equality with his environment instead of singled out (268). This sense of involvement, in turn, produces a commitment to social responsibility guided by extensive knowledge of the way others live. Comparing their current and former views on New York, March and his wife decide that the “main difference was that they saw it more now as a life, and then they only regarded it as a spectacle” (276). Because of this transformation, “March could not release himself from a sense of complicity with it, no matter what whimsical, or alien, or critical, attitude he took. A sense of the striving and the suffering deeply possessed him, and this grew the more intense as he gained some knowledge of the forces at work—forces of pity, of destruction, of perdition, of salvation” (276-277).¹⁸ Learning about actual social conditions has a directly inhibiting effect on March’s ability to distance himself from

them. In turning to realism, March embraces a form whose inevitable consequence is deep social engagement.

The novel's conclusion only confirms that Fulkerson and branding are responsible for setting March on this trajectory. When the death of his son leaves Dryfoos grief-stricken and vulnerable to his daughters' entreaties to make a fresh start in Europe, Fulkerson and March accept his offer to sell them *Every Other Week*. In effect, Howells ends the novel by making official the mutual dependence of branding and Howellsian realism. Whereas Fulkerson's creation and promotion of reductive, clichéd product narratives about the magazine motivate March's interest in the realist values of specificity and complexity, the formal joining of Fulkerson and March as co-owners of *Every Other Week* seems to promise that these values in turn will be abstracted into a new product narrative by means of which future issues of the magazine will be marketed and sold. A *Hazard of New Fortunes* thereby recapitulates the larger development of Howellsian realism from the late 1870s up to the publication of the novel. Having offered realism as a formal countermeasure to product narratives, by the time of *Hazard's* publication Howells's many explanations and examples of realism had accumulated to the point of reducibility, so that realism as a critique of branding had begun to function as itself a kind of brand. The man of letters who became a man of business had become, more specifically, a man of branding.

Challenging the New "Branch of Fiction"

I emphasize this point in order to clarify and distinguish Howells's specific formulation of the relationship between brands and fictions, product narratives and

literary narratives. As later dissertation chapters will show, his idea of literary fiction as a corrective to branding differed markedly from that of other authors. But I also make this case as a counterpoint to recent analyses of Howells's relationship to business. Gib Prettyman, for example, has claimed that "despite the fact that 'business' in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is elaborately thematized as monstrous, ironic, unthinking, dangerous, and corrupting, there is also a significant underlying utopian impulse that the powerful principles of business might be used to effect an ideal good" (110). Business serves an "inspirational function" (99) in the novel, according to Prettyman, and demonstrates the potential of abstract conceptions—including aesthetic forms—to create change in the everyday world. Developing this logic further, Jason Puskar argues that insurance, in particular, provided a model for Howells's thinking about realism: "Imagining realism as a kind of insurance allowed writing, like underwriting, to participate fully and unashamedly in capitalism's markets while still working to construct communities of interdependent risk- and asset-sharers" (30). Prettyman and Puskar both contend that Howells conceived of realism largely through business metaphors—that realism drew on business forms and practices in order to achieve "Howells's broader goal of fostering social cohesion and communal interdependence" (Puskar 30).

In doing so, however, they overlook *Hazard's* evidence concerning the antagonistic nature of business's, and specifically branding's, role in the development of Howellsian realism. Far from serving as a model for a narrative form that would promote "social cohesion and communal interdependence," branding promoted reductive and sometimes even misleading narratives about late nineteenth-century social problems, thereby engendering not unity and cooperation, but rather fractiousness and self-interest.

Recognizing this, Howells consciously described and exemplified realism as a form acting counter to branding's deceptive oversimplifications. *Hazard* makes this position clear, and so too, more succinctly and perhaps more bluntly, does a "Life and Letters" column he published in *Harper's Weekly* on May 9, 1896. Like his earlier "Editor's Study" column for *Harper's Magazine* (1886-1892), "Life and Letters" provided Howells a space in which to comment on recent literary and cultural developments. What makes this particular 1896 column notable is its discussion of branding's primary instrument, advertising, a discussion provoked by the publication of Charles Austin Bates's *Good Advertising* (1896), one of the earliest books on modern advertising forms and techniques. Handed the book by a friend, Howells constructs his column as a kind of Socratic dialogue with this friend concerning advertising's current cultural role and likely future development.

Immediately, Howells expresses an interest in these subjects extending beyond friendly conversation to include their impact on writing. Having somewhat embarrassedly admitted to his friend a compulsion to write about "Spring," the friend suggests dropping this cliché-ridden topic in favor of advertising; "no sooner [had he] pronounced these words than I began to feel a weird and potent fascination in his suggestion," Howells writes. This sense of "poten[cy]" remains at the surface of their conversation as the two debate Bates's contention that advertisements are capable of generating demand merely by suggesting the myriad ways such demand could be satiated if it were suddenly to arise. Howells and his friend agree that advertising directed toward latent desires is generally unsuccessful: "We *may* be full of all sorts of unconscious wants which merely need the vivifying influence of an advertisement to make them spring into

active being: but I have a feeling that the money paid for advertising which appeals to potential wants is largely thrown away,” the friend states (original emphasis, 462). This statement is striking because neither man seems to dispute the “vivifying influence of an advertisement.” Their position stems rather from a belief that “potential wants” simply are not important; they have no commercial value. Howells’s “fascination” with advertisements therefore concerns less the specific conditions enabling their business instrumentality than the advertisements’ “vivifying influence”—the impression they give of capturing true-life moments and scenes.

Later on in the conversation, it becomes clear that this “vivifying influence” should be understood as a kind of narrative power quite similar to that possessed by the work of a late nineteenth-century novelist. Howells declares that the “adsmith,” Bates’s advertising expert, “seems to have caught the American business tone as perfectly as any of our novelists have caught the American social tone,” suggesting a link between the maker of product narratives and the maker of literary narratives. Howells’s friend then further establishes this link by claiming that adsmiths “have put their art quite on a level with fiction pecuniarily,” to which Howells responds, “Perhaps it *is* a branch of fiction” (original emphasis). He continues, whimsically suggesting that just as “advertisement” has been shortened to “ad,” “work of fiction” might be abbreviated as “wof,” and a novelist might thereby be known as a “wofsmith” (462). Howells claims for advertising the status of “branch of fiction,” but his enumeration of parallels between the two suggests that he may also be thinking, at least implicitly, of the reverse—fiction as a branch of advertising. His coining of “wof” and “wofsmith” seems playful, but seen

from this perspective, it might also carry a suggestion of duress. Advertising's narrative power appears poised to contest literature's in the shaping of culture.

Turning to this situation directly, Howells wonders what will be the eventual culmination of advertising's growth and development over the previous few decades. He expresses a hope that Bates's book will "give us some philosophy of the prodigious increase of advertising within the last twenty-five years, and some conjecture as to the end of it all. Evidently, it can't keep on increasing at the present rate. If it does, there will presently be no room in the world for things; it will be filled up with the advertisements of things." This vision of a world in which the simple, abstract narratives that differentiate consumer products entirely replace the products themselves is accompanied by a vision of the adsmith's cultural influence looming high over that of the wofsmith. "The adsmith," Howells says, "may be the supreme artist of the twentieth century. He may assemble in his grasp, and employ at will, all the arts and sciences." This pronouncement echoes his friend's earlier claim that advertising "experts" such as Bates "have advanced [the profession] almost to the grade of an art, or a humanity" (462). The cultural threat posed by advertising is clear: heretofore novelists have claimed the authority to range across "all the arts and sciences" in producing their representations, but now advertisers have usurped this authority, and have legitimated the usurpation by establishing their own profession as "supreme" among cultural disciplines.

The result, for Howells, is a virtual guarantee that advertising will only continue to proliferate in the future. He imagines discomfiting scenarios in which this trajectory causes the public either to "go mad" or to become entirely desensitized to the "very excess and invasion of the appeals." And here, just before the column ends, Howells

writes most revealingly about his own relationship to the new “branch of fiction.” His friend suggests that he write up some of the nightmare scenarios about future advertising he has been imagining. Howells demurs: “You know that isn’t my line; I must leave that sort of wofsmithing to the romantic novelist.” Besides, his own “line,” realism, offers a more potent critique: “I have my well-known panacea for all the ills our state is heir to, in a civilization which shall legislate foolish, and vicious, and ugly, and adulterate things out of the possibility of existence.” Howells goes on to claim that “[m]ost of the adsmithing is now employed in persuading people that such things are useful, beautiful, and pure,” but in the world he intends realism to bring about, these misrepresentations will be rejected wholesale, and not “foisted upon the community by adsmiths.” Realism’s insistence on representing the ambiguous, dirty, and prosaic aspects of life works counter to the oversimplified and misleadingly pleasant representations of advertisements. Beginning as a review of Bates’s book, Howell’s column ends as a restatement of the function of realism articulated in *Hazard* six years earlier.

Indeed, this point proved sufficiently resonant—and important—that Howells chose to make it yet again, briefly, in *An Open-Eyed Conspiracy* (1897), a short novel chronicling the Marches’ vacation at Saratoga some time after the events described in *Hazard*. Standing in Saratoga’s recreation of the Pompeian House of Pansa, March and one of *Every Other Week*’s regular contributors discuss possibilities for an article exploiting the current vogue for classical architecture. Before the discussion can advance very far, March brings it to a close by responding, “Well, we’ll see what Fulkerson says. He may see an ad in it” (94). Mrs. March, overhearing the talk, expresses surprise that the “House of Pansa would lead to shop” for her companions. “You never can tell which

way copy lies,” her husband replies (95). March’s irritation concerning product narratives’ influence on literature is powerfully expressed by each of his statements here, but more powerfully by the second. While submitting article ideas to the publicity manager for approval may seem enough of an imposition, a yet more ominous note is sounded through March’s ambiguous use of the term “copy.” Is he talking about advertisements or articles—product narratives or literature?

What distinguishes Howells’ writing, I ultimately want to suggest, is his exploration of troubling moments like this one in order to communicate the rationale behind his own realist form. That this form would prove to have limited effectiveness—brand-aversion quickly becoming a brand itself—is a fate Howells seems to predict in *Hazard*. Just after Fulkerson’s brand-laden outburst, Dryfoos’s son idealistically suggests that it is possible to earn money in a manner that does not impoverish anyone else. “Business is business,” Dryfoos scoffingly responds (200). Howells’s attempt to enact and combine both the artistic free expression of the man of letters and the economic self-sufficiency of the man of business becomes somewhat ensnared by the imprisoning tautology Dryfoos articulates. Nevertheless, by at least imagining a literary space outside this tautology—and at his best, occupying it—Howells opens new territory to realist authors in the late nineteenth century.

CHAPTER I NOTES

¹ While Daniel H. Borus’s *Writing Realism* discusses the shaping influences of celebrity, mass media, and advertising on American literary realism, his analysis centers more on the profession of authorship than on textual practices, and does not treat branding in particular.

² I have discussed the terminology of Bartley's beer in slightly greater detail in an article titled "Product Branding in Howells's *A Modern Instance*," from which the discussion here is partly taken. See Graydon.

³ Bartley, of course, faces this and more: having fled his own divorce trial in Indiana, he is later shot and killed by an irate reader in *Whited Sepulchre*, Arizona.

⁴ Significantly, the Ivory product narrative gained strength and coherence in the 1880s despite conflict between Procter and Gamble partners concerning the value of advertising which prevented the creation of a focused strategy for promoting the product. Without this strategy, consumers seem to have constructed a compelling product narrative on their own (Strasser 8). According to Frank Presbrey, one of the first historians of advertising, three of the four leading brands in the 1880s were soaps (qtd. in Norris 48). For a detailed history of Ivory's creation and early years, see Dyer, Dalzell, and Olegario 23-41. For an account of a similarly iconic brand, H. J. Heinz, which also appeared at this time, see Koehn 43-90.

⁵ Each of the patent medicines mentioned here appeared in the South after the Civil War; Wine of Cardui eventually achieved national popularity. "Plantation Bitters" is probably a reference to Drake's Plantation Bitters, a patent medicine that had been sold for decades by the time *Silas Lapham* appeared (Young 96-99). For a brief discussion of patent medicines' leadership in the field of branding, see Smythe 55.

⁶ Nevertheless, like most patent medicines, Pinkham's Compound claimed to cure a wide range of malaises. The combination of this misrepresentation and the fact that many, due to their alcohol and/or opium content, were highly addictive and actually produced negative health effects caused prominent magazines, led by *Ladies' Home Journal*, to begin refusing patent medicine advertisements in the early 1890s. Public awareness of the products' danger, aided by Samuel Hopkins Adams's "The Great American Fraud" exposé in *Collier's Weekly*, led to passage of the Food and Drugs Act of 1906, which placed severe restrictions on the patent medicine industry. For an excellent history of patent medicines in the United States prior to 1906, see Young. See also Adams for precise ingredients in some patent medicines. For an account of how marketing techniques continued to shape the medicine and health industries after patent medicine regulation, see Tomes.

⁷ For additional discussion of the origins and definition of branding, see Jones and Slater.

⁸ For historical accounts of the rise of the United States city in the late nineteenth century and the challenges facing new city dwellers, see Barth, *City People*; White; and Bartlett 78-98. White is especially useful in pointing out that in addition to various cultural dislocations, many recent urban arrivals would have experienced challenges to their health in the form of pollution, poor diet, overcrowded living conditions, and incessant

noise (46-47). These deleterious health effects would have made patent medicines even more enticing.

⁹ Company-issued trading cards contributed to this effect: “At least one advertiser deliberately played to the crossover between the intimacy of owning a photograph of someone and seeing the photograph’s subject as an acquaintance. The Lydia Pinkham patent-medicine company invited collectors to see its company symbol as an intimate in one brown-on-tan chromolithograph closely resembling a sepia-tone carte-de-visité photograph of the sort that people often exchanged with one another” (Garvey, “Scrapbook” 113-14).

¹⁰ It bears mentioning that this journey from rural hamlet to urban metropolis was one that Howells himself had made, though he began not in the New England countryside, but in Martin’s Ferry, Ohio. Even after decades living in Boston and New York, Howells still considered himself to be, like Fulkerson and March, a “western man” (*Hazard* 7).

¹¹ Howells recorded some of these experiences in a memoir, *A Boy’s Town* (1890), published the same year as *A Hazard of New Fortunes*.

¹² Howells joked that, in contrast to Henry James’s, “nothing happens” in his own novels (*Indian* 164).

¹³ Leslie was a prominent figure in New York newspaper publishing from the mid-1850s until his death in 1880. Munsey helped pioneer the development of the ten-cent magazine as an alternative to more expensive publications like the *North American Review* and the *Atlantic Monthly*. Bacheller and McClure started the first newspaper publishing syndicates in the United States almost simultaneously in 1884, and though Bacheller eventually turned to writing fiction (after syndicating work such as Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* [1893]), McClure remained a leader in magazine publishing well into the twentieth century. For a suggestion of the literary influence of these latter two men, see Johanningsmeier.

¹⁴ Lears names itinerant peddlers “the most revealing forerunner of the national advertiser,” and argues for their importance in the development of branding in the United States (64).

¹⁵ On the earning power of poets in the early and mid nineteenth century, Charvat writes: “The total bulk of a poet’s work is usually small compared to that of the prose writer, and the problem of the poet who wants to make a living is how to sell the same poem as many times as possible. Ordinarily, in the nineteenth century, his resources in this respect were three: (1) single publication in a newspaper, magazine, or annual; (2) collection in a small volume; (3) reassembly of small volumes in a ‘collected’ edition” (157). Longfellow’s success at the time and current canonical status are owed at least in part to his particular expertise in marshalling this third resource. “Experience early showed Longfellow that the technique of this form was worth watching. On the one hand, several levels of market

could be reached by variations in price; on the other hand, each collection could be strategically outmoded through the publication of new separate volumes of verse and the inclusion of these in new collected editions” (Charvat 162). On Longfellow’s choice of a literary career and conception of literary labor, see Gartner.

¹⁶ Their investment was of a different nature than that of consumer product manufacturers, however. Whereas makers of shoes and cigarettes used advertising to differentiate similar products that consumers could see, hold, and inspect, railroads used advertising to idealize and exoticize locations about which consumers probably had no personal knowledge. The Santa Fe Railroad, for example, used romantic depictions of the Southwest in its advertising campaigns of the 1890s (Laird 41, 82).

¹⁷ For a survey of the effects of postbellum industrialization on the natural environment, see Steinberg. In *Silas Lapham*, Howells registers these effects as well as the backlash they provoked by noting the Coreys’ repeated complaints (72, 94) about Lapham marking large rocks and other natural surfaces throughout Maine and Massachusetts with the words “Lapham’s Mineral Paint—Specimen” in “three colors” (14). For an account of outdoor advertising in the late nineteenth century, see Baker; Chang and Taylor.

¹⁸ March’s feelings here invoke the “principle of Complicity” (*Novels* 165) Howells had previously treated in detail in *The Minister’s Charge* (1887). For an extended analysis of “complicity,” realism, and Howells’s fiction, see Barton and Dimock.

CHAPTER II

MARK TWAIN'S TWIN TROUBLES: *PUDD'NHEAD WILSON* AND THE PRODUCT NARRATIVE

When Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* appeared in *The Century* in late 1893, and then again in book form the following year, reviewers were understandably somewhat perplexed. The short novel is set in Dawson's Landing, a quiet antebellum Missouri town much like Tom Sawyer's St. Petersburg, and weaves together disparate plotlines involving babies switched at birth, identical twins, duels, murder, blackface, prohibitionism, forensic science, and dramatic courtroom revelations. It combines tragic conditions with farcical escapades, inexorable logic with unabashed sentiment, and dialect speech with omniscient narration. In doing so, the novel reworks a host of themes—racial identity, the basis and operation of law, life in antebellum Missouri—which readers had by the 1890s come to expect from Twain's writing. These expectations were not entirely fulfilled by the novel's hodgepodge of forms and conventions, however. In spite of his having written it, the book seemed to reviewers only partly to belong to Twain. "Mark Twain's latest story," wrote William Livingston Alden for *The Idler*, "is the work of a novelist, rather than of a 'funny man.' There is plenty of humour in it of the genuine Mark Twain brand, but it is as a carefully painted picture of life in a Mississippi [River] town in the days of slavery that its chief merit lies" (215). A reviewer for *The Athenaeum* similarly remarked on the relationship between the novel's humor and Twain's previous work: "Of course there are some funny things in the story—it would not be by Mark Twain if there were not—but the humour of the preface

might very well be spared; it is in bad taste” (“Rev.” 216). Likewise, T. M. Parrott argued in *The Booklover’s Magazine* that “[h]ad anyone but Mark Twain written such a book it would no doubt have been more generally recognized as the grave and powerful piece of art it really is” (218). For each of these reviewers, *Pudd’nhead Wilson* is somehow not fully commensurate with what Alden calls the “genuine Mark Twain brand.”

This chapter explores the significance of this gap between novel and brand for Twain’s career and for American realist authors more generally. In chapter 1, I noted that beginning in the mid-1880s William Dean Howells began to show cognizance of the manner in which, after several decades of steady literary output, his writing, image, public appearances, and relationship with other authors (including Twain) gradually combined to create a narrative that defined both his writings and his authorship as products. I did not pursue this line of inquiry, however, because Howells’s sense of authorship as a kind of ongoing brand development surfaces only intermittently in his writing; sustained reflection on the issue would likely have led him to address more directly a situation in which realism, conceived and deployed as a cultural countermeasure to branding, wound up a formidable brand itself.

In contrast, Twain’s sense of authorship as brand development was both highly developed and readily apparent to even the most casual observer. Like Howells, Twain grew up around newspaper offices and worked as a typesetter and printer’s apprentice. Unlike Howells, however, he emerged from these experiences committed to a performative notion of authorship. In Stephen Railton’s formulation, “‘Mark Twain’ was himself a performance, a series of enactments” played out on the “stage defined by the

intersection of Clemens's ambitions and his audience's expectations" (543). From his earliest stories, sketches, and lectures to his final, unfinished autobiography, and from his characteristic white suit, pipe, and unruly hair to the legal trademarking of his pen name, Twain actively sought to create, control, and exploit a product narrative into which all aspects of his authorship were absorbed.¹

The reviewers' responses to *Pudd'nhead Wilson* reveal that Twain's efforts were largely successful. Each of the three evinces a similar perception of what constitutes this author's brand. For Alden, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* fits the Twain product narrative since it treats "life in a Mississippi [River] town" with "plenty of humour." *The Athenaeum's* reviewer finds "some funny things in the story" which serve to verify that the novel is in fact Twain's work. And Parrott suggests that because Twain has written the novel, it must be considered along comedic lines; to treat it otherwise would be tantamount to denying its attribution to Twain. Nevertheless, each of these brand affirmations—reassurances that readers who pick up *Pudd'nhead Wilson* are also picking up the larger Twain product narrative where it most recently left off—is couched in some uneasiness concerning the new novel. Its "chief merit" is its detailed depiction of life "in the days of slavery," not its jokes. The humor in the main part of the novel, which is identifiably Twain's, does not completely expunge the "humour of the preface," which is "in bad taste," and consequently not identifiably Twain's. And finally, viewing the novel as "the grave and powerful piece of art it really is" somehow requires suggesting that it was written by "anyone but Mark Twain." The reviewers' celebration of the Twain product narrative is closely bound up with an open suspicion that *Pudd'nhead Wilson* participates in this narrative only to unravel it from the inside.

This emphasis on the novel's entrenched contradictions anticipates the critical debates shaping recent interpretations of the novel, most of which have centered on its treatment of law, race, and slavery. While I do not want to put these concerns wholly aside, this chapter will take the novel in a new direction by investigating its place in Twain's evolving consideration of authorship and branding. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is most directly about two sets of twins: Tom Driscoll and Valet de Chambre, a scion of the local gentry and a slave, respectively, whose identical appearance allows them to be secretly switched as infants; and the Italians Luigi and Angelo Capello, identical twins by birth whose unexpected arrival in Dawson's Landing elicits a mixture of both awe and resentment. The lives of the four collide when Tom's uncle is murdered and Luigi and Angelo are charged with the crime. In the extended courtroom sequence that concludes the novel, Wilson uses fingerprint evidence not only to exonerate Luigi and Angelo, but also to prove Tom's guilt and to reveal the infant switch that occurred twenty-three years earlier.²

Critics of the novel have generally responded to the twin troubles first tangled and then untangled in this plot as an invitation to examine Twain's post-*Huckleberry Finn* views on racial identity. In doing so, however, they largely ignore a third set of twins: David Wilson, the transplanted eastern lawyer whose scientific acumen and logical reasoning cut through layers of popular misperception in order to solve the crime; and Pudd'nhead Wilson, the benevolent but befuddled and aloof man the citizens of Dawson's Landing believe David Wilson to be.³ David's virtuosic triumph in the trial banishes Pudd'nhead forever—but the significance of this banishment has yet to be fully explored. In shifting the novel's focus to this third set of twins, I suggest that Twain's

exploration of racial identity is framed and structured by an exploration of authorial identity. Of what use, asks Twain in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, is having a public identity—a personal market fiction—a brand? And, having acquired one, what can be done to get rid of it?

The Mark Twain brand conditioned the intelligibility of the novel for its first reviewers, which makes these questions especially significant. But they are also pressing in light of recent shifts in the novel's critical trajectory. Even while plunging into the debate over Twain's treatment of race in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, several recent critics have suggested pursuing other lines of inquiry. In his contribution to *Mark Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson: Race, Conflict, and Culture* (1990), a collection of essays that helped establish the centrality of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* to studies of both Twain and the Gilded Age, George Marcus argues that while "there is much sharp critique of race" in the novel, "it did not seem to me to be what the novel was centrally about" (199). Responding to Marcus's assessment, and evincing an even stronger desire to reorient critical discussion, Robert Moss has concluded after studying the various additions and deletions Twain made between drafts of the novel that *Pudd'nhead Wilson* "does not show Twain's efforts to come to terms with the issue of race in the Missouri of his childhood; it demonstrates, instead, a conscious effort by its author to avoid dealing with the issue at all" (original emphasis, 44). While Moss's argument has not diminished continuing analysis of the novel's racial politics, it has in effect licensed inquiries in new directions. Recent articles by Peter Messent, David Lionel Smith, Martin Buinicki, and Loren Glass have investigated *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and Twain's later career in the context of, respectively, Twain's relationship with Standard Oil vice-president H. H. Rogers; the

commercial popularity of Twain's iconoclasm; his views on copyright law; and his efforts to transform authorship into a corporate endeavor. In addition to illustrating his attitude toward race in the later part of his career, then, Twain's novel serves usefully in locating Twain in relation to the business of authorship in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century.

In an article on social spaces at the end of the nineteenth century, Philip Fisher has suggested that "Mark Twain" functioned "not so much as a pen name but as . . . a brand name for the various enterprises of lecturing, door-to-door subscription sales of novels or travel books, printing investments, and public appearances" ("Appearing" 165). I argue in this chapter that *Pudd'nhead Wilson* may be read as a powerful, and personal, critique of authorship's increasing abstraction through branding into a product narrative. By the 1890s, Twain had largely ceased the attempts to cultivate a "genuine Mark Twain brand" (Alden 215) that characterized his early career. As the contemporary reactions to *Pudd'nhead Wilson* suggest, however, this brand continued to govern readers' expectations and interpretations of Twain's writing, placing him in the difficult position of relying on the brand for literary success while simultaneously chafing at its constraints.⁴ The story of David Wilson's transformation into Pudd'nhead Wilson and then back into David Wilson envisions a world in which product narratives may be cast off without loss of social recognition or commercial viability. Twain felt harried in the early 1890s by financial setbacks that compelled him to write and lecture in a stagnant branded persona increasingly disconnected from his evolving interests and attitudes, and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* in many ways enacts a fantasy of release from this brand imprisonment. Accordingly, the novel reveals the degree to which the brand authorship

that Twain pioneered came in the later part of his career to serve more as a burden than a benefit to his ongoing development as an author. Finally, by looking at how Twain's attempt to shake off this burden shapes the form of his novel, we may ultimately begin to discern branding's influence on the development of American literary realism.

The "Matter" and "Manner" of Mark Twain

"I do not claim that I can tell a story as it ought to be told," Twain begins his short essay "How to Tell a Story," published in 1897. "I only claim to know how a story ought to be told." The cornerstone of this knowledge is a distinction Twain makes between different kinds of stories: "The humorous story depends for its effect upon the *manner* of the telling; the comic story and the witty story upon the *matter*" (original emphasis, 3). Having separated "*matter*" and "*manner*," script and performance, Twain expands his argument:

The humorous story is told gravely; the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it; but the teller of the comic story tells you beforehand that it is one of the funniest things he has ever heard, then tells it with eager delight, and is the first person to laugh when he gets through. And sometimes, if he has had good success, he is so glad and happy that he will repeat the 'nub' of it and glance around from face to face, collecting applause, and then repeat it again. It is a pathetic thing to see. (4)

Twain's contempt for the teller of the comic story stems in small part from his association of this kind of story with the English (he associates the humorous story with Americans); it stems in large part from the comic storyteller's inability to recognize the crucial importance of presentation, delivery, and showmanship. For Twain, the humorous story's superiority derives from the pleasurable uncertainty listeners feel by supposing that the teller is in on the joke but finding no cracks in the teller's naiveté by

which to confirm this supposition. “To string incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and sometimes purposeless way”—the matter of humorous storytelling—is far less important than to “seem innocently unaware that they are absurdities”—its manner (8).

Given that Twain’s oratorical performances were known and admired around the world by the time this essay appeared, his privileging of skillfully dramatized storytelling is unsurprising.⁵ But to read this essay as purely, or even primarily, self-flattery is to miss Twain’s larger point about narrative and authorship at the end of the nineteenth century. What Twain ultimately suggests is the necessity of providing stories, irrespective of their conventionality or audacity, with larger framing narratives about the original stories’ existence and performance. The humorous storyteller tells one story simply by speaking the substance he intends to convey to the audience. In offering a richly complicated exterior narrative concerning this story, however, a performance involving gravity, concealment, and subtle invitations to speculate about the speaker’s history, personality, relationships, and desires, the storyteller generates interest not only in the specific story being told, but also in the encompassing narrative of the storyteller’s own real or imagined life. It is this interest which the comic storyteller fails to engage by serving up his own reactions to the story as an initial argument which the story itself will subsequently prove. Whereas the humorous storyteller craftily builds audience interest in a partially glimpsed narrative of his own life and circumstances, the comic storyteller immediately dispels this interest by declaring his identity and disposition before the storytelling even begins.

Though simple, the significance of this distinction should not be underestimated, particularly since Twain had firmly established the centrality of his own personal narrative to an understanding of and appreciation for his writing early in his career. By the time he wrote “How to Tell a Story,” Twain had not simply mastered the art of blending biography and fiction, of grafting the meanings of his life experiences onto his stories and vice versa; he had virtually established this cross-fertilization as the enabling condition for modern, successful authorship. This makes Twain both a pivotal figure in the reconfiguration of authorship for an age of mass media and an especially difficult subject for biographers and scholars to pin down, as such titles as William Dean Howells’s *My Mark Twain* (1910), Louis J. Budd’s *Our Mark Twain* (1983), Everett Emerson’s *The Authentic Mark Twain* (1984), Andrew Hoffman’s *Inventing Mark Twain* (1997), Leland Krauth’s *Proper Mark Twain* (1999), and Fred Kaplan’s *The Singular Mark Twain* (2003) attest. These titles foreground the slipperiness of Twain’s personality, what Lawrence Howe calls the “notorious otherness of Mark Twain” (3), seeming almost to long for an author whose writing, identity, and legacy form a more coherent, unified narrative than the actual multiform narrative Twain presents. Much Twain scholarship has consisted of attempts to iron out complexities and ambiguities in the historical and literary records—to identify an “authentic” or “proper” core at the center of Twain’s life and work—and thereby to unmask Twain as essentially “singular.”

Recent scholarship examining Twain in a business context, however, has abandoned this search for the one true Twain in favor of an approach that views Twain’s polyvalence not as an obstacle to inquiry, but rather as an important subject of inquiry in itself. Loren Glass, for example, has argued that Twain’s ability to inhabit a middle

dialectical space between private self and public personality helped usher in an era of celebrity authorship that lasted nearly to the end of the twentieth century. Glass notes that, in the 1880s and 1890s, “private life increasingly achieved its significance through public exposure in the new metropolitan dailies and mass-market magazines” at the same time that “public exposure was increasingly understood in terms of a mass public engrossed in the private experience of reading and consuming” (11). Twain’s celebrity, Glass argues, formed at the intersection of two modern phenomena: accounts of his private life published in mass-circulation periodicals (and in books such as *The Innocents Abroad* [1869], *Roughing It* [1872], *A Tramp Abroad* [1880], and *Life on the Mississippi* [1883]), and accounts of his public personality constructed privately by individuals out of their various encounters with him and with published reports of his life and work. Invented through the collision of these two kinds of account—the author emerging from both private narratives made public and public narratives made private—Twain acts, in Glass’s analysis, as a ground-breaking innovator in the use of celebrity to expand both the literary influence and the financial rewards of authorship.

While Twain seems to have taken some delight in celebrity for its own sake, he also thought deeply and strategically about the different business purposes to which it could be applied. Consequently, building on Glass’s discussion of how Twain came to know himself publicly and to be publicly known requires a change in critical terms. A certain measure of business savvy is presumed in crediting Twain with concocting and promulgating a celebrity personality with a specific history, character attributes, and cultural associations, but thinking about Twain’s specific intentions for the public narrative of his life and work—intentions directed toward this narrative as a consumer

product similar in many ways to the thousands of other consumer products appearing in the late nineteenth-century United States—entails a shift from Twain as celebrity to Twain as brand. Glass points out that, thanks in some degree to Twain’s success, “through live readings, interviews, and promotional appearances, authors were increasingly expected to offer up their personalities as a promotional component of their work in the literary marketplace” (16-17). The purpose of these events was not merely to communicate basic information to readers about the authors’ latest writings, but to create a context for these writings, a narrative of their existence that facilitated readers’ attempts to make sense of them—and, even more importantly, that compelled readers to purchase copies of them. As branded products with memorable names, images, packaging, and slogans increasingly supplanted nondescript bulk goods on storekeepers’ shelves and in consumers’ homes, readers looked to popular authors for origin stories, catchphrases, and distinctive images that would likewise constitute a cohesive author-brand. No author between the end of the Civil War and the end of the nineteenth century met these brand expectations as skillfully and consistently as Twain.⁶

Of course, readers’ growing aptitudes for piecing together product narratives out of their interactions with the products themselves, various media, and each other might have prepared them to perceive a Twain brand even had the intention to create one not existed. But in Twain’s case, the intention, however inchoate, existed from the beginning of his career, as the selection of his pseudonym indicates. Larzer Ziff notes that “Clemens first used the name [Mark Twain] in 1863 when he was reporting on the doings of the Nevada legislature for the *Virginia City Enterprise*.” Evincing an instinctive faculty for colorful reportage, “[h]is articles were popular throughout the region, and

many readers knew who wrote them even though their author was not identified in print.” Here Twain seizes an opportunity to capitalize on reader interest in his authorship by shaping the information about him that came to readers’ attention. As Ziff reports, “aware of his local popularity and eager to be known to a wider audience, Clemens told his editor that he would like to sign his articles; he chose the name ‘Mark Twain’ because, he said, that river term, the leadman’s cry of two fathoms (twelve feet), ‘has a richness about it; it was always a pleasant sound for a pilot to hear on a dark night; it meant safe water’” (Ziff 8). His explanation of his choice of pseudonym foregrounds several characteristics that would remain hallmarks of the Twain brand for decades to come. For Twain, the name suggests riverboating’s “richness”—its predisposition for adventure—while also suggesting comfortable dependability, the “pleasant sound” of “safe water.” It also suggests intrinsic duality, particularly in language: irony’s centrality to the Twain brand is evident from the way he calmly describes twelve feet as a comfortable depth for a riverboat (presumably, it was not).⁷ As though anticipating the postbellum United States’s fascination with the West, need for national symbols to repair (or, at least paper over) the rifts left by the Civil War, and receptiveness to ironic humor, Twain structured a product narrative of his life and writings around these pillars almost from the beginning of his career.

Several critics have noted that, as Twain’s literary success grew over the next two decades (1870s and 1880s), his interest in business ventures also grew, a fact which led to his making striking insights concerning the business of authorship.⁸ Martin Buinicki, for example, points out that Twain’s experiences as a silver miner in the mid-1860s provided him with an enduring conceptual structure for thinking about copyright, both as

concerned his own individual works and as concerned laws governing U.S. and international publication. Twain “saw property rights as matters of individual responsibility,” Buinicki writes, “rather than as divine or natural rights. He felt that one had to defend these rights actively to keep them” (59-60). This belief, expressed in mining terms, resulted in a longstanding practice of “guarding his claim while at the same time allowing just enough of the ‘ore’—whether that be travel letters later revised into books or an occasional short story—to circulate and continue whetting the public’s interest in ‘Mark Twain’ products” (69). Buinicki’s discussion of Twain’s skill at protecting the core body of his work while occasionally floating fresh bits of biography and personal narrative into public discourse about himself suggests that a concern for public identity, carefully nurtured and refreshed when needed, structured Twain’s practices as author and as businessman so similarly as to bring these practices to almost completely overlap. As a result, Twain’s swashbuckling yet self-deprecating frontier philosopher brand—conceived in the 1860s, enlarged and further developed over the next two decades—helped to produce a combination of literary and commercial success unprecedented in the United States.

By the early 1890s, however, the chief drawback of this mode of achieving success was starting to become evident. Louis J. Budd has argued that “any competent biographer will show that Samuel Clemens became self-fashioning early, with self-adjusting brakes as he read characterizations of himself far more pointed than those we all react to from our circle of friends and—alas—ring of enemies. His self-imaging . . . grew deliberate and calculating rather than just responsive” over the course of his career (268). As his body of work grew and his fame spread around the world, Twain became

increasingly tactical in his efforts to shape and control his brand. Leveraging his brand heavily, though, created the possibility of tension between the Twain product narrative, which needed to remain within the relatively fixed confines of the established sardonic-traveler and teller-of-tall-tales personality, and the private Twain, who found himself increasingly engaged by ideas, events, and people outside the scope of this personality as he aged. Twain felt this tension acutely in the early 1890s as both national and personal developments conspired to make the Twain brand onerous. Nationally, the American West began to yield to the modern industrial city as the dominant space of the cultural imagination—a transition explicitly announced in such works as Henry Blake Fuller’s novel *The Cliff-Dwellers* (1893), which transfers the moniker of the pre-Columbian Anasazi of southwest Colorado to the denizens of Chicago’s new skyscrapers.⁹ Budd notes that “[w]hen Frederick Jackson Turner announced the end of the domestic frontier [in 1893, at the Chicago World’s Fair], he was also announcing the end of the ebullient, far western Twain” (268). This is not to say that the “far western Twain” ceased to exist, but rather to say that he continued to exist only as a product narrative, a market fiction appealing to specific perceptions of American history and identity.¹⁰ National events thus forced a partitioning of the Twain brand and the cultural conditions from which it sprang.

Personally, this time was marked by Twain’s mounting exasperation at the dwindling fortunes of his publishing company, Charles L. Webster & Co., and repeated setbacks in the development of the Paige compositor, a venture in which Twain had invested heavily for more than a decade. As a result of the national financial panic of 1893, Twain was unable to borrow funds to keep the publishing company afloat, and

creditors forced its bankruptcy in 1894, the year *Pudd'nhead Wilson* appeared. Twain also broke with James Paige at this time, conceding that the massive amounts of money he had sunk into the typesetting machine would never be recovered. Sick with worry as he watched his commercial interests falter and then fail, Twain wrote to Fred Hall, his partner in the publishing company: "I am terribly tired of business. I am by nature and disposition unfitted for it and I want to get out of it. . . . Do your best for me, for I do not sleep, these nights, for visions of the poor-house" (qtd. in Messent 59). Twain was fortunate to have recently befriended H. H. Rogers, vice-president of Standard Oil, whose shrewd assistance (including the transfer of Twain's copyrights to his wife, Olivia, which put them out of reach of creditors) helped to stave off complete disaster (Messayent 59). Nevertheless, he knew, even before his financial state reached its nadir, that the only road to recovery lay along the path of the Twain brand.¹¹

The prospect of an extended period in which Twain would have to lean heavily on this brand in order to climb out of debt was made bitter not only by the growing gap between the brand and the national mood, but also by the gap between the brand and Twain's own mood. The business fatigue he described to Hall included both Paige's mechanical invention and his own narrative self-invention. Twain's difficulty lay in the fact that escaping the first required him to inhabit the second ever more deeply, and at a time when he had become severely disillusioned with it. *Tom Sawyer Abroad*, a novella written hastily in late 1893 for a badly needed \$5000, makes this disillusionment evident. The story takes place sometime after the events in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), and chronicles a trip made by Tom, Huck, and Jim in a balloon aircraft to Africa and the Sinai Peninsula. Ron Powers describes the work as "pure pulp" (546), and R.

Kent Rasmussen notes “an emptiness about the story” stemming from its population, “aside from Tom, Huck, and Jim,” with “faceless figures observed from a distance.” In addition, Rasmussen writes, “the jarringly abrupt ending suggests that [Twain] ended the story in the middle of something longer. It may be that he intended to publish the rest if the first part proved popular, which it did not” (468). While Rasmussen accounts for the novella’s incoherent plot, lack of depth, and failure to engage the public imagination by characterizing the piece as hack work—old material rewritten for quick cash—we might also look to Twain’s brand disillusionment for an explanation. The novella reads like an uncomfortable attempt to reposition the Twain brand along a national frontier that had moved outside the geographical United States. Moreover, its “faceless figures” and “abrupt ending” also suggest an author unable to fully connect with the lively, adventurous imagination that once spun such colorful tales with apparent ease.

This ease had now become distaste and even revulsion. Forced in 1891 to economize by closing his Hartford mansion and moving his family to Europe, Twain sought to leverage the Twain brand not only by reviving Tom, Huck, and Jim, but also, particularly as prospects for salvaging the Webster publishing company and the Paige compositor dwindled to nothing, considering a return to the lecture circuit. Clara Clemens recalls her father later remarking on his agonizing reluctance to do so: “Do you remember . . . the hellish struggle it was to settle on making that lecture trip around the world? How we fought the idea, the horrible idea, the heart-torturing idea. . . . I was to pack my bag and be jolted around the devil’s universe for what? . . . But once the idea of that infernal trip struck us we couldn’t shake it” (qtd. in Lorch 184). Lecturing had the advantage of being lucrative (with money from the tour and from *Following the Equator*

[1897], his published account of it, Twain cleared his debts in 1898 and returned to the United States), but also placed serious demands on Twain's health. What made lecturing truly "heart-torturing," however, was the necessity of performing a self-caricature now almost completely detached from both cultural and personal realities. With his white suit, bushy hair and mustache, and exaggerated Missouri drawl, Twain presented to his international audiences a persona much at odds with the cosmopolitan New England man of letters he had become over the previous twenty years. While awareness of this incongruity helped Twain to formulate the distinction between humorous and comic storytelling he illustrates in "How to Tell a Story," it also caused him to lament the power that branding had come by the mid-1890s to exercise over authorship generally and over his own career in particular. Dependent on his brand for survival, Twain nevertheless began to imagine scenarios in which branding has an imprisoning effect, and in which escaping one's own product narrative becomes the key to renewed happiness and self-preservation.

Unbranding the Author: Two Scenarios

I will argue below that *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is Twain's most direct and sustained treatment of this understanding of branding, but it will be helpful first to discuss two instances in his earlier fiction that prefigure the representations he puts forward in *Pudd'nhead*. The first, and well known, instance is Hank Morgan's effort in *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court* (1889) to transform the knights of Arthurian England into late nineteenth-century salesmen who roam the countryside hawking basic consumer products instead of seeking out evil beasts in need of slaying and virtuous

damsels in need of rescuing. The second instance has rarely been discussed, and concerns Howard Tracy's elevation out of poverty through portrait painting in *The American Claimant* (1892). Both of these cases presage important questions about branding considered in greater depth in *Pudd'nhead*.

In *Connecticut Yankee*, branding is one of many late nineteenth-century inventions (others include the telephone, the Gatling gun, and baseball) that Morgan brings forth in Camelot, both directly through his knight-advertising scheme and indirectly through the way he conceives of transforming various Arthurian institutions. Examples of the latter are sprinkled throughout the text. When disparaging the behavior of the women of the court, Morgan complains to Sandy that the “women here do certainly act like all possessed. Yes, and I mean your best, too, society's very choicest brands” (137). Later, when contemplating plans for restoring water to the sacred well in the Valley of Holiness, he remarks to himself that “[a]s a matter of business it was a good idea to get the notion around that the thing was difficult” since “[m]any a small thing has been made large by the right kind of advertising.” Morgan's “business” receives an immediate boost when a monk in charge of the well becomes quickly “filled up with the difficulty of this enterprise” and eager to “fill up the others,” too (202). Taking aim at two pillars of Arthurian society—chivalric social customs and unreasoning religious devotion—Morgan makes use of the language (and practice) of branding to signify his desire to topple these pillars by manipulating and humiliating those who shelter under them.

Likewise, Morgan exploits the mysticism surrounding a perpetually bowing hermit to sell for an exorbitant price the shirts manufactured by means of a sewing

apparatus he harnesses to the hermit. The shirts “were regarded as a perfect protection against sin,” Morgan smugly explains, noting that he branded them by deploying “paint-pot and stencil-plate” so that “there was not a cliff or a boulder or a dead-wall in England but you could read on it at a mile distance: ‘*Buy the only genuine St. Stylite; patronised by the Nobility. Patent applied for.*’” (original emphasis, 205-06). His efforts are rewarded when the shirts sell “like smoke to pilgrims at a dollar and a half apiece, which was the price of fifty cows or a blooded racehorse in Arthurdom” (205). As examples of Morgan’s interest in branding accumulate over the course of the novel, this practice is singled out as one of the characteristic institutions of the late nineteenth century—that is, it is identified as central to the project of recreating the nineteenth century out of the sixth century. But together these examples also suggest Twain’s bitterness toward branding as a cultural phenomenon. Morgan’s disparagement of the women he labels “society’s very choicest brands” indicates his skepticism toward brands as reliable markers of quality. His successful branding of the two religious icons (the well and the hermit), moreover, portrays branding as a kind of cheerfully malevolent fraud. In *Connecticut Yankee*, at least, branding has no particular salutary effects worth noting. Accordingly, its prominent place in Morgan’s reformed Arthurian England seems justified perhaps less by its importance in late nineteenth-century America than by its ripeness, once transported into a radically different historical context, for thorough critique. By featuring branding in his historical romance, then, Twain offers himself the opportunity to express critical views of branding with a minimum risk that these views will be seen to reflect directly on his own cultural moment or on his position as a branded author. History, geography, and

myth are deployed as protection against those who might read the novel as a pointed critique of the very brand authorship that enables the novel's existence.

This critique comes closest to puncturing the façade of Arthuriana in the case of Morgan's relationship to the knights. Four years after becoming "Boss," and with his numerous factories, academies, and other endeavors fully launched, Morgan yields to pressure from the court to undertake a chivalric adventure in keeping with his status and reputation. In the course of his subsequent wanderings with Sandy, the two come upon a strangely dressed knight: "As we approached each other, I saw that he wore a plumed helmet, and seemed to be otherwise clothed in steel, but bore a curious addition also—a stiff square garment like a herald's tabard. However, I had to smile at my own forgetfulness when I got nearer and read this sign on his tabard: '*Persimmons's Soap – All the Prime-Donne Use It.*'" (original emphasis, 144) (fig. 2-1). Several of Morgan's initiatives come together in this image of the knight on horseback bearing a large soap advertisement: an attempt to improve personal hygiene among the masses, an attempt to undercut the social and political status of the knights, and an attempt to adapt sixteenth-century customs in the service of nineteenth-century business practices. Whereas elsewhere in his narrative Morgan is content simply to describe the changes he has introduced into his adopted culture, the knight presents a strikingly salient instance of such a change brought forward for the reader's close inspection.¹²

One result of this inspection is confirmation that Twain's critique targets branding—the multi-form creation specifically of product *narratives*—and not merely advertising, one of branding's most powerful and visible components. Although Morgan



Pears' Soap is nothing but Soap—no medicine in it—pure soap. And yet—but read what a great authority says of it:

I have tried very many different soaps, including all the best known, whether English or foreign, pursuing my investigations with perfect independence; and I have now, after all these years of careful observation in very many thousands of cases, both in hospital and private practice, no hesitation in stating that *none have answered so well or proved so beneficial to the skin as Pears' Soap*—an experience not only endorsed in their works on the skin by the late Sir Erasmus Wilson and Dr. Tilbury Fox, but vouched for by such eminent analytical chemists as Professors Redwood, Attfield, Cameron, and others. . . . Time and more extended trials have only served to ratify this opinion, and to increase my confidence in this admirable preparation.—*Milton's Hygiene of the Skin*, p. 90 (ed. 1891).

It has no alkali in it—nothing but soap.

The more purely negative soap is, the nearer does it approach to perfection.

Figure 2-1. Advertisement for Pears' Soap. *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1893. Pears' is the likely model for Hank Morgan's Persimmons's Soap. It shares a fruit name, was extremely popular in the 1880s, and also originated in England.

reads the result of his scheme in the name and slogan on the knight's "tabard," he explains that this advertisement is only the outward sign of a much broader forced revision of the knight's identity and story: "Whenever my missionaries [i.e. already branded knights] overcame a knight errant on the road they washed him, and when he got well they swore him to go and get a bulletin-board and disseminate soap and civilisation the rest of his days. As a consequence the workers in the field were increasing by degrees, and the reform was steadily spreading" (146). Morgan has already outlined the customs and (in his view) absurdities of knight errantry when earlier excusing his reluctance to embark on the virtuous chivalric quest expected of him as a favorite of the king. As a result, the contrast between conventional knight errantry and Morgan's new version, which closely resembles the journeying of a late nineteenth-century itinerant salesman, is clear. The knights now bear much more than a "bulletin-board" advertisement; they bear an entire product narrative that links "soap and civilisation" and makes those who "disseminate" them representatives of an emerging modern society. Morgan congratulates himself on constructing a system in which the knights' appearance, behavior, ideals, and social status are prescribed in conformity to a brand.

While acknowledging that the purpose of this system is to earn money—the knights' efforts drive production at his soap factories—and to build up a national economy, Morgan also plainly acknowledges that he intends branding to humiliate the knights. "[I]t was a furtive, underhand blow at this nonsense of knight errantry, though nobody suspected that but me," he reveals. "I judged that by-and-by when they got to be numerous enough they would begin to look ridiculous; and then, even the steel-clad ass that *hadn't* any board would himself begin to look ridiculous because he was out of the

fashion” (original emphasis, 144). Morgan generally describes the changes instituted under his authority as “Boss” as directed toward the improvement, or progress, of Arthurian society. Here he abandons even the pretense of benevolent motives, however; out of one “nonsense” Morgan seeks only to create another, more modern nonsense. The anticipated final result is a community so permeated by branding that even those who retain their original appearances, behavior, ideals, and self-understandings feel abject, caught between “ridiculous” product narratives and an equally “ridiculous” state of being “out of the fashion.” Though his first-person voice, frequent confidential asides, and control over the narrative invite readers to identify with him, Morgan’s coerced branding of the knights with the intention primarily to humiliate them calls into question the desirability of this identification.

Indeed, the “Battle of the Sand-Belt” at the end of the novel, which restores the knights to the peak of their chivalric glory, causes even Morgan himself to show sympathy for the knights and respect for the strength they demonstrate in throwing off the yolk of branding and reclaiming control of their identities. In spite of their enmity toward him, and of the foolishness of this enmity given his vastly superior weaponry, Morgan cannot help but feel awed by the sight of the knights charging en masse against the defenses he has mounted:

The sun rose presently and sent its unobstructed splendours over the land, and we saw a prodigious host moving slowly toward us, with the steady drift and aligned front of a wave of the sea. Nearer and nearer it came, and more and more sublimely imposing became its aspect; yes, all England was there, apparently. Soon we could see the innumerable banners fluttering, and then the sun struck the sea of armour and set it all aflash. Yes, it was a fine sight; I hadn’t ever seen anything to beat it. (394)

The suspicion, irritation, and contempt that characterize nearly every previous description of the knights are here entirely absent, replaced by a sense of their innate nobility and natural beauty. This sense only grows stronger as the riders draw near:

At last we could make out details. All the front ranks, no telling how many acres deep, were horsemen—plumed knights in armour. Suddenly we heard the blare of trumpets; the slow walk burst into a gallop, and then—well, it was wonderful to see! Down swept that vast horse-shoe wave—it approached the sand-belt—my breath stood still; nearer, nearer—the strip of green turf beyond the yellow belt grew narrow—narrower still—became a mere ribbon in front of the horses—then disappeared under their hoofs. Great Scott! (394)

Secure behind his lines of buried mines and electrified fences and armed with a battery of Gatling guns, Morgan nevertheless feels the “sublimely imposing” power of the knights, who are “plumed” and “in armour” rather than sandwiched between boards advertising soap and other basic consumer products. Whereas earlier they constituted “as ridiculous a spectacle as one might want to see” (191), they are now simply “wonderful to see,” a “fine sight” (394) unparalleled in Morgan’s previous experience. His admiration seems to have emerged concomitantly with the knights’ rebellion against the regime of branding he had placed them under.

Given the illogical nature of this change of view as well as the certain annihilation awaiting the knights at the end of their charge, the temptation to read Morgan’s gushing appreciation ironically is strong. It is easy to suppose, for example, that Morgan offers his praise with eye-rolling incredulity at the knights’ assault on such a lethally fortified bunker. But given Twain’s own struggles with branding in the years of *Connecticut Yankee*’s composition, why should we not read the knights’ rejection of branding, even at the price of personal destruction, in precisely the way Morgan describes it—surprising, valorous, and awe-inspiring? If Morgan’s habitual sarcasm validates a reading of this

scene as just one more manifestation of his deepening mania, Twain's palpable need to imagine the rejection of one's brand as not merely possible, but laudable and even righteous, makes available another reading. In this account, Twain displaces his anxieties about branding onto a historical fantasy in order to resolve them with minimum risk of adversely affecting his real-life fortunes. Faced with the need to continue inhabiting a branded authorship that no longer fit his opinions, interests, and desires, Twain struggled with the urge to put this burden behind him. His treatment of the knights' relationship to branding in *Connecticut Yankee* can be read as one dramatization of this struggle.

Another, quite different dramatization can be found in Twain's later novel *The American Claimant* (1892), which takes up again the schemes and escapades of Eschol Sellers (now "Colonel Mulberry Sellers") first chronicled in *The Gilded Age* (1873). In this novel, Sellers' most prominent scheme is his attempt to claim rightful ownership of a British title of nobility. When the true heir to the title undertakes a test of American openness, democracy, and equality of opportunity that brings him to the United States, the fortunes of the two men are set to collide. Not surprisingly, then, the novel's plot is sustained by the various accidents, misrecognitions, and other obstacles that forestall their eventual meeting and the resolution of each man's difficulties. Twain's representation of branding in *The American Claimant* differs markedly from that in *Connecticut Yankee*, first in the former novel's modern Washington, D.C. setting, and second in its conclusion that the best solution to the problem of brand imprisonment is not rejection of the brand in favor of some kind of prior, un-branded identity, but rather a comprehensive modification of the brand that addresses changing market conditions. When one's brand begins to feel like a prison cell, in other words, one option is to

attempt an escape. Another option—explored in detail in *The American Claimant*—is simply to redecorate.

While *Connecticut Yankee* and *The American Claimant* ultimately arrive at these contrasting viewpoints, Twain establishes the conditions for their emergence using the same strategy. As does the earlier novel, *The American Claimant* contains carefully staged moments that bring branding to the reader's attention and make possible the more complex significance attending one element of the novel in particular. For example, when Sally Sellers, the Colonel's daughter, appears lifeless and distracted at the dinner table following her first afternoon in the company of Howard Tracy, the disguised British heir, she is promptly offered "various reputable patent medicines, and tonics with iron and other hardware in them" (206). Patent medicine manufacturers pioneered branding techniques in the 1870s and 1880s, and by the early 1890s had become notorious for the imaginativeness (and misrepresentations) of their product narratives. Twain's reference to patent medicines here helps to insert the novel into a lively cultural discussion of the nature, merits, and pitfalls of branding.¹³

In another scene, Sellers has hired Tracy to touch up some of the pictures he keeps on his walls, most of which originated as promotional materials and advertising giveaways. While checking on Tracy's progress, he unveils his latest acquisition: "It was a chromo; a new one, just out. It was the smirking, self-satisfied portrait of a man who was inundating the Union with advertisements inviting everybody to buy his specialty, which was a three-dollar shoe or a dress-suit or something of that kind. The old gentleman rested the chromo flat upon his lap and gazed down tenderly upon it, and became silent and meditative" (212). The portrait and its invocation of a "three-dollar

shoe” are almost certainly references to the W. L. Douglas Shoe Company, which, as Charles Chatfield has noted, began advertising its three-dollar shoes extensively in New England in 1884 and was expanding nationally at the time Twain’s novel appeared (Chatfield 160-66) (fig. 2-2). But the narrator’s inability—or unwillingness—to specify the identity of the man in the portrait, or even which product exactly (shoes, suits, or something else?) he represents, suggests a concern more with the broader institution of branding than with any particular instance or manifestation of it. Like the patent medicine offer extended to Sally, the unveiling of Sellers’s new chromo helps to place branding as a business practice under critical scrutiny.

This scrutiny goes deepest in the case of Tracy’s joining a pair of portrait painters in an effort to stave off the poverty and depression resulting from the failure of his test of American ideals. Firmly believing that in the United States only hard work and determination are required to produce community acceptance and economic prosperity, Tracy is initially disheartened and at last embittered and destitute when these qualities fail to win him respect and a decent living. Just as he reaches rock bottom, his only friend, Barrow, brings over a collection of portraits painted by a duo he knows in order to raise Tracy’s spirits. The effort is successful owing to the fact that, while the subjects of the portraits change, the background does not:

The pictures were fearful, as to color, and atrocious as to drawing and expression; but the feature which squelched animosity and made them funny was a feature which could not achieve its full force in a single picture, but required the wonder-working assistance of repetition. One loudly dressed mechanic in stately attitude, with his hand on a cannon, ashore, and a ship riding at anchor in the offing,—this is merely odd; but when one sees the same cannon and the same ship in fourteen pictures in a row, and a different mechanic standing watch in each, the thing gets to be funny. (163)

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Figure 2-2. Advertisement for W. L. Douglas Shoes. *Century*, April 1898.

Tracy's amused reaction stems specifically from the spectacle of many different mechanics represented in the exact same setting—a setting, furthermore, that has nothing to do with their profession. Though “fearful” and “atrocious,” the portraits’ “repetition” of cannon and ship is somehow pleasantly disarming; its unexpectedness and seeming whimsicality invite speculation as to the origins of the portraits, the feelings of their subjects, and the desirability of owning one of the paintings.

For Tracy, such speculation is obviated by a visit from the men whose collaboration has produced the portraits: Handel, a German shoemaker who paints the figures, and Captain Saltmarsh, a sea-captain who puts in the backgrounds. During the ensuing discussion the mystery concerning the presence of the cannon and ship in every portrait is solved when Tracy asks why other backgrounds and symbols are never used. The captain confesses that he paints a cannon and ship far better than anything else, but then goes on to defend this setting even when it appears as a jarring irregularity by claiming it as the chief element of the duo's brand—the most visible part of the portrait's product narrative. “Why, look here,” Saltmarsh says to Tracy, pointing at one of the portraits. “This fellow here, No. 11, he's a hackman,—a flourishing hackman, I may say. He wants his hack in this picture. Wants it where the cannon is.” This is precisely the situation Tracy has been imagining. The captain's response to the hackman, however, takes Tracy a little by surprise: “I got around that difficulty, by telling him the cannon's our trademark, so to speak—proves that the picture's our work, and I was afraid if we left it out people wouldn't know for certain if it *was* a Saltmarsh-Handel—now you wouldn't yourself” (original emphasis, 166). The “so to speak” appended to Saltmarsh's use of the term “trademark” here is crucial, for it excuses him from intending the term's meaning in

a legal context. What Saltmarsh does mean is that the cannon enters the portrait into a specific product narrative that encompasses origin, subject, quality, price, function, and other characteristics that “people” would “know” go into a true “Saltmarsh-Handel.” Saltmarsh assumes that this product narrative is what his customers value most.

In Tracy’s conversation with the two painters, however, the product narrative appears more a barrier to growth and success than a means to achieve them. The captain has usefully pegged his creative abilities to his professional identity. As his partner, the German shoemaker, explains, “He is born mit dose cannon in him. He tondt haf to do noding, his chenius do all de vork. Of he is asleep, und take a pencil in his hand, out come a cannon” (166). But the single-mindedness that makes the cannons effortless comes at the cost of an ability to paint objects and scenes that might appeal to a broader customer base. “Py crashus,” the shoemaker exclaims, “of he could do a clavier, of he could do a guitar, of he could do a vashtub, it is a fortune, heiliger Yohanniss it is yoost a fortune!” (166). Echoing the shoemaker, Barrow emphasizes the downside to brand fidelity by asserting that the duo “could double their trade and work the women in, if Capt. Saltmarsh could whirl a horse in, or a piano, or a guitar, in place of his cannon. The fact is, he fatigues the market with that cannon” (163). If the captain’s concern for the integrity of the “Saltmarsh-Handel” brand seems to anticipate the concern for the “genuine Mark Twain brand” (Alden 215) voiced in reviews of *Pudd’nhead Wilson* a few years later, the larger problem of branding in *The American Claimant* likewise parallels Twain’s real-life struggles with branding. In each situation, the brand acts simultaneously as a commercial asset and an artistic limitation. Both Twain and the

Saltmarsh-Handel partnership face the need to move in new artistic directions in spite of constraints posed by their respective brands.

Fortunately, for the Saltmarsh-Handel partnership, at least, branding's constraints on subject matter, color, shape, and style prove more illusion than reality. Tracy strongly contests the captain's conviction that customers will not recognize the duo's work without its characteristic nautical theme: "Anyone who has once seen a genuine Saltmarsh-Handel," he announces, "is safe from imposture forever. Strip it, flay it, skin it out of every detail but the bare color and expression, and that man will still recognize it, still stop to worship" (166). In effect, Tracy argues that brands are much more mutable than they may at first appear. Given a consistent "bare color and expression," all of a brand's details may change, allowing for near total reinvention without sacrifice of the impalpable essence to which customers respond. As Tracy maintains, the customer will "still say to himself again as he had said a hundred times before, the art of the Saltmarsh-Handel is an art apart, there is nothing in the heavens above or in the earth beneath that resembles it" (167). Unperturbed by the notion that certain details in the "art of the Saltmarsh-Handel" will need to remain fixed in order to retain brand recognition, Tracy posits an unquestionably unique, yet almost ineffable quality to the Saltmarsh-Handel brand that customers will feel compelled to recognize and appreciate regardless of its specific material guise.

As later becomes apparent, Tracy's argument for the mutability of brands and the fidelity of customers in the face of brand transformation is not a disinterested one, for he makes it knowing that his painting skills are strong enough to compensate for the deficiencies of the captain and the shoemaker. Already flattered by Tracy's interest,

moreover, the two need little convincing: “The arrangements were soon made. Tracy was taken into full and equal partnership, and he went straight to work, with dash and energy, to reconstructing gems of art whose accessories had failed to satisfy” (173). Since Tracy feels that the “art of the Saltmarsh-Handel” (167) lies in an impalpable, but nonetheless immediately identifiable, essence, he shows no hesitation in altering the physical details of the portraits. “Under his hand,” Twain writes, “artillery disappeared and the emblems of peace and commerce took its place—cats, hacks, sausages, tugs, fire engines, pianos, guitars, rocks, gardens, flower-pots, landscapes—whatever was wanted, he flung it in.” In spite of the captain’s anxiety that in the absence of the “trademark” cannon customers would devalue the portraits, Tracy’s versatility and willingness to attempt new scenes boosts business to levels no one had anticipated. Twain briefly summarizes the outcome: “The pirates were delighted, the customers applauded, the sex began to flock in, great was the prosperity of the firm” (173).¹⁴ In the end, Tracy’s argument about the nature and behavior of brands has the effect both of rescuing him from poverty and of discrediting the notion that, having become trapped by a brand that functions more as a burden than a benefit, one’s only option is to abandon branding entirely. As this episode in *The American Claimant* suggests, brands are capable of evolving, and they can become much more effective as a result of thorough transformation.

This suggestion mattered deeply to Twain, not because he seriously contemplated a comprehensive makeover of his brand, perhaps, but rather because he needed to imaginatively explore the conditions under which such change might take place as well as the consequences it might bring. Certain aspects of this exploration remain clearly

underdeveloped. What, for instance, actually constitutes the inner brand essence that remains immediately recognizable even when nearly everything else about the brand changes? This underdevelopment is less a flaw in Twain's thinking, however, than a reminder of his continuing position on the frontier of the expanding relationship between business and authorship in the late nineteenth century. Having been in many important ways the first author to inhabit a fully formed brand, he becomes also the first author to think through possibilities for extricating oneself from a brand. Indeed, Twain's conjectures about branding, both in *Connecticut Yankee* and in *The American Claimant*, are more aptly characterized as consciously ruminative than as underdeveloped. Whereas in the first novel he considers responding to the problem of brand imprisonment by rejecting the brand entirely, in the second he imagines that the brand can be wholly reconstituted in a more congenial form. Examined together, the two novels show Twain puzzling through his own options in order to better understand the conditions governing his remaining literary career in a culture now increasingly organized around branded authorship.

A Product Narrative on Trial

Pudd'nhead Wilson, published two years after *The American Claimant*, demonstrates Twain's most complex and sustained engagement with these conditions. After identifying in his earlier novels the two extremes to which he might go in addressing the problem of branding, Twain settles in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* on a synthesis of the two. Years of toil under the unwelcome persona of "Pudd'nhead" finally end for David Wilson when his compelling presentation of fingerprint evidence in the murder

trial of the Capello twins produces both an acquittal of the twins and an identification of the actual murderer, Tom Driscoll. The citizens of Dawson's Landing are delighted by Wilson's performance, but also chastened by the intimations of injustice it attaches to those who have long held Wilson in bemused contempt. Eager to compensate for this wrong, they celebrate Wilson's scientific expertise and forensic prowess to the exclusion of the more puzzling aspects of his personality and behavior. Accordingly, while Wilson's victory at the end of the novel strongly suggests a rejection of branding, the personal characteristics and associations through which he is newly perceived conspicuously fail to encompass the complexity and mutability of his conduct. Simplification thus supersedes simplification, and what looks like a rejection of branding begins to look also like brand transformation.

From the novel's beginning, branding is presented by Twain as causing one of the several twin troubles that drive the plot forward. After describing Dawson's Landing and some of its prominent citizens at the beginning of the first chapter, Twain devotes a scant half paragraph to the birth of the two identical boys, Tom and Chambers, whose subsequent exchange of identities will eventually precipitate the murder of Judge Driscoll and the trial of the Italian twins. In contrast, the "birth" of the two Wilsons receives extended treatment. "In that same month of February," Twain writes, "Dawson's Landing gained a new citizen." This person is revealed as "Mr. David Wilson, a young fellow of Scotch parentage. He had wandered to this remote region from his birthplace in the interior of the State of New York to seek his fortune. He was twenty-five years old, college-bred, and had finished a post-college course in an Eastern law school a couple of years before" (5). Having identified Wilson through this personal history, Twain

anticipates the novel's later preoccupation with physical uniqueness by offering details of Wilson's appearance: "He was a homely, freckled, sandy-haired young fellow, with an intelligent blue eye that had frankness and comradeship in it and a covert twinkle of a pleasant sort" (5). Twain's description of Wilson fixes him firmly in the reader's mind as a warm, intelligent, unprepossessing young man, an outsider only by virtue of not having grown up in the close-knit community of Dawson's Landing.

Almost as soon as he has arrived, however, Wilson finds himself hampered by the presence of an unwelcome twin. During his first stroll through what Gregg Crane describes as "a homogeneous rural village where everyone has a known identity and role" (301), he becomes irritated by a barking dog and makes an inexplicable remark in full hearing of some new acquaintances. "I wish I owned half of that dog," he says. When asked why, he responds, "Because I would kill my half" (5). Wilson offers no clarification or elaboration of this statement, spoken or otherwise.¹⁵ Consequently, his listeners draw their own conclusions, chief among which are that "he *is* the downrightest fool in the world" (original emphasis, 5), and a "lummux," a "labrick," and a "[p]erfect jackass" (6), to boot. The most devastating label, though, as well as the one that sticks, is "pudd'nhead." "Within a week," Twain writes, "he had lost his first name; Pudd'nhead took its place. In time he came to be liked, and well liked, too; but. . . . That first day's verdict made him a fool, and he was not able to get it set aside, or even modified. The nickname soon ceased to carry any harsh or unfriendly feeling with it, but it held its place" (6). Just as the identical Tom and Chambers are arriving in Dawson's Landing at the same hour, so too do David Wilson and Pudd'nhead Wilson make nearly simultaneous appearances in the town.

Twain's recounting of this episode is striking in several respects. First, Wilson's Pudd'nhead moniker appears to be directly the fruit of what he says about the dog. But by noting Wilson's distant origin, superior education, and wide range of experiences, Twain reveals a way in which the moniker might be not only justified, but also, for town citizens attempting to negotiate the potential threat posed by Wilson's strangeness, highly convenient. Dawson's Landing already contains a few citizens singled out by their education, worldliness, and ambition, but these men (Colonel Cecil Burleigh Essex, Pembroke Howard, Percy Driscoll, Judge Driscoll) all lay claim to F.F.V. status, while Wilson does not. Assigning Wilson the simple, familiar, and nonthreatening role of the pudd'nhead helps to mitigate anxiety produced by his unfamiliar beginnings, uncertain motives, and seeming inscrutability. In this manner, Wilson's Pudd'nhead persona functions in much the same way as the popular brands of the 1890s, including Quaker oats (see chapter 1), Ivory soap, National Cash Register cash registers (fig. 3-3), Cream of Wheat breakfast food, and Aunt Jemima pancake mix.¹⁶ Furthermore, Twain explains that "[i]n time he came to be liked, and well liked, too" (6), but does not suggest that Wilson's being rechristened Pudd'nhead was an obstacle to gaining the town's affection. Indeed, the opposite appears more likely: as Pudd'nhead, Wilson is actually more likable, because less unexpected and intimidating, than he is as David. This appeal also contributes to the brand functionality of Wilson's new persona.

MISCELLANEOUS



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Figure 3-3. Advertisement for the National Cash Register Co. *Scribner's Magazine*, Dec. 1890.statement.

A second striking aspect of the episode involving Wilson and the dog concerns the manner—or rather, lack of one—in which Wilson delivers his seemingly nonsensical Searching for some clue to the stranger’s meaning, Twain writes, his listeners “found no light there, no expression that they could read” (5). While this deadpan delivery is clearly out of place on the streets of Dawson’s Landing in 1830, it was Twain’s performative *pièce de résistance* at the time the novel was written, the key distinction, as he noted a few years later in “How to Tell a Story,” between humorous storytelling and merely comic storytelling. Though their two audiences react differently—Wilson’s “fell away from him as from something uncanny” (5), while Twain’s usually erupted in laughter—this delivery, which sparks the creation of Pudd’nhead as much as Wilson’s actual words do, helps to cement Wilson’s identification with Twain in the context of branding. That the deadpan delivery has largely negative consequences for Wilson, moreover, suggests that, for Twain, the purpose of this identification is critique. In describing the effects of branding on Wilson’s career, Twain insinuates the presence of similar forces at work in his own career.

Becoming Pudd’nhead eventually endears Wilson to the citizens of Dawson’s Landing, but it is hard to see that anything else positive comes from it. After the episode involving the dog, Wilson attempts to launch himself as an attorney by renting an office in the town and hanging out a sign announcing his legal expertise. “But his deadly remark had ruined his chance,” Twain writes. “He took down his sign after a while, and put it up on his own house with the law features knocked out of it. It offered his services now in the humble capacities of land-surveyor and expert accountant” (7). Whereas the law offers Wilson an opportunity to pursue truly meaningful work, work that might shape

the course of Dawson's Landing's social, ethical, and political development, the "humble" tasks of surveying and bookkeeping offer only the opportunity to exercise basic mechanical skills. The simplification of Wilson's identity to Pudd'nhead produces a concomitant simplification of his career to merely functionary employment.

Nevertheless, "[w]ith Scotch patience and pluck he resolved to live down his reputation and work his way into the legal field yet. Poor fellow, he could not foresee that it was going to take him such a weary long time to do it" (7). While Twain describes Wilson as a "poor fellow," he does so without the least hint of irony. It might be possible to "live down" a brand, but the "weary long time" required to do so makes any such effort seem shortsighted.

Accordingly, when Wilson begins to devote his spare time to the study of fingerprints, he is unaware that this hobby will eventually enable him to leave behind his identity as Pudd'nhead. Interested in "every new thing that was born into the universe of ideas" (7), Wilson takes up "palmistry," as well as another pursuit to which "he gave no name." Observing that "his fads added to his reputation as a pudd'nhead," he repeatedly refuses to "explain to anybody what [the nameless fad's] purpose was, but merely said it was an amusement." However, Twain reveals that the "fad without a name was one which dealt with people's finger-marks" and describes Wilson's habit of asking his acquaintances to mark small glass plates with their fingers at various intervals of time spanning several years. These "records" become an absorbing subject of study, often occupying Wilson "until far into the night," though "what he found there, if he found anything, he revealed to no one." Not content with the small glass plates, moreover, "[s]ometimes he copied on paper the involved and delicate pattern left by the ball of a

finger, and then vastly enlarged it with a pantograph, so that he could examine its web of curving lines with ease and convenience” (7).

Twain was familiar with, and fascinated by, a wide range of nineteenth-century scientific developments; *The American Claimant*, among other works, draws extensively on them.¹⁷ For this reason, the particular interest Wilson takes in fingerprints seems, on Twain’s part, more a matter of design than accident, though Ron Powers notes that Francis Galton’s *Finger Prints* (1892) had recently piqued his interest in the subject (549).¹⁸ Stung by the professional consequences of becoming a caricature, an abstracted version of himself, Wilson turns his attention, not surprisingly, specifically to scientific inquiries that posit an ineradicable coding of unique identity onto the body. Fingerprints hold out the promise of an identity unchanged by the vagaries of chance and circumstance; one’s location, appearance, speech, conduct, beliefs, social status, personal history, cultural associations—everything that contributes to the functioning of a brand—might change, but one’s identity, as registered in fingerprints, does not. Consequently, Wilson copies and enlarges his “records” both in order to study them “with ease and convenience” and in order to map more clearly the physical evidence for an argument for fixed, unchanging identity.

Fingerprints will prove crucial in Wilson’s presentation of this argument during the trial at the end of the novel, but they are not the sole means of proving the body’s resistance to caricature and abstraction, as Wilson’s use of palmistry to discover the secrets of Luigi Capello’s past demonstrates. In its similar insistence on the existence of an enduring and discernable personal identity unaffected by shifts in context or popular perception, palmistry forecasts the direction of Wilson’s later contentions involving

fingerprints. The practice comes up during Wilson's conversation with Tom and the Italian twins soon after their arrival in Dawson's Landing. Jokingly, Tom suggests that Wilson can "read . . . wrinkles as easy as a book" (49). Much to Tom's surprise, Angelo reveals the twins' respect for this "science": "Four years ago we had our hands read out to us as if our palms had been covered in print" (50). Eager to see Wilson humiliated by an attempt to duplicate this feat, Tom asks him to examine the twins' palms. At first, Wilson hesitates: "When a past event is somewhat prominently recorded in the palm I can generally detect that, but minor ones often escape me—not always, of course, but often—but I haven't much confidence in myself when it comes to reading the future" (50). He confesses further that he has examined fewer than "half a dozen hands in the last half-dozen years" since "the people got to joking about it" (50). In addition to establishing hands as sites of identity inscription, this exchange suggests an antagonism between Wilson's interest in palmistry and the town's interest in knowing him as Pudd'nhead. Furthermore, Tom's and Angelo's comparisons of reading palms to revealing and interpreting "a book" or "print" likens palmistry to authorship; Twain's figure continues to frame Wilson's interests and actions.

Once the reading begins, Wilson focuses exclusively on Luigi's palm—he makes no effort to deduce events in Luigi's past through asking veiled questions, watching for reactions, or simply guessing. Only the body, as text, matters:

Wilson began to study Luigi's palm, tracing life-lines, heart-lines, head-lines, and so on, and noting carefully their relations with the cobweb of finer and more delicate marks and lines that enmeshed them on all sides; he felt of the fleshy cushion at the base of the thumb, and noted its shape; he felt of the fleshy side of the hand between the wrist and the base of the little finger, and noted its shape also; he painstakingly examined the fingers, observing their form, proportions, and natural manner of disposing themselves when in repose. (51)

Wilson not only catalogues all of the features of Luigi's hand, but also studies them in relation to each other. He seeks knowledge of both the anatomy of the hand and the particular encoding of unique identity this anatomy performs. As a result, he correctly identifies the past event—killing a man—Luigi has briefly described on a slip of paper and given to Tom for verification. The whole performance generates “absorbing interest” (51) because the past event is so out of keeping with the narrative woven around the twins in Dawson's Landing through both their own courteous and gracious self-presentation and the town's eagerness to see them as benevolently exotic journeymen. As Tom concludes, irrefutable proof has been offered that “a man's own hand keeps a record of the deepest and fatalest secrets of his life” (52). Public perception cannot alter or erase the fixed identity that remains written in the body's “marks and lines.”

However forcefully Wilson makes this claim using the esoteric practice of palmistry in the privacy of his own home, the task of convincing the entire town, in a public setting and using more self-evident means, remains uncompleted until the trial. Wilson finds himself powerless to defend the twins against circumstantial evidence that they murdered Judge Driscoll until Tom, who has come over to tease Wilson the night before the last day of the trial, unknowingly reveals his guilt by leaving a set of fingerprints on one of Wilson's “records.” Upon making this discovery, Wilson begins preparing his case by enlarging the relevant fingerprints: “He did these pantagraph enlargements on sheets of white cardboard, and made each individual line of the bewildering maze of whorls or curves or loops which constituted the ‘pattern’ of a ‘record’ stand out bold and black by reinforcing it with ink” (105).¹⁹ As earlier with the lines marking Luigi's palm, the “maze of whorls or curves or loops” constituting the

fingerprints are here suggestive of written text, “bold and black” “ink” set against a “white” background. Once converted to a form approximating written text, moreover, the fingerprints become undeniable indices of unique individual identity: “To the untrained eye the collection of delicate originals made by the human finger on the glass plates looked about alike; but when enlarged ten times . . . the dullest eye could detect at a glance, and at a distance of many feet, that no two of the patterns were alike” (105). With props in place, Wilson is prepared to make the trial as much a refutation of simplification and abstraction as a refutation of the twins’ guilt.

Indeed, the twins feature almost not at all in Wilson’s argument, and Roxy, Tom, and Chambers receive only slightly more attention. As Forrest Robinson has noted, Wilson’s investigation is “sparely, relentlessly diagnostic” (124); he acts “as an automaton, an utterly dispassionate isolato” (227) fixed less on the redemption of a certain kind of human value than on the performance of a technical exercise. For Robinson, this emphasis dehumanizes the enactment of racial justice—not that racial justice, in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, is a settled idea. Robinson’s point is simply that Wilson’s focus on conceptual questions (how do we derive our sense of personal identity? and is it actually possible for us to be wrong about who we are?) deflects reader interest away from the people whose plight has raised such questions and whose lives will be most affected by the way in which they are answered. “In casting ourselves as disinterested spectators to essentially technical operations,” he writes, “we join . . . in neglecting to attend to our own entanglement in the drama unfolding before us. The novel’s cultural significance is thus inseparable from its validation of the reader’s impulse to back away from its sharp cutting edge, and to view it instead from a detached critical perspective”

(125). If the novel encourages a “detached critical perspective,” though, it does so in relation to inquiring into intangible issues of identity, representation, and authorship, and not out of any attempt at foreclosing opportunities for readers to deepen their racial consciousness. Wilson and his enlarged, inky fingerprints take center stage as a way of foregrounding these issues. The manner of presentation is certainly “diagnostic”—but the problem diagnosed is one of branding, not race. From the moment Wilson recognizes Tom’s fingerprints as those of the murderer, he knows his defense of the twins will be successful. Victory in the murder case assured, he is able to devote nearly the entirety of the twins’ defense to an argument for fixed, unchanging identity in the face of an unfairly imposed and professionally constraining brand.

Wilson’s explanation during the trial of where fingerprints originate and how they function provides the logical basis for an understanding of this unfairness and constraint. Standing before the packed courtroom and inviting all assembled to verify by testimony of their own bodies the truthfulness of his claims, Wilson speaks with a clarity and purpose which could not be further from the mystification and aloofness of his statement about the dog twenty-three years earlier. “Every human being,” he declares, “carries with him from his cradle to his grave certain physical marks which do not change their character, and by which he can always be identified—and that without shade of doubt or question” (108). Wilson goes on to describe these marks as a “signature” or “physiological autograph” that “cannot be counterfeited,” disguised, or hidden, “nor can it become illegible by the wear and the mutations of time.” Unlike face, hair, height, or form, all of which can be changed or duplicated, “this signature is each man’s very own—there is no duplicate of it among the swarming populations of the globe!” (108).

The citizens of Dawson's Landing respond to this news by minutely examining and comparing their hands as well as those of their friends and neighbors. No two are found to be alike. As a result, Wilson's argument begins to take hold, and new perceptions of him circulate among the crowd. No longer to be written off as loony, Wilson gains an increasing measure of the town's respect and appreciation.

His status continues to change as further explanations and disclosures follow. Even the twins are found to conform to Wilson's revelation of fingerprints as indices of unique individual identity. As their fingers are being examined, Wilson announces that "there was never a twin born into this world that did not carry from birth to death a sure identifier in this mysterious and marvelous natal autograph. That once known to you, his fellow-twin could never personate him and deceive you" (108-09). Wilson's statement has obvious implications for Tom, Chambers, Luigi, and Angelo—but what about David and Pudd'nhead? For the crowd present at the trial, these latter twins are the most visible and, at this particular moment, controversial. Though Pudd'nhead long ago replaced David as Wilson's public identity, David reemerges during the defense of the twins both through the logic of his general argument about fingerprints and through the specific way in which Wilson himself seems to testify to the truth of this logic by virtue of his clear, rational, and compelling performance. In other words, while Wilson's argument's purpose is the exoneration of the twins, the condemnation of Tom, and the exposure of Roxy's infant exchange, the argument's chief effects are the restoration of Wilson's original persona, David, and the banishment of the Pudd'nhead brand. Having witnessed feats that their collection of perceptions about Wilson cannot accommodate, the

townspeople jettison these perceptions in favor of new ones that accord with Wilson's own idea of himself and with the character of his courtroom performance.

This performance's conclusion leaves the twins free, Tom jailed, and Wilson occupying notably different social and professional positions than those he occupied when it began. "The town sat up all night to discuss the amazing events of the day," Twain writes, "and swap guesses as to when Tom's trial would begin" (113). Much of the discussion centers on Wilson, whom the town immediately hails as a hero: "Troop after troop of citizens came to serenade Wilson, and require a speech, and shout themselves hoarse over every sentence that fell from his lips—for all his sentences were golden now, all were marvelous. His long fight against hard luck and prejudice was ended; he was a made man for good" (113-14). Twain's emphasis on the citizens' treatment of "every sentence" as "golden" and "marvelous" draws attention to the stark contrast between this adoration and the contempt which greeted Wilson's earlier, infamous sentences about the dog. In addition, the two defining moments are brought together even more explicitly by the reappearance of the voices whose response to those earlier sentences had such pronounced effects: "some remorseful member" of each group that comes to celebrate Wilson "was quite sure" to remark, "[T]his is the man the likes of us has called a pudd'nhead for more than twenty years. He has resigned from that position, friends." Another would then respond: "Yes, but it isn't vacant—we're elected" (114). These voices burdened Wilson with the Pudd'nhead brand "more than twenty years" before, but they now pronounce his reinvention as a "made man for good."

“Made Man”

Much depends upon this label, “made man.” Just as the resurfacing of the anonymous community voices marks either a point of narrative closure—signifying the distance Wilson has traveled—or a point of circularity and stasis—signifying that Wilson has not traveled at all, “made man” carries two possible meanings. On one hand, this label suggests that Wilson’s new social and professional status after the trial is a fulfillment of longstanding desires. By this logic, his reinvention appears in several ways to be a reclaiming of the fixed identity that pre-existed the Pudd’head brand and continued to lurk beneath its surface—an affirmation of the totalizing reach of the “natal autograph.” Wilson’s hard-earned fulfillment accordingly represents a rejection of branding as such. After long years of toil his legal credentials have finally been established, allowing him to quit relying on occasional surveying and accounting jobs for employment. Socially, moreover, Wilson has become the toast of Dawson’s Landing; his life of tinkering with fingerprints and other pursuits whilst only infrequently receiving visitors seems guaranteed to change dramatically. Throughout the novel certain hints, such as Wilson’s stated reluctance to practice palmistry due to fear of fueling his notoriety (50), have suggested that responsibility for his professional and social woes be assigned directly to the power of branding. Wilson’s victory over these woes can be seen as a triumphant opting-out of branding, a denial of its cultural influence, and an assertion of not only the possibility, but the right, to occupy a position outside its reach.

On the other hand, “made man” might signify fabrication rather than fulfillment.²⁰ In this reading, the label hints at ways in which Wilson’s experience during and after the trial is less a matter of brand rejection than a matter simply of brand transformation.

Twain's description of Wilson's performance before the court certainly supports this notion. "Wilson stopped and stood silent," he writes. "All palms and fingerballs went down, now . . . all eyes were fastened upon Wilson's face. He waited yet one, two, three moments, to let his pause complete and perfect its spell upon the house; then . . . he put out his hand and took the Indian knife by the blade and held it aloft where all could see the sinister spots upon its ivory handle" (109). If Wilson earns his Pudd'nhead persona through the performance of incomprehensibility, he reclaims his David persona through the performance of clear, measured rationality. The two are equally performative—equally reductive in presenting only a narrow view of Wilson's desires, values, experiences, and relationships.²¹ The latter performance, far from conveying the more authentic Wilson, even seems to anticipate Twain's later comments in "How to Tell a Story" on the power of the well-timed pause in staging narrative events: "The pause is an exceedingly important feature in any kind of story, and a frequently recurring feature, too. It is a dainty thing, and delicate, and also uncertain and treacherous; for it must be exactly the right length—no more and no less—or it fails of its purpose and makes trouble" ("How" 9). Insofar as the strategic use of the pause helps to redefine Wilson as David, the warm, intelligent college graduate, David is no less a fabricated persona than Pudd'nhead; Wilson's performance suggests not a rejection of branding, but the transformation of one brand into another.

In *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, then, Twain brings together the two possible responses to branding suggested earlier in *Connecticut Yankee* and *The American Claimant*, perhaps in an unconscious effort to further distinguish them from each other and to discern their relative merits as well as the conditions under which each might be viable. What Twain

seems to discover, however, is the difficulty of telling these two responses apart. Consequently, while Twain's critiques of branding in the late 1880s and early 1890s do not produce a decisive stance through which to read the remaining fifteen years of his career, they do produce an account of Twain constantly grappling with the question of how to negotiate the advantages and disadvantages of the branded authorship he had played such a prominent role in pioneering. After *Pudd'nhead Wilson* appeared, Twain continued to write and lecture in a manner calculated to capitalize on consumer perceptions of himself and his writing as characteristically American, the musings of a frontier spirit buffeted by the nation's growing pains while wryly clinging to traditional customs and values. But at the same time Twain revived the anger and frustration over politics, religion, technology, militarism, and other issues he dramatized in *Connecticut Yankee* in such later writings as "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" (1899), "What Is Man?" (1906), and *The Mysterious Stranger* (written in 1899; edited version published by Albert Bigelow Paine in 1916). The two strains of Twain's career uneasily coexisted, and though it seems evident that, in spite of his anxieties, Twain never rejected branding outright, evidence concerning whether he conceived of his later critical writings as furthering a transformation of what *Pudd'nhead Wilson* reviewers thought of as the "genuine Mark Twain brand" (Alden 215) is less conclusive.²²

Nevertheless, that Twain even contemplated the possible futility of a position opposing branding demonstrates a gap between his views and those of Howells. Furthermore, taking this gap seriously means adjusting the account, derived from Howells, of American realism as a literary movement shaped by its antagonism to branding. Given Twain's more nuanced position, and given his own stature within the

realist movement as well as his influence over authors who aspired to participation in this movement, a broader account of realism as shaped both by resistance to branding and by exploitation of branding emerges. As Twain demonstrates, this exploitation became increasingly vexed as the turn of the century approached. But even at its most critical moments, such as when Wilson's elevation of empirical science, rational inquiry, and professionalism—all celebrated in realism—helps him to shed the Pudd'nhead brand and become David once again, realism, as seen through Twain, cannot exorcise the suspicion of branding's nascent cultural hegemony. It is this increasingly perceptible hegemony which makes an attempt to stand outside of branding look like the first move in the formation of a new brand. And it is Twain's wary representation of this hegemony which places him not only in the company of Howells, but also in the company of contemporaries experimenting with literary naturalism for whom branding's hegemonic power was simply undeniable. One of these naturalist authors, Stephen Crane, is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER II NOTES

¹ In an article titled "Trademark Twain," Loren Glass writes: "No American writer more completely and enthusiastically embodied . . . overlap between the cultural performance of authorial personality and the generic reliance on authorial autobiography than the man known as Mark Twain. More than any other author of the nineteenth century, Twain's life story was inextricably entangled with his writing, which in turn dictated the popular and critical reception of his texts to this day" (671). Glass's article analyzes Twain's relationship to trademarks, signatures, and incorporation in detail.

² *Pudd'nhead Wilson's* complex compositional and publication history includes *Those Extraordinary Twins*, the story out of which *Pudd'nhead* grew. The two narratives were first published together as one book, and while I do not discuss *Those Extraordinary*

Twins, many scholars have used it to inform their critiques of *Pudd'nhead*. Two examples of this approach are O'Connell and Wonham.

³ Derek Parker Royal enumerates a longer list of the novel's "thematic twins"—"Luigi and Angelo, Tom and Chambers, Tom and Roxy, Roxy and Wilson, Wilson and Judge Driscoll, and Wilson and Tom" (414)—but does not consider the possibility that David and Pudd'nhead might belong on this list, or, as in my argument, dominate it.

⁴ I argue that Twain is more or less *sui generis* in this regard. Richard Lowry is right to argue that "[l]ike Mark Twain," other Gilded Age authors "were public figures, inhabiting not only the texts that bore their names on the title page, but also the entire cultural system—the newspapers and magazines, the book reviews and advertising, the public performances and readings—through which their texts circulated" (9). But because Twain in many ways took this public circulation to an unprecedented level, insights derived from Twain's work about the conditions of late-nineteenth-century authorship can be applied to other authors only with significant adjustments to take into account individual circumstances.

⁵ Paul Fatout's *Mark Twain on the Lecture Circuit* provides a detailed account of Twain's many lecture tours, including his final round-the-world trip. When he lectured in Sydney in August 1895, audience members came from as far as a hundred miles away (Fatout 253). Speaking in such cities as Mazaffarpur, Lucknow, and Cawnpore, India, a few months later, "[j]ammed houses were the rule" (261). Fatout describes both Twain's meticulous preparation for his performances and the enthusiasm with which they were greeted.

⁶ The line between branding and celebrity can sometimes be difficult to identify. In *Walt Whitman and the Culture of American Celebrity* (2006), for example, David Haven Blake draws on the celebrity theories of Leo Braudy, P. David Marshall, and Richard Schickel in order to develop an account of Whitman's relationship to the rise of mass media and popular entertainment in the second half of the nineteenth century. In doing so, however, he relies heavily on analysis of Whitman's engagement with mid-century advertising. Like Blake, I am interested in the commercial benefits of an author's being widely known, but whereas Blake considers these benefits largely incidental (in Whitman's case) to the larger project of gaining celebrity, I consider them more central. My argument about Twain and branding suggests not only that Twain's writing was shaped by an interest in being widely known, but also that this interest developed in a specific business context and accomplished a specific business purpose.

⁷ See Bradbury, "Mark Twain."

⁸ Critics have until only recently treated Twain's business ventures mostly as lamentable distractions from his literary career. Bruce Michelson mockingly parrots these critics: "If only Mark Twain had consented to be our American Proust, relentlessly immersed in his art, and hadn't sought also to be the Andrew Carnegie of a media revolution, and

sometimes its P. T. Barnum” (8). Michelsen’s book on Twain and the printing industry, *Printer’s Devil*, is among several recent studies that treat Twain’s interest in the business of authorship as integral to his literary imagination. I intend this chapter as a further contribution to these studies.

⁹ The success of William Dean Howells’s urban novels in the 1880s testifies to this transition, as does the success of Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). For an account of popular as well as critical responses to Riis, see Leviatin. For an account of Twain’s engagement with the American West, see Coulombe.

¹⁰ Stephanie Le Menager takes up the question of Twain as a “post-Frontier” (406) author in “Floating Capital.”

¹¹ For a complete account of this period in Twain’s career, see Gold.

¹² The nonchalance with which Morgan mentions the changes he institutes even extends to business ventures. When he and Arthur are traveling in disguise and notice a distant fire one night, Morgan casually remarks, “Fires interested me considerably, because I was getting a good deal of an insurance business started, and was also training some horses and building some steam fire-engines, with an eye to a paid fire department by-and-by” (*Connecticut* 273). The attention branding receives distinguishes it from these other ventures.

¹³ For detailed analysis of William Dean Howells’s contributions to this discussion, see chapter 1.

¹⁴ The reference to “pirates” here is puzzling, since they are referred to nowhere else in the text. I can only assume that Twain is referring to the captain and the shoemaker.

¹⁵ Twain does not indicate whether the lack of a legible expression on Wilson’s face stems from a *Bartleby*-like refusal to explain, simple obliviousness, or another cause. Regardless, the result is the same: the inexplicable nature of Wilson’s comments is compounded by the silence and blankness that follow them.

¹⁶ For histories of the latter two, see Goings, Kern-Foxworth, Manring, and Roberts. For the history of Ivory soap, see Sivulka and Davis, Dalzell, and Olegario. For a history of the early years of the National Cash Register Company, see Friedman.

¹⁷ For a detailed study of Twain and science, see Cummings.

¹⁸ Twain’s anachronistic depiction of fingerprint analysis in the 1850s (when it was really only emerging in the 1890s) lends support to a reading of the novel, like mine, which emphasizes the novel’s participation in fin-de-siecle cultural debates over its representation of race in antebellum Missouri.

¹⁹ Another anachronism: cardboard was not invented until 1874 (Manring 63).

²⁰ I realize that I am putting a lot of interpretive pressure on this phrase. In doing so, however, I am following the lead of Susan Gillman, who in *Dark Twins: Imposture and Identity in Twain's America* has argued that Twain's lifelong interest in doubleness and duality reached a new level of intensity in the 1890s.

²¹ Twain here appears to anticipate contemporary theorists of performance such as Judith Butler, who in *Gender Trouble* argues that all social existence is performative. Hence Wilson cannot escape his Pudd'nhead persona, for to do so is merely to perform another persona, whether that of David or of someone else. For an account of how clothing shapes these performances and others in the novel, see Morris.

²² See Glass's "Trademark Twain" for an account of Twain's preparations for a posthumous literary existence.

CHAPTER III

COMPANY MAN: H. C. BUNNER, STEPHEN CRANE, AND THE BRANDING OF NATURALISM

“I know more of an ink, a brand of hams, a kind of cigarette, and a novelist than any man living,” Stephen Crane boasted in 1897. He had recently moved to England, and made this claim in the last of a series of short, witty sketches published in Frank Harris’s *Saturday Review* under the heading “London Impressions.”¹ Though not his first articulation of an intense interest in product branding, this claim was perhaps his most direct and explicit. The sketch continues: “I went by train to see a friend in the country, and after passing through a patent mucilage, some more hams, a South African Investment Company, a Parisian millinery firm, and a comic journal, I alighted at a new and original kind of corset. On my return journey the road almost continuously ran through soap” (*Men* 224). Crane’s train does not pass literally through hams and soap, of course. In his perception of the journey, however, this is precisely the landscape in which the train moves. The advertisements lining its route not only leap into a kind of three-dimensional life, but also replace the natural scenery. There are no trees, hills, or fields here—only comic journals and corsets. Branding, the business practice that brings the track-side advertisements to life, has been naturalized, and Crane’s language suggests that this natural force has a profound impact on his thinking and acting. In this chapter, I trace branding’s influence on Crane’s writing and on American literary naturalism more broadly.

The basic outlines of this influence, and especially its insistence on the speciousness of individualism, are evident in the “London Impressions” sketch. Crane begins the piece by stating his dislike for signs, and then declares that he “once invented a creature who could play the piano with a hammer” and “mentioned him to a professor in Harvard University whose peculiarity was Sanscrit.” The connection between these two statements becomes clear when he avers that the professor “had the same interest in my invention that I have in a certain kind of mustard.” Mustard stands in here for a range of consumer products, and Crane’s point is that such products have no more instinctive appeal or interest for him than a piano-hammering “creature” would have for a Sanscrit scholar. Nevertheless, he continues, “this mustard had become a part of me.” Upon reflection, however, he admits that he might have this wrong: “Or, I have become a part of this mustard” (224). It is hard to know, Crane suggests, exactly where the boundary between individual and brand might lie—assuming that such a boundary exists. Through its capacity to compel interest in specific products, regardless of their personal desirability, branding has disrupted the geography of the self.

In Crane’s mind, brands have become points of departure and arrival, routes, detours, and destinations—physically as well as culturally. “I am at their mercy,” he writes. “If I want to know where I am I must find the definitive sign.” He compares their integration into the routine assumptions and practices of daily life to the integration of various chemical compounds into the physical makeup of the body: “I suppose even the Briton in mixing his life must sometimes consult the labels on ‘buses and streets and stations even as the chemist consults the labels on his bottles and boxes” (224).² Lives are now composed of brands, the “definitive sign[s]” of who people are, how they are

perceived, and how they perceive others and the world around them. Penetrating to the most elemental levels, these brands are on a certain level freely chosen—they become much cherished and intimate companions—and yet their implacability leaves people occasionally, and uneasily, looking for “mercy” from them.

In several ways, this little known sketch from “London Impressions” acts as a coda to Crane’s treatment of branding in his earlier, widely celebrated novel, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). Journeying through hams and comic journals and finally arriving at a corset, Crane is merely reprising, in more direct language, Henry Fleming’s charges back and forth over the Chancellorsville battlefield. While these charges certainly address Fleming’s transformation into a soldier and the perfection of his masculinity, as many critics have argued, I suggest that they also demonstrate his development as a modern, brand-conscious consumer. Crane drew on his knowledge of the Civil War when writing *Red Badge*, but he also drew on his local surroundings. As biographer Linda H. Davis has written, the author spent much of his time in New York in the early 1890s wandering the “vibrant human wasteland” (53) of the Lower East Side and observing the “commonplace things” (45) of street life. One of the most common, yet significant, street scenes of the time involved people confronted by, interacting with, and talking about brands for a broad range of inexpensive consumer products. Most often these scenes’ immediate focus was on advertisements, display windows, or the products themselves, but the summation of such scenes created a brand—a collection of story-images embodying a unique narrative about a product and the consumer’s relationship to it. My reading of *Red Badge* foregrounds Crane’s sense of the power

these narratives exerted in disturbing notions of individual choice and determination, arguing that branding plays an important role in producing the novel's naturalistic form.

This account of naturalism derives to some extent from Jennifer Fleissner's recent effort in *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (2004) to link the source of this narrative form to a broad cultural interest at the turn of the twentieth century in compulsion, which she identifies as a middle ground between deterministic subjection and celebratory rejuvenation. "[N]aturalism's most characteristic plot," Fleissner writes, "is marked by neither the steep arc of decline nor that of triumph, but rather by an ongoing, nonlinear, repetitive motion . . . that has the distinctive effect of seeming also like a stuckness in place" (9). She locates this "stuckness" in concerns about women's relationship to idealized, ahistorical nature, on one hand, and systematized, technical modernity on the other. By describing naturalism as produced by a cultural phenomenon that both subjects individuals to larger totalizing narratives and promises greater individual expression—indeed, that subjects individuals *by* promising enhanced individualism—my argument borrows from Fleissner's formulation of naturalist compulsion while reorienting this formulation away from a primary concern with gender.

In the preceding chapters, I have described branding's influence on William Dean Howells and Mark Twain. Howells represented its abstract fantasies and elisions of social problems as threats to meaningful political engagement, while Twain's initial enthusiasm for the phenomenon turned sour as he later struggled to overcome its constraining tendencies. The pressures and challenges of branding, I have argued, should be recognized as instrumental in shaping both of these authors' evolving commitments to

realism. For Crane, however, realism proved to have only limited use. More immersed than either Howells or Twain in the lower classes' daily struggle for survival under harsh conditions occasioned by the rise of industrial capitalism, Crane understood the assumption of unfettered individual agency that underpinned realism's critique of branding to be false, the kind of assumption that only a certain blindness to the practice's scope and power could tolerate.³ His writing represents this practice not as a threat to be resisted, but rather as an entrenched and incontrovertible reality—a cultural phenomenon behaving as a natural force—at best merely endured, never defied. Even as brands hold out the promise of self-invention, this promise results in compulsion, or “stuckness,” rather than liberation: “I am at their mercy,” Crane writes. His naturalism may consequently be seen as a registration of branding's power at the level of literary form.

“American Posters,” Before and After

In *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896), Harold Frederic's novel about a young Methodist minister whose posting to a village parish in upstate New York causes his life to slowly unravel, signs of cultural change abound. Even in provincial Octavius, glimmers of the modern social and intellectual currents already shaping metropolitan areas gradually become known to the novel's protagonist, Theron Ware. A trio of distinctly modern local figures who find his plainness and introspection charming soon welcome him into their circle. Equally charmed, Theron makes increasingly noticeable efforts to remake himself in their more experienced, sophisticated image. In Celia Madden, Theron glimpses aesthetic refinement; in Father Forbes, a seductively urbane theology; and in Dr. Ledsmar, the power of rational, scientific inquiry. Not realizing that

they value him for his simplicity and traditionalism, Theron mistakes the trio's interest for encouragement of his efforts to become more knowing, shrewd, and cynical.

Accordingly, he hesitates little in following Celia and Father Forbes to Manhattan toward the end of the novel. Just as the sun rises, his train arrives at the Hudson River: "The wide river lay before him, flanked by a precipitous wall of cliffs which he knew instantly must be the Palisades. There was an advertisement painted on them which he tried in vain to read" (Frederic 313). Theron's puzzlement over the advertisement quickly turns to despair as, confronting Celia in a hotel, he discovers the true consequences of his transformation. Having sought to master the new cultural assumptions, discourses, and attitudes of the late nineteenth century, Theron learns that they have actually mastered him. Frederic's positioning of the Palisades advertisement at the cusp of this realization—it is Theron's first clue that modern culture understands him much more fully than he understands modern culture—makes branding into an important metonym for a cultural landscape otherwise discussed in the novel more broadly in aesthetic, religious, and scientific terms. Appearing only briefly, this central component of consumer marketing nevertheless stands at the gates to deeper comprehension of late nineteenth-century culture and one's place in it.

Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (1888) makes a similar case. Julian West, the protagonist of this novel, awakens from a Rip Van Winkle-like slumber to find himself in twenty-first century Boston. The problems of war, suffering, and inequality that had plagued nineteenth-century society have been completely resolved. As a result, West's own Boston of 1887, which he visits in a dream at the end of the novel, suffers profoundly by contrast. "Another feature of the [nineteenth-century]

Boston,” he testifies, “was the prevalence of advertising.” West is disturbed not only by advertising’s ubiquity, but also by the narratives this advertising appears to transmit. He becomes uncomfortably aware that “the walls of the buildings, the windows, the broadsides of the newspapers in every hand, the very pavements, everything in fact, save the sky, were covered with the appeals of individuals who sought, under innumerable pretexts, to attract the contributions of others to their support. However the wording might vary, the tenor of all these appeals was the same” (Bellamy, *Looking* 203-04). Bellamy, like Frederic, locates branding at culture’s leading edge; its salience makes it a window onto underlying cultural principles—in this instance, greed, deception, and crass individualism. As Julian West walks the streets of Boston, his relationship to contemporary social, economic, and political ideologies is transformed by branding’s power to represent these ideologies in an urgent and compelling fashion.

Did Stephen Crane, who spent much of 1892-94 tramping about the streets of Manhattan, undergo similar transformation? In her biography of Crane, Davis emphasizes that after he left Syracuse University to become a full-time author, Crane seemed drawn to the city both for its publication opportunities and for its capacity to provide a kind of education in the varieties of human experience that the college had been unable to offer. Making his older brother’s house near Paterson, New Jersey, “his new home base and official residence,” Davis writes, Crane went to work: “The streets were his university now. He began making trips into New York, wandering into the tenements and exploring the Bowery, the brazen, mile-long strip of saloons and dance halls, brothels, flophouses, and dirty, unlighted alleyways lying east of Broadway, from Worth Street to about East 4th Street” (42).⁴ In these “wandering[s],” he encountered an urban

environment very like the Boston streets described in Bellamy's novel, a city where "everything in fact, save the sky" seemed awash in advertisements for competing brands.⁵ If the streets were Crane's "university," it is crucial that an account of what he learned while wandering them and what impact this education had on his writing factor in the ubiquitous presence of brand-driven "appeals." We might start by considering Bellamy's claim that "[h]owever the wording might vary, the tenor of all these appeals was the same." But then, what exactly constituted this tenor? What form did a typical late nineteenth-century brand take, and how was this brand expected to function?

Not surprisingly, these questions received a good deal of attention at the time. One of the most comprehensive and perceptive attempts to answer them came from H. C. Bunner, whose article on the development of branding, "American Posters, Past and Present," appeared in the October 1895 issue of *Scribner's Magazine*. As editor of *Puck*, a satirical weekly, and author of "New York as a Field for Fiction," an open letter in the September 1883 issue of *Century* challenging novelists to confront the changing character of New York City in their writing, Bunner was well positioned to observe and comment on consumer marketing's evolving role in American culture. He begins "American Posters" by rooting the compulsion to engage with even the crudest attempts at branding, in the form of advertisements with embellished text, in the laws of nature: "The craving to look at pictures, or even decorative lettering or pure decoration itself, seems to be natural to all types and classes of Americans" (429). Bunner's sense of the "decorative" is limited to human creations; he does not include unmediated glimpses of spectacular scenery, like waterfalls or mountains. Immediately, then, he sets about naturalizing a resolutely cultural phenomenon.

In addition, Bunner makes clear from the outset that branding, as a natural force, is most powerfully operative when its narrative components are highly developed. The “natural” “craving” for “pictures” may be lessened by basic images and designs, but deeper satisfaction derives from those that begin, through the deployment of plot, conflict, theme, and characterization, to approximate literature. “Any kind of picture attracts the untutored taste,” he writes, “but of course preference is generally given to such as” prove themselves to be “distinctly literary,” primarily by telling their “own direct and indirect comprehensible story” (429). Ensnared by narrative, consumers find their perceptions reorganized, to a greater or lesser degree, in terms suggested by the brands. The more developed its narrative, Bunner suggests, the more powerful a brand’s conditioning effects and the more forceful its cultural impact.

He goes on to register branding’s growing influence by indicating that advertisements, its most salient manifestation, have become commonplace features of the urban landscape (and, though less frequently, the rural landscape, as Frederic also suggests). Insofar as they increasingly figure in the life of the streets, moreover, advertisements seem both to represent this life and to redirect it, for in the story-images appearing on billboards, magazine pages, and product packages, among other places, a more absorbing drama than that of the sidewalks unfolds. Bunner claims that the “indifference of the New York street crowds to strange sights, odd people, fantastic costumes, and the like has often been noted” (429). What is surprising about this “indifference,” though, is its weakness in the face of the simplest brand materializations: “hurrying workers who will not give a second glance to an Oriental garbed in dazzling gorgeousness, or even to a dime-museum giant off duty, will stop short at the sight of a

sign-painter, and, putting all business or occupation aside, will gaze on him in seemingly helpless fascination while he letters ‘Eisenstein, Einstein, Ehrenstein, Johnstone & Co.’” (429). If mere names produce “fascination,” however, the addition of even roughly representational figures inspires something like awe. Still thinking of the imaginary “sign-painter,” Bunner asserts that “if by chance he illuminates his handiwork with a design of the garment known as ‘pants,’ and bearing a distant and painful resemblance to trousers, the crowd will stay faithfully by him till the last stroke of his brush—silent, eager, intent—looking upon him as upon one who performs a miracle” (429-30). Here Bunner makes explicit a cultural shift only hinted at by Frederic. Whereas Theron Ware rejects religious faith without quite understanding what has replaced it, Bunner’s street-corner gawkers recognize a modern “miracle” when they see it. The power of religious institutions to shape traditions, attitudes, and beliefs has in some measure passed into the practice of branding.

According to Bunner, the transfer of power has been effected largely through this practice’s more successful efforts at presenting stories that, because of their use value in specific cultural contexts, people want to believe in. He illustrates this argument by describing the “wondering rapture” of the “back-country boy” when a circus’s advance promoters arrive bearing fantastic pictures of people and animals “never before dreamed of by the student of natural history or the humble observer of animated nature” (430). Turning to the more sophisticated (and adult) readers of *Scribner’s Magazine*, he asks, “Do you wonder that he loves it? Do you wonder that his soul prostrates itself before the elephant whose ears are so big that the ends of the flaps have to be supported by two attendant Nubians? Do you wonder that he loves the dromedary with four humps?”

(430). Bunner asks these questions not as an invitation to condescension, for “of course he will not see these marvelous features, and, in a certain sense, he knows it.” Even if he experienced the same cycle of hope and disappointment when the circus came the previous year, the promises made by the extraordinary posters will still prove irresistible. “[A]s he watches the great pictured sheets” going up all over town, Bunner writes, “the boy sees those animals, and those assorted colored people in regal clothes, just as if they were really there—for he sees them with the eye of faith” (430). In appealing to his readers to empathize with the boy, Bunner is essentially asking them to confirm that they also look on advertisements with the “eye of faith,” and consequently to reinforce the notion that what he describes is not a single boy in thrall to branding, but an entire culture willingly—even eagerly—submitting to its influence.

Just how much sway a particular brand is capable of exercising depends, Bunner explains, to a significant extent on how skillfully the brand structures and develops a compelling narrative. However intensely four names and a rudimentary drawing of a pair of pants might grab the public’s attention, only some kind of story, incorporated into or associated with the brand, can prolong this attention to the degree necessary to produce enduring conceptual and affective attachments. Bunner credits patent medicine manufacturers with first implementing and then popularizing the strategic use of narratives in brand building. Initially, he writes, this implementation consisted mostly of “what was known as the ‘Before and After’—which was short for Before and After Taking” (434). Two images would be shown, the first depicting a toothless and balding man “who was apparently trying to present his physical disabilities to the beholder in the most unpleasant possible light,” and the second showing “a sturdy, lusty person in the

prime of life, with well-slicked hair and as many teeth as the artist could crowd into his mouth, which was always shown stretched open in a laugh of an impossibly large size.” Taken together, the two pictures constituted a clear, engaging narrative: “Old Dr. Ripley’s Resurgent Reinvigorator” or “Imbricated Indian Tonic” had obviously converted the “aged wreck into an offensively healthy person of thirty-five” (434). In addition to expanding the number and quality of the consumer’s brand associations, narrative helps here to focus and define the specific responses (surprise, delight, gratitude) the brand is intended to evoke.

Bunner emphasizes the important role narrative has played in boosting branding’s cultural influence over the preceding two decades by offering a second detailed example of its typical deployment. The “Before and After” formula introduced to help brand “Old Dr. Ripley’s,” “Imbricated Indian Tonic,” and the like, he reveals, soon grew more intricate and sophisticated, both in patent medicine promotions and in promotions for other basic consumer goods. Stock characters began to appear and reappear in slightly altered form. A certain cherubic “little boy,” for instance, “was among the most useful of all poster-subjects.” Bunner describes an advertisement, evidently offered with little variation by several patent medicine manufacturers, that enjoyed “considerable popularity”; it “showed a happy and precocious little boy with red striped stockings, yellow clothes, and, necessarily, red and yellow hair, rushing merrily into the room of his aged grandmother, and offering her a bottle of the good doctor’s decoction” (435). Building from this simple scenario, “if the advertiser wanted to spend money, he could have two pictures, in the first of which the grandmother sat paralyzed in her arm-chair with a crutch by her side . . . while in the second tableau the boy’s rejuvenated relative

accompanied him to the front door, and cast her crutch violently into the perspective” (435-36). With less money, an advertiser might choose “one picture . . . wherein the old lady rose from her striped arm-chair, flinging her crutch loosely among the furniture at the mere sight of the boy and the bottle” (437). Both advertisements offer an expanded version of the aged and rejuvenated faces narrative, one which invites closer attention and more nuanced interpretation. And in both, Bunner states, “the old lady’s chair was striped with the colors of the boy” (437) to produce emotional resonance. Brands’ growing narrative sophistication included experiments with conflict and resolution, color and shape, reason and emotion, all in the service of increasing the frequency and significance of consumers’ interactions with them. As a result, they became increasingly woven into daily choices and routines.

Moving forward to the mid-1890s, Bunner explains that branding has settled on a strategy of placing primary emphasis on the narratives that give each product a unique life in the mind of the consumer; only minor emphasis falls on the physical specifications of the products themselves. He imagines a “worried business man, hurrying to his office” and brought to a complete halt by the sight of “a poster that, though it bore the name of a well-known nostrum, bore also a highly attractive picture . . . evidently made especially for the use it was put to, and evidently reproduced by the costliest skill” (437). The poster captivates the busy, distracted man by foregrounding narrative elements over product features: “The subject was nothing—a single figure and the article to be advertised; but the latter object, while it was recognizable, was not unduly prominent; and the figure was an admirably drawn study of a type well chosen to interest observers of every class” (437-38) (fig. 3-1). For Bunner, the poster’s success is measured both by

the capacity of the “figure” to “interest” a variety of consumers and by the product’s noticeably modest demand for recognition. Both of these criteria suggest the difficulty of producing a compelling advertisement: narratives must be evocative, but accessible and meaningful to “observers of every class,” while products must be prominent, and yet not “unduly” so, lest the consumer’s willing suspension of disbelief be threatened by persistent reminders of who solicits it. Daunting as these criteria may be, however, Bunner’s account of branding’s development indicates that manufacturers, advertisers, designers, artists, and other key figures in the rapidly professionalizing industry of consumer marketing have become increasingly adept at finding ways to meet them.

This account ends, in “American Posters,” with a discussion of printing technology and artistic quality in England, France, and the United States, but before turning to these issues, Bunner summarizes his argument about branding’s current form and function by way of presenting an imagined conversation between an experienced poster maker, Mr. Halliday, and his apprentice, Rollo. It begins with Rollo inquiring about a nearby “billboard” featuring a “yellow lady kicking the silk hat off the blue moon.” Mr. Halliday identifies this image as “an advertisement of a patent specific for the cure of ingrowing eyebrows,” explaining that the lady is celebrating her return to health and confidence. Rollo then says that he initially overlooked the name of the product due to its being “printed inconspicuously in an obscure corner of the placard,” and that he now recognizes this design as “made to make the people wonder what on earth the picture is intended to advertise, so that they will look at it a long time in order to find out what it is.” Satisfied with this response, Mr. Halliday then points out that the advertisement “has . . . accomplished its purpose in having attracted our attention, and

**ASK FOR
"PABST"**

PABST MILWAUKEE

**Dyspepsia and
Indigestion.....**

There are times when the brain draws so upon our vitality that we cannot digest our food, we can get no strength from what we eat. If we let this go on, we sow the seeds of weakness which will blossom in disease. Read this letter about

**PABST MALT EXTRACT
The "Best" Tonic.**

If you are a brain worker, a woman with household worries and cares, or if you need physical strength to fight the battles of life,

act at once.

.....

"I cannot be too grateful for the immense improvement PABST MALT EXTRACT, the "Best" Tonic, has made in my system. Two years ago I was a dyspeptic wreck of fifty, but PABST MALT EXTRACT, The "Best" Tonic, has changed all that. It has not only cured my dyspepsia, but it has braced my nerves and cured me completely of insomnia. I consider that it has saved my life. It has changed a nervous, broken down wreck of fifty-two to a strong, fresh young man of forty. When my daughter was recovering from typhoid fever, she gained nearly a pound a day for three weeks, solely by the liberal use of your decidedly "Best" Tonic.

JOHN D. HOMER, Hayward, Cal.

**PERFECTION
IN BREWING
IS REACHED
IN AMERICA**

THE FIRST

Figure 3-1. Advertisement for Pabst Malt Extract. *North American Review*, April 1897. The figure here appears to be George Washington, shown with other patriotic icons. While the text makes certain basic claims about the product, these claims do not distract from the artistry of the illustration.

held it for a sufficient length of time to impress upon our minds the name of the article it advertises” (441). The duo’s exegesis of the patent medicine advertisement stands as an exposé of branding’s inner workings—an illustration of its evolution, and its consolidation of cultural influence, through the years leading up to publication of Bunner’s article in 1895. Ultimately, this article argues for branding’s place among the dominant cultural forces of the era.

Another Cultural Source for Naturalism

Readers of the *Century* would have found in Bunner’s argument a clear explication of the terms and conditions of consumer marketing’s rise to significance in their lives. But for an *interpretation* of this rise—a complex theorization of the ways branding in particular might cause them to think and act differently—such readers were best served by novelists. Frederic and Bellamy’s representations of the cultural dynamics of consumer marketing suggest that this interpretive project exerted a significant influence on the production of literary fiction at the end of the nineteenth century. So, too, does the work of Frank Norris, one of naturalism’s most influential proponents in the United States and the author of, among other important naturalist novels, *The Octopus* (1901). This epic story of struggle between a group of wheat ranchers in California’s San Joaquin Valley and the increasingly powerful Pacific & Southwestern Railroad, a monstrous “octopus” that threatens to push them off their land, has figured prominently in accounts of naturalism by Walter Benn Michaels and Mark Seltzer. These accounts rightly characterize the naturalist properties of *The Octopus*—the crushing of the weak by the powerful; the failure of idealism; an inability to transcend brute competition—as a

cultural response specifically to the Supreme Court's declaration of corporate legal personhood in 1886, and more broadly, in Alan Trachtenberg's phrase, to the "incorporation of America."⁶

However, the beginning of Norris's novel suggests that the corporation, as a kind of force of nature, is perhaps less powerful than branding, which accompanied, facilitated, and was in many ways produced by the corporation's rise. Presley, the poet who observes and comments on the ranchers' struggle, cycles through the San Joaquin Valley and encounters "one of the county watering-tanks." "Since the day of its completion," Norris writes, "the storekeepers and retailers of Bonneville [a nearby town] had painted their advertisements upon it. It was a land-mark. In that reach of level fields, the white letters upon it could be read for miles" (4). Stopping for a drink, he notices two men "painting a sign—an advertisement. It was all but finished and read, 'S. Behrman, Real Estate, Mortgages, Main Street, Bonneville, Opposite the Post Office.' On the horse-trough that stood in the shadow of the tank was another freshly painted inscription: 'S. Behrman Has Something to Say to *You*'" (original emphasis, 4-5).⁷ As the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad's omnipotent agent, "S. Behrman was the railroad" (67), which makes him in turn "the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster" (51) that the ranchers battle, unsuccessfully, throughout the novel. Norris carefully positions this man as a synecdoche for the Gilded Age corporation.

That readers first encounter him not as a person, but as an advertisement, suggests that his power (and that of the corporation he represents) has in a sense already been superseded by something greater. By expanding national shipping and communication networks and fueling the widespread industrial growth that would help produce the rise

of the corporation (including the corporate railroad), railroads aided in establishing conditions conducive to the development of consumer marketing techniques. The corporation, as embodied in the Pacific & Southwestern Railroad, is clearly the force motivating Norris's deployment of naturalist narrative form. But his immediate foregrounding of branding in the figure of the looming, ever-visible water tank advertisements haunts his representation of the corporate railroad as overwhelming "Force"; S. Behrman commands less ground than his own advertisement.

Surprisingly, Presley later joins him in this fate. Toward the end of the novel, the poet finally completes and publishes his long awaited opus, "The Toilers," which honors the San Joaquin ranchers' struggles against both the land and the sprawling railroad which threatens to strangle them. The poem is "an enormous success" and quickly finds a national audience: "It was discussed, attacked, defended, eulogised, and ridiculed. It was praised with the most fulsome adulation; assailed with the most violent condemnation. Editorials were written upon it. Special articles, in literary pamphlets, dissected its rhetoric and prosody." Crucially, it is soon "distorted so as to read as an advertisement for patented cereals and infants' foods" (394). The discursive journey undergone by Presley's poem is revealing: initially a social sensation, it metamorphoses through phases as topical exposé, polemical argument, editorial fodder, literary exemplar, and then finally, ineluctably, advertisement. What begins as a narrative conveying the "Truth" (376) about the labor involved in the growing of wheat—"Your inspiration has come *from* the People," Vanamee, the first person to hear the poem, remarks admiringly (original emphasis, 377)—ends as a wheat product brand. The poem leads readers and listeners not into the California wheat fields, but into their local markets.⁸ Dedicated to

representing the corporate railroad as a natural, and indomitable, power, Norris's novel nevertheless seems once again distracted by intimations of a force perhaps greater in strength.

The reason for this distraction, I suggest, lies in branding's offering a nuanced contribution to the deterministic worldview that gives naturalism its formal properties. As Norris represents them, the corporate railroad and branding both act to curb expressions of individualism. In the first case, the ranchers' long battle to hold onto the land that anchors their sense of identity and purpose inevitably ends in the victory of the Pacific & Southwestern; individualism simply cannot survive in the face of an insurmountable power. In branding's case, the situation is more complex. For Presley, "The Toilers" is the result of an attempt to produce a work of literary genius—an artifact of absolute individualism. Norris's representation of this artifact's inexorable transformation into a brand is, like the railroad's crushing of the ranchers, an examination of individualism's limits. What the transformation of "The Toilers" shows, however, is not that individualism cannot exist at all, but rather that it can exist only within the larger bounds of a class of individuals. To put this another way, the consumers who choose to buy specific "patented cereals and infants' foods" because of these products' association with "The Toilers" do so at least partly as a way of individually differentiating themselves from other consumers. Even so, this action can only differentiate them by causing them to join a larger group of individuals who have chosen the same form of individual differentiation. Though branding encourages what appear to be acts of creative self-expression, these acts ultimately prove specious. Norris's naturalism

formalizes the notion that this practice has in fact placed limits on individualism while only seeming to expand and develop it.

Paul Young has recently argued that “‘American naturalism’ in the 1890s was less a movement than a jumble of proffered peculiarities” (646). But if the instances of novelistic engagement with branding I have so far discussed, including Norris’s, do not quite amount to a “movement,” they still hang together much more cohesively than Young’s “jumble” characterization implies. While bringing this practice into dialogue with naturalism does not necessarily alter our understanding of this narrative form’s properties, it does expand our understanding of the historical currents that brought these properties into being, and consequently also expands the range of literary and cultural functions they might serve. Donald Pizer, a longtime student of naturalism, has suggested that the Enlightenment optimism that propelled much nineteenth-century thought assumed that the “world . . . may be a difficult place, and man is imperfect, but the passage of time profits the bold and good-hearted and leavens life with judgment if not with wisdom” (104). In its typical form, however, naturalism “no longer reflects this certainty about the value of experience but rather expresses a profound doubt or perplexity about what happens in the course of time” (104). I am not challenging this formulation. I am, however, arguing that a crucial cultural foundation for it has been hitherto overlooked. The rise of consumer marketing gave many naturalist authors a setting in which to express this “profound doubt” about individuals’ ability to advance their interests through willpower and “judgment.” For these authors, branding, specifically, joined a critical mass of natural forces in directing and determining human actions.

This circumstance is evident in the work of H. H. Boyesen, author of a trio of novels largely concerned with the effect on social relations of the economic shifts and disruptions occurring at the height of the Gilded Age. Branding was just one of many factors shaping (and produced by) these economic developments, but Boyesen singles it out as demonstrating notable social influence. In *The Mammon of Unrighteousness* (1891), for example, it provides a narrative model for imagining how one's actions are perceived by others. The novel focuses on the careers of two brothers, Alexander and Horace Larkin. When Bella Robbins faints in the presence of Kate Van Schaak, her rival for Horace's affections, Kate administers "homeopathic medicine" (196) and then silently congratulates herself on this charitable behavior: "She had a pleasant sense of having done her duty when this task was accomplished. There was a quiet satisfaction in her handsome and intelligent face, which was like an advertisement of a good conscience" (197). This last simile may originate in Kate's self-conception, in which case the novel's third-person narrator simply transcribes it. Or, the simile may be selected by the narrator as an apt description of her appearance. Regardless, Boyesen sensitizes his readers to the temptation of channeling social interactions into the simple and often reductive narrative model offered by branding. In order for her face to appear "like an advertisement," limitations on the complexity of the narrative of "quiet satisfaction" it registers must be imposed. As witness to the growth and development of consumer marketing described by Bunner, Boyesen offers in *Mammon* an imaginative assessment of its consequences for everyday life.⁹

This assessment surfaces again several times in Boyesen's later novel *Social Strugglers* (1893), the story of a *nouveau riche* family from the West, the Bulkleys,

attempting to enter New York society.¹⁰ By the middle of the novel, Maud Bulkley, one of three daughters in the family, has won the love of both Marston Fancher and Philip Warburton, two New York bachelors. Neither man knows of the other's love for Maud until one evening when, having settled down to smoke after dinner, Marston attempts to consult Philip as to the best way to win her over. Before querying his friend, he turns to "a small teak-wood table of exquisite workmanship; the top of which, when removed, revealed a dozen compartments, filled with different brands of cigars. Philip confessed to a plebeian preference for the pipe, and the only brand of tobacco which he smoked was kept, for his special delectation, in a drawer of the same teak-wood table" (Boyesen, *Social* 173-174). Here brand consumption serves as an indication of character. Marston, the self-interested cad, cannot deny himself the opportunity to select a different brand, with its attendant images, personality, and narrative, each day. Branding consequently facilitates as well as reveals the fickleness which will eventually cost him Maud's affection. Philip, who gains it, demonstrates his earnestness and constancy by his fidelity to a specific brand of pipe tobacco.¹¹ But in both cases, brands act as a kind of compulsory language; they speak things the two men, who have not yet discovered their rivalry, would prefer not to say to each other. Readers learn from this scene that branding has the power to compel people into speech even when they wish to remain silent.¹²

Lessons such as this one aid readers in coming to understand this practice as nearly always functioning in excess of its prescribed business purposes. To select one brand of cigar from among many—or to select none at all—is to engage in more than just consumer decision-making; it is to engage in ongoing processes of cultural construction. Boyesen's naturalism evinces a belief not only in the impossibility of standing outside

such processes, but also in the impossibility of exerting perfect individual control over them. This notion is on display later in the novel as Marston and a group of companions ride in carriages south along Fifth Avenue in the direction of the Lower East Side and its tenements. Marston initially feels annoyed at being paired with Maud's homelier sister, Peggy, while Maud rides in another carriage. But then the "electric blaze on Madison Square, and the magic-lantern advertisement which declared that 'ladies will be delighted with the next,' diverted his attention somewhat from his grievance, and made him regard Peggy's vivacious countenance opposite to him with a kindlier interest" (Boyesen, *Social* 261). Marston's preference for Maud over Peggy is as much a cultural valuation as a personal one, for Maud exhibits characteristics—striking beauty, ethical scruple, domestic self-sacrifice—recognized in the late nineteenth century as belonging to an idealized femininity. Accordingly, the Madison Square advertisements' shifting of Marston's attention in an unwonted direction, against the grain of entrenched gender biases, amounts to a cultural intervention. Marston makes no resistance. Indeed, he seems unaware that his own actions make clear the degree to which he is in fact acted upon.

As these moments from *Social Strugglers* suggest, Boyesen joins Norris in emphasizing branding's deterministic effects. If these effects are produced to a certain extent internally—that is, if they result from consumers' brand choices, like Marston's and Philip's—they nevertheless function as the same kind of check on individualism as the other forces conventionally represented in naturalism. Pizer has suggested that this narrative form consists of "not a single, describable entity but a complex of devices and techniques that differs in degree and kind from writer to writer and from novel to novel

while still sharing certain general and therefore abstractable tendencies” (104-05).

Perhaps the most widely shared and easily recognized of these tendencies is the description of “civilized” things (people, machines, cities) as natural phenomena (plants, animals, weather). Engaging this technique, Crane reveals that Maggie Johnson, in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), “blossomed in a mud puddle” like a “most rare and wonderful” flower (16). In *The Pit* (1903), Norris has Curtis Jadwin pause at the entrance to the commodities trading floor, where the “roar was appalling, the whirlpool was again unchained, the maelstrom was again unleashed” (326). And at the end of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899), Edna Pontellier approaches the ocean like a “bird with a broken wing . . . reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water” (108). The purpose of these descriptions is to reveal primal nature beneath civilization’s veneer—to uncover the vast and merciless forces animating even the smallest of human actions.

What has hitherto gone unnoticed is the frequent representation of branding as one of these forces. If one typical naturalist move is to show the power of biology at work in the world, another, I am suggesting, is to likewise demonstrate the power of branding. In Henry Blake Fuller’s *With the Procession* (1894), for example, consumer marketing has blanketed the buildings of downtown Chicago with billboards and notices, constantly threatening to eclipse the city’s original architecture just as new wealth and new fashions threaten to overwhelm the novel’s protagonists, the Marshall family.¹³ On a visit to the new developments on the city’s South Side, Jane Marshall notices that advertisements have become conspicuous even here: “her eye took transversely the unkempt prairie as it lay cut up by sketchy streets. . . . In one direction she saw above the

dead crop of rustling weeds the heads of a long line of people on their way to church; in the other . . . [a] vast advertisement which glared in the sun from the four-story flank of an outlying shoe-store. ‘I hope the next man who builds will shut *that* out,’ she thought” (original emphasis, 251). For Jane, the shoe store’s “vast advertisement” is more oppressive, because more all-seeing and all-controlling, than the midday sun that illuminates it. Branding has appropriated the power of nature in the urban landscape of the modern city, and Fuller’s careful registration of Jane’s reaction to the burdensome advertisement indicates the shaping influence of this appropriation on the form of his novel.¹⁴

Perhaps the most striking aspect of her reaction is its sense of futility. Jane may be fully aware of branding’s oppressive power, but she is helpless to confront it as a whole, and reduced to a “hope” that others will intervene in the case of individual advertisements. This futility is echoed in *In His Steps* (1897), a popular sermon-turned-novel by leading Congregationalist minister and Christian Socialist Charles Sheldon. Edward Norman, editor of the *Raymond Daily News*, has taken a pledge early in the novel to act only as Jesus would act, and slowly the consequences of this decision become known. When Norman receives a letter from a major tobacco dealer requesting termination of the dealer’s longstanding advertising arrangements on suspicion that Norman plans to use the paper as an instrument for social reform, the editor reconsiders his advertising policies. “What would Jesus do with that other long advertisement of liquor?” he wonders. “He was simply doing what every other business man in Raymond did. And it was one of the best paying sources of revenue. What would the paper do if it cut these out?” (Sheldon 36). Norman seems quite aware of branding’s cultural power—

otherwise he would not set himself and his paper against it. Nevertheless, in targeting certain kinds, he merely reaffirms that this practice as a whole has acted to condition his religious beliefs. In other words, branding informs Norman's sense of what is evil and what is not, and resistance to it—an obsessive focus on it—only strengthens its hold on his religious worldview. In pursuing the practice as a problem, Norman reveals its role in structuring and defining larger metaphysical questions.

Though starkly different in many other respects, Edward Bellamy's *Equality* (1897) similarly represents branding as shaping the very terms under which it is possible to formulate a critique of it. *Equality* picks up where *Looking Backward* leaves off—Julian West awakens, in Boston in the year 2000, from his nightmare of being transported back to 1887—and consists entirely of conversations further elaborating the improvements to civilization undergone over the previous century. At one point, Julian and Dr. Leete are observing some high school examinations, and a student is asked to explain the illogical nature of nineteenth-century advertising. “[I]t was prodigiously expensive,” the student responds, “and the expense had to be added to the price of the goods and paid by the consumer, who therefore could buy just so much less than if he had been left in peace and the price of the goods had been reduced by the saving in advertising” (Bellamy, *Equality* 171). Bellamy plainly intends this answer as an economic critique of late nineteenth-century consumer marketing; it is the logical correlative, and reinforcement, of Julian's horror of Boston's saturation by advertisements in the dream that ends *Looking Backward*. But what makes this critique possible is a belief that products should not betray, through pricing or other means, the labor expended in producing and distributing them. And this belief, in turn, was in large

part an artifact of branding, which taught consumers to value products for their potential ability to satisfy personal desires rather than for the time, energy, and materials used to create them.¹⁵ Bellamy's reasoning forecloses the possibility of critiquing branding in a way that this practice itself has not brought about. As a result, he joins other naturalists in representing this it as a governing presence in late nineteenth-century American culture.

Crane's *Maggie* similarly foregrounds this source of determinism. Having survived the perils of the Bowery's "Rum Alley" (16) into young womanhood but not yet turned to prostitution, Maggie "got a position in an establishment where they made collars and cuffs," Crane writes (17). With "twenty girls of various shades of yellow discontent" for company, she "treadled at her machine all day, turning out collars, the name of whose brand could be noted for its irrelevancy to anything in connection with collars. At night she returned home to her mother" (17). The absurdity of the collar brand comes through clearly here, but what comes through even more clearly is its undeniable power. Unlike Bunner, Crane considers the way this power affects not just consumption, but production as well. He recognizes that branding governs employment opportunities as well as purchasing decisions. Consequently, this image of Maggie trapped in a crowded, windowless room while "treadl[ing]" monotonously on her sewing machine for long hours each day expands branding's power even further beyond what is conveyed in Bunner's description of a crowd assembled on the sidewalk, mesmerized by the processual narrative created by painters' stenciling a pair of pants onto a window. Crane's vision of the totality of the practice's influence marks him out even among other naturalists.

Andrew Lawson has recently made this point about *Maggie*, and about its author's comprehensive grasp of consumer culture, in slightly different terms. Crane conveys the "illusion Maggie labors to achieve of sensuous participation in the life world of the class whose consumption habits she mimics," he writes, while also showing how "she expends her own labor on the commodity in order to fashion it into the desired object" ("Class" 599). For Lawson, Crane's class insights entail not only "Maggie's consumption practice," but also the "repressed world of production," a "world" that includes both the private labor Maggie "expends" on improving her personal appearance and class associations and the public labor she performs at her sewing station in the collar sweatshop. Crane sees branding's power at work in homes, businesses, and beer gardens, and in behavior and beliefs large and small. Even more than Norris, Boyesen, Sheldon, Bellamy, and the other authors I have discussed, he places it at the center of a late nineteenth-century culture organized by forces that curb expressions of absolute individualism. And the work in which he most powerfully demonstrates branding's influence is *The Red Badge of Courage*.

Henry Fleming's Pictures: From Windows to Walls

In early 1893, Crane was lounging around the painting studio of recent acquaintance Corwin Knapp Linson when he received a tempting offer of work. Crane had moved to Manhattan the previous autumn and was living precariously, barely supporting himself through intermittent newspaper assignments while he completed the manuscript of *Maggie*. It would be another month or two before he discovered the "Battles and Leaders of the Civil War" articles in old copies of the *Century* lining

Linson's bookshelves. By July, Crane would be busy channeling his antipathy to these articles into the creation of *Red Badge*. But on this day, Henry Fleming and Chancellorsville were still a long way off, and so Crane seriously considered the bit of writing suggested to him. As Linson later described the occasion, a number of paintings were distributed around the studio when Crane visited, and "[t]here was among the lot one that had been painted in the hope of sale as a thread advertisement." This particular painting depicted a "great Jap doll" lying "prone" while surrounded by "a host of tiny dolls tying him to the earth." "[A]n excited, curious throng crowded about" the prostrate doll and its minute captors, while "balls of thread in odd little carts" and a "gay flutter of parasols and cherry bloom" dotted the scene. Having updated Gulliver's arrival in Lilliput for the late nineteenth century's emerging consumer culture, the image needed only a modern Swift to supply advertising copy. "Write something for it, Steve," someone suggested (Linson 4).

After deliberating a moment, Linson reveals, Crane allowed a "wan smile" that "came and went like faint sunshine passing over a shadowy field" to drift across his features before responding, "I don't think I could." Linson explains that the would-be thread advertisement "was a trivial doll-Gulliver jest, but children were amused by sillier things and it might have earned a few dollars between us." He embraces Crane's refusal to write the ad copy in spite of prolonged impoverishment as the manifestation of "a simple ingrained honesty of purpose" that committed him to "write of life only as he felt it" (4). This refusal turns out to hinge less on artistic scruple than on form and setting; Maggie Johnson's experience with the shirt collars suggests that Crane did indeed consider it important to "write of life" in the context of the rise of branding, and that in

fiction, not advertising copy, he found an apt medium for doing so. *Red Badge* represents his strongest and most extended fictional engagement with this issue.

With the notable exception of Perry Lentz's *Private Fleming at Chancellorsville: The Red Badge of Courage and the Civil War* (2006), recent critical readings of Crane's novel have argued overwhelmingly that its representation of the Civil War actually says much less about this period of U.S. history than it does about the period in which the novel was produced. Lentz claims that the "more readers know about the American Civil War, the more they can appreciate Crane's depiction of 'An Episode' within it" (2); hence he provides an exhaustive account of the Battle of Chancellorsville, the strategies and maneuvers associated with infantry combat, and soldiers' equipment (uniforms, musketry), among other things, all in the service of celebrating *Red Badge* as a gateway to understanding the war. But if, as Lentz seems to suggest, Crane is best regarded as a historian, other critics have found him more useful as a historian of the present—that is, of the 1890s. Following Amy Kaplan's assertion that "arguments about the historical accuracy" of Crane's depiction of the Civil War are "beside the point" (3-4), these critics have paid heed to such compositional facts as Crane acknowledging that "what interviewing he did to construct his story was worthless" (Crisman 207) and that, consequently, what passes for Civil War reconstruction makes more sense as contemporary reconstruction, an account of late nineteenth-century culture written in the idiom of an earlier historical event.

Beginning with this premise, several recent articles on *Red Badge* have demonstrated the novel's engagement with contemporary culture, establishing useful points of reference for an examination of its treatment of branding.¹⁶ Terry Mulcaire, for

example, identifies the Army of the Potomac as an army of workers as well as an army of soldiers. Its “natural enemy,” he argues, is both the Confederate infantry pressing northward to the Union capital and “industrial inefficiency” (47). For Mulcaire, Crane’s novel functions as an early statement of the functional design dogma later codified in Frederick Winslow Taylor’s *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911): in *Red Badge*, “Crane imagines the population of a Civil War battlefield as a progressive, Tayloresque society” (61). Not only does Crane’s novel engage contemporary culture, then, but it also singles out specific aspects—industrial restructuring, emerging scientific management, gendered labor ideology—as issues crucial to forming an understanding of this culture.

John C. Orr has built on Mulcaire’s analysis by reading Fleming’s transformation in the novel not as naïve farm boy turned to disciplined veteran, but rather as “autonomous individual” turned to “corporate self” (59). Orr’s account represents Fleming’s final acceptance of “submission to a hierarchical structure as a basis for action” (59) as typical of the fate of the modern worker. Extending this account to Crane’s own professional circumstances, Andrew Lawson has described Crane’s novel as a “story of a writer attempting to find a place within a corporate system” (“*Red*” 63). Both Orr and Lawson join Mulcaire in emphasizing that, as Orr writes, “the modern corporation is largely a product of the last thirty years of the [nineteenth] century, roughly the time-span of Crane’s life” (60). Crane’s maturation as an author coincided with the maturation of the corporation, a coincidence that resonated deeply in his fiction. In writing specifically about the ways *Red Badge* manifests these resonances in the form of a protagonist who increasingly embraces efficiency, learns to privilege group

membership over individualism, and identifies with laboring soldiers more than managing generals, these three critics have solidly established Crane's novel as a touchstone of cultural critique for an era dominated by large-scale transformation of business forms and practices.

Surprisingly, branding, which is integral to corporate identity, figures in none of their accounts. Orr's argument concerning the emptying out of individualism under emergent corporate capitalism, however, identifies one of its chief effects—an effect that the novel seems at times to represent quite clearly. While it will come under intense pressure later in the novel, individualism appears in the first pages of *Red Badge* as not only possible, but also desirable. Fleming's regiment has been idly camped near the banks of the Rappahannock for some time, and occasionally reports surface that the men will be ordered to move. Jim Conklin, the "tall soldier," one day returns from a shirt-washing mission "swelled with a tale he had heard from a reliable friend, who had heard it from a truthful cavalryman, who had heard it from his trustworthy brother, one of the orderlies at division headquarters" (3). Despite likely having been the victim of such rumors before, Jim repeats his "tale" to everyone he sees: "He adopted the air of a herald in red and gold" (3). And despite misstatements by earlier "herald[s]," his listeners credit his proclamation enough to contest it. "Many of the men engaged in a spirited debate" about the news, Crane writes (4). Predictably, Jim turns out to be wrong about the army's plans, at least in the short term, but one consequence of this occurrence is the suggestion of an authoritative individualism circulating among the soldiers. Jim's mistakenness proves unimportant, in the end; what matters is his assertion's affirmation that individuals are capable of seeking and acquiring knowledge.

This affirmation is revealed less in Jim's making so dubious a claim than in the other soldiers' willingness to entertain it. They feel compelled to look into the matter, asking if others have heard the news, repeating Jim's declaration, supporting it, challenging it, and generally lending it the status of possible, if not actual, truth. All of this activity speaks to the novel's initial commitment to the primacy of individual authority—to individualism as itself a gesture of truthfulness. Indeed, Jim's declaration comes closest to achieving veracity when he stops offering support for it. "Well, yeh kin b'lieve me er not, jest as yeh like. I don't care a hang," he tells some hecklers. "There was much food for thought in the manner in which he replied. He came near to convincing them by disdain to produce proofs. They grew much excited over it" (4). Fleming, who observes these exchanges, feels "obliged to labor to make himself believe" (4), and therefore retreats to his tent in order to reflect on what he has witnessed. Confronted with the imminent possibility of battle and its attendant tests of courage, loyalty, and ferocity, Fleming reviews the series of events—his desire to enlist, his leave-taking of his mother, a farewell reception at his school, the train journey from New York to Washington—that have brought him to his current circumstances.

Formally, it is almost as though the novel has begun a second time. After thinking over his prior experiences, Fleming returns to the present moment in which he rests alone in his tent. This narrative maneuver of Crane's isolates the first pages of the novel—Jim's announcement and its prickly reception—and allows them to serve as a prologue of sorts, one outlining a conjecture that the body of the novel then puts to a test. I am arguing that the conjecture is individualism's resiliency in the face of overwhelming force, and that while the force is most obviously war, Crane's language suggests branding

as a close analogue. Given Crane's firsthand knowledge of this practice as well as recent critiques of the novel demonstrating its responsiveness to readings informed by the business conditions of the 1890s, it would seem unsurprising to find suggestions of the practice in *Red Badge*. And, indeed, these suggestions appear as early as Fleming's recounting of the past in the novel's first chapter, forming a series of encounters with branding over which, in conjunction with Fleming's battlefield experiences, individualism yields to mass subjection and original perceptions yield to compulsory ones. Crane's novel ultimately suggests that branding is a force powerful enough to curtail expressions of individualism; *Red Badge*'s naturalism consequently follows at least partly from the conclusion that this force necessitated a new kind of literary form.

Initially, branding does not inhibit individualism, but rather enables it. Lying on his bunk, Fleming thinks about how his initial skepticism of the war gradually turned to enthusiasm: "He had burned several times to enlist. Tales of great movements shook the land . . . and he had longed to see it all. His busy mind had drawn for him large pictures, extravagant in color, lurid with breathless deeds" (5). As Bunner demonstrates, "large," "extravagant," and often "lurid" "pictures" had become central to branding as early as the 1880s. Hardly out of adolescence, moreover, Fleming "draw[s]" romantic images of war that are strikingly similar in form and effect to the exaggerated and fearsome circus billboards that capture the attention of Bunner's typical country boy. Nevertheless, one key distinction separates Fleming from this stock figure: whereas Fleming creates his own "pictures," and thus takes responsibility for generating the images and evanescent accompanying narratives that shape his perceptions, the country boy simply absorbs what is brought to him by circus promoters. The issue here is not whether Fleming's ideas

about heroism and military service are shaped by naïve fantasies—obviously, they are—but rather how much power he has as an individual in producing, and accepting or rejecting, these fantasies. Fleming’s survey of the recent past suggests his recognition that, prior to his enlistment, this power was strong.

It remains strong, furthermore, in the leisurely moments during which he actually conducts this review. Suddenly uneasy at the prospect of soon being tested in battle, Fleming tries to reassure himself that his formerly firm, if baseless, confidence in his courage and prowess has not been delusional. “A little panic-fear grew in his mind,” Crane writes. “He contemplated the lurking menaces of the future, and failed in an effort to see himself standing stoutly in the midst of them. He recalled his visions of broken-bladed glory, but in the shadow of the impending tumult he suspected them to be impossible pictures” (8). Again, Crane clearly signals Fleming’s individual agency with regard to the “pictures.” Even if he can no longer summon precisely the ones he wants—can no longer “see himself” occupying such heroic narratives as he once seemed destined to occupy—Fleming retains the capacity to judge which images are possible and which are “impossible.” This also distinguishes him from Bunner’s country boy, whose faith in gaudy and simplistic images and the stories they tell suffers not at all from his knowledge of their patent falsity. As with his ability to project them, Fleming’s ability to discriminate among “visions of broken-bladed glory” as his circumstances evolve testifies to the support the novel initially offers for the notion that individualism remains unthreatened in a culture increasingly organized around brands.

This support falters as the novel continues, and particularly once Stephen’s regiment finally engages enemy troops. His courage holds out during a first Confederate

charge, but when the second begins he runs to the rear and eventually finds himself alone in the trees, listening to the battle raging around him but seeing nothing. Hearing guns, artillery, and shouting, “there passed through his mind pictures of stupendous conflicts. His accumulated thought upon such subjects was used to form scenes. The noise was as the voice of an eloquent being, describing” (37). A slightly altered version of the “stupendous conflicts” Fleming envisioned earlier has returned. However, he does not produce this version entirely on his own: while “his accumulated thought” acts to “form scenes,” the “pictures” that spark this process seem precipitated from the environment, as does the “voice” that “eloquent[ly]” narrates the procession of images “pass[ing] through his mind.”

This sense that Fleming is not completely in control of the “pictures” through which he comprehends his thoughts and behavior receives reinforcement later, after Jim Conklin’s death, when he tries to motivate himself to rejoin the fighting: “Swift pictures of himself, apart, yet in himself, came to him . . . a blue, determined figure standing before a crimson and steel assault, getting calmly killed on a high place before the eyes of all” (48). Crane’s ambiguous structuring of the beginning of this passage allows two interpretations. On one hand, the “pictures” might represent Fleming as “apart, yet in himself.” But on the other hand, the “pictures” themselves might occupy this liminal position. In this second case, Crane might be pointing to the evacuation of the self as the site of picture-making. And in both cases, it seems that from this point on, pictures will be encountered rather than made; they will come to Fleming rather than be “drawn” by him (5).

Fleming's altered relationship to pictures offers readers a specific suggestion of how his battlefield experiences have begun to affect him. Earlier, in an oft-cited passage, Crane describes these experiences in terms of a dramatic decrease in individuality: "He suddenly lost concern for himself. . . . He became not a man but a member. . . . He was welded into a common personality which was dominated by a single desire. For some moments he could not flee no more than a little finger can commit a revolution from a hand" (26). Fleming's transition from generating his own images to passively interpreting those that come to him is an important component of this shift. Instead of creating his own visions of his experiences, he starts to identify with visions that seem to already exist. As he continues rallying himself for a return to the front, for example, "he saw a picture of himself, dust-stained, haggard, panting, flying to the front at the proper moment to seize and throttle the dark, leering witch of calamity" (48). This "picture" is something outside himself that Fleming sees, not something inside himself that he creates. Its genesis is in his environment, a fact emphasized moments later when, disgusted by his inability to act, he halts his efforts at self-motivation. "He now conceded it to be impossible that he should ever become a hero," Crane writes. "He was a craven loon. Those pictures of glory were piteous things" (49). What permits this harsh judgment is the distance between Fleming and the "pictures." They are not his, and as he did not make them, he can only blame himself for his credulity in allowing them to influence his behavior and beliefs.

They soon exert such influence regardless of whether he allows them to, however. Having received his wound, albeit from the rifle butt of a fellow Union soldier, his regiment solicitously receives him. Fleming takes a seat by the campfire, submits to an

examination of the gash in his scalp, and then encounters a picture that replaces, rather than represents, the activity around the camp. Looking up through a fog of exhaustion, he sees “an officer asleep, seated bolt upright, with his back against a tree. . . . Dust and stains were upon his face. His lower jaw hung down as if lacking strength to assume its normal position. He was the picture of an exhausted soldier after a feast of war” (58).

What has hitherto operated as a representational phenomenon now operates as an ontological one. For Fleming, the “picture” has transformed over the course of the novel from a window onto reality (initially self-devised, later accepted as an artifact of the environment) into reality itself. He peers across the campfire and discovers not that he is imagining how the officer would appear in a picture, but that there is no officer apart from the picture—that the entire scene exists only as a picture.

In a novel so heavily invested in foregrounding perceptions and impressions, this moment delivers an especially new and remarkable experience. What has happened to cause or enable Fleming’s shift from perceiving *through* pictures to simply perceiving pictures? The only noteworthy event immediately preceding Fleming’s reunion with his regiment is his acquiring, not longer after “regard[ing] the wounded soldiers in an envious way” and judging them “peculiarly happy,” his own “red badge of courage” (41). The significance of the wound’s location “on his head, the site of reason, rationality, knowledge” (Orr 59) has been noted, though not in the context of Fleming’s relationship to pictures and its likely cultural implications. If we consider the blow to Fleming’s head injurious to his ability to “reason,” and if we also take note of his associating the red badge with acceptance, inclusion, membership, and even happiness, then one compelling way of interpreting Fleming’s change from interacting with pictures on a representational

level to interacting with them on an ontological level is to imagine this newly marked soldier as now subject to branding.

For Fleming, the red badge functions very much like one of the signs, symbols, and figures that graced the advertisements and packages increasingly pervading New York when the novel was written. Purchasing a branded product—one of the wheat cereals associated with Presley’s “The Toilers,” for example, or one of Maggie Johnson’s collars—could produce personal transformation both in one’s own eyes and in the eyes of others. Revealingly, acquiring a red badge, in Crane’s novel, can produce something similar. In Crane’s mind, the modern city and the battlefield had much in common—he once proclaimed that “The Sense of a City is War” (qtd. in Orr 57)—and the red badge effectually bridges the two spaces by signifying in each a means to rewrite one’s personal narrative in ways that increase social status and degree of community membership. Taking advantage of this means, however, also entails more far-reaching changes to one’s perceptions and impressions. Having acquired a red badge, Crane seems to suggest, Fleming has not only rewritten the narrative of his battlefield experiences, but also has given up his individualism. The gap between what exists and what Fleming perceives has closed; there is now only what Fleming perceives, and insofar as he produces these perceptions himself, doing so can at best only join him to a community of like-minded individuals. Fleming has certainly become “welded into a common personality” (26). And though this “personality” is clearly that of the united 304th New York Volunteers, Crane makes available terms which also cast this entity as the great mass of modern, brand-conscious consumers.

The remainder of the novel bears out this assertion. Awakening the next morning before any of his comrades, Fleming “believed for an instant that he was in the house of the dead. . . . In a second, however, he achieved his proper mind. . . . He saw that this somber picture was not a fact of the present, but a mere prophecy” (60). Here Fleming is concerned only with how to date the “somber picture” before him. Because he now perceives only pictures, this is the only question available for him to consider. In addition, Fleming’s later experience of his regiment’s victorious charge against the Confederates is similarly shaped by pictures’ ontological, rather than representational, status: “The youth, in his leapings, saw, as through a mist, a picture of four or five men stretched upon the ground or writhing upon their knees with bowed heads as if they had been stricken by bolts from the sky” (93-94). In its stark realism, this “picture” is quite different from the “large pictures, extravagant in color, lurid with breathless deeds” that Fleming “had drawn” early in the novel (5). But the most important difference between these pictures, a difference that alerts us to one of the novel’s crucial tropes, is the difference between how Fleming relates to each of them. Whereas he creates the romanticized pictures at the beginning of the novel as a way of interpreting his experiences, at the end of the novel Crane suggests that increasingly this is no longer possible. Instead, pictures have become, in a manner, opaque: not windows onto the world, but rather walls—the world themselves. Triumphantly swinging into line with other members of his newly reformed brigade, Fleming marches on toward the next engagement both as a seasoned Civil War veteran and as a modern, brand-conscious consumer.

Despite this image's fitting conclusiveness, *Red Badge* was not Crane's final word on branding, its impact on individual perceptions, and its shaping influence on late nineteenth-century culture, for his confession of being "at [brands'] mercy" (*Men* 224) would come several years later. As I have argued, however, Crane's novel functions as a kind of prelude to this confession, and consequently prepares late nineteenth-century readers to encounter branding's full spectrum of meanings. Other authors from the period offer passing glimpses of this practice's undeniable influence on how people think and behave, and these glimpses are useful in suggesting the wide range of contexts—from the California wheat fields (Norris's *The Octopus*) to a Midwestern Congregational church (Sheldon's *In His Steps*) to Park Avenue (Boyesen's *Social Strugglers*)—in which branding had begun to function. But in Crane's writings, and particularly in *Red Badge*, this practice's effects on individuals are revealed in depth. A cultural creation, to be sure, branding nevertheless acts in Crane's view as a natural force, a basic fact of existence that determines human behavior just as biology and heredity do, and one that attains particular salience in the urban environments of the 1890s. Having studied these environments intimately, Crane offers an astute assessment of branding's deterministic power. What he does not offer, however, is an assessment of how this power operated with regard to different genders. For that, we must turn to Edith Wharton, who is discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III NOTES

¹ The pieces appeared in the 31 July, 7 August, and 14 August 1897 issues. They first appeared in book form as eight "chapters" in the anthology *Last Words* (1902), and then

were reprinted in Vincent Starrett's edited collection of work by Crane, *Men, Women, and Boats* (1921).

² I am assuming here that Crane uses "chemist" in the British sense, i.e. a pharmacist.

³ Crane is not known to have had a relationship, either professional or personal, with Twain. Howells, however, played an important role in Crane's career by encouraging his early efforts and offering advice on style and choice of subjects. For an account of the relationship between Howells and Crane that addresses the attitudes of each toward the slums, see Sorrentino.

⁴ He was not the only journalist investigating this territory: Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) had been published just a few years before. For a recent account of the Lower East Side slums that focuses on Riis and Crane, see Gandal.

⁵ Advertising was most heavily concentrated in major cities like New York and Chicago, but this is not to say to say that rural areas were entirely ignored (see Blanke and Lears). For accounts of the rise of branding in the United States that focus on advertising, see Fox, Jones and Slater, Koehn, Norris, Sivulka, and Strasser. For accounts that focus on the department store, see Benson, Ferry, and Twyman.

⁶ See Michaels, Seltzer, *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad Company*, and Trachtenberg.

⁷ This image seems to prefigure the billboard featuring the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, who similarly presides over an arid, dusty landscape, the "valley of ashes" (28), in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). For an account of Norris's influence on Fitzgerald, see Eby.

⁸ In these markets, consumers would have had a variety of new branded wheat products to purchase. According to historian Gerald Carson, the first patents for a wheat shredding machine were issued in 1893; in 1896, W. K. Kellogg received the first patent for a "flaked cereal food"; and in 1898, Kellogg introduced Sanitas Corn Flakes and C. W. Post introduced Grape Nuts. See Carson 258.

⁹ It should be obvious from this discussion that I am skeptical of arguments that represent material consumption as an act of personal liberation. For an account of consumer culture studies that shares my skepticism, see Steigerwald's "All Hail the Republic of Choice." For rebuttal, see Cohen's "Escaping Steigerwald's 'Plastic Cages.'" See also Cohen's *A Consumer's Republic* and Breen's *The Marketplace of Revolution* for detailed historical accounts of consumption as liberating behavior. I discuss the politics of consumption in greater detail in chapter 4.

¹⁰ The Bulkley family bears a striking resemblance to the Dryfoos family in William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), and given that Boyesen dedicated this novel to Howells, his friend and mentor, the resemblance is likely meant in homage.

¹¹ Brand consumption may indicate character fairly bluntly, but for Boyesen, at least, its relationship to class status is more complex. *Social Strugglers* begins with an account of Peleg Bulkley's bewilderment at some of the measures his wife has taken in order to raise her social class in their (unnamed) Western city. Chief among these measures has been the silent renouncement of her former pride in the clothing business that has brought the family vast wealth—including its branding efforts. Thus, if Marston and Philip's discriminating brand consumption indicates a high social class, Mrs. Bulkley's association with brand *production* indicates a low social class. The passage describing the Bulkley brand, from the novel's first paragraph, is worth quoting at length: "It was impossible for him [Peleg Bulkley] to comprehend the frame of mind to which a merchant tailor's business (and a very big one at that) could appear something to be ashamed of, particularly as he well remembered the pride Mrs. Bulkley once took in the huge plate-glass windows and the big pictorial advertisements in the Sunday papers, showing the rapid rise in the world of the man who bought his clothes of Bulkley, and the accumulation of disasters which overtook him who did not. And what a source of delight his rhymed and gorgeously illustrated catalogues had been to her and the children! How they had admired the jingling doggerel about coats and trousers; and what a work of art that colored frontispiece had seemed to them, exhibiting the President and his cabinet beaming with contentment because they had been so fortunate as to secure suits of Bulkley's manufacture, while the poor Prince of Wales and a mob of kings looked disconsolate because they had to put up with the tailoring of Poole and his consorts" (Boyesen, *Social* 1-2).

¹² It is worth noting that this is a reversal of the usual critique of branding. Brands are often maligned for operating as a communicative shorthand, which reduces communication to consumption. But here Boyesen seems to suggest that what is troubling is not branding's power to channel other forms of communication, but rather its ability to force us to communicate even when we wish not to. The only author, to my knowledge, who has developed this criticism of compulsory communication as a substantial critique of branding is novelist William Gibson, whose protagonist in *Pattern Recognition* (2003) goes to great lengths to purge brands from her clothing, vocabulary, etc.

¹³ See Baker for an account of how advertising changed the urban landscape of Chicago in the late nineteenth century. I draw extensively on Baker's account in my discussion of changes to authorship and readership at the turn of the century in chapter 5.

¹⁴ Another, more well known text that functions in the same way is Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906). Sinclair alerts readers to the ubiquitous advertisements looming over the squalid living environs of Jurgis Rudkus and his family by including them in the tour of the stockyards the family receives early in the novel: "After they had seen enough of the

pens, the party went up the street, to the mass of buildings which occupy the centre of the yards. The buildings, made of brick and stained with innumerable layers of Packingtown smoke, were painted all over with advertising signs, from which the visitor realized suddenly that he had come to the home of many of the torments of his life. It was here that they made those products with the wonders of which they pestered him so—by placards that defaced the landscape when he traveled, and by staring advertisements in the newspapers and magazines—by silly little jingles that he could not get out of his mind, and gaudy pictures that lurked for him around every street corner. Here was where they made Brown's Imperial Hams and Bacon, Brown's Dressed Beef, Brown's Excelsior Sausages! Here was the headquarters of Durham's Pure Leaf Lard, of Durham's Breakfast Bacon, Durham's Canned Beef, Potted Ham, Deviled Chicken, Peerless Fertilizer!" (38).

¹⁵ An important exception here, of course, is the product that satisfies a personal desire for something that clearly cost much labor and material to produce. In the 1890s, however, these products were not typically involved in branding, whose purpose was to perceptually differentiate inexpensive, mass-produced consumer goods. The concept of the "luxury brand" would only appear later.

¹⁶ Although I do not discuss it here, George Monteiro's *Stephen Crane's Blue Badge of Courage* (2000) also demonstrates the thorough immersion of Crane's fiction in contemporary culture by grounding this fiction in the context of the late-nineteenth-century temperance movement.

CHAPTER IV

THE ASCENT OF WOMAN, “THE DESCENT OF MAN,” AND *THE HOUSE OF MIRTH*: EDITH WHARTON’S BRANDED PERSONS

Much has been written about Lily Bart’s confrontation with Gus Trenor near the middle of Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* (1905), a scene in which the source of the money he has given to her as well as his reasons for giving it are dramatically revealed. “Over and over her the sea of humiliation broke,” Wharton writes, as Lily recognizes Trenor’s anticipation of sexual favors and realizes that her already precarious social situation has now become truly desperate (212). *The House of Mirth* offers a bleak view of women’s social agency by tracing Lily’s career of failed attempts, like this one, to achieve independence from the expectations of turn-of-the-century New York society. In this chapter, I argue that Wharton’s novel follows Crane’s *Red Badge* in suggesting that individuals are circumscribed by larger governing forces, and furthermore that her naturalism derives at least partly from her conscious identification of branding as one of these forces. Accordingly, Lily’s confrontation with Trenor, one of the defining moments in her long decline, should not be separated from the moment that immediately precedes it—Trenor’s offering, and Lily’s accepting, a particular kind of cigarette.

Expecting to be shown up to Mrs. Trenor’s room, Lily has instead followed Trenor into the back of the house. “Come along,” he tells her, “and you can toast yourself over the fire and try some of my new Egyptians—that little Turkish chap at the Embassy put me on to a brand that I want you to try” (205). Growing increasingly uncomfortable at Trenor’s evasiveness, Lily finally demonstrates her intention to leave by

tossing her half-smoked sample of Trenor's "new Egyptians" into the grate. This act registers in the text only through Trenor's surprised reaction: "Tell me what you think of that cigarette. Why, don't you like it? What are you chucking it away for?" (207). The drama of the scene clearly centers on Lily's gradually learning that Trenor thinks he has purchased certain pleasurable attentions from her. Engrossed in this drama, however, we should not forget that as it unfolds Lily is smoking Trenor's new cigarette "brand." Nor should we overlook the significance of Lily's "chucking" her cigarette into the fire—a rejection of the brand and a rejection of Trenor's sexual claims, both expressed in a single, quick gesture.

Trenor, as the novel has thoroughly demonstrated by this point, generally behaves toward others in accordance with their capacity to satisfy his large and coarse appetites. Even so, this scene's suggestion that Lily and a new cigarette brand function similarly, if not identically, with regard to these appetites—Trenor's surprise at the cigarette's rejection registers simultaneously as surprise at the concomitant rejection of his sexual advances—is striking for its boldness of perception. *The House of Mirth* has long been recognized as heavily concerned, on one hand, with marriage, gender, and the status of women, and, on the other hand, with economics, materialism, and consumption. The novel is notable for its illustration of the many points at which these two groups of concerns intersect. And yet the question posed by Lily's confrontation with Trenor—what happens when a woman becomes a brand?—has not yet been considered either in criticism of Wharton's writing or in broader accounts of American culture at the turn of the twentieth century. This chapter positions Wharton as an author especially attentive not only to the cultural problems posed by the rise of consumer culture and the

emergence of the New Woman, but also to the nuanced areas in which these problems distinctly overlap. Exploring such areas through her fiction, I argue, allows Wharton to show branding's impact on changing conceptions of womanhood as well as these conceptions' role in the development of branding.

In chapter 3, I examined Stephen Crane's relationship with branding, reviewing the cultural milieu that shaped his understanding of branding and then arguing that he represents it as a business practice with marked cultural effects. For Crane, these effects are most powerfully figured in an individualism limited by branding's ability to compel specific beliefs and behaviors. Like Henry Fleming, the modern consumer increasingly substitutes brand phenomena—names, catchphrases, designs, images, characters, conflicts—for original perceptions of everyday life. Branding consequently acts deterministically, and according to Crane (in contrast to realists like Howells and Twain), incontestably: it cannot be countered by force of individual will. This chapter builds on my reading of Crane by bringing this account of branding to bear on contemporary developments in gender relations. Whereas women hardly register in Crane's representation of branding and its effects, they are, as Lily's pairing with the new cigarette brand suggests, at the very center of Wharton's.

I argue that Wharton's naturalism, like Crane's, is motivated by a conception of branding's deterministic force, but that in Wharton's writing this force is constituted specifically through gender inequality. In *The House of Mirth*, women are frequently treated as articles for exchange and consumption (by both men and other women), a circumstance sometimes identified by critics as empowering to women. According to this logic, women may leverage others' desire into improved conditions for themselves.

As brands, however, women have no such opportunity. Granting the long established claim that Wharton depicts women's commodification, and then probing deeper to discover how, precisely, she understands this commodification in terms of contemporary business practices (about which, as a businesswoman herself, she was quite knowledgeable), we discover her representation of women to be noticeably influenced by one of these practices, branding, in particular. Viewing Wharton's women in relation to branding clarifies what it means for Lily Bart, among others, to circulate, consume, and be consumed in the marriage economy of the New York social elite. It also offers a necessary revision of overly optimistic accounts of the strategies and resources provided to independent-minded women by the rise of consumer culture in the United States.

These accounts have repeatedly surfaced in recent readings of *The House of Mirth* in spite of Lori Merish's warning, more than a decade ago, that "naturalism circumscribes consumer agency by turning the female consumer quite literally into the things she desires" (324). For Merish, Wharton's novel "probes and questions the cultural logic according to which women's bodies are used to display men's wealth and men's wares" (334). This is not to say, however, that in "prob[ing]" this "cultural logic" the novel attempts to reverse it by turning the "display" of "men's wealth and men's wares" into a source of feminine power. Still, several critics have argued, either directly or indirectly, that it does. Bonnie Lynn Gerard has suggested that "Wharton's naturalism" is permeated by "self conscious irony," and consequently Lily's "present[ing] herself as an item to be consumed" may be seen as the necessary prelude to becoming "an empowered consumer" in her own right (410). Lori Harrison-Kahan has claimed that Lily's conformity to feminine and consumerist expectations is itself subversive, an example of

radicalism “taking as its disguise the very position it sought to overturn” (37). And, most recently, Jennifer Shepherd has maintained that the novel’s plot is driven by Lily’s becoming “increasingly susceptible to the idea of feminine agency nurtured by contemporary marketing” (149). My argument works to elaborate in greater detail the “cultural logic” Merish describes while also countering readings of *The House of Mirth* that posit Lily’s liberation from gendered, consumerist objectification in the very terms of her subjection to it.

In making this literary-critical intervention, then, I also seek to make a historical one. Many accounts of the rise of consumer culture in the United States, including one of the earliest and most influential, Susan Porter Benson’s *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (1986), note this historical development’s ambiguous impact on women’s social and economic status. While department stores, mass-circulation magazines, advertisements, and innumerable new products—including the bicycle and the automobile—gave women greater freedom to appear in public, move about independently, socialize, work, and generally fashion their lives according to their own desires, this freedom often entailed being treated by both men and other women no differently than mannequins in display windows or brightly colored packages of thread, soap, cereal—or cigarettes. In this sense, engaging consumer culture meant simply swapping one form of subjection for another. Nevertheless, historians continue to sound the same note of optimism heard in the double entendre of Benson’s title, a hope that some kind of progressive politics might be salvaged from the opportunities presented by consumer culture even if these opportunities proved, in many ways, debilitating. *The House of Mirth*, I argue here,

functions as a reminder of how debilitating to women the everyday realities of consumer culture could be, and how dubiously a progressive politics constituted through acts of purchase and sale turns out.

Consuming Women

If Trenor's offering a new brand of cigarettes to Lily serves the thematic purpose of suggesting a specific linkage between Lily and branded products, it also serves the historical purpose of suggesting how deeply integrated into all classes and arenas of society these products had become by the first years of the twentieth century. Especially in urban centers such as New York, rich and poor alike found themselves navigating a cultural landscape where brands acted as symbolic signposts, clues to a person's economic status, social circle, and self-conception. Of course, this landscape featured literal signposts as well, posters, billboards, shop windows, and advertisements on railings, streetcars, and the sides of buildings. As early as 1885, the satirical magazine *Puck* suggested that prominent ad-free spaces had grown scarce enough that difficulty raising funds for a Statue of Liberty pedestal could be surmounted easily by selling space on the statue to advertisers of beer, clothing, eyeglasses, and other consumer products (Edwards 92) (fig. 4-1). By the time *The House of Mirth* appeared twenty years later, consumers' encounters with advertisements had grown even more frequent and elaborate.



Figure 4-1. Editorial Cartoon.
Puck, April 1, 1885.

Perhaps nowhere were such encounters as likely as in department stores, the new shopping emporiums designed expressly to attract middle- and upper middle-class women. Pioneered by John Wanamaker in Philadelphia, Marshall Field in Chicago, and R. H. Macy in New York, these vast structures contained not only advertisements for products, but the products themselves—hundreds of them, enough to offer women consumers a range of product choices to meet their every need.¹ Gathering women together to shop as briefly as a few moments or as long as an entire day, department stores competed to see which could provide the most congenial shopping experience.

“Stores in New York’s department store district, christened the Ladies’ Mile,” writes Rebecca Edwards, “vied to attract middle-class women by offering ladies’ lounges, tea rooms, and indoor playgrounds,” and also “installed elevators and electric lights when they were still novelties” (95). According to Kathy Peiss, these amenities complemented the “new self-conscious notion of the woman consumer” also promulgated through other channels: “magazines and advertisers inducted their female readers into a world of brand-name products and smart shopping, while department stores created a feminine paradise of abundance, pleasure, and service” (50). By encouraging women to browse and to linger, department stores gained additional opportunities to drive home the message that “particular items were not just products but affirmations of a buyer’s respectability, religious faith, or love of home and children” (Edwards 95). Once invested with a significance transcending their material functionality, products became desirable for their ability to perform tasks wholly separate from those indicated by their physical properties and design.

Indeed, department stores selected and presented their products (and various services) with a view less toward streamlining the shopping experience than toward slowing and expanding it, a strategy calculated to exploit its responsiveness to cultural pressures, including women’s growing demand for independence, authority, and communal space outside the home. Shelley Stamp has described department stores as contributing toward the practice of “stately feminine leisure.” In doing so, she writes, they “fostered a culture . . . organized around [women’s] fantasies and desires” (23). Certainly, the idea that buying things could fulfill fantasies and satisfy desires was not new. For hundreds of years, this had been one of the chief pleasures of the wealthy. But

here, notes Elizabeth Pleck, lies perhaps the most important change instituted by the rise of consumer culture generally, and by the department store in particular: the practice of shopping for the purpose of enacting personal fantasies was extended to the masses. “Films, magazines, and advertisements,” she claims, “conveyed the view that the American consumer—often seen as a woman—could take on a new, improved identity (as a fairy princess or queen for a day, for example). What changed was less the desire for personal satisfaction and happiness than the means available to the average person to realize that desire” (4-5). Once limited to the role of onlookers at the wealthy women’s ball, in other words, women of modest means now found themselves constantly solicited by retailers eager to gratify their personal desires—and readily able to buy products that did so.

The implicit suggestion of a democratizing movement inherent in this extension of the purchasing franchise to the non-wealthy has led to the idea of consumer culture’s instituting a broad shift in gender politics toward greater empowerment of women. For Pleck, a woman’s ability to become “queen for a day” carried a certain element of power; in the enactment of this fantasy, the woman escaped, if perhaps just barely, the false naturalization of her roles as wife and mother. Likewise, for Mary Louise Roberts, the “culture of display and appearance” constructed by advertisements, women’s magazines, and department stores, among other things, “had the capability to destabilize gender identities.” This subversive “capability” was a significant factor in its attraction for women, she argues, which leads her to suggest that shopping be treated on the order of a political strategy: “For women seeking to escape the inexorable call of convention, that ‘destabilizing’ effect of commodity culture could be very useful indeed” (Roberts 843).

In Roberts' account, women did not necessarily need to purchase lots of commodities in order to accumulate such political capital. They needed only to demonstrate interest in these commodities and in the forms of their display and distribution—to fashion an association with consumer culture—in order to become more slippery and elusive, less fixed within the gender boundaries that had hardened over the course of the nineteenth century. From this point of view, consumer culture proved instrumental in effecting the transition, in Carolyn Kitch's words, "from True Woman to New Woman" (13).² Initially offering merely a respite from the gender conventionalities of the home, consumer culture wound up powering wholesale social transformation.

From another point of view, however—one rooted in any of the many groups of women excluded from the white middle- and upper-classes—consumer culture appeared much less liberating, if liberating at all. As Martha Patterson points out in her recent revisionist account of the New Woman, turn-of-the-century developments in gender politics were experienced variously by women of differing backgrounds. "The figure that emerges in my study," she writes, "is one of proscription as much as of liberation or transgression, and it changes depending on the racial/ethnic, economic, political, regional, and aesthetic locations of the writer" representing her (3). In surveying this range of locations, Patterson demonstrates the figure of the New Woman to be much more capacious than has hitherto been recognized.³ Taking this capaciousness seriously, moreover, means acknowledging a critical limitation on consumer culture's capacity to act as a catalyst and resource for women's self-reimaginings. For women committed to a progressive vision of gender politics, but whose social identity, penury, and/or geographic location either denied them access to consumer culture or made such access

undesirable, speaking of the New Woman as vitally empowered by the advertisements and shopping emporiums that in fact appealed to one specific group of women is indeed a “proscripti[ve]” rather than descriptive act. Paying close attention to these women’s voices, as Patterson does, is one way of gaining a sense of the weaknesses of declaring the progressive value of consumer culture.

Another, which I want to develop in detail, is to recognize ways in which the particular women who found themselves drawn in by consumer culture were not so much exploiting this culture for their own purposes as, to an important degree, being exploited themselves. In order to understand this power dynamic, it will be helpful first to clarify some of the qualities of the department store shopper, women’s magazine reader, and advertising target as she was popularly represented. Caroline Ticknor’s “The Steel-Engraving Lady and the Gibson Girl,” a vignette that appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in July 1901, offers a wittily staged composite sketch of such representations.⁴ The vignette consists of a visit by a Gibson Girl, named for Charles Dana Gibson’s iconic drawings of the New Woman, to the home of a Steel-Engraving Lady, or conventional Victorian woman.⁵ The purpose of the visit is to gather information for a paper the Gibson Girl is writing on the subject of “Extinct Types” (Ticknor 106). Neither of the women can resist trading barbs with the other, however, and consequently what emerges is a brief disquisition on the two types, with particular emphasis placed on their chief points of divergence.

Not surprisingly, the first of these to surface is relation between the sexes. Before her visitor arrives, the Steel-Engraving Lady sits peacefully beside an open window in an attitude of expectancy whose object becomes clear as, upon hearing the Gibson Girl

climbing the stairs, she blushes and asks herself, “Can that be Reginald?” (105).⁶ In the conversation that follows, the Steel-Engraving Lady explains her ideal of service to men, one which involves ornamenting and beautifying their lives through the cultivation of sewing, music, literature, and an ordered home in which to receive them. Listening impatiently to this explanation, the Gibson Girl announces that “We,” meaning her own generation, “have progressed in every way. When a man approaches, we do not tremble and droop our eyelids. . . . We meet him on a ground of perfect fellowship, and converse freely on every topic” (106). When the stunned Steel-Engraving Lady asks whether a man approves of such behavior, the Gibson Girl adds that “[w]hether he *likes* it or not makes little difference; *he* is no longer the one whose pleasure is to be consulted” (original emphasis, 106). This divergence, as the two women note, is in a sense written on their bodies; while comparing attitudes toward men, they also compare appearances. The Steel-Engraving Lady is delicate and composed, “glossy abundant hair . . . smoothly drawn over her ears,” with skin of “alabaster whiteness” (105), which causes the Gibson Girl to exclaim, “Dear me! you're just as slender and ethereal as any of your pictures” (106). For her own part, she says that she likes a “healthy coat of tan upon a woman” and that the “day is past when one deplors a sunburned nose and a few freckles” (106). Rejecting conventional notions of feminine decorum, the Gibson Girl strikes out into the world without regard for the consequences of this adventurousness on her body.

She does, however, adapt her clothing to meet her new circumstances, a change the Steel-Engraving Lady characterizes as masculinizing. Observing her visitor’s “short skirt and heavy square-toed shoes” as well as her “broad-brimmed felt hat tipped jauntily upon one side,” she wonders, “have you possibly put on your brother’s shoes for an

experiment?" (106). In comparison with her own "drapery sleeve" (105), the Steel-Engraving Lady finds little to admire in the Gibson Girl's "mannish collar, cravat, and vest" (106). The Gibson Girl in turn notices her rival's "slim, tiny slippers" and remarks on their potentially crippling effect (106), a jibe that brings into relief the different locations the two women claim as their own. The Steel-Engraving Lady's confinement to domestic spaces is evident in the care she has taken to decorate her apartment: "A large elaborate sampler told of her early efforts with her needle, and gorgeous mottoes on the walls suggested the pleasing combination of household ornamentation with Scriptural advice" (105). The Gibson Girl's tossing a golf club onto her hostess's sofa, her avowed refusal to "sit down at home just to amuse her parents" (107), and her yielding to the charge of being a "public character" (107) all bespeak the mobility she has acquired in order to succeed in what she calls a "utilitarian age" (107). In comparing clothing and preferred spheres of influence, each woman shows a distinct eagerness not only to describe herself, but also to disparage the other by force of juxtaposition.

On no point of divergence do these dual objectives emerge so clearly as on education. "You see, I've had a liberal education," the Gibson Girl declares. "I can do everything my brothers do; and do it rather better, I fancy. I am an athlete and a college graduate, with a wide, universal outlook" (106). She and her modern sisters "must be 'up and doing;' we must leave 'footprints on the sands of time,'" she says (107). The Steel-Engraving Lady, on the other hand, emphasizes her "training" in personal conduct: "I was taught grace of motion, drilled in a school of manners, made to enter a room properly, and told how to preside at the table with fitting dignity" (107). "Mine," she explains to the Gibson Girl concerning her education, "was designed to fit me for my

home; yours is calculated to unfit you for yours” (107). Intended as a summation of the two women’s educational differences, this statement also serves fittingly as a summation of their differences as to relations with men, bodies, clothing, proper location, and other characteristics. Appropriately, then, Ticknor’s piece ends not with the Steel-Engraving Lady’s silently rising and exiting the room in protest of the Gibson Girl’s brash claims—the event that brings their colloquy to a close—but with brief individual views of the women later in the evening. The Steel-Engraving Lady has returned to her place at the open window in anticipation of Reginald’s arrival. The Gibson Girl sits on a fence near a golf course, “swinging her heavy boots” (108).

Even under close scrutiny, “The Steel-Engraving Lady and the Gibson Girl” presents little in the way of discernible preference for one type of woman over another. Instead, Ticknor offers stasis—“And the sun dropped behind the woods, and the pink afterglow illumined the same old world that it had beautified for countless ages” (108), she writes near the end. She also offers ambiguity: “And the night breeze sprang up, and murmured: ‘Hail the new woman—behold she comes apace! WOMAN, ONCE MAN’S SUPERIOR, NOW HIS EQUAL!’” (original emphasis, 108). This final sentence of the vignette playfully challenges those who might unthinkingly equate the “new” in New Woman with “better.” For if Ticknor has proven anything by bringing the two women together for comparison, it is not the superiority of one over the other, but rather the tendency of each to slide into caricature and oversimplification. From the Steel-Engraving Lady’s exaggerated insistence on the virtues of an almost medieval-sounding chivalric romance to the Gibson Girl’s parroting of empty slogans in defense of her involvement in public affairs, Ticknor demonstrates how entertaining the reduction of

what were in fact highly complex groups of women to flat, clear-cut representations could be. There is a danger, her satire suggests, in allowing the complexity, particularly of the New Woman movement, to be shunted into a walking, talking, stylish and attractive figure such as the Gibson Girl.

More specifically, this danger involves the facility with which a popular caricature might come to substitute for the enumeration of historical changes and ideological shifts that were frequently contested and consequently better described in more ample and precise detail. Even as informed and sophisticated a commentator as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the well known feminist activist and author of “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), proved susceptible to the lure of Gibson Girl shorthand. In *Women and Economics* (1898), she argues that “[i]t is not only in the four States where full suffrage is exercised by both sexes . . . that we are to count progress; but in the changes legal and social, mental and physical, which mark the advance of the mother of the world toward her full place” (148).⁷ Having made an appeal for a broadened definition of “progress,” however, she then falls back on popular caricatures that severely undercut this appeal: “Have we not all observed the change even in size of the modern woman, with its accompanying strength and agility? The Gibson Girl and the Duchess of Towers—these are the new women; and they represent a noble type, indeed. . . . Not only do they look differently, they behave differently” (148). The problem with Gilman’s invocation of the “Gibson Girl” and “Duchess of Towers” to make her point is its narrowing, rather than broadening, logical trajectory.⁸ Even considered only in relation to physique, these two caricatures reduce the spectrum of changes to body, clothing, and fashion represented by the New Woman to a single, vivid figure. As examples, in other

words, they are coercive: they substitute for, rather than suggest possible instances of, broadly construed changes in women's lives at the turn of the century.

This problem would be relatively insignificant were it limited to treatises such as *Women and Economics*. But in fact the Gibson Girl (and to a much lesser extent, the Duchess of Towers) came to narrowly define the New Woman not only in formal cultural criticism like Ticknor's and Gilman's and more informally in magazine covers and story illustrations, but also in ubiquitous products aimed at women consumers. As the "first visual stereotype of women in American mass media" (Kitch 37), the Gibson Girl possessed an intrinsic market value, and manufacturers quickly moved to capitalize on her familiarity and widespread appeal:

Her 'chiseled face and aristocratic bearing' were reproduced on china . . . as well as silverware, pillowcovers, chairs, tabletops, matchboxes, ashtrays, scarves, and wallpaper. She appeared on the covers of sheet music and advertising posters for songs and plays that were written about her. Her figure and garb inspired the manufacture and sale of Gibson Girl shirtwaists, skirts, corsets, shoes, and hats. (Kitch 41)

Whereas the Gibson Girl originated as an idea—one artist's distillation of wide-ranging cultural trends—she soon became a product narrative, a collection of stories, images, and associations giving a unique identity to knick-knacks, furniture, and articles of clothing that would otherwise be functionally indistinguishable. As such, she served both men and women as a market-generated means of declaring their social and economic statuses, political affiliations, aesthetic views, and other characteristics and attitudes.

Consequently, the Gibson Girl stands as one example of the ways in which branding, the engine of turn-of-the-century consumer culture, effected not the liberation of women from outmoded gender ideologies, but rather the conscription of women into consumerist visions that generally reaffirmed such ideologies instead of disrupting them.

Encouraged by the various components of consumer culture to willfully blur the boundaries between fantasy and reality, men and women both began to see women in the same way they saw figures such as the Gibson Girl—not, necessarily, in terms of similar fashion and style, but certainly in terms of similar market function. If the image of an attractive, distinctive, and desirable woman sitting in a particular chair sufficed to raise the value of this chair, thereby also boosting the accepted valuation of its owner, would not an actual woman sitting in the chair produce the same result, especially if she were beautiful, stylish, and popular? More than just an icon of the United States' turn-of-the-century consumer culture, the Gibson Girl acts as an index of women's position and function within this culture—a paragon of the everyday woman-as-brand.⁹

Branding Science

Wharton's short story "The Angel at the Grave" (first published in *Crucial Instances* [1901]), which concerns a woman's preservation of the legacy of her philosopher grandfather, opens with a description of his house and of the many visitors who come to see him there. Fortunately for the philosopher's daughters, who act as hostesses in spite of their inability to understand their father's thinking, these visitors are less interested in philosophy than in the prosaic details of the famous man's domestic life. "A legend had by this time crystallized about the great Orestes," Wharton writes, "and it was of more immediate interest to the public to hear what brand of tea he drank, and whether he took off his boots in the hall, than to rouse the drowsy echo of his dialectic" (*Crucial* 37-38). Wharton then offers this general commentary on the relationship between leading intellectuals and their influence on the wider world: "A great man never

draws so near his public as when it has become unnecessary to read his books and is still interesting to know what he eats for breakfast” (38). The remainder of the story bears out this logic: after the philosopher dies, and questions about his boots and his breakfast become moot, his public existence dwindles to nearly nothing. Only his granddaughter feels compelled to continue sounding the “drowsy echo of his dialectic,” her only audience for long years the empty rooms of her grandfather’s forgotten house.

Although “The Angel at the Grave” focuses primarily on the emotional dimensions of the granddaughter’s loyalty, Wharton’s brief suggestions early in the story as to the declining appeal of intellectual fellowship in a culture newly presented with attractive forms of consumption-based fellowship are provocative. While she does not indicate whether the philosopher realizes that his brand preferences surpass his writings, which feature “mystic vocabulary” and “bold flights into the rarefied air of the abstract” (41), in the interest of the public, Wharton makes clear that the issues of “free will and intuition” (41) he finds compelling hold little force for his followers, who have become habituated to evaluating a “great man” according to “what he eats for breakfast.” Presumably, moreover, this curiosity about the philosopher’s breakfast centers not on eggs and toast, but rather, as with the inquiries concerning his tea, on which brand—of oatmeal, corn flakes, or another of the recently developed packaged breakfast foods—he favors (fig. 4-2). In “The Angel at the Grave,” brands have replaced philosophies as the basic material from which culture is formed.

MOTHER GOOSE IN PROSE FREE





Pettijohn's Breakfast Food

ALL THE WHEAT BUT THE OVERCOAT

FREE

MOTHER GOOSE IN PROSE.
By I. FRANK BAUM.
Beautifully printed and illustrated. In 15 parts.
"Better entertainment than the jingles on which it is founded."—*Boston Transcript*.
"A world of entertainment for the little ones."—*Chicago Evening Post*.
"Will surely keep the children happy."—*St. Louis Post Dispatch*.
Send three Bears cut from Pettijohn's Breakfast Food package and 8 cents in stamps to pay for mailing, and we will send you FREE a copy of the first part of **Mother Goose in Prose**.

THE AMERICAN CEREAL Co.,
Monadnock Bldg., Chicago, Ill.

FREE

Avoid mushy, starchy, pasty breakfast cereals by eating Pettijohn's Breakfast Food. Each flake of Pettijohn's Breakfast Food is a thin, delicate wafer containing all of the nutrition of one large plump kernel of choicest Pacific Coast wheat. Unlike granulated cereals it may be properly cooked without becoming a starchy, unpalatable mush.

Figure 4-2. Advertisement for Pettijohn's Breakfast Food. *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1900. This advertisement typifies efforts to brand breakfast foods circulating when "The Angel at the Grave" was written and published.

This story offers a suggestion of Wharton's interest in branding's cultural reach, but in order to explore this interest further, and to establish additional context for a naturalistic reading of brands in *The House of Mirth*, it will be helpful to examine another short story, "The Descent of Man," in detail. First published in *The Descent of Man and Other Stories* (1904), this story takes up what had become, in the wake of Wharton's immediate success with her first short story collection, *The Greater Inclination* (1899), a preoccupation with authorship and fame. "Copy: A Dialogue" (1900), *The Touchstone* (1900), and "Expiation" (1903) are all fundamentally concerned with what happens to authors whose books achieve commercial success.¹⁰ Because it recognizes, and explores, the similarity between successful books and authors and other kinds of successful product, however, "The Descent of Man" may be Wharton's most thoughtful and nuanced treatment of this theme. The story follows Professor Linyard, an entomologist at a New England college who publishes a satirical book that proves indistinguishable, in readers' minds, from the straightforward book they expect and desire. Suddenly awash in sales royalties and thrust into the public spotlight, Linyard finds it difficult to return to his scientific work. In the end, Wharton suggests that it may be impossible for him to do so—and that branding is to blame.

The irony contained in Linyard's ending as a branded author stems from its unexpectedness, given that his original intention is to offer a correction to popular accounts of nineteenth-century science that demonstrate greater awareness of reader desires than of scientific facts. "The inaccessible goddess whom the Professor had served in his youth now offered her charms in the market-place," Wharton writes. "And yet it was not the same goddess, after all, but a pseudo-science masquerading in the garb of the

real divinity” (*Descent* 7). As the story begins, Linyard has embarked on a solitary vacation to rural Maine in order to think over his plan to “avenge his goddess by satirizing her false interpreters” (7). Entirely ignorant of the trade publishing industry, he nevertheless determines to “write a skit on the ‘popular’ scientific book; he would so heap platitude on platitude, fallacy on fallacy, false analogy on false analogy, so use his superior knowledge to abound in the sense of the ignorant, that even the gross crowd would join in the laugh against its augurs” (7). The success of Linyard’s “skit” hinges on two qualities he presumes his readers possess: first, the ability to identify each “platitude,” “fallacy,” and “false analogy” he inserts; and second, a willingness to make such identifications in spite of the implicit recognition of their chiding intent this involves.

Neither assumption proves safe, as the failure of both to hold true in the satire’s first reader suggests. After returning from his vacation with a completed manuscript, Linyard visits a publisher who happens also to be an old college classmate, one whose droll wit in those days leads Linyard to think that, notwithstanding the years that have passed, he will evince appreciation for such an elaborate joke. “So rare a sense of irony,” Linyard tells himself, “so keen a perception of relative values, could hardly have been blunted even by twenty years’ intercourse with the obvious” (9). Without telling Harviss, the publisher, anything about it, Linyard offers him the manuscript, a gesture that makes Harviss slightly uncomfortable. “I’m afraid you’re a little *too* scientific for us,” he explains. “We have a big sale for scientific breakfast foods, but not for the concentrated essences. In your case, of course, I should be delighted to stretch a point, but in your own interest I ought to tell you that perhaps one of the educational houses would do you

better” (9). Harviss’s description of his publishing house’s books as “breakfast foods” ought to suggest to Linyard the treatment his book will receive from Harviss as well as how deeply entrenched certain cultural biases toward simplicity and caricature—biases that both fuel and are fueled by branding—will prove. Unlike the philosopher in “The Angel at the Grave,” Linyard is acutely aware of the influence that “breakfast foods” now carry in a culture of consumption. But even this awareness does not dampen his belief in the possibility of countering such influence through the careful deployment of satire.

Accordingly, he is initially baffled when Harviss congratulates him, a few weeks later, on producing a book so completely in step with popular feeling. Linyard believes he has fully accomplished his aim to write a book larded heavily enough with scientific nonsense—hackneyed assertions and trite slogans—to break the hold of reductive fantasies on the popular imagination. In taking the formula too far, he thinks, his book exposes it to ridicule. For Harviss, however, the book appears quite naturally as an “apologia”—a “confession of faith” (13). He fails to detect any ironic intention in Linyard’s amassing of commonplace sentiments, and consequently describes the book as a “serious piece of work—the expression of your convictions” (16). Puzzled by Linyard’s response, he elaborates:

I tell you there’s nothing the public likes as much as convictions—they’ll always follow a man who believes in his own ideas. And this book is just on the line of popular interest. You’ve got hold of a big thing. It’s full of hope and enthusiasm: it’s written in the religious key. There are passages in it that would do splendidly in a Birthday Book—things that popular preachers would quote in their sermons. If you’d wanted to catch a big public you couldn’t have gone about it in a better way. The thing’s perfect for my purpose—I wouldn’t let you alter a word of it. It will sell like a popular novel if you’ll let me handle it in the right way. (16)

If the book expresses Linyard’s “convictions,” though, it does so not by conveying “hope and enthusiasm,” but rather irritation and even despair. Swayed by the possibility of the

book's generating a simple and appealing narrative of the scientist, "whose leanings had hitherto been supposed to be toward a cold determinism" (17), finally admitting to "things that popular preachers would quote in their sermons," Harviss cannot help but shape his interpretation accordingly. By the time Linyard leaves his office, the publisher has done as much as he can to suggest that meaning is more a function of what "the public likes" than of what an author specifically desires to say.

In Linyard's view, he has not done enough. Despite Harviss's claim to "represent the Average Reader" (15), a role he has learned to play only after many years of careful training, Linyard remains skeptical of the idea that his book is likely to be, from his own perspective, misread. Appeased by the offer of a "large premium" (17) against royalties, however, he leaves his manuscript with Harviss thinking that he has accomplished his original goal along with the added benefit of turning a profit: "the book would have addressed itself to a very limited circle: now it would include the world. The elect would understand; the crowd would not; and his work would thus serve a double purpose" (17). The "elect" here refers to the scientific community, whom Linyard dismisses with the reflection that "one glance at his book would let them into its secret" (18). As for the "crowd," Linyard remains confident of at least a few conversions to his point of view: "after all, nothing was changed in the situation; not a word of the book was to be altered" (17). This, finally, is the foundation of Linyard's confidence—he simply cannot see that the words in the book matter less than the degree to which they are perceived to fulfill a particular consumer fantasy. Harviss has tried to warn him, not least in his suggestion that the book will "sell like a popular novel." But Linyard ignores this suggestion's inference that the book's commercial success will both stand comparison with a popular

novel's and likewise conform to its readers' wishes and desires. He refuses to follow Harviss's hints about the power of branding.

One reason for this refusal, of course, is that Linyard does not know the manner in which the book will be presented to the public, while Harviss plans this presentation personally. As expected, then, the "'tip' . . . give[n] the reviewers" reflects the "publisher's point of view" (17), not Linyard's, and forms only one part of a massive "campaign" conducted by the "experienced strategist" (20). "Weeks in advance [of publication]," Wharton writes, "the great commander had begun to form his lines of attack. Allusions to the remarkable significance of the coming work had appeared first in the scientific and literary reviews, spreading thence to the supplements of the daily journals" (20). No opportunity to apply a "quicken[ing] touch to the public consciousness" is wasted; "seventy millions of people were forced to remember at least once a day that Professor Linyard's book was on the verge of appearing" (20). It is at this point that Wharton chooses to reveal the title of Linyard's book: "The Vital Thing" (20). Playing on two related meanings for "vital," the title suggests both that the book concerns a topic of critical importance and that the book, as object, has come to life. The timing of the title's revelation brings this second meaning into particular relief. In preparing the public for the arrival of Linyard's book, Harviss takes special care to give the book a memorable name, a distinct character, a brief history, specific cultural associations—in other words, an effective product narrative, or brand.

Linyard is forced to acknowledge this fact when *The Vital Thing* is published and immediately enjoys tremendous success. His uneasiness at what appears to be mass obliviousness to his satirical intent and his confrontations with evidence of the book's

widespread circulation increase in equal measure. “Every newspaper, every periodical, held in ambush an advertisement of ‘The Vital Thing,’” Wharton writes (20). “The shriek of the advertisements was in his ears” (21)—but not in his alone. “Slips emblazoned with the question: *Have you read ‘The Vital Thing?’* fell from the pages of popular novels and whitened the floors of crowded street-cars” (20-21). Linyard is disturbed to find that this “query, in large lettering,” also “assaulted the traveler at the railway bookstall, confronted him on the walls of ‘elevated’ stations, and seemed, in its ascending scale, about to supplant the interrogations as to sapolio and stove-polish which animate our rural scenery” (21). He “had sworn not to lend more than a passive support to the fraud of ‘The Vital Thing’” (26), but he finds that even “passive support” is hardly necessary—the simple “fraud” of the book proves much more congenial to the public than the book’s complex truth. Like “sapolio,” a popular brand of soap, Linyard and *The Vital Thing* function for consumers as a familiar product that has acquired a unique and appealing identity that serves them usefully in the resolution of a cultural problem.

Ultimately, it serves them so well that Linyard is effectually thwarted from returning to what he thinks of as his “real work” (29), rigorous laboratory analysis of insects. “For some time” in this work, “he had been feeling his way along the edge of a discovery: balancing himself with professional skill on a plank of hypothesis flung across an abyss of uncertainty” (29). Fortunately, royalties from sales of *The Vital Thing* permit the purchase of new equipment that might enable Linyard to raise his already solid scientific credentials to heights of true greatness. All he needs in order bring together the accumulated insights of his career, turning a wobbly “plank” into a sturdy bridge, is an extended period of time in which to synthesize his earlier achievements and to construct a

theory that explains them. To gain this time, however, he must rely solely for income on *The Vital Thing*, and consequently must dedicate nearly all of his attention to giving interviews, producing ancillary writing for popular publications, and generally keeping himself and his book in the public eye. Even as branding has brought Linyard closer than ever before to fully realizing his research ambitions, it now monopolizes his time to an extent that makes formulating his culminating scientific conclusions appear impossible. “Presently his head began to figure in the advertising pages of the magazines,” Wharton writes. “Admiring readers learned the name of the only breakfast-food in use at his table, of the ink with which ‘The Vital Thing’ had been written, the soap with which the author’s hands were washed, and the tissue-builder which fortified him for further effort” (27-28). Though Linyard himself comes to the realization only gradually, the difference between “his head” and these products rapidly lessens to a point at which they are functionally indistinguishable.

As a result, Linyard’s final achievement is to become not a great scientist, but a great brand. The story ends with his signing a contract with Harviss for the publication of a second, not yet written book that will extend and refresh the product narrative driving sales of *The Vital Thing*. If all goes well, Harviss cheerfully proposes, a boxed set of the books might prove popular as a holiday gift (32). This is small consolation for Linyard, who must give up his laboratory research for the foreseeable future while he writes the second book and then acquiesces to the same kind of brand-building efforts that made his first such a success. But what Wharton demonstrates in “The Descent of Man” is that consolation, like any other reaction Linyard might experience, is beside the point, given his fundamental lack of choice in the matter. Wharton borrows her title from

The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex, Charles Darwin's 1871 scientific treatise applying the theory of evolution first expounded in *On the Origin of Species* (1859) specifically to the form and history of human development. Darwin's work demonstrated this development's conformity to natural law; in appropriating his title, Wharton also appropriates his sense of life as determined by inexorable forces.¹¹ For Wharton, however, the rise of consumer culture in the interval since publication of Darwin's *Descent* has been cause for a re-visioning of the forces shaping human beliefs and behavior. By describing branding as salient among these forces, Wharton updates Darwinian naturalism for the nascent twentieth century.

Surprisingly, this updating only marginally extends to the experience of women—or rather, woman—in the story. Mrs. Linyard, the only female character in “Descent,” hovers around the edges of her husband's commercial success, reproaching him for not telling her about the publication of *The Vital Thing* and reminding him of the ways in which a larger income would relieve strains in the management of the household. She remains mainly offstage, a vague figure shadowing her husband's strivings for scientific achievement even as “his head passed in due course from the magazine and the newspaper to the biscuit-tin and the chocolate box” (28). Wharton's story is largely an amplification and clarification of what, in this context, is meant by “in due course”—a detailed dramatization of branding's deterministic power. But while “Descent” illustrates this power only with respect to men, Mrs. Linyard surfaces frequently enough in the story to raise questions concerning how it might function regarding women. What if it were “her head,” and not “his,” moving inevitably from the book review pages to the boxes of sweets? Would a woman even need to appear in advertisements or on slips of paper

littering elevated train platforms in order to feel branding's impact? Published just a year after "Descent," *The House of Mirth* takes up precisely such questions.

Lily Bart and the Woman-As-Brand

On June 6, 1886, President Grover Cleveland married Frances Clara Folsom. Their wedding ceremony was performed at the White House, and drew enormous press coverage, not only because no president had been married there before, but also because Frances was beautiful, charismatic, and just twenty-one years old. According to biographer Stephen F. Roobar, she was so popular that advertisers soon "began to use her name and image without her permission to sell soaps, perfumes, candies, liver pills, ashtrays, and even ladies' undergarments" (42). The exciting spectacle of a dynamic and fashionable young woman installed as first lady drew even the makers of "a certain brand of arsenic pills" (42) to associate their product with Frances Cleveland. "This issue," Roobar writes, "prompted a rash of letters to Frances expressing outrage that she would take advantage and commercialize her role as First Lady. The truth was that she'd never sanctioned such advertisements, and in this case, had never even heard of the company" (42). The advertising continued in spite of President Cleveland's public displeasure and a legislative attempt to stop it. Using images of women in advertisements for consumer products was already a common branding strategy at this time, and for Frances Cleveland to have been declared off-limits would have gone against a well established business practice (in addition to stifling political speech). Consequently, the propriety of treating women as brands was publicly affirmed, and women's names, images, personalities, and

biographies began featuring in advertisements in even greater measure than they had before.¹²

In 1893, Grover Cleveland was again elected President, but the first years of this term were marked commercially less by advertisers' appropriations of the first lady than by a devastating financial panic. Nevertheless, both events make their way into *The House of Mirth*. Lily, who is twenty-nine years old (Wharton 66), lies sleepless in bed after a humbling review of her finances near the beginning of the novel and reflects on the experiences that have led to her become, increasingly, a flatterer and hanger-on to her wealthy friends. "Lily was nineteen when circumstances caused her to revise her view of the universe," Wharton writes (55). Scholars have determined that Wharton began writing the novel in 1904 (Waid 161), and in the absence of any indications that its main action is set in a time other than the present, this dating suggests that that the crucial defining moment Lily reflects upon occurred in 1893. The moment itself consists of her father's being "ruined" (57), his fortune erased, though the novel does not explicitly say so, in the national financial panic then transpiring. The linkage between Lily's formative moment and this historical event does not directly impact what happens to her in the immediate aftermath of her family's impoverishment. Her father soon dies, and Lily and her mother shuttle between wealthy relatives and cheap European hotels; then her mother dies, and Lily is reluctantly taken in by a stodgy aunt. It does, however, create a strong association between Lily and branding.

As historian William Leach has noted, the Panic of 1893 dealt a serious blow to proprietary capitalism and accelerated the consolidation of assets and market control by large consumer product retailers already then in progress. Because of their ability to

absorb short-term revenue losses, giant department stores such as Marshall Field's, in Chicago, not only survived the depression, but soon profited from it. Small shops and markets suffered greatly during the slow-down, and with few resources to draw upon, they faced a combination of insolvency and the intensified competition of their larger competitors (Leach 26-29). As a result, many of them failed. The same circumstances obtained for manufacturers. At both levels, large companies cleared the field of competition and by this means commanded greater influence over the formation of consumer culture. These companies were more likely than their small, local counterparts to possess the financial depth, manufacturing specialization, and national distribution necessary for branding to be both possible and desirable. Accordingly, the Panic of 1893 helped push branding in the United States to new levels.¹³ Wharton's fashioning this historical moment into a personal crucible for Lily's development adds specifically to what, in the wake of the widespread appropriation of stylish young women for branding typified by the case of Frances Cleveland, would already have been a general cultural predisposition to view Lily as a brand. Even more than her contemporaries, Lily is marked by the convergence of personal experiences and historical conditions as an instrument of consumer culture.¹⁴

Her interactions with Percy Gryce on the train to Bellomont demonstrate this instrumentality in practical terms. Unlike Lawrence Selden, with whom she has afternoon tea to begin the novel, Gryce is extremely wealthy; and unlike Simon Rosedale, whom she encounters on her way to the station, Gryce's social credentials are unchallengeable. He is perfectly suited to her marriage ambitions socially and financially, and so, overlooking their obvious temperamental differences, Lily finds

herself acting in a manner that stimulates Gryce's fantasies as to how it might feel to be married to her. "When the tea came," Wharton writes, "he watched her in silent fascination while her hands flitted above the tray, looking miraculously fine and slender in contrast to the coarse china and lumpy bread" (38). Horrified by the notion of "making tea in public in a lurching train," Gryce finds it "wonderful" that Lily can "perform with such careless ease the difficult task" (38). Relieved of the scrutiny that might attend his own performance of the tea-making ritual, and "secure in the shelter of her conspicuousness, he sipped the inky draught with a delicious sense of exhilaration" (38-39). Lily's "conspicuousness" feeds a fantasy Gryce has of his own latent confidence and extroversion; he imagines that, as the beneficiary of her "wonderful" and "miraculously fine" ministrations, the other passengers in the crowded train compartment must perceive him quite differently (and more impressively) than his own actions merit.¹⁵

The language of this scene—particularly "conspicuousness"—evokes Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), which codified the notion of "conspicuous consumption" for later cultural critics such as Wharton. Ruth Yeazell has suggested that *The House of Mirth* "rivals" Veblen's critique "both as sociology and satire" (714). Borrowing Veblen's frame of reference, she argues that "[t]hough Lily does not find a 'collector' either in Gryce or in Rosedale, the novel repeatedly emphasizes that she has no other function, that the position of leisure-class marker is the only one she knows how to fill" (719). Where Wharton proves "understandably more sensitive than Veblen," however, is in recognizing that "a woman's conspicuous display of herself is . . . work" (720). For Yeazell, Wharton's novel acts as a correction to the problem of Veblen's "scarcely seem[ing] to notice how the cult of [a woman's] physical

beauty contributes to her status as an object, or to remark that the more attractive a woman, the greater her value as a vehicle of display” (720). Whereas Veblen fails to consider the effort expended in achieving “status as an object,” Wharton pays particular attention to the often extraordinary amount of complex labor involved in fashioning oneself into a thing of “conspicuous uselessness” (720).

Where Yeazell’s own analysis falls short, however, is in failing to recognize the way Wharton situates this labor not only in a sociological context, but also in a business context. Much of Lily’s predicament throughout the novel might be properly classified as a problem of reputation—of Lily’s mismanaging others’ perceptions of her. I am suggesting, however, that Wharton’s frequent articulation of this problem of reputation in the language of consumer marketing suggests an awareness of the danger branding posed to women. So, for example, knowing that Gryce is painfully reticent about everything but trading and collecting “Americana” (27), Lily deliberately questions Selden on this subject earlier in the day, then carefully brings it into the conversation on the train: “The only difficulty was to introduce the topic and to keep it to the front; most people showed no desire to have their ignorance dispelled, and Mr. Gryce was like a merchant whose warehouses are crammed with an unmarketable commodity” (41). Dry and dull, like the writings of the philosopher in “The Angel at the Grave,” this “commodity” also needs a brand, a lively narrative that will reveal to even the least interested its uniqueness and desirability. Lily recognizes that her chances of marrying Gryce hinge to a large degree on how well she performs as this brand. She knows, moreover, that Gryce thinks of himself as somehow coterminous with his collection; even as he hides behind a newspaper prior to her greeting him on the train, he is privately speculating about the

“interest which would be excited if the persons he met in the street, or sat among in travelling, were suddenly to be told that he was the possessor of the Gryce Americana” (42). To be the brand of one is thereby to be the brand of the other, and accordingly Lily models her ability to market the “unmarketable” Americana as a means of demonstrating how useful she might be in transforming Gryce’s private fantasies of distinction and renown into public realities.

She presents a convincing case, too, but only partly because of the specific preparations she makes concerning the Americana. Wharton suggests several times in the early pages of the novel that Lily’s function as a brand is an institutionalized one—that it inheres not only in her relations with wealthy men, but also in her relations with women and with non-wealthy men. Acting as a brand is simply what society expects Lily to do. It is her mother who, after Mr. Bart dies, treats Lily’s beauty as the “last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt” (59)—presumably by deploying it in the transformation of wealthy friends’ self-images. But she is by no means unique in placing such importance on Lily’s associative value. Nearly everyone Lily meets thinks of her largely in terms of how associating with her might affect their own valuation in the eyes of others. Not surprisingly, then, she also has come to appraise herself this way. She speaks without blame or self-pity when she says to Selden, “If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don’t make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman?” (29). This last rhetorical question is revealing: “Who” refers both to Lily’s friends—including Selden—and to Lily herself.

Not quite grasping the force of the question, Selden teasingly suggests that even a “dingy woman” might draw the eye of a few wealthy bachelors. “Ah well,” he remarks, “there must be plenty of capital on the look-out for such an investment” (30). His mistake is to think that Lily acts as a brand only when specifically solicited to do so. Lily, on the other hand, understands that while such situations involving “capital on the look-out” may occur—her encounter with Gryce on the train is one; her later entanglement with Gus Trenor is another—the pressure to act as a brand is more constant, a kind of nagging burden. Both because they are expected to and because they expect themselves to, women like Lily find themselves continuously negotiating for advantage by working to enhance their brand potential. Selden seems not to realize this fact, though it is evident even in the flattery Lily directs at him, which he clearly enjoys. Moreover, he shows no sign of understanding the label “dingy woman” to resonate beyond her remarks about “shabby” clothing, as Lily does. For Lily, to be “dingy” is to be unable to advance an appealing narrative about oneself, and consequently to be unable to survive in a culture that values women for such narratives.

Just how highly it values them becomes clear when, a few days after arriving at Bellomont, Lily becomes distracted by the possibility of Selden’s interest in her and allows Bertha Dorset, her sometime friend (and Selden’s would-be lover) to spoil the favorable impression she has created in Gryce’s mind by telling him stories of Lily’s smoking and gambling. Wharton explains that “[h]er faculty for adapting herself, for entering into other people’s feelings, if it served her now and then in small contingencies,” also prevents her from attaining lasting social and financial stability (85). In this case, Lily recognizes her ability to fulfill Selden’s fantasies as well as Gryce’s.

Finding the former more to her liking, she skips an appointment with Gryce and goes for a solitary walk in the park with Selden. “Lily had no real intimacy with nature,” Wharton writes, “but she had a passion for the appropriate and could be keenly sensitive to a scene which was the fitting background of her own sensations” (99). While Selden’s social connections might satisfy her ambitions, his relatively modest professional income falls short. Nevertheless, Lily’s “passion for the appropriate” here extracts a near-confession of love from him, which in turn moves her to near-reciprocation. Wharton describes Lily as a “water-plant in the flux of the tides,” carried along by the “current of her mood” (85), but Selden’s moods clearly also exert a great deal of pull. Drawn to Selden by an anticipation of fulfilling her own fantasies of identity as well as his, Lily rejects Gryce, thereby reducing her chances of finding a secure foothold in New York society.

Subsequent events reduce these chances still further, principally because, though Lily gains a certain measure of power as the object of others’ desire, this power is circumstantial at best, and does not serve as the foundation for a more lasting empowerment. At the wedding of her cousin Jack Stepney and the dowdy Evie van Osburgh (a reminder of Lily’s wasted opportunities), Lily experiences one of the occasional “moments when, in the consciousness of her own power to look and to be so exactly what the occasion required, she almost felt that other girls were plain and inferior from choice” (143). Later, on a visit to the Adirondack “camp” (165) of the *nouveau riche* Wellington Brys, Lily tells herself that “[i]f these people paid court to her it proved that she was still conspicuous in the world to which they aspired; and she was not above a certain enjoyment in dazzling them by her fineness, in developing their puzzled perception of her superiorities” (167). Each of these instances of Lily’s skillful

adaptation to the occasion—scrutinizing the social landscape, then fitting herself to its most advantageous viewpoints—produces only a momentary triumph. Afterward, as when Lily returns from her holiday with the Brys, or later, when Bertha Dorset decides Lily’s usefulness in covering up her affair with Ned Silverton has run out, Lily is thrust back upon her own dwindling resources.

As a result, the novel’s trajectory shows Lily gaining not in firmness and strength, but in “pliancy” (63) and elasticity to the demands of her surroundings. Instead of achieving liberation from others’ desires and legitimation of her own self-worth, she achieves only greater dependence on the artful versatility that helps her to realize the wishes of both her friends and her enemies. “Misfortune had made Lily supple instead of hardening her,” Wharton writes early in the novel with regard to the death of Mr. Bart and impoverished wanderings of Lily and her mother; ten years later she has become “as malleable as wax” (85). Perhaps at no point is the significance of this malleability revealed so clearly as when Lily poses in a *tableau vivant* for Mrs. Bry’s first large-scale social entertainment. There is an element of risk in doing so, for Mrs. Bry has yet to be accepted into the highest echelons of Fifth Avenue society. But Lily cannot resist the opportunity to give “eager expression” to “her vivid plastic sense” by manipulating the “disposal of draperies, the study of attitudes, and the shifting of lights and shadows” in the service of the portrait she is to portray (191). Granted the chance to demonstrate publicly “that her loveliness was no fixed quality, but an element shaping all emotions to fresh forms of grace” (191), Lily easily dismisses the adverse social consequences that performing this demonstration under the Brys’ auspices might have.

The *tableau vivant* scene is significant first in the estimation of Lily it elicits from Selden, who believes that in seeing her portray someone else he sees her more clearly than he ever has before. Like a brand, the *tableau vivant* exists in the “boundary world between fact and imagination” (194). It calls out to the “responsive fancy” and offers “magic glimpses” of personal transformation (194). In choosing to recreate Sir Joshua Reynolds’s *Mrs. Lloyd*, Wharton tells us, Lily chooses an image “so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself. It was as though she had stepped, not out of, but into, Reynolds’s canvas, banishing the phantom of his dead beauty by the beams of her living grace” (196). As extraordinary as this feat is, it merely makes visible and explicit Lily’s everyday practice of “banishing the phantom” in others’ minds and replacing it with her own much more vivid reality—“embody[ing]” someone else’s vision “without ceasing to be herself.” For Selden, this explicitness is revelatory. Accustomed to treating each of her statements and gestures as at least partly a ruse, the “mask of a very definite purpose” (17), he now finds “that for the first time he seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart” (196). Even the character in the novel with the greatest sympathy for Lily sees her as most “real” when she is most obviously and successfully bringing someone else’s vision to life.¹⁶

While several others present in the Brys’ ballroom share Selden’s thoughts, he alone experiences them so abstractly. The various *tableaux* are populated exclusively with beautiful young women drawn from the same elite stratum of society. None attracts as much awe and fascination as Lily’s, however, a fact that becomes itself a subject of conversation. “Gad, what a show of good-looking women; but not one of ‘em could touch that little cousin of mine” (201), the “experienced connoisseur” (196) Ned Van

Alstynne boasts to Selden and Trenor as they collect their coats at the door. “It’s not her fault if everybody don’t know it now,” Trenor replies (201). Given Trenor’s belief that Lily owes a special debt to him, it is unsurprising that he grumbles about not receiving a greater share of her attention than other men. He has already voiced a similar complaint earlier, upon finding her installed in Rosedale’s box at the opera (171-74). What makes Trenor feel Lily’s injustice especially acutely on this occasion is that she has publicly demonstrated her ornamental value without also publicly registering this value in his social account. If Selden’s insight involves recognizing that Lily is most herself when she is most overtly someone else, Trenor’s involves recognizing how valuable this circumstance might be if harnessed in the service of his own interests. A second significant aspect of the *tableau vivant* scene, then, is its suggestion of the specific uses toward which New York society directs Lily’s malleability be put. Here, as elsewhere in the novel, she is represented as a figure whose social purpose is to be the living manifestation of an appealing image.

Lily’s success in the Brys’ *tableaux vivants* comes even as signs have appeared that there are limits to her ability to fulfill this purpose. Finding fewer and fewer notes and invitations in the post, she thinks that “[i]t was as she had said to Selden—people were tired of her. They would welcome her in a new character, but as Miss Bart they knew her by heart” (149). Conscious that her ability to charm and delight through sensitivity to others’ desires is diminishing, her desperation increases proportionally: “whichever way she looked she saw only a future of servitude to the whims of others, never the possibility of asserting her own eager individuality” (151). A cruise to the Mediterranean onboard the Dorsets’ yacht initially promises a respite from this situation.

When Selden chances upon Lily and some friends in Monte Carlo, however, he observes the desperation engendered by her failure to impart to the yachting party the narrative of carefree enjoyment it urgently needs. This desperation, he thinks, can be read in her faintly altered appearance: “[A] subtle change had passed over the quality of her beauty. Then it had had a transparency through which the fluctuations of the spirit were sometimes tragically visible; now its impenetrable surface suggested a process of crystallization which had fused her whole being into one hard brilliant substance” (273). For Selden, it is as though Lily has transformed from a window in which both the viewer’s reflection and a space beyond were formerly visible to a solid mirror offering no hint of interior rooms. “[H]er own eager individuality” shows no signs of emerging, and yet even her “brilliant” mirroring of essentially dismal scenes proves inadequate to the task of buoying up her sinking social prospects.

These prospects fall still further when, after returning to New York, she learns that her aunt has drastically reduced her inheritance as a result of her gambling and recent fallout with Bertha Dorset in Monte Carlo. Reading in this devaluation a sharp change in Lily’s desirability as brand—while she still imparts a narrative to those associated with her, it is now a narrative of misfortune and decline rather than promise and possibility—her relatives and her former friends, with the exception of Gerty Farish and a few others outside the main current of fashionable society, begin to “snub” her (318). Because functioning as a brand is consistent with Lily’s self-understanding, she sees the behavior of the others as unpleasant, yet not exactly unjust. Gerty suggests that she make a concerted effort to communicate to her friends the “whole truth” of the incidents on the Dorsets’ yacht, but Lily merely scoffs at this plan: “What is truth?” she asks Gerty.

“Where a woman is concerned, it’s the story that’s easiest to believe. In this case it’s a great deal easier to believe Bertha Dorset’s story than mine, because she has a big house and an opera box, and it’s convenient to be on good terms with her” (319). Here Lily spells out for Gerty two key facts about society from which, because of her small independent income, she is insulated: that a woman is constituted socially through a “story” about her that is rewritten as circumstances change; and that she is treated in accordance with the utility others perceive in her story.

Acknowledging these facts means, for Lily, that a new social position cannot be carved out of her usual circle of acquaintances. She turns to Carry Fisher, a divorcee similarly accustomed to passing from one group of socialites in need of fulfillment to another, who places her with women—Mattie Gormer and Norma Hatch—who aspire to the social position of Judy Trenor, Bertha Dorset, Gwen Stepney, and Lily’s other former friends. Though Lily recoils slightly from the lack of refinement these new patronesses and their hangers-on sometimes display, she is grateful that “they received her without question into the easy promiscuity of their lives” (331). Nevertheless, the fact that she has been “publicly *branded* as the heroine of a ‘queer’ episode” (emphasis added, 331) eventually upsets each of these situations—first Mattie Gormer begins to chafe at being associated with a woman “branded” so negatively, then Norma Hatch’s circle presumes Lily’s brand will allow her to countenance the entrapment of a dissolute young man who belongs to her former social set and with whom she privately sympathizes. In spite of Lily’s training in the “art of saying and doing the right thing” (377), she finds herself unable any longer to successfully function as a brand even in an environment such as

Norma Hatch's luxury hotel, which is appropriately named the "Emporium" (384). Even ensconced in a virtual department store, in other words, Lily's brand fails to sell.

Among her acquaintances, no one sees and describes this situation as clearly as Rosedale. Selden may be singled out in the novel as the character most sympathetic to Lily's social difficulties, but Rosedale possesses greater clarity with regard to the precise terms in which her predicament is staged. An understanding exists between them—"She understood his motives, for her own course was guided by as nice calculations" (35)—that allows Rosedale to negotiate his relationship with Lily on an explicitly consumerist footing when others can do so only implicitly and indirectly.¹⁷ Accordingly, he prefaces his first marriage proposal to Lily by remarking, "[I]f I want a thing I'm willing to pay: I don't go up to the counter, and then wonder if the article's worth the price" (251). Later, when he conditionally renews his proposal, this articulation of the relationship between woman and suitor in the language of product and consumer places striking emphasis on branding. Having lost her place with Mattie Gormer, Lily tells Rosedale that she will marry him. Rosedale responds, however, by declaring that her popular valuation has fallen considerably—while his own social position has slowly risen. Whether others misjudge Lily matters not at all to Rosedale's "stock-taking eyes"; faced with their clear-sighted gaze, she feels like "super-fine human merchandise" (361). Inasmuch as this feeling is an uncomfortable one, however, her discomfiture stems not from Rosedale's having belittled her, but rather from his having offered her the "whole truth" (361) instead of the "tissue of social falsehoods" (362) she hears from others. "I understand you," Lily says to him in response (362).

In many ways, Rosedale's words in this scene, and not Selden's in the drab boarding-house room where Lily eventually dies, are those that "made all clear" (462). There is a melodramatic quality to the remainder of the novel—Lily burns Bertha Dorset's incriminating letters, gives up Selden, recognizes the virtue of poverty-stricken motherhood, and dies dreaming of holding a baby—that seems to mark this conversation as belonging to what Rosedale calls "real life," while everything afterward represents simply what happens "in novels" (361). In her last scene before effectually leaving off social critique in order to provide the novel with a popularly acceptable *dénouement*, then, Wharton returns to the functional equivalence between women and brands promoted by an ascendant consumer culture. The distance between valuing fictional women such as the Gibson Girl for their capacity to fulfill a consumer's personal fantasies and valuing real women for the same perceived capacity is short, Wharton suggests, and engaging in the former almost inevitably leads to engaging in the latter. As a result, women like Lily Bart find themselves able, in certain circumstances, to leverage others' desire for the narrative they represent into greater personal power. In the long run, however, this practice proves more debilitating than empowering. As Lily's example shows, momentary empowerment hardly registers in a life given over to constant servitude.

Naturalism in "These Days of Energetic & Emphatic Advertising"

"The Descent of Man" concerns branding and authorship; *The House of Mirth* concerns branding and fashionable women; together, the two parse issues of urgent interest to Wharton, a fashionable woman author, from the very beginning of her career

as a novelist. Just weeks after the publication in 1899 of her first short story collection, *The Greater Inclination*, Wharton wrote a letter to William Crary Brownell of Charles Scribner's Sons complaining about the firm's lackluster promotional campaign:

The book has now been out about six weeks, & I do not think I exaggerate in saying that it has met with an unusually favourable reception for a first volume by a writer virtually unknown. . . . So far, I have seen once, in a Sunday paper, I think, an advertisement . . . with a line or two from the "Sun" review, which appeared among the first. Even that notice I have not found since, till it reappeared in the same shape in the new "Scribner" for May, without the addition of any of the many notices that have since come out. . . . Certainly in these days of energetic & emphatic advertising, Mr. Scribner's methods do not tempt one to offer him one's wares a second time. (qtd. in Barlowe 46)

Wharton argues that her publisher is either lazy, negligent, or simply behind the times. Positive reviews of her book have begun to accumulate, and she sees these "notices" as prime material for shaping a product narrative concerning the book's success. "[I]n these days of energetic & emphatic advertising," not to do so is to risk losing the public's interest, a fate that Wharton, having traveled a long road to successful authorship, clearly means to avoid.

Nevertheless, by the time "The Descent of Man" appeared, in 1904, occupying the public's interest had come to seem equally, if not more, objectionable. Harviss's promotional campaign for *The Vital Thing* is everything Scribner's campaign for *The Greater Inclination* appears not to have been: attentive to reviewers, generous with posters, billboards, and print advertisements, and acutely sensitive to the power of branding to boost sales by structuring readers' perceptions of the author and novel into a unique, coherent, and appealing narrative. And yet, for Wharton, there is something profoundly enervating in this campaign's results. Whereas Linyard begins the story a scientist tinkering with the idea of publicly tweaking his pseudo-scientific counterparts,

he ends it essentially in thrall to the brand that has brought about his success. Branding acts deterministically in “The Descent of Man,” I have argued, compelling specific beliefs and behaviors and establishing a check on unrestrained individualism. Once slips of paper announcing publication of *The Vital Thing* begin to cover train platforms and the professor’s choice of breakfast foods becomes a matter of central public concern, his future is effectively ordained. The case of Linyard and the initially innocuous little book provides Wharton an opportunity to update nineteenth-century naturalism’s preoccupations with environmental determinism for a twentieth-century environment dominated by branding.

In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton extends this updating specifically to developments in gender relations at the turn of the century. At a time when many, like Ticknor’s Gibson Girl, were inclined to see nearly every cultural change as a potential path to women’s further empowerment, Wharton points out the danger of attempting to leverage desire for fictional women into more numerous and more capacious rights for actual women. In the twentieth century’s emerging consumer culture, differences between the two kinds of women were all too likely to be ignored. As a result, Wharton suggests, a woman could easily find herself, like Lily Bart, performing the function of a brand—treated like a new kind of cigarette—valued only for the narrative she is able to impart to others’ lives, and, in the absence of this ability, hardly valued at all. As *The House of Mirth* demonstrates, Wharton found this outcome so certain that it motivated her deployment of naturalistic literary form.

But as her letter to Brownell suggests, even while organizing her fiction around the impossibility of resisting branding’s cultural influence, she at least occasionally

entertained the idea of working within this influence. In her hints that Scribner might have done better than to reprint an early advertisement for her book in the “same shape” in a more recent magazine issue lie a conception of branding’s usefulness when shaped by a deft hand. If branding is impossible to resist, it may nevertheless be nudged in advantageous directions, and Wharton faults Scribner for failing to apply the appropriate nudge. Other authors were more direct in addressing this issue; unlike Wharton, they counted branding among their own authorial responsibilities. This difference necessarily helped produce a change in their literary form, and in order to explore this change, I turn in the next chapter to Edna Ferber.

CHAPTER IV NOTES

¹ For a history of the department store that focuses on Marshall Field in particular, see Twyman. For a history that traces the department store’s development internationally, see Ferry.

² Kitch derives her notion of the Victorian True Woman from Barbara Welter, who emphasizes this figure’s “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity,” and Karen Blair, who adds to these qualities an emphasis on training in the fine arts. “Such qualities,” Kitch writes, “made women the ruling moral force of the home, a private sphere separate from the male world of commerce” (20). See Welter and Blair, as well as, for an insightful discussion of the True Woman in relation to illness, Piepmeier 71-76.

³ In particular, Patterson demonstrates that responses to the New Woman figure crossed racial and ethnic lines. Margaret Murray Washington, Pauline Hopkins, and Sui Sin Far all feature prominently in her analysis.

⁴ Caroline Ticknor was the granddaughter of William D. Ticknor, a partner in Ticknor & Fields, the publishing firm that later included James Osgood and published many of the best known American authors of the late nineteenth century.

⁵ Gibson’s drawings began appearing in the early 1890s. For a representative selection of reproductions, including many of the drawings that became identified with the Gibson Girl, see Gibson. For a very brief account of Gibson’s life and career, see Pitz’s

introduction to this volume, and for a more extended analysis of Gibson's work, see Downey.

⁶ Ticknor's choice of names is revealing. "Reginald" derives from "Regis," the Latin term for royal, monarch, or king.

⁷ Gilman actually published *Women and Economics* as Charlotte Perkins Stetson—she did not marry George Houghton Gilman, her second husband, until 1900. However, I will adopt the common critical practice of using this later name when discussing her early writings.

⁸ The Duchess of Towers is a statuesque woman character in George du Maurier's novel *Peter Ibbetson* (1891).

⁹ Although my argument focuses on women consumers (and the consumption of women), recent scholarship has challenged the notion that men were significantly less active as consumers than women and that manufacturers and advertisers rarely targeted them. See Swiencicki.

¹⁰ "Copy: A Dialogue" first appeared in Scribner's Magazine (June 1900) and was collected in *Crucial Instances* (1901). "Expiation" first appeared in *Hearst's International-Cosmopolitan* (December 1903) and was collected in *The Descent of Man and Other Stories* (1904).

¹¹ Wharton scholars have long noted her familiarity with nineteenth-century science (see Benstock 61-62) and have traced its impact on her work. For recent accounts of Wharton and science that focus on *The House of Mirth*, see Kassanoff and Kim. For an account that examines some of Wharton's other major works, see Quay.

¹² According to President Cleveland's most recent biographer, H. Paul Jeffers, the president resented any mention at all of Frances in the press, thinking it unchivalrous. Jeffers, who does not mention advertisements, notes that newspapers controlled by Cleveland's political adversaries often printed rumors of Frances' mistreatment by the president, fueling his contempt for the press as an institution. See Jeffers 170-86, and also Brodsky 171-78.

¹³ David Zimmerman has recently published a study of the representation of financial panics, including the Panic of 1893, in American fiction. While he does not mention Wharton—his chief examples are drawn from Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and several lesser known authors—Zimmerman does offer a few statistics regarding the Panic of 1893: 600 banks failed, 16,000 businesses collapsed, approximately 20% unemployment nationwide, and 100,000 unemployed workers in Chicago alone (Zimmerman 12). For a detailed account of the Panic of 1893, see Steeples and Whitten.

¹⁴ Ellen Gruber Garvey points to 1893 as also marking “the big change in magazine economics” from a reliance on subscription revenues to a reliance on advertising revenues (9). In her view, the conversion of *Munsey’s*, *McClure’s*, and *Cosmopolitan* from subscription to advertising subsidization in this year constituted a tipping point for the industry and a minor watershed moment in the development of consumer culture.

¹⁵ For Travis Foster, this moment helps to introduce the novel’s class-based aesthetic value system. “[I]t’s fantasy Percy desires,” he writes, “not reality: he desires, even if temporarily, to inhabit a belief that others see in him a glorified and fantastic Percy, and even more so, he longs to see this Percy himself” (Foster 1).

¹⁶ William Moddelmog has recently drawn attention to the novel’s interest in testing whether the “real” Lily Bart can ever be known by the novel’s other characters, and by the reader as well. For Moddelmog, this interest derives not from branding, but from Wharton’s related concern for privacy and subjectivity in an era when such notions were under marked social, psychological, and legal pressure.

¹⁷ For Wharton, this directness about acquisition and ownership is the visible sign of Rosedale’s Jewishness. Recent studies of the novel that focus on Rosedale and the significance of Jewish identity to Lily’s social status include Goldsmith and Harrison-Kahan.

CHAPTER V

EDNA FERBER'S EMMA MCCHESENEY STORIES: BRANDING FICTION

Edna Ferber is mostly remembered today as the author of several enormously popular narrative franchises. *Show Boat* (1926), *Cimarron* (1929), and *Giant* (1952), to name only the best known, all began as novels before moving to the Broadway stage, the cinema, or both. From the 1920s onward, Ferber seemed not only to have an especially fine sense of what stories readers and audiences liked, but also a nearly unmatched skill in finding narrative forms for these stories that both set them apart from others in their respective genres and survived adaptation into other media. The success of Ferber's fiction on stage and screen suggests almost that it was made to be visualized. Indeed, this chapter offers an account of Ferber's earliest popular success, a series of stories featuring the traveling saleswoman Emma McChesney, indicating that these stories in particular *were* made to be visualized—to spring to life in the reader's mind. Collected in *Roast Beef, Medium* (1913), *Personality Plus* (1914), and *Emma McChesney & Co.* (1915), the Emma McChesney stories serve as an example of branded fiction, fiction that differentiates itself from other consumer products—including, but not limited to, other fiction—through the unique narrative constituted in its formal innovation. Ferber's stories enumerate a rationale for applying the techniques of branding to literature while simultaneously putting this rationale into effect.

In doing so, they contrast sharply with the work of Crane, Wharton, and many of Ferber's contemporaries, including those, like Theodore Dreiser and Sherwood

Anderson, who also worked in journalism, publishing, and advertising, and consequently witnessed the emergence of branding at close range.¹ What sets Ferber apart is her consciousness that the rise around the turn of the century of consumer culture—with its proliferating products, catalogs, advertisements, display windows, and department stores—has produced conditions in which a work of popular fiction’s survival depends not only on its competing successfully against other works of popular fiction, but also on its competing successfully against other inexpensive and widely available consumer products. In writing about a traveling saleswoman, Ferber takes the recent evolution of sales practices as her theme. As a result, I suggest, she produces what amounts to a theorization of narrative form’s potential role in branding.

By the mid-1910s, when Ferber’s Emma McChesney stories appeared, the branding of consumer products had become *de rigueur*. From cigarettes to soft drinks to sewing machines, nearly every basic consumer product had a unique name, image, design, slogan, history, and cultural associations, all of which coalesced in a narrative, or brand, describing consumers’ real and imagined interactions with the product. In an era of standardized, mass production—Frederick Winslow Taylor’s *The Principles of Scientific Management* appeared in 1911; Henry Ford’s first moving assembly line opened in 1913—a product’s brand differentiated it from potentially dozens of similar, or even identical, products. Recognizing that brands had become not only a major means by which her readers distinguished one product from another, but also a fundamental tool for creating, influencing, and comprehending culture, I argue here, Ferber began to consciously and purposefully brand her fiction.

In chapters 3 and 4, I claimed for Stephen Crane and Edith Wharton an interest in branding's role as a cultural basis for naturalism. Less sanguine than realists such as Howells and Twain concerning the possibility of counteracting the simple fantasies branding produced, Crane and Wharton both observed the progress of branding's increasing cultural entrenchment—albeit from quite different social positions—and manifested this entrenchment through naturalistic literary form. Often labeled naturalists yet rarely in the same context or for precisely the same reasons, these two authors nevertheless were likewise motivated by a perception of branding's ingrained cultural force to represent this force as triumphing over assertions of individual resolve that seemed to posit a form of personal agency independent of branding. Ferber's lack of interest in such assertions registers a change of view. Even more conscious of branding than Wharton, given its exponential growth and development in the first decade of the twentieth century, Ferber suggests that in order to be understood in a culture saturated with brands, fiction needs to have brands of its own. Branding's cultural influence appears certain to continue to deepen and intensify; rather than persist in organizing literary form around the impossibility of resisting this influence, then, Ferber explores ways of using formal innovation to work within it for the creation of a kind of fiction that remains interesting and relevant to readers steeped in branding specifically and in consumer culture more broadly.

This chapter demonstrates the ways in which Ferber's Emma McChesney stories both explain to readers why and how they might begin to encounter branded fiction and offer an example of what form this fiction could take. I begin by discussing changes in the relationship between authors and readers occasioned by a publishing industry

increasingly supported by branding. I then turn to the historical account of the traveling salesman and the advertiser embedded within Ferber's stories, which provides a context for my subsequent analysis of how the stories themselves might be seen to constitute a brand. Throughout, my argument remains narrowly focused on Ferber. Insofar as Ferber's self-conscious formalism arises from textual engagement with emerging mass media, fragmenting sensory experience, and literature's status as commodity, and thereby presages characteristic modernist tropes, however, my argument identifies branding as an important motivation for modernism's keen interest in formal innovation. Early twentieth-century consumer culture placed intense pressure on manufacturers of all kinds of consumer products to perceptually differentiate one from another, and authors felt this pressure as keenly as makers of toothbrushes and shirt collars. In explaining as well as modeling how formal innovation might serve the purpose of a brand, Ferber offers important insight into the development of modernist literature and culture.

Authors and Readers in "The Age of Advertising"

Founded by the pioneering advertising agent George P. Rowell in 1888, *Printers' Ink*, an advertising trade journal, reported on developments in the industry and generally fought to secure advertising's place in American culture.² Just as William Dean Howells concurrently sought an institutional footing for American realism in the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's Magazine*, Rowell sought firm ground for advertising—a space to debate its problems and to rebut its critics (including Howells). One measure of how advertising's cultural position evolved over the next quarter century may be seen in a pronouncement issued by the editors of *Printers' Ink* in 1915.³ "When the historian of

the Twentieth Century shall have finished his narrative,” they write, “and comes searching for the subtitle which shall best express the spirit of the period, we think it is not at all unlikely that he may select ‘The Age of Advertising’ for the purpose” (qtd. in Tebbel and Zuckerman 140-41). Given this statement, it is no wonder that an author like Ferber would evince views about branding so different from those of Howells. Whereas Howells was able to identify branding as an opponent, and thus to isolate and refute it, such clarity of vision was much more difficult, if not impossible, to achieve in Ferber’s time. Even discounting their probably exaggerated conception of advertising’s importance, the *Printers’ Ink* editors’ assertion that advertising so saturated the century’s early years as to make it the likely defining cultural influence of the coming decades seems to justify Ferber’s notion of the impossibility of setting oneself against it—and the usefulness of carving out a role for oneself within it.

In making their claim for an “Age of Advertising,” the editors would have been mindful of the tremendous growth in both quantity and variety of advertising that had, by 1915, made it nearly unavoidable throughout the United States. Posters, which H. C. Bunner described in his 1895 article, “American Posters, Past and Present,” as dominating both rural and urban landscapes to the point of frequently stopping in his tracks both the country boy lounging along a fencerow and the business man hurrying toward a downtown train (see chapter 3), became even more omnipresent in the ensuing two decades. Historian Laura E. Baker, whose recent work has documented the explosion of outdoor advertising in the early twentieth century and identified it as a locus of important cultural debates, reports that “[i]n 1903, the trade journal *Billposter* identified over twenty establishments in the United States specializing in posters and

estimated that these transacted more than \$5 million in business that year, representing a twenty-five fold increase in volume over the previous decade” (1191).⁴ The makers of Uneeda Biscuit, whose multi-year, nationally coordinated billboard campaign helped drive this increase, “estimated that more than 30 million people saw its outdoor advertising each day of the year” (1191) (fig. 5-1). Even a conservative estimate of the growth in posters continuing after *Billposter*’s 1903 count might suggest a further five- or ten-fold increase in business volume by the time *Roast Beef, Medium* appeared in 1913. Uneeda Biscuits would have been only one of potentially hundreds of products the average person saw advertised simply by going about daily routines.

Predictably, advertising was most ubiquitous in and around the country’s rapidly expanding cities. In Chicago, the setting for several Emma McChesney stories, “an estimated fifty miles of billboards edged the city’s streets by 1905” (1191). Other cities and towns were similarly bedecked: by 1908, “industry calculations estimated that more than 8.5 million linear feet of billboards lined the nation’s streets, railways, and roadways,” a figure Baker puts into perspective by noting that it would be “enough to stretch in a continuous line between Chicago and Mexico City” (1191). The pressure to advertise was so strong that advertisers and the owners of increasingly scarce un-signed spaces struck business arrangements that literally, as well as metaphorically, reshaped the world of the city dweller. “Property owners were not averse to leasing the facades of aging or dilapidated buildings for posting,” Baker observes, “and it became common in Chicago, New York, and other large cities to encounter building fronts along busy thoroughfares whose upper stories were entirely eclipsed by advertising” (1191). Posting

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**Do
You
Know
Uneeda
Biscuit
?**

The advertising success of the century is that of "Uneeda Biscuit" and "Uneeda Jinjer Wayfer."

The name "Uneeda" was coined by us. The name "Uneeda Jinjer Wayfer" was produced by us.

The popular catch phrases, "Do You Know Uneeda Biscuit", "Everybody Knows Uneeda Biscuit" and "Now Uneeda Jinjer Wayfer" were originated by us.

The advertising campaign was planned, and is being executed in all its branches by us.

We are not in the general scramble to get an advertising order regardless of the interest of the advertiser.

We do not accept advertisements relating to vile diseases, disreputable business or intoxicating drinks.

We are anxious for all the first-class advertising that can be made profitable to the advertiser and to ourselves—and only such.

Our long experience (thirty years) and our large business (the greatest in our line), should give us unequalled advantages and facilities for doing *good* advertising.

Advertising would open a profitable field to many a manufacturer who to-day is fretting over the evils of the old way of marketing goods, little dreaming of the opportunities that might be his. We are specially glad to talk to thinking men of this class.

**Everybody
——— Knows
Uneeda ——
——— Biscuit**

**NOW
Uneeda
Jinjer
Wayfer
!**

Newspaper Advertising.
Magazine Advertising.

N. W. AYER & SON,
PHILADELPHIA.

Figure 5-1. Advertisement for N. W. Ayer & Son. *Century*, Oct. 1899. This advertising agency, one of the oldest and most prominent in the United States, created the pathbreaking Uneeda Biscuit campaign of the 1890s.

signs and even advertisements on the sides of buildings was, of course, a practice dating back decades. But never before had this practice been instituted on such a totalizing scale. Crowded city streets offered no respite from advertising for the modern consumer, who sometimes could not tell where advertisements ended and buildings began.

This experience extended to the interiors of buildings in the case of department stores, where advertisements exerted equal, if not greater, influence. In an early Emma McChesney story, “Chickens,” Ferber’s heroine discovers a few open days in her travel schedule and decides to spend them visiting a friend in Chicago. Immediately upon exiting the train, Ferber writes, “[a]n unholy joy seized her. She entered the Biggest Store and made for the millinery department, yielding to an uncontrollable desire to buy a hat” (*Roast* 54). Emma McChesney’s “unholy joy” stems at least partly from the satisfaction of finding herself in a large, modern city after months of traveling through small, isolated Midwestern towns.⁵ Yet the speed with which she makes for the “Biggest Store,” guided by an “uncontrollable desire” to buy a basic consumer product, speaks to cities’ increasing orientation toward branding. Emma McChesney takes pride in her moral principles as well as her self-control, which makes this “unholy” and “uncontrollable” act remarkable. It is as though simply stepping off the train into a cityscape dominated by advertisements has effected a weakening of her usual powers of judgment and restraint. As surprising as such weakening appears in Ferber’s story, however, it was likely a common experience for Chicago’s residents and visitors. Baker notes that “advertising had become so concentrated along Chicago’s Michigan Avenue by 1900 that the *Tribune-Herald* suggested that it might be more appropriately renamed ‘Billboard Avenue’” (1191-92). By the time of Emma McChesney’s stepping off the

train in 1913, “billboard avenue[s]” had gone from big city novelty to regular feature of urban life.

In addition to registering this change, Ferber’s stories register—and more deeply engage—a concomitant change in the constitution of magazines during this period. According to historians John Tebbel and Mary Ellen Zuckerman, magazines, which began to proliferate after the Civil War, initially operated through subscription revenues. Production costs were offset to some extent by advertisements tipped into the magazines or printed in the back pages, but for the most part readers directly subsidized writing, editing, printing, and distribution costs. This structure began to change around 1890. In that year, total advertising in the United States amounted to \$190 million dollars; by 1914, this figure had reached \$682 million. Tebbel and Zuckerman state that “[m]uch of this went into magazines” (141), largely as a result of lowering subscription prices. Price decreases boosted readership, which made advertising more desirable, allowing publishers to include more advertisements—by 1907, they made up half the content of an average popular monthly, frequently sharing page space with columns, stories, and articles—and to charge higher rates. As a result of this shift, the extremely popular *Saturday Evening Post* raised advertising revenues from \$6,933 in 1897 to more than \$16 million in 1917; its publisher, the Curtis Company, raised advertising revenues from \$500,000 in 1892 to nearly \$23 million in 1917. Far from anomalous, Tebbel and Zuckerman write, “[t]his kind of growth had become the order of the day” (141). Just as advertisements increasingly blanketed the sides of buildings, they more and more greeted readers from the pages of magazines.

Both of these developments become significant in light of what Richard Brodhead has identified as the “cultures of letters” shaping reading, writing, and interpretation at the end of the nineteenth century. Literary critics and historians have a tendency to treat reading and writing as practices unto themselves, Brodhead argues, acts performed in a vacuum that erases the circumstances in which they take place. But in fact, this is not the case, since “writing has no life separate from the particularized mechanisms that bring it to public life” (5). Brodhead elaborates: “Writing always takes place within some completely concrete cultural situation, a situation that surrounds it with some particular landscape of institutional structures, affiliates it with some particular group from among the array of contemporary groupings, and installs it with some group-based world of understandings, practices, and values” (8). For Brodhead, taking this “concrete cultural situation” seriously means accommodating interpretation to culture’s status as “more than a backdrop” for what plays out on the page (8). It means regarding a work of literature as simply one among many of culture’s moving parts, parts whose character and function are determined by how they relate to neighboring parts and to the machine as a whole. By this logic, “American literary history should be rethought as . . . a history not of texts or contexts but of the multiform transactions that have taken place between them” (8-9). Plumbing these “transactions” allows for clearer interpretation of the texts that participate in them.

Within such an interpretive framework, Brodhead implies, those cultural “transactions” that involve literature and advertising should receive particular attention. His leading example of a case ripe for reinterpretation singles out the young Theodore Dreiser, newly arrived in Chicago in the late 1880s and accepting a series of menial jobs

in order to get by. After developing an urge to write about the city and applying for what he thought was a reporting position at the *Chicago Herald*, Brodhead relates, Dreiser found himself instead working to augment the paper's circulation by managing promotional scams. This experience strongly shaped the writing he later produced as a reporter, critic, and novelist in Chicago and New York: "Dreiser eventually . . . work[ed] his way through a succession of reporter jobs. . . . But all of these scenes of his writer's work had something in common with his first place of literary employment. They all made writing inseparable from a larger action of advertising, the media's creation of consumer desire that helps boost the publisher's profit" (Brodhead 2). For Brodhead, advertising forms an integral component of Dreiser's specific "culture of letters," and understanding his writing requires assessing its relationship to the "genre of the cheap, the factual (and commercial), the readily consumable and disposable, and the up-to-the-minute" (5). Reading Dreiser's work in relation to the "genre" it both informed and was informed by produces more precise and attentive interpretations than those that distill the author from his cultural surroundings.

The perils of such distillation—and, correspondingly, the usefulness of Brodhead's framework—become even greater after the turn of the century, as Dreiser's immersion in and blurring of different forms of literary and advertising consumption come to be shared by more and more authors and readers. Without naming Brodhead, Ellen Gruber Garvey's *The Adman in the Parlor* (1996), a study of magazines and gender in the United States at the turn of the century, nevertheless applies his way of thinking specifically to this burgeoning group. "[T]here is no pure sphere of literature from which fiction emerges," she writes, "untouched by the commercial nexus within which it is

published and within which its writers live and work; instead, fiction constantly if uneasily reflects on its place within commerce” (5). At the turn of the century, she notes, this “place” was firmly bound up with the status of the magazine, and it is therefore important to recognize, critically, that “magazines no longer appear to be the site of a war between commerce and culture in which literary or editorial interests are separate from and in conflict with advertising and commerce.” Echoing Brodhead, Garvey premises her analysis on the claim that “advertising and fiction acted on one another in complex and unexpected ways” (4). Only rarely did these instances of mutual influence take on an antagonistic character.

Indeed, from readers’ perspectives advertising and fiction seemed almost invariably to complement each other, even to join forces as texts functioning similarly to demystify the shifting culture of the United States and to advise readers as to which choices might best aid them in adjusting to change. “Any insistence on an editorial/advertising split distorts the experience of actual magazine readers, who took in a magazine as a whole” Garvey explains (4). Sometimes “[a]ds provided glimpses of life that were excluded from stories” as well as “opportunities for pleasure and play more accessible than those that stories offered,” but “ads also depended on stories to accustom the reader to their techniques and concerns.” Because many readers were closely attentive to magazine advertising, and “found as much value in it as in the editorial matter,” moreover, advertisements should not be ignored in considerations of what magazine stories meant to readers. But neither should they be ignored in considerations of how authors crafted these stories. “When we read them together,” Garvey notes “we find advertisers learning from fiction writers, while fiction writers define themselves both

within and against advertising. The reader is invited to move between the two” (4). Authors and advertisers proved indispensable not only to readers, but to each other as well. In reacting to one another’s strategies and experiments, they charted a mutually constituted historical development.

As Garvey demonstrates, a host of ideas about race, class, and gender (her own specific focus) were precipitated out as this development unfolded. While advertisements borrowed basic narrative structures from magazine stories, “[p]roduct-focused stories . . . in effect promoted product categories, along with the general sense that shopping choices and consumption itself were important” (15). Each of these borrowings enhanced the ability of the two kinds of text to produce sophisticated representations of—to take one example—changing social roles for women. Garvey notes that Kate Chopin and Willa Cather both published stories in popular magazines that featured women using bicycles to escape the threat of a confining marriage. These stories drew on “a common image in bicycle magazine ads and catalogs—that of a woman riding off into the countryside” (Garvey 130). If the stories appropriate a familiar advertising image in order to elicit reader interest, however, they also embed this image in a complex narrative that suggests ways readers might position and contextualize it during their next advertising encounter. Juxtaposing magazine stories and advertisements for consumer products reveals the circulation and evolution of specific ideological formations across the magazine page.

What Garvey does not consider, in doing so, is the consumer product status of magazine stories themselves. These stories did not merely represent such products; they *were* such products. And the strongest evidence for regarding them in this light is that authors created brands for their fiction (and themselves) in much the same way that

manufacturers and advertising agencies created brands for mass produced soaps, baking powders, vacuum cleaners, shirtwaists, and other products. The first decades of the twentieth century witnessed a dramatic expansion in the number and variety of inexpensive products available to the average consumer, as the aggressive blanketing of roadsides and buildings with signs and billboards attests. As a result of this expansion, and also of a shift by magazines toward advertising subsidization, authors found their stories competing on the page with product narratives—that is, brands—invented for the purpose of differentiating the many similar products readers were being asked to buy. In such an environment, it made sense to equip one’s fiction with a brand of its own, both because brands were becoming more and more an inescapable part of the language and iconography of American culture and because doing so made this fiction more commercially competitive. Readers could not be expected to immediately recognize and appreciate a work of fiction’s brand, however; they needed an explanation of what form this brand might take and how it might function. Ferber’s Emma McChesney stories, to which I now turn, deserve special notice for the effort they make to convey such an explanation.

A Brief History of the Traveling Salesman and the Advertiser

In adopting the practice of branding only after the turn of the century, authors were in many ways behind the times. Building on the success of patent medicine manufacturers, the beauty product industry had long since embraced branding when authors first began to employ it. In her study of the “making of America’s beauty culture,” Kathy Peiss notes that by 1900 “one wholesaler sold fifty different brands of

cream, as many American-made powders and skin preparations, and eleven brands of cosmetique” (51). In spite of their newness, comparatively high cost, and the social controversy often attached to them, as Garvey demonstrates, bicycles also (with the help of authors like Chopin and Cather) successfully acquired brands; Ross D. Petty argues that bicycle marketing campaigns broke new ground in the areas of product promotion and market segmentation.⁶ Even coffins, Roland Marchand reveals, became so numerous and standardized that brands were created in order to make consumers perceive differences between them: “Few products seemed beyond the pale of advertising after 1909, when the National Casket Company embarked on a national magazine campaign” (Marchand 5). Magazine fiction, as Ferber shows, was not one of them.

Nevertheless, the Emma McChesney stories do not suggest that branding’s ubiquity alone makes it necessary or appropriate for authors to engage. Indeed, they seem rather to present an account of the recent history of sales and consumption that ends up identifying specific conditions for branding’s deployment in relation to authorship. This account begins with the very first story, “Roast Beef, Medium,” which is less a story than an extended introduction to Ferber’s protagonist.⁷ “There is a journey compared to which the travels of Bunyan’s hero were a summer-evening stroll,” it opens. “The Pilgrims by whom this forced march is taken belong to a maligned fraternity, and are known as traveling men” (*Roast* 1). In the remainder of the story Ferber lays the groundwork for repeated upendings of this “maligned fraternity” by its most successful, and only female, member. But immediately, in this opening statement, she suggests that while her stories about a traveling saleswoman are intended to update conventional notions of labor, gender, and social propriety for a new Progressive Era, they are also

intended to update conventional notions of literature.⁸ Figuring Emma McChesney's "journey" through the "travels of Bunyan's hero" alerts readers to Ferber's dual purposes. She plainly aims to give them something new in the way of stories that deconstruct the glib, rakish masculinity associated with "traveling men," and she also, more indirectly, signals her aim to remake a tired literary form to suit the changing culture that has effectually brought her protagonist into being.

The first of these aims is accomplished through the stories' primary focus on Emma McChesney, whose comprehensive scolding of a fellow drummer's advances in "Roast Beef, Medium" serves as synecdoche for a decade-long career of taking on her male competitors and besting them through reason, determination, and sacrifice. "She talked from the great storehouse of practical knowledge which she had accumulated in her ten years on the road. She told the handsome young cub many things for which he should have been undyingly grateful," Ferber writes (*Roast* 11). Emma McChesney's scolding of the naïve young drummer provides Ferber an opportunity to fill in salient details concerning her heroine's past: marriage at age eighteen to a man who proved a scoundrel; divorce eight years later; and "ten years on the road" as sales representative for the T. A. Buck Featherloom Petticoat Company. Her son, Jock, is now seventeen and independent, though very close to his mother; details of his bringing-up are conspicuously omitted. The adversity she has endured fuels Emma McChesney's objection to her slick, inexperienced would-be suitor. By the end of the story, however, the mild disgust she feels for him yields to an equal measure of compassion. Even while Emma McChesney has triumphed in a culture largely hostile to both the idea and the

reality of a woman working as a “traveling man” (*Roast* 24), she remains sensitive to the plight of her competitors and to the state of her profession more generally.

Accordingly, she demonstrates an interest in emerging challenges to this profession from the very beginning. After Ferber’s opening reference to Bunyan’s Pilgrims, “Roast Beef, Medium” moves to an image of Emma McChesney taking her “safe and solitary supper” (*Roast* 2) in a hotel dining room:

She had the last number of the *Dry Goods Review* propped up against the vinegar cruet, and the Worcestershire, and the salt shaker. Between conscientious, but disinterested mouthfuls of medium roast beef, she was reading the snappy ad set forth by her firm’s bitterest competitors, the Strauss Sans-silk Skirt Company. It was a good reading ad. Emma McChesney, who had forgotten more about petticoats than the average skirt salesman ever knew, presently allowed her luke-warm beef to grow cold and flabby as she read. (*Roast* 3)

Emma McChesney is linked in the story’s exposition with plain, efficient, no-nonsense “medium roast beef”—it embodies the diligence and self-sufficiency that constitute her strategy for surviving life on the road. Consequently, for this “luke-warm beef to grow cold and flabby,” even before Emma McChesney has spoken a word, the “snappy ad” in her trade magazine must register on a level deeper than that occupied by Strauss Sans-silk’s newest petticoat design. It is not this particular advertisement, but advertising as a whole, which claims Emma McChesney’s attention. And as much as the personal travails of Emma McChesney will occupy the stories to come, Ferber seems to announce, the fate of the traveling salesman—and saleswoman—in what *Printers’ Ink* would soon call the “Age of Advertising” will claim equal notice.

As the Emma McChesney stories progress, Ferber at times suggests that this fate rests on the outcome of a growing struggle between the traveling salesman and the advertiser—a struggle in which the salesman for the most part loses. *Personality Plus*,

for example, begins with a tribute to the traveling salesman that doubles as a memorial to his departure. “When men began to build cities vertically instead of horizontally there passed from our highways a picturesque figure, and from our language an expressive figure of speech,” Ferber writes. Standing before the newly risen skyscraper, the “oily-tongued, persuasive, soft-stepping stranger in the rusty Prince Albert and the black string tie who had been wont to haunt our back steps and front offices with his carefully wrapped bundle, retreated in bewildered defeat” (*Personality* 1). Traveling salesmen have and will continue to become increasingly obsolete, Ferber suggests, as cities have swelled in size and skyscrapers have concentrated the populations of entire towns into areas smaller than a city block. First the itinerant peddler, who sold his own wares, began to disappear; now even the seasoned drummer for established manufacturers has become scarce.⁹

In what might be seen as a narrative concession to this cultural shift, Emma McChesney herself goes to work in a New York skyscraper when she is made secretary (i.e. partner) of the T. A. Buck firm toward the end of *Roast Beef, Medium*. This change sets the stage both for her marriage to T. A. Buck, Jr.—their domestic trials occupy the final story collection, *Emma McChesney & Co.*—and for a refocusing of the stories, in *Personality Plus*, toward Jock McChesney’s coming-of-age. Not surprisingly, his maturation is effected through his learning the ropes as an advertiser. For Ferber, this involves Jock’s joining a host of “new being[s]” arising, phoenix-like, from the “ashes” of the traveling salesman: “Neither urger nor spellbinder he. The twentieth century was stamped across his brow, and on his lips was the word ‘Service.’ Silent, courteous, watchful, alert, he listened, while you talked. . . . Blithely he accepted five hundred

thousand dollars and gave in return—a promise” (*Personality* 3). Seen in relation to Emma McChesney as well as her competitors—the young drummer in “Roast Beef, Medium,” for example, and Fat Ed Meyers, her arch-nemesis—the advertiser appears in many ways the opposite of the traveling salesman. Whereas the traveling salesman ranges over a designated territory, carrying samples with which to entice individual buyers, the advertiser remains centrally located and deals not in actual merchandise, but in “promise[s],” especially those generated through the skillful deployment of product narratives. “Neither urger nor spellbinder,” Ferber’s advertiser operates more subtly by making consumers desire the narrative that will expand to include them if they purchase its associated product.

In the Emma McChesney stories, the aging of one generation and coming-of-age of another serves as a built-in mechanism for suggesting the succession of the traveling salesman by the advertiser. The “twentieth century” is “stamped across” more than the younger McChesney’s career aspirations, however; other incidents in the stories reinforce a sense that the series as a whole forecasts emerging patterns of business development in the United States. Emma McChesney’s promotion to secretary of the T. A. Buck firm provides glimpses of the expanding field of scientific management, as when, after an absence of several months, she returns to the company office to find the space reconfigured for staff segmentation and increased efficiency (*Emma* 50-51). Internationalization also surfaces after Emma McChesney’s promotion. With the vantage point offered by her executive position, she realizes that the firm’s petticoats might enjoy strong sales abroad, and undertakes a trip to South America for the purpose of introducing them there. When her first attempts to collect new orders prove

unsuccessful, Emma McChesney pauses to consider the challenges she must overcome: “She learned that the North American business firm is thought by the Southern business man to be tricky and dishonest, and that, because the Northerner has not learned how to pack a case of goods scientifically, as have the English, Germans, and French, the South American rages to pay cubic-foot rates on boxes that are three-quarters empty” (*Emma* 27). Efficiency reappears here, in combination with the necessity of recognizing and negotiating cultural stereotypes. Emma McChesney negotiates these stereotypes with cash, the “Esperanto of the nations, the universal language understood from Broadway to Brazil” (*Emma* 31)—but only when she finds herself in a pinch. The larger suggestion conveyed by her trip to South America is that honesty, diligence, and hard work will open new markets abroad, just as they have in the United States.

Scientific management and international expansion are less salient business developments in the Emma McChesney stories than the passing of the traveling salesman and the rise of the advertiser. Curiously, though, Ferber’s occasional references to such a succession are historically misleading. According to Timothy Spears, the “traveling salesman remained a significant part of American commercial life” even as, from 1900 to 1925, the “marketplace became dominated by corporations and sophisticated wholesaling techniques” (550). Spears explains that the traveling salesman was “[n]ever simply an order-taker—even when advertisers assumed the primary role in eliciting consumer desire—he followed in the wake of advertising campaigns and helped retailers arrange promotional material in stores” (550). Consequently, Ferber strongly exaggerates both in suggesting that the number of traveling salesmen declined as a result of the widespread adoption of branding and in suggesting that branding diminished their functional value.¹⁰

Spears points out that resentments and rivalries between traveling salesmen and advertising managers did sometimes occur, but “as salesmen conceded that advertising was really the same thing as salesmanship and traveling men vowed to get along with advertising managers, cooperation and organization became key words” (550). Rather than one replacing the other, the two ended up combining energies in a striking example of the period’s concern with functionality and interdependency at work.

To be fair, Ferber does not write the traveling salesman entirely out of her account of early twentieth-century business. In fact, this figure remains prominent even as the advertiser, mostly in the form of Jock McChesney, also begins to receive significant attention. Emma McChesney dusts off her old sample cases and sales pitches when it becomes evident that whoever goes to South America to introduce the firm’s line of petticoats will need extraordinary reserves of dedication and experience to draw upon; advertising is never considered as a substitute for the performance of this particular task. While Emma McChesney is absent on this extended trip, moreover, a new traveling salesman is born: T. A. Buck, her wealthy, idle business partner (and soon-to-be husband), is forced to take on the daunting “Middle Western territory” (*Emma* 13). After her return, Emma McChesney discovers changes to T. A. Buck’s manner and outlook: “His old air of leisureliness was gone. His very attitude as he sat there, erect, brisk, confident, was in direct contrast to his old, graceful indolence” (*Emma* 46). She has difficulty pinning down the precise alteration in her partner’s character—“The way you look and act and think. The way you carry your head. The way you sit in a chair. The very words you use, your gestures, your intonations. They’re different,” she tells him (*Emma* 54)—but clearly, to Emma McChesney’s eyes, the arduous life of the traveling

salesman has acted to reform T. A. Buck's lazy and self-indulgent tendencies. Even as she proclaims the triumph of the advertiser in grand, sweeping terms, Ferber seems to praise the enduring skills and virtues of the traveling salesman.

Consequently, while Ferber appears at times to place the advertiser and traveling salesman in conflict, as a whole the Emma McChesney stories depict the kind of working partnership between the two figures described by Spears, a partnership made necessary by a business environment increasingly structured and organized by the practice of branding. Indeed, it is this growing allocation of business resources to branding which constitutes the most significant underlying historical narrative in Ferber's fictional account of the traveling salesman and the advertiser. If the advertiser merits particular notice in this account as the newer of the two figures, this notice hardly detracts from the continuing importance of the traveling salesman. Spears notes that "[b]y the turn of the century, there was little doubt that salesmanship depended as much on selling one's self as on presenting a product. Success required not only a careful attention to the customer's personality and an ability to adjust to it—talents which commercial traveling had always demanded—but also a willingness to efface the self" (Spears 546). Advertisers engage in self-effacement by default. Isolated in their company offices, like the employees of Jock McChesney's own Berg, Shriner Advertising Agency, they debate ideas and devise campaigns without necessarily meeting the consumers they are attempting to persuade. Traveling salesmen, on the other hand, do less of this conceptual work, as Spears notes, but meet consumers face-to-face, offering themselves in many senses as coequal with the products they sell. Each proves integral, in the Emma McChesney stories, to the larger task of building a successful brand.

As if to drive home this point, two of the stories involve one member of the branding partnership learning just how difficult, yet essential, the job of the other can prove. In “Personality Plus,” Jock begins to act a little too self-assured around the office, and consequently is sent out to persuade an up-and-coming “lady cold cream magnate” (*Personality* 33) to place her advertising account with Berg, Shriner.¹¹ He travels upstate in order to meet the manager of the cold cream plant and to make his case in person. To his surprise, the manager turns out to be a member of his own college fraternity, and as a result they talk little of business, electing instead simply to golf and get to know each other. A few other advertisers dropped in, Jock tells Berg, the head of his firm, after returning to the office, but the manager only gave them a few minutes. Jock feels perfectly confident of having won the account. He is stunned to learn from Berg that he did not, and further stunned at Berg’s assertion that he was simply “too darned charming.” “Personality’s one of the biggest factors in business today,” Berg tells Jock. “But there are some men who are so likable that it actually counts against them. The client he’s trying to convince is so taken with him that he actually forgets the business he represents. We say of a man like that that he is personality plus. Personality is like electricity, McChesney. It’s got to be tamed to be useful” (*Personality* 51). Here Jock learns the importance of self-effacement. In failing to shape his “personality” in accordance to the narrative of business proficiency the consumer desires, he falls short in the traveling salesman’s imperative to offer himself as part of his product.

In another story, “Dictated but Not Read,” the opposite scenario develops. After some trouble with a traveling salesman, Emma McChesney finds herself unexpectedly receptive to Jock’s claims that the T. A. Buck firm should begin relying on advertising to

spread awareness of its products. “[W]hy in the name of all that’s foolish do you persist in using the methods of Methuselah!” he contends. “People don’t sell goods any more by sending out fat old ex-traveling men to jolly up the trade” (*Personality* 74). Emma McChesney agrees to let Jock’s agency devise an advertising campaign, and she withholds her opinions until it becomes obvious that the campaign is a failure. She then steps in with some advertising copy that draws on her own experience as a traveling saleswoman: “It used to go by word of mouth. I don’t see why it shouldn’t go on paper. It isn’t classic advertising. It isn’t scientific. It isn’t even what they call psychological, I suppose. But it’s human. And it’s going to reach that great, big, solid, safe, spot-cash mass known as the middle class” (*Personality* 88). The immediate success of Emma McChesney’s copy—“It looks very much as though we were going to be millionaires in our old age,” T. A. Buck later declares (88)—strikes a blow at “scientific” advertising’s pretensions to omnipotence. But Jock’s original argument about the growing inadequacy of traveling salesmen alone remains unchallenged. If successful advertising requires the kind of first-hand knowledge of the “great, big . . . mass” that traveling salesmen are uniquely qualified to dispense, effective branding nevertheless requires a substantial investment in advertising.

Like the other Emma McChesney stories, but to a greater degree, “Personality Plus” and “Dictated but Not Read” are didactic: they educate readers about contemporary business practices, and more specifically about the conditions that enable the successful creation and deployment of a brand. Foremost among these conditions are, as the first story emphasizes, a calculated and skillful blurring of perceptual boundaries between the product, the person selling it, and the person buying it; and as the second story

emphasizes, a significant presence within the burgeoning print media increasingly influencing both the direction of American cultural development and the purchasing decisions of individual consumers. Readers gain from the Emma McChesney stories a basic understanding of why branding is necessary and how it works. This, in addition to clever dialogue, tightly constructed plots, and compelling thematic conflicts, constitutes the pleasure of the stories: they bring readers news about their world while appearing only to entertain. In this case, however, Ferber's instruction has a purpose much more local and immediate than simply preparing readers to encounter brands as they read, shop, travel, and otherwise go about their daily lives. Ferber's aim in sensitizing readers to the forms and conditions of branding is to draw attention to the manner in which the Emma McChesney stories themselves comprise a brand.

As Brodhead's "cultures of letters" interpretive framework and Garvey's research into the relationship between advertisements and magazine fiction at the turn of the century suggest, Ferber's readers' understanding of the Emma McChesney stories would have been deeply influenced by the stories' publication context as well as larger cultural context. And at each of these contextual levels, brands increasingly held sway. As a result, Ferber's opening image of Emma McChesney ignoring her supper in favor of a magazine advertisement functions both as an introduction to the protagonist and, suggestively, as a mirroring of the reader's own current action. Ferber provides readers with the tools for recognizing and appreciating brands in the hope that they will come to see her as Jock sees Grace Galt, an advertising copy writer in the Berg, Shriner office to whom he boasts about his assignment to visit the cold cream manufacturer. "[I]t was Grace Galt's gift that she could take . . . hard, dry, technical facts and weave them into a

story that you followed to the end,” Ferber writes. “She could make you see the romance in condensers and transformers. She had the power that caused the reader to lose himself in the charm of magnetic poles, and ball bearings, and high-tension sparks” (*Personality* 37). For Jock, Grace’s “power” lies in her ability to transform readers’ perceptions by imbuing common products with appealing narratives. Ferber’s implied contention is that she herself has performed this same feat in the case of the ordinary magazine story.

The Emma McChesney Brand

In doing so, Ferber suggests, she has formulated a new kind of literary product, one that represents a break with the past. “The Man within Him,” a story about Jock’s struggle with the operating rules of his advertising agency, comes closest to making this claim directly. After working for Berg, Shriner for two years, Jock has had some small successes, but has yet to achieve the signal accomplishment of landing a major advertising account using solely his own designs and plans. Now the new president of the “Griebler Gum Company” (*Personality* 98) has approached Berg, Shriner about overhauling its advertising, but refuses to sign with the agency unless he sees some ideas in advance. In accordance with its “code of ethics” (100), the agency’s management has declined to show him any. The reasoning behind this stance is never fully explained—it has something to do with the likelihood that ideas submitted conditionally will be stolen by other firms—and Jock longs to challenge it by showing his ideas to Griebler privately. He explains the situation to his mother, describing his frustration at being prevented from winning the respect (and money) he feels he has earned. “I suppose you’d say I’m lucky to be associated with a firm like that, and I suppose I am,” he says. “But I wish in the

name of all the gods of Business that they weren't so bloomin' conservative. Ethics! They're all balled up in 'em, like Henry James in his style" (103). This comparison is startlingly incongruous. Does invoking the baroque "style" of Henry James's later years really shed light on Jock's professional difficulty?

Insofar as the Berg, Shriner Agency and James both adhere to a set of formal rules, it does. But the point of this comparison seems much less to further illustrate Berg, Shriner's rigidity than to invite readers to recognize, in Jock's plight, a fictional recasting of Ferber's own challenges as an author in an era of branding. The commercial environment in which Ferber produces her stories has changed dramatically even in the relatively short period—just a decade—since the appearance of *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). By aligning herself with the young, fresh, and always "modish" Jock (*Personality* 4, 6, 13), Ferber demonstrates her sympathetic responsiveness to a reader who, like Griebler, "is one of the show-me kind" and "wants value received for money expended" (*Personality* 99). This reader has become accustomed to navigating a consumer culture in which brands declare important differences between functionally identical products, thereby facilitating consumer choice. Jock wonders why a potential client should be expected to sign with his firm solely on the basis of various assurances that the firm will produce excellent work. Likewise, Ferber wonders why a reader would choose an author who remains "all balled up," unwilling or unable to present an awareness of branding and to welcome "show-me" readers who possess a demonstrated interest in fiction's exhibiting a brand just as other consumer products now do.

In order to indicate that the Emma McChesney stories have been crafted with precisely these readers in mind, Ferber turns to several devices calculated to embed the stories in readers' experiences of branding—and to make visible the unique Emma McChesney brand. "Representing T. A. Buck," for example, begins with a description of Emma McChesney's practiced and efficient method of arriving in a new town. She sizes up the other passengers on the bus to the hotel, identifying the salesmen by various telltale signs and making shrewd guesses as to the products associated with each. Then, standing in front of the hotel clerk, she anticipates his attempt to give her an inferior room: "She eyed the clerk, a half-smile on her lips, one arm . . . resting on the marble, while her right forefinger, trimly gloved, tapped an imperative little tattoo. (Perhaps you think that last descriptive sentence is as unnecessary as it is garbled. But don't you get a little picture of her—trim, taut, tailored, mannish-booted, flat-heeled, linen-collared, sailor-hatted?)" (*Roast* 30). Ferber's parenthetical aside acts as a complement to the typecasting Emma McChesney has just been engaged in on the bus. First Ferber shows her protagonist drawing conclusions about her companions based on their suits, hats, shoes, watches, and luggage. These accoutrements spark simple stories about each of the men; Emma McChesney could as easily be glancing over an advertisement as casually observing actual people. Next, Ferber asks readers to think of her traveling saleswoman as she might appear, stripped of her unique characteristics but still embodying a recognizable type, in "a little picture." The suggestion here is that readers might as easily be glancing over an advertisement as reading magazine fiction.

Ferber employs indirect references to well known brands as another device for merging the act of reading the Emma McChesney stories with readers' previous

experiences of branding. One night, as Jock and his mother are sitting quietly after dinner, their conversation turns to what Jock has learned over the course of his apprenticeship in the advertising industry—a good deal, it turns out. “I know the power that advertising has,” he boasts, “how it influences our manners, and our morals, and our minds, and our health. It regulates the food we eat, and the clothes we wear, and the books we read, and the entertainment we seek. It’s colossal, that’s what it is!” (*Personality* 96). Advertising’s “colossal” nature, however, encompasses more than just a deep penetration into “our” choices about “food,” “clothes,” “books,” and “entertainment,” among other things. Jock also refers to the sheer size to which some advertisements have grown. “Two years ago,” he explains, “when I walked down Broadway at night, a fifty-foot electric sign at Forty-second was just an electric sign to me. Just part of the town’s decoration like the chorus girls, and the midnight theater crowds. Now—well, now every blink of every red and yellow globe is crammed full of meaning” (95-96). Jock’s paean to advertising here takes on the slightly secretive and knowing tone (what “meaning,” exactly?) befitting a young man who has worked hard to skill himself in the science of advertising. Nevertheless, the narrative he conveys entails an ordinary “man on the street” learning to access apparently hidden levels of communication; paying close attention to advertisements, it suggests to readers, can lead to the unlocking of interesting and potentially glamorous mysteries.

Jock locates his “fifty-foot electric sign” at what, since 1904, had been known as Times Square, and by the time the Emma McChesney stories were appearing in the early 1910s, giant signs made of hundreds of light bulbs had become common in New York City and other large cities.¹² But it is possible that Jock’s sign is intended to evoke the

first, and still one of the most famous, of these signs, which had also been located on Broadway, twenty blocks farther south, at Madison Square Park. This sign, according to historian Nancy Koehn, was personally designed by Henry Heinz as a centerpiece of the H. J. Heinz Company's early marketing efforts. It was installed in 1900, and "was six stories high and included a large pickle bearing the Heinz name as well as the '57 Varieties' slogan. Lit by 1,200 bulbs, it rang up an electricity bill of \$90 a night." Koehn notes that the sign managed to impress both from a distance and up close: its size and brightness made it visible from many blocks away, while "[i]n the display room below the sign, daytime visitors and passersby could watch company employees packing miniature pickles in bottles" (Koehn 380). The giant, electrified Heinz pickle became an iconic signpost on the Manhattan landscape and pioneered a form of branding that was rapidly adopted by other companies. Jock's discussion of his personal maturation in terms that evoke this expansion and development of branding amalgamates the two histories, making the recounting of one into the recounting of the other.

This amalgamation deepens—and Jock's probable reference to the Heinz pickle sign becomes almost certain—as his conversation with his mother continues. Much to Emma McChesney's amusement, Jock's disgruntlement stems not only from Berg, Shriner's policy against submitting advance plans to potential clients, but also from his earning far less money than some of the more talented women in the field. Jock feels uncomfortable around Grace Galt, since they both know that her salary "more than doubles" his; Emma McChesney remarks that, due to deep biases against women in the workplace, this probably "means she's worth six times as much" (*Personality* 95). Shrugging off this rejoinder, Jock turns to "Mrs. Hoffman, who's with the Dowd

Agency.” He concedes that “[s]he can write copy that lifts a campaign right out of the humdrum class, and makes it luminous.” Still stinging from his mother’s riposte, however, he cannot help undercutting his compliments: “Of course she’s a wonder, even if her face does look like the fifty-eighth variety” (96-97). In the Emma McChesney stories, lack of composure marks a person as inadequate to the challenges of modern business, a fact demonstrated by Fat Ed Meyers’s looking as if he is “going to have apoplexy” after each time Emma McChesney bests him through cleverness and hard work (*Roast* 106, *Emma* 4). And presumably, given that ketchup was already one of Heinz’s leading products, this lack of composure is what Jock implies in Mrs. Hoffman’s possessing a red face. In order to understand this insult, readers not only must recognize the reference to Heinz’s “57 Varieties,” but also must tacitly acknowledge the sense of Jock’s transferring this brand from one context to another and imparting to it a new social function. To read the Emma McChesney stories is, consequently, to be asked to approve the importation of branding into new forms and places.

For Ferber, this approval pays off most when readers comprehend that they are being asked specifically to recognize her own uniqueness in importing branding into the form of the magazine story. The opening of “Pink Tights and Gingham” offers an example of this innovation. “Some one,” Ferber writes, “probably one of those Frenchmen whose life job it was to make epigrams—once said that there are but two kinds of women: good women, and bad women. Ever since then problem playwrights have been putting that fiction into the mouths of wronged husbands and building their ‘big scene’ around it.” She sketches a popular convention in very broad terms, inviting readers to summon instantiations of this convention from memory. In the same breath,

however, she announces her intention to turn this convention on its head: “But don’t you believe it. There are four kinds: good women, bad women, good bad women, and bad good women. And the worst of these is the last. This should be a story of all four kinds, and when it is finished I defy you to discover which is which” (*Roast* 107). Even as “Pink Tights and Gingham” begins with an invocation of generic rules, these rules are immediately discarded in favor of a form Ferber construes as original to her own, more nuanced, point-of-view.

Notwithstanding this preface, the story that follows does not particularly stand out among the Emma McChesney stories, or, indeed, among magazine stories by other authors. Its plot consists of Emma McChesney’s meeting, on a train platform, a down-at-the-heels burlesque dancer named Blanche LeHaye, whom she subsequently invites to join her for a Sunday afternoon at the home of Ethel Morrissey, a local skirt buyer and longtime friend. The three women while away the afternoon cooking, talking, and generally enjoying a bit of domestic relaxation.¹³ Gradually, however, Emma McChesney and Ethel Morrissey begin to make their pity for Blanche LeHaye known by trying—unsuccessfully—to persuade her to give up the life of a “queen of burlesque” (*Roast* 112). Blanche LeHaye neatly turns the tables by questioning her companions’ assumptions about the moral probity of their respective professions and placing the virtue of their attempts at persuasion in doubt. The end of the story does, as promised, leave no clear picture of good women and bad women, only a sense that good women are sometimes guilty of thoughtless, though well intentioned acts. But in many ways, I am suggesting, this is beside the point. What matters is Ferber’s attempt, in a context deliberately shaped to foreground branding’s importance in readers’ lives, to equip her

fiction with its own distinct product narrative—that is, its brand. Like manufacturers of other basic consumer goods, she strives to increase the value of her product not by changing the product itself, but by changing consumers' perception of it. This is the purpose of the brief story about stories that prefaces "Pink Tights and Gingham."

Ferber does not restrict her branding efforts to the beginnings of her stories; these efforts are just as likely to surface elsewhere in the text. On the day Jock discovers that he has failed to win the advertising account of the major cold cream manufacturer in "Personality Plus," for example, he returns home to an empty apartment, gloomy and dejected. "He flicked on the light in the living-room," Ferber writes. "A new magazine had come. It lay on the table, its bright cover staring up invitingly. He ran through its pages. By force of habit he turned to the back pages. Ads stared back at him—clothing ads, paint ads, motor ads, ads of portable houses, and vacuum cleaners—and toilette preparations." Usually a source of interest and diversion, these advertisements now offer only reproach: "He shut the magazine with a vicious slap" (*Personality* 53). Having thoroughly established Jock's overconfidence early in the story, Ferber stages a confrontation with magazine advertisements after his failure in order to reinforce the nature and magnitude of his professional disappointment. In Jock's "vicious slap" to the offending magazine, readers gain a deeper sense of his emotional wounding as well as the juvenility that lingers even in the face of his more adult responsibilities and aspirations.

The conspicuous appearance of magazine advertisements here also suggests an interpretive context for the commentary on standard magazine fiction that immediately follows. Wandering from the empty living-room to his bedroom, Jock "turned on the light there, too, then turned it off. He sat down at the edge of his bed. How was it in the

stories? Oh, yes! The cub always started out on an impossibly difficult business stunt and came back triumphant, to be made a member of the firm at once” (*Personality* 54). In Jock’s case, events have turned out quite differently. Furthermore, no signs of a miraculous recovery seem likely to appear: “A vision of his own roseate hopes and dreams rose up before him. It grew very dark in the little room, then altogether dark. Then an impudent square of yellow from a light turned on in the apartment next door flung itself on the bedroom floor. Jock stared at it moodily” (54). This image of Jock, alone and “star[ing] . . . moodily” at a spot on the floor, contrasts sharply with that of the “cub” who “always” emerged “triumphant” “in the stories,” and the contrast both identifies Ferber’s story with a specific conventional narrative and distances her story from it. Coming in such close proximity to the scene of Jock’s reaction to the magazine advertisements, moreover, the contrast occurs within a context directly linked to branding. Together, the two scenes suggest a product narrative differentiating Ferber’s work from typical popular magazine fare.

This product narrative can also be generated without mentioning fiction, magazines, or advertisements directly, as when, before describing an episode involving Jock and the Berg, Shriner agency, Ferber offers an extended comparison between the advertising business and the traditional English foxhunt. “They used to do it much more picturesquely,” she writes. “They rode in coats of scarlet, in the crisp, clear morning, to the winding of horns and the baying of hounds, to the thud-thud of hoofs, and the crackle of underbrush . . . scrambling up the inclines, pelting down the hillside, helter-skelter, until, panting, wide-eyed, eager, blood-hungry, the hunt closed in at the death” (*Personality* 89). Ferber develops the comparison further by claiming that the “scarlet

coat has sobered down to the somber gray and the snuffy brown of . . . the business suit” and that the “winding horn is become a goblet, and its notes are the tinkle of ice against glass” (89). The comparison ends with two continuities: “The look in the face of the hunter as he closed in on the fox is the look in the face of him who sees the coveted contract lying ready for the finishing stroke of his pen. And his words are those of the hunter of long ago as, eyes a-gleam, teeth bared, muscles still taut with the tenseness of the chase, he waves the paper high in air and cries, ‘I’ve made a killing!’” (90). Though different in period and style, the foxhunt and the contract signing serve similar purposes and are enacted in similar form.

One obvious aim of this comparison is to assert that while the circumstances of masculine sport have changed, according to Ferber, its essential character and rituals remain unaltered. The frenzied, single-minded pursuit of the advertising contract hence retains the fundamental outlines of its ritualistic antecedent, the pursuit of the fox. A second, more subtle, aim is to offer a product narrative that distinguishes the Emma McChesney stories from others readers might consume. From beginning (“They used to do it much more picturesquely”) to end (“finishing stroke of his pen, “waves paper high in air”), Ferber’s descriptions of foxhunting and contract signing double as descriptions of fiction writing. They suggest that although readers will find her prose pared down and plain, more “somber gray” and “snuffy brown” than “scarlet,” this is merely a concession to the ordinariness of her modern subject matter. Her words remain “those of the hunter of long ago,” imbued with conflict, suspense, and dramatic resolution—they have simply been modernized. In characterizing her fiction as the latest in a long line of stories, Ferber imparts to it a product narrative that distinguishes it from other, competing fiction.

Like a manufacturer of cold cream or ketchup, she sets her product apart from others of its kind by furnishing it with a unique and memorable brand.

Ferber's Novel Art

Other magazine fiction authors, of course, also inserted self-reflexive moments into their stories, whether elaborately constructed allegories of writing, like Ferber's description of contract signing as foxhunt, or simple asides that bring generic conventions to the reader's attention, like her reminder that the young striver handed a big assignment usually struggles to accomplish his task but then is lavishly rewarded for his effort. What makes Ferber's self-reflexivity unique is the purpose imputed to it by the Emma McChesney stories' thorough grounding in the history and practice of branding. Embedded in a brief institutional account of the traveling salesman and the advertiser, these stories instruct readers about the conditions necessary for successful branding. To read the stories, in addition, is to gain a firm sense of the presence and uses of actual brands, such as Heinz's "57 Varieties." The particular "culture of letters" generated by this context transforms Ferber's self-reflexivity into a product narrative that enhances consumers' perceptions of her product without altering its typical, standardized quality.

If the Emma McChesney stories offer a glimpse of the formal adjustments necessary for fiction to survive in a culture increasingly constituted through advertisements, endorsements, celebrity, mass media, and other elements of consumer marketing, they also forecast one of the major preoccupations of subsequent modernist authors. In *The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction after Henry James* (2001), Mark McGurl argues that the first few decades of the twentieth century were marked by

repeated attempts to establish novel writing as a fine art on the order of painting or sculpture. Authors such as Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein, and William Faulkner, he suggests, turned to dense, polyvalent, “difficult” fiction as a way of “elevating” their work above the uncultivated mass readership with which the novel had for the greater part of the nineteenth century been closely associated. The formal innovation and experimentation that resulted has long enjoyed a synecdochical relation to critical understandings of modernism.

As McGurl points out, ironically inherent in the attitudes that accompanied “high” modernist literature, if not in the literature itself, was a craving for popular success among those authors who, like James, crafted their fiction precisely so as not to be understood and appreciated by just any common reader.¹⁴ This irony becomes especially sharp when considered in light of the business function formal innovation could be expected to serve. “It was in dialectical relation to [a mass] audience, and working for the most part within the institutions of an expanding mass market, that the novel would attempt to reinvent itself as fine art,” McGurl writes. Within the “mass market,” furthermore, the “art-novel thus becomes visible as a version, of sorts, of the widespread contemporaneous phenomenon of product differentiation—that status-conscious aspect of mass consumerism in which, for famous instance, the mass-produced regularity of the black Ford Model T gives way in the 1920s to the multicolored hierarchies of automotive distinction” (5). According to this logic, modernism was constituted at least partly in response to consumer culture’s interest in “product differentiation.” And given that this interest extended far beyond physical color to include a host of less tangible attributes, it

is unsurprising that early twentieth-century authors would identify formal innovation as a means of structuring consumer perceptions of their novels into unique product narratives.

But what *is* surprising, in light of a modernist literature and culture shaped by such narratives, is a continuing critical emphasis on fiction self-consciously constructed in opposition to the prerogatives of mass consumption. McGurl's reading of James and his high modernist successors suggests that if these authors branded their fiction through conspicuous formal innovation, they did so on the way to achieving for the novel a distinctly literary status (i.e. a state, as Jock says, "all balled up" in "style"). My reading of Ferber's Emma McChesney stories suggests that, in contrast, she branded her fiction as a means of erasing its literary status, of making fiction as literary as a bicycle or a sewing machine—or a petticoat. Recognizing that popular authors such as Ferber shared narrative forms and purposes with acknowledged modernists like Stein and Barnes usefully broadens the field of modernist literature. And one consequence of this broadening is an indication that certain instantiations of modernism's goals and effects moved in a literary trajectory opposite to that traditionally associated with authors in this field. With a view both toward broadening modernism's scope even further and toward investigating similar problems concerning the relationship between modernism, narrative form, and consumer culture in another medium, the next chapter examines branding in early American cinema.

CHAPTER V NOTES

¹ Though Dreiser and Anderson worked in both journalism and advertising in their early years as writers, Ferber is known only to have worked as a newspaper reporter. As

Richard Brodhead suggests, however, journalism and advertising at the turn of the twentieth century were much less professionally and organizationally distinct than they are (perceived to be) today. Ferber's newspaper work would have brought her intimate knowledge of the forms, techniques, and history of advertising in the same way that it brought this knowledge to Howells, Twain, and Crane. See my discussion of Brodhead and "cultures of letters" in the first section of this chapter.

² *Printers' Ink* continued to perform this function until ceasing publication in 1967. For an account of other early advertising industry publications—both journals and books—see Coolsen.

³ This group did not include Rowell, who died in 1908.

⁴ Baker summarizes these debates: "Critics challenged outdoor advertisers' model of public space as a medium of capital accumulation, advocating what one called a 'sane socialism'—the restriction of private property rights—as a solution to what they saw as business's illegitimate exploitation of a collective resource they believed essential to civic life. Yet while their criticisms contained a compelling dimension of protest against the commercialization of public space, these critics were no cultural populists. Rather, their primary concern was with the threat it posed to their own authority—to their power to shape public culture and, by extension, citizenship and nationhood by architectural means" (1188). Public space was seen as instrumental in the formation of culture; debates centered on who would control it.

⁵ Throughout this chapter, I follow Ferber's lead in never abbreviating "Emma McChesney" as "Emma." While using just the character's first name would, in my opinion, make for clearer and less repetitive reading, I think it would obscure the sense of purpose and professionalism Ferber probably intended strict use of her protagonist's full name to impute to this character.

⁶ In the area of promotions, bicycle manufacturers supported the formation of local cycling clubs as well as a national organization the League of American Wheelmen. They also sponsored well known athletes, hosted highly publicized races, and participated in large trade shows (Petty 39-40). As early as the 1870s, moreover, "bicycles were marketed to various discrete segments defined by usage, price, gender, and image/life-style," a strategy that would not be pursued by automobile manufacturers until the 1920s, and by most other consumer product manufacturers until after World War II (42).

⁷ The Emma McChesney stories originally appeared in *American Magazine*, edited by Bert Boyden, from 1911-1915. In his introduction to *Roast Beef, Medium*, Lawrence R. Rodgers describes the magazine as "one of the day's more popular women's journals" (ix). According to William Gleason, Ferber was offered a "blank contract for more McChesney stories" by *Cosmopolitan* 1915, but turned it down in a belief that she needed to move on if she was to continue developing as a writer (206-07).

As this reaction suggests, Emma McChesney is in many ways a (perhaps idealized) fictionalization of Ferber herself: clever, dedicated to her work, admired by women, and respected by men. Ferber accordingly joins a long tradition of American women authors shown by Alison Piepmeier to have ventured “out in public” by embodying themselves in print. In particular, she appears to have built on the accomplishments and legacy of *Godey’s Lady’s Book* editor Sarah Josepha Hale (see Piepmeier 172-208).

⁸ The term “Progressive Era” appears nowhere in the Emma McChesney stories, nor does Ferber figure prominently in major accounts of it (e.g. Hofstadter). However, the stories clearly represent some of the dominant concerns of the period, including the elimination of waste and inefficiency and the advancement of women’s rights. One of the stories, “Sisters under Their Skin,” offers a pointed critique of class biases displayed by some in “The Movement” (*Emma* 185).

⁹ On peddlers in the late nineteenth century, see Lears, who argues that the “peddler was the most revealing forerunner of the national advertiser” (64).

¹⁰ Spears notes that declarations of the traveling salesman’s demise appeared throughout business and popular literature in the early twentieth century—and so Ferber is hardly alone in making this representation. In 1904, a description of advertising as “salesmanship on paper” began to circulate among advertisers. The simplicity of this phrase, combined with an eagerness to win even greater respect and centrality to the business enterprise, convinced many advertisers that they had essentially replaced traveling salesmen. See Spears 525.

¹¹ Interestingly, Jock receives a warning from his mentor, Sam Hupp, before he leaves: “You think that advertising is a game. It isn’t. There are those who think it’s a science. But it isn’t that either. It’s white magic, that’s what it is” (*Personality* 35). This warning points to contemporary debates over the nature of advertising that took place as the field became increasingly consolidated into a business and cultural institution. On one hand were those who considered advertising a form of art; on the other were those who treated it as a science. This latter group steadily gained strength, fueled by leading researchers and theorists such as Walter Dill Scott, who first applied psychological research toward the formulation of advertising principles. See Scott, *The Theory of Advertising* and *The Psychology of Advertising*, as well as Adams.

¹² As William Leach points out, however, Times Square continued to feature the largest and most spectacular electric sign advertisements in the country; together, they formed “a provocative, startling, brilliant, and sometimes suffocating blend of color, glass, and light, never subtle, always carnivalesque, employing a prescribed palette of colors and aiming to circulate money and goods in the biggest conceivable volumes” (Leach 344). See also Chang and Taylor.

¹³ Their conversation offers Ferber the opportunity to insert what may be another brand reference in the mode of Jock's "fifty-eight variety" comment: "Give 'em to me in a brown crock, with a chip out of the side," Blanche LeHaye demands. "There's certain things always goes hand-in-hand in your mind. You can't think of one without the other. Now, Lillian Russell and cold cream is one; and new potatoes and brown crocks is another" (*Roast* 126). I have not been able to identify a specific brand of cold cream associated with or endorsed by Russell, but it is possible that this would have evoked a specific brand to Ferber's readers.

¹⁴ For a sense of these attitudes and a broader account of how modernist authors sold themselves and their work to the public, see the essays collected in Dettmar and Watts, eds., *Marketing Modernisms*.

CHAPTER VI

THE CHEAT AND NARRATIVE FORM: MODERNISM AS BRAND MANAGEMENT

Each of the primary authors examined in this dissertation's first five chapters—Howells, Twain, Crane, Wharton, Ferber—has engaged, to varying ends, with an issue central to the shaping of literature and culture at the turn of the twentieth century: the transformation of branding from a literal into a figurative act. Originating in the sixteenth century as a practice of burning proprietary marks into the flesh of livestock using a hot iron (i.e. “brand”), the development of large-scale industrial manufacturing in the U.S. after the Civil War altered this term's meaning to denote, in the context of an emerging consumer culture, the attribution of a unique symbolic identity to a basic consumer product.¹ This identity commonly emerged as a simple narrative that came to represent the product in consumers' perceptions, and the authors I have so far discussed each shaped their own literary narratives in response to these rival fictions. I turn now to *The Cheat*, a feature film directed by Cecil B. DeMille and released in late 1915, for two reasons. First, this film approaches branding more directly than any of the literary texts I have discussed; its plot centers on a wealthy woman who, in the course of a social intrigue, is physically branded (with a hot iron) and forced to reveal her brand to the public. In literalizing what had by 1915 become almost exclusively a figurative practice, the film returns the practice to a meaning it was just escaping in the 1880s, where this dissertation began, as a way of investigating the figurative practice's significance in 1915 and going forward. In a manner, then, *The Cheat* brings this scholarly project full circle.

Second, cinema emerged in the early years of the twentieth century as an important medium for negotiating ideas about the cultural functions of narrative form. “No one who is interested in the conditions under which the mass of the people live but must count in nowadays the moving-picture show as a factor in the education, diversion, and development of a great mass of people,” an article in *Harper’s Weekly* declared in 1911 (“Moving” 6). By the early 1910s, the “moving-picture show” was well into its second decade of existence and beginning to acquire a measure of cultural legitimacy. Still considered by some a purveyor of cheap thrills and an incitement to immorality, “a great mass of the people” had nevertheless begun to embrace the cinema as a force for “education, diversion, and development.” In this manner, it had begun to fulfill some of the traditional roles of literature. Like literature, moreover, cinema faced the challenge of appealing to consumers for whom product branding, among other modern marketing practices, had assumed central importance: new narrative forms were required if the authors of films, like the authors of novels, were to compete in a market now inundated by rival fictions. The previous chapter identified the way Edna Ferber’s Emma McChesney stories both explain the challenge posed by branding and offer conspicuous formal innovation as a solution to it. For Ferber, I argued, form itself serves as a brand; modernism’s interest in formal innovation and self-reflexivity might thereby be at least partly ascribed to the pressures of branding. This chapter argues analogously that branding motivated an interest in the form of early narrative films that has since been recognized as an important contribution to the development of modernism.

Promotional materials for *The Cheat* offer a glimpse of this relationship between branding and narrative films. On December 25, 1915, twelve days after it was released, a

two-page advertisement for the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company and its new film appeared in the trade journal *Moving Picture World*. The left-hand page of this advertisement is dominated by a stylized headshot of Fannie Ward (fig. 6-1). Her bold stare at the reader is complemented above by text suggesting the actress's importance as the film's star—the font used for her name is slightly larger and more widely spaced than the fonts used for Jesse Lasky's name and for the film's title—and below by a quotation from a letter praising Ward's performance. The letter, sent by Lasky to W. W. Hodkinson, president of Paramount, the film's distributor, expresses his “doubt if her remarkable performance in ‘The Cheat’ has ever been surpassed” (“Cheat” 2296). This half of the advertisement conveys a clear message: image, text, and quotation both individually and collectively associate the identity (and value) of *The Cheat* with its star.²

The opposite half, however, conveys a different and potentially conflicting message (fig. 6-2). Plain text centered on the right-hand page proclaims the value of “LASKY” as visual signifier: “LASKY—The Trade-Mark: There are two kinds of trademarks: those that mean nothing; and those that mean something. The name of Lasky means Something” (“Cheat” 2297). In contrast to its star-driven counterpart, this half of the advertisement boldly emphasizes the high caliber—technological, aesthetic, moral, and economic—of the company behind the film, as represented by its iconic identifier. “LASKY” guarantees refinement and profitability for exhibitors and an edifying and pleasurable cinematic experience for spectators. Whereas one half of the advertisement suggests that *The Cheat* is a creation of its star, the other half suggests that, by virtue of its attendant trademark, *The Cheat* is the product of a corporate author.

PARAMOUNT

Jesse L. Lasky
presents

FANNIE WARD

in the sensational photo drama

"THE CHEAT"

by Hector Turnbull

Produced by Cecil B. DeMille



"Fannie Ward, the star, will in this picture, take her place as one of the few great emotional actresses of the screen. I doubt if her remarkable performance in 'The Cheat' has ever been surpassed."

—From a letter by Jesse L. Lasky to W. W. Hodkinson, president of Paramount Pictures Corporation.

Released through Paramount Pictures Corporation,
DECEMBER 13th



JESSE L. LASKY

120 WEST 41ST STREET

JESSE L. LASKY Pres.

SAMUEL GOLDFISH

Figure 6-1. Left-hand page of advertisement for *The Cheat*.
Moving Picture World, Dec. 25, 1915.

PROGRAM

LASKY--The Trade-Mark

THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF TRADE-MARKS

- Those that mean nothing
- and those that mean something

THE NAME OF LASKY MEANS Something

- It means perfection in photoplay productions
- It means quality, tense drama, clean comedy

MAKE USE OF THE NAME OF LASKY

- Display it outside and inside of your theatre
- It brings increased business
- It adds quality to your theatre

LASKY PRODUCTIONS

on the

PARAMOUNT PROGRAM

FEATURE PLAY CO.

NEW YORK CITY

Treas. and Gen. Mgr

CECIL B. DE MILLE Dir. Gen.

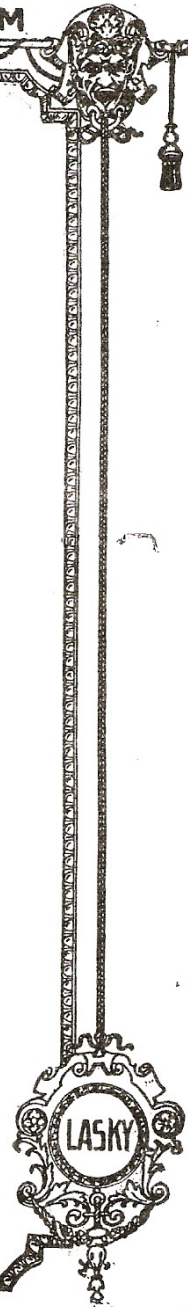


Figure 6-2. Right-hand page of advertisement for *The Cheat*.
Moving Picture World, Dec. 25, 1915.

This chapter identifies and analyzes the ways in which the Lasky Company's film negotiates the tension between star authorship and corporate authorship evident not only in its own *Moving Picture World* advertisement, but also throughout the film industry at the time. Beginning about 1907, spectators began to demonstrate strong interest in the identities, both on- and off-screen, of the bodies that appeared in motion before them. For the most part, film companies were quick to recognize the commercial opportunity this interest presented—they rapidly seized on what became by 1915 the fully developed “star system” as an instrument for both publicizing and differentiating their films. In gratifying and exploiting spectator interest in stars, however, film companies were in many ways relinquishing their claim to authorship of the films they produced. Film companies' commercial interests were given a tremendous boost by the star system, but tapping its profit-making potential—as the Lasky Company did with its advertisement for *The Cheat*—flew in the face of two decades of industrial practice governed by the need for companies to assert *corporate* authorship of their films. For purposes of intellectual copyright, cultural identification, quality assurance, and—perhaps most importantly—product branding, companies had been engaged since the film industry began in the creation of a visual discourse of corporate authorship. Through a clearly identifiable and legible system of iconic self-representations, I argue, film companies deployed visual signs of their status as creator and authorizer of the meanings their films conveyed.

Consequently, the moment in early American cinema at which *The Cheat* appeared is distinguished by the conscious sublimation of one discourse asserting the authorial claims of the film companies into a more commercially advantageous discourse affirming—even celebrating—the claims of the stars to superior authorial status. That

this film makes the resulting discursive tension visible is hardly surprising. The discussion that follows interprets *The Cheat* as a critique of the ways in which visual signs of authorship were mobilized commercially in the corporatized film industry of the early 1910s. Released as the star system was just coming into full flower, this film rejects established industry strategies for representing a corporate author as aesthetically and commercially limiting. *The Cheat* is, on its surface, a melodramatic film that sensationalizes the danger posed to white patriarchal authority by the twin threats of the New Woman and the Asian “other.” Within this conventional narrative framework, however, the film works to clarify and legitimate a complex change in the commercial signification of film authorship.

More specifically, *The Cheat* suggests that film companies’ efforts to brand their films are better served by the emerging star system than by trademarks and icons—or, in the terms suggested by the bifurcated *Moving Picture World* advertisement, better served by Fannie Ward’s profile than by “LASKY.” The debate over film authorship to which the Lasky Company’s film contributes is at bottom a debate over how the film industry might cope with, on one hand, an ongoing market imperative that films exhibit brands, and on the other, spectators’ growing resistance to any disruption of their engrossment in the cinematic image. Firmly entrenched in early twentieth-century consumer culture, films required brands in order to be recognized, understood, and valued as consumer products. When this requirement began in the early 1910s to conflict with a shift toward longer narrative films that posited a coherent fictional space and elicited rapt attention from spectators, a compromise was needed. *The Cheat* suggests that a change in narrative form that replaces corporate signifiers with film stars might achieve just such a

compromise. In doing so, the film shows how branding helped to motivate and structure one of the key transitional moments in early film history as well as to elevate celebrity and stardom to defining characteristics of modern culture.

The Case for Corporate Authorship

Film critics and historians often marvel at the diversity of spectators, exhibition settings, technologies, and film subjects that constituted early cinema. Rapidly evolving equipment enabled constant innovation and experimentation in cinematic technique, and shifting conceptions of film's social, moral, economic, and aesthetic value impacted aspects of spectatorship ranging from where films were shown to how they were presented to how they were *represented* in print and in other media. Organizing these constant changes into a coherent account of cinema's development in this period has proven particularly challenging. However, one of the most compelling and authoritative accounts to appear, Richard deCordova's *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (1990), does so by charting the gradual discursive "emergence" of the film star between 1907 and 1915 in publicity materials, reviews, fan magazines, changes in filmmaking technique, and a variety of other phenomenon. In effect, deCordova offers a genealogy of one half—the Fannie Ward half—of *Moving Picture World's* advertisement for *The Cheat*. My argument for a visual discourse of corporate authorship offers a genealogy of the "LASKY" half, and in doing so provides a critical counter-narrative to the "emergence" of the star system in early American cinema.

Before outlining this counter-narrative, it will be helpful to briefly review deCordova's argument. Prior to 1907, he claims, the film spectator's attention centered

primarily on the experience of filmgoing—the pleasures of a functioning cinematic apparatus. In 1907, however, the work of performers appearing in films began to be noticed and commented upon, and “to be characterized, after a theatrical model, as acting. In effect, a system of enunciation was put in place that featured the actor as subject. This institutionalized a mode of reception in which the spectator regarded the actor as the primary source of aesthetic effect” (deCordova 46). By 1909-10 the discourse on acting had evolved to include a notion of performative identity constructed through multiple films. The “picture personality,” deCordova explains, possessed a name, image, distinguishing mannerisms, and professional history, all of which circulated among and were constructed through the films in which the performer appeared (73). By 1913-14, a second evolution in spectator perceptions of the performer was becoming evident: “The actor’s ‘real’ identity was no longer a shadowy extension of his or her work in film; it was much more—something that could emerge out of a richly drawn and relatively autonomous narrative” (99). The “star” began to materialize, and to substitute for the film company as the primary source of a film’s identity and value as well as the authorizer of its meanings.

The narrative deCordova unfolds is one in which the body of the performer takes on an increasingly powerful role as the “speaker” for the film. The term he uses to describe this role is “site of textual productivity,” and his thesis is that the film, as meaning-laden text, becomes gradually more indebted first to the actor, and then to the picture personality, and finally to the star, for opening it to an ever-widening range of possible interpretations (30). By 1915, the performer had become the “principal figure in the enunciative apparatus,” the author of the film as cultural artifact (80). The film

company, once a determining influence on the number and variety of registers in which a film could signify, had been largely displaced. At the time of *The Cheat*'s release, the star had begun to steal the show.

By all appearances, however, this transition was not a smooth one, as film companies seemed to take measures to protect their claims to film authorship and the discursive power this authorship entailed. Bowser notes that several film companies, most notably Biograph, the home of D. W. Griffith, among others, at first resisted requests by spectators and industry commentators for information about the personal and professional lives of performers to be made public.³ She suggests that this initial resistance, which lasted only until 1910-11 (Biograph alone held out until 1913), was probably the result of misconceptions on the part of film producers. Among the misconceptions she mentions is the belief that stars whose names were advertised would be tempted to demand higher salaries, a fear which subsequently proved baseless (*Transformation* 108). DeCordova notes also that some companies persisted, for a short time, in believing that "if the actors were known in real life it would spoil the illusion of cinema" (80). With pressure to maintain the "illusion" of a coherent cinematic space increasing, the argument went, information about performers' "real" lives would be potentially disruptive.

Other misapprehensions prove, under scrutiny, to have been ingenious devices for increasing spectator interest in screen performers. DeCordova states, for example, that film companies frequently cited as an excuse for withholding information the need to protect the identities of performers who also acted in legitimate theatre and whose elite reputations might be damaged through connection with the cinema, which a minority of

commentators continued to associate with seediness and vice. Well known theatre actors with established reputations would have had nothing to fear from this connection, however, and so the concealment's effect would have been to suggest the involvement of many more leading theatrical performers in cinema than there actually were (77). The notion, then, that film companies opposed or inhibited the emergence of the star system appears to be largely a myth. As deCordova asserts, even in cases where companies deliberately withheld information about performers from the public, spectator desire for this kind of knowledge was only sparked to even greater intensity as a result: "The truth of the human labor involved in the film was constituted . . . as a secret, one whose discovery would be all the more precious and pleasurable since it would emerge out of ostensible attempts to conceal it" (82). While presumably acting to contain the threat to their authorship claims posed by stars and the adulatory discourses that grew up around them, film companies thus actually accelerated the process of their own authorial displacement.

Understanding this process and its significance in the history of early cinema involves recognizing that prior to—and during—the emergence of the star system, film companies actively propagated a visual discourse of corporate authorship. Before there were stars by which to differentiate films as consumer products, there were only film companies distinguished by the unique perceptions and associations attached to each in the public imagination. Spectators identified and assessed various films according to these perceptions and associations, which comprised the film companies' "brand names" and were often suggested by the conspicuous placement of corporate icons in both extra-filmic and filmic settings (Bowser, *Transformation* 103; Robinson 158). Anchored by

these widely recognized and meaning laden corporate icons, constructions of film authorship prior to the establishment of the star system emphasized the film company as author (and owner) of the films it produced.

An extra-filmic instance of the visual discourse of corporate authorship I have described can be found in film catalogs of the period. “Printed film catalogs reflect the development of the early motion picture industry from their introduction in 1894 until the formation of the Motion Picture Patents Company at the end of 1908, and therefore present readers today with a rich resource for understanding these formative years,” according to Charles Musser (“Guide” 4). Catalogs originated as a means of systematizing and circulating information about products and practices among producers and exhibitors amidst the disorganization and rapid growth of the early film industry. As industrial conditions became more centralized, particularly after the formation of the MPPC, catalogs were no longer vital to the completion of business transactions. In addition, their advertising and publicity functions were increasingly transferred to the emerging trade press. As Charlie Keil observes, “most trade journals offered not only reviews and editorials but also technological advice on projectors and cameras, tips to theater owners and accompanists, profiles of actors and manufacturing executives, letters from readers, and instructions for prospective scenarists. One also finds pages devoted to advertisements and (highly complimentary) preview layouts of upcoming films” (Keil 28). Because the trade press organized and circulated such information much more cheaply and efficiently than film catalogs, extant catalogs from the years after 1908 tend to convey fewer and fewer pieces of information about films as commercial products.

Their status as corporate expressions is the exception to this trend.⁴ Gradually divested of nearly all transaction-oriented information, after 1908 film catalogs became little more than vehicles for iconic representations of corporate authorship, as a comparison of two selections from the *Biograph Bulletins* makes clear.⁵ Bulletin No. 47, dated August 10, 1905, advertises *The Firebug* on four pages. The bulletin begins with a letter on Biograph stationary announcing and describing the film. This letter is followed by a title page, which features a subtitle and supplementary praise, a small still photograph with caption, the film's length in feet, its class, and a statement that the film is "produced and controlled exclusively by the American Mutoscope & Biograph Co.," whose New York address is then provided. The bulletin concludes with one and a half pages of a detailed synopsis (Niver 164-67). In contrast, an unnumbered bulletin dated November 7, 1912, advertises *His Auto's Maiden Trip* on a single page containing a title, large still photograph with no caption, and four sentence synopsis. This page also displays the title and brief synopsis of a second film (*The Club-Man and the Crook*), and at the bottom the word "BIOGRAPH" in large print, flanked by two "AB" icons (Bowser, *Biograph* 137). The absence in this second bulletin of much of the information exhibitors and exchanges might find valuable in deciding whether or not to order the films indicates that the bulletin did not serve primarily as a transaction-facilitating document. Rather, as the large twin icons most prominently suggest, the bulletin served as an assertion of Biograph's corporate authorship of the two films represented.

The Charles Urban Trading Company's February 1905 catalog bears a similar iconic imprint. Its cover displays the firm's trademark, a shield overlaid with the intertwined initials "C," "U," "T," and "C." Inside, the trademark reappears alongside a

message to readers: “All genuine Urban Films bear a facsimile of this Trade Mark with counter signature of C. Urban embossed on the beginning of each Film. All Films of our Subjects not so marked are either pirated duplicated copies or rejected misprints. *You accept all so-called Urban Films without this Trade Mark at your own risk*” (original emphasis, Herbert 79, 83). “Duping,” or illegally copying a competitor’s films, was widespread in the early film industry as a result of intense competition and frequently changing production technologies, copyright laws, and patent procedures. By associating its trademark with a warning to exhibitors against purchasing or renting films identifiable through the absence of a trademark as duped, the Urban catalog invokes the trademark’s specific functions as signifier of intellectual property ownership and guarantor of artistic authenticity.

Construed more broadly, however, the Urban Catalog’s characterization of its trademark suggests that the quality and value of an Urban film reside not in the film’s individuality—the unique merits that set it apart from all other films, whether made by Urban or by one of the company’s competitors—but rather in the corporate icon that appears in the film’s first few frames. Subject matter, aesthetic properties, narrative structure, and moral perspective are all elided by the trademark’s equating of individual film identity with corporate identity. This elision, in turn, reinforces the strong perception of corporate authorship that serves, at least initially, to generate sales. An initials-on-shield icon marks each film, over and above its own particular characteristics, as the intellectual property and artistic product of the Charles Urban Trading Company; what is supposed to attract consumers is not primarily the product itself, but instead the mark on its surface.

The threat that competing companies might engage in film piracy (in combination with the need to minimize copyright expenses) also motivated an instance of the visual discourse of corporate authorship similar to that found in the Urban catalog, but filmic. As late as 1913, well after they began to conflict with an increasingly dominant realist aesthetic, trademarks were used by film companies to visually mark scenes within their films. These trademarks were sometimes painted onto the sets of particular scenes. Just as often, however, they were constructed out of metal or wood and temporarily fixed to a wall or large object on the set, then removed and passed on to other sets as needed. Each company was designated by a simple and clearly identifiable icon: “Vitagraph had a winged ‘V,’ Lubin had a bell, Biograph used an ‘AB,’ Essanay had a circle with ‘S&A’ inside of it, Pathé a cock . . . Kalem a sun . . . Thanhouser used a wreath enclosing comic and tragic masks as well as intertwined company initials, and American had a winged ‘A’” (Bowser, *Transformation* 137). Like the intertwined initials appearing just before the start of each “genuine” Urban film, the trademark found staked to the ground, nailed to a tree, or incorporated into a wallpaper pattern was intended to provide irrefutable visible proof of a film’s status as legal artifact and property of a corporate author.

Nevertheless, trademarks embedded in a film’s scenery also handily served another, equally important, role in establishing corporate authorship: product branding. During the early and mid-1910s, which saw the gradual rise and conventionalization of feature-length narrative films, spectators began to expect more “realistic” sets and scenarios.⁶ In a February 1911 article in *Moving Picture World*, for example, George Rockhill Crow declares that the “technical *ne plus ultra* of picture drama—of all drama, in fact—is to form an illusion, to make the audience believe that the thing really has

happened as a matter of life” (“Technique” 229). Therefore, he continues, film producers should strictly avoid “jarring incongruities that may divert the mind of the audience from its interest in the thematic progress of the play” (229). Trademarks, which needed to be large and conspicuous in order to be seen clearly by the camera, began to be perceived as egregious disruptions in the field of vision. A cinema of “illusion,” rather than attraction, had taken hold, and becoming absorbed in the “thematic progress” of the narrative had come to constitute one of the cinema’s chief delights.

Sustaining such pleasurable absorption proved difficult for spectators when confronted with Biograph’s “AB,” Kalem’s sun, or any of the other trademarks. These distinctive icons promptly punctured spectators’ fantasy of a “real” cinematic space, particularly if they appeared on an outdoor set or on the set of a historical drama. For Craw, moreover, the purpose of inserting such “jarring incongruities” into the film has nothing to do with intellectual property rights and everything to do with advertising and publicity. “But now, after our high-salaried, artistic, and experienced producer has put his brains into creating the height of illusion,” he complains, “that little commercial trade mark undoes all the expense and work that art has gone to, for it spoils the illusion, and says to the audience, ‘This is not life; it is ‘make believe.’ *Our* studio is doing all this!’” (original emphasis, 229). In Craw’s account, trademarks embedded in scenery intrude into the spectator’s experience of the film, constantly—and annoyingly—threatening to reconstitute this experience in terms of brand-driven product consumption. Filmgoers are yanked away from the spectatorial seductions of increasingly conventionalized narrative by a disruptive, and therefore unpleasant, reminder of films’ status as branded products

and their own status as brand-conscious consumers. When the trademark appears, “life” becomes only “make believe,” and spectators become only shoppers.

This insight can be difficult to grasp unless spectator perspectives are given special consideration. Commenting on Craw’s article, Bowser confesses her inability to make sense of his blaming advertising departments for the continued presence of trademarks on the set: “I don’t know whether this accusation betrayed ignorance of the original reason for using the trademark or whether indeed the trademark had come to be used to emphasize brand-name values as well” (*Transformation* 139). As a spectator and commentator, however, Craw would have attached little or no importance to the trademark’s ability to signify intellectual property ownership. Its ability to signify artificiality, on the other hand, especially given the rise of a realist film aesthetic, would have assumed paramount importance.⁷ Likewise, its ability to interject a narrative of extra-filmic consumerism into an increasingly conventionalized film narrative would understandably have drawn serious attention. The trademark’s only relevant function for spectators was as a purveyor of “brand-name values,” and consequently Craw excoriates it as the visible manifestation of commercialism’s incursion into art.

If Craw’s critique seems perhaps overly pointed, it nevertheless makes sense in the context of popular advertising and publicity strategies in the film industry of the early 1910s, strategies that frequently exploited the trademark and thereby conditioned spectators to be sensitive to its function as an advertising tool.⁸ Epes Winthrop Sargent, a columnist for *Moving Picture World*, repeatedly urged exhibitors to adopt a trademark for their theaters and to display it at every opportunity. In October 1912, he wrote: “We confess a weakness for the trademark cut. It pays and it pays a big premium. Get

something that is really distinctive and then hold on to that even though you may later find something that seems to you to be even better. Put it on everything you have, over the door, on your slides, your letter heads, your lithographs, your employees and your patrons” (338). The following year, he again urged exhibitors to adopt a trademark and to “make it SINK IN and stay in the minds of your townspeople,” where “it will soon become established and the name of your theater will be synonymous with and will instinctively suggest your trademark” (original emphasis, 695).⁹ Whereas trademarks embedded in the scenery may not have been intended by film companies to function as brands, other trademarks confronting the spectator in the theater, particularly those of exhibitors, were clearly designed and displayed with branding in mind. Responding to trademarks embedded in the scenery as brand icons was, for Craw and other spectators, simply one of several such responses solicited during the larger filmgoing experience.

But if exhibitors were substantially to blame for spectators’ sensitivity to trademarks as brands, they were in many cases only putting to good use the business strategies film companies had shown them. Film companies’ advertising materials both modeled for and facilitated exhibitors’ efforts to establish trademarks as profitable brands. In March 1914, for example, just a few weeks after the release of its first film, the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company received special recognition from Sargent for its comprehensive and aggressive handling of advertising and publicity. The press package distributed by the company upon release of a new film, according to Sargent, was “newspaper stuff all the way through” and “put in such a shape that all the [theater] manager has to do is to tear off at the perforations and hand it into the newspaper offices.” It included “several reading notices, press stories, advance announcements and

display advertisements all on stout paper in mechanical typewriting” (1227). Each item in the Lasky Company press package was ready-made, obviating the need for interpretation by either exhibitors or journalists and allowing the film company to coordinate and repeat specific names, descriptions, and images in such a way as to brand the particular film being released with the sign of the Lasky Company, its corporate author. The package both demonstrated successful branding at work and provided for exhibitors a foundation of promotional materials on which to build their own distinct brands.

As Sargent’s praise suggests, the Lasky Company stood out among the major film companies of the mid-1910s as especially adept at promoting its films through establishing and mobilizing a brand. Correspondingly, the company was significantly invested in discursively constituting itself as a corporate author. In late 1915 and early 1916, for example, both before and after *The Cheat* was released, Lasky Company advertisements emphasizing “LASKY” as trusted symbol of filmmaking excellence repeatedly occupied the cover of trade journal *Motion Picture News* (fig. 6-3). “LASKY is synonymous with the very highest type of PHOTOPLAY PRODUCTIONS,” proclaimed one advertisement; “Thanksgiving Reminder: LASKY PHOTOPLAYS, Photoplays To Be Thankful For,” announced another. Still others confronted readers with “The name of LASKY means PERFECTION in PHOTOPLAY PRODUCTIONS” and “LASKY PHOTOPLAYS of PROVEN VALUE and QUALITY.”¹⁰ Each advertisement presents its message as text appearing on a theatre curtain, a design no doubt intended to remind readers of the commitment, suggested by the company’s name, to feature-length films adapted from stage plays.

Hanging from the ropes at either side of the curtain, moreover, appear small, ornate crests with “LASKY” in the center circle. These crests closely resemble in appearance both the corporate icons found in film catalogs and the trademarks embedded in film scenery until only a couple of years before, and are demonstrative of the Lasky Company’s late contribution to a visual discourse of corporate authorship that had nearly disappeared by the end of 1915. Like the right-hand half of the Lasky Company’s advertisement for *The Cheat* in *Moving Picture World*, its *Motion Picture News* cover advertisements persuasively identify the film company as creator and authorizer of its films’ meanings. Unlike the former advertisement, however, the latter does not complicate this identification by suggesting that star authorship, as established and propagated by the star system, has come to displace corporate authorship. The two forms of authorship—in effect, two different forms of branding—remain very much in conflict. For a dramatization of this conflict and its consequences, as well as a vision of how the film industry might move forward to embrace stringent narrative conventions without abandoning successful marketing practices, we must turn to *The Cheat*.

JANUARY 1, 1916

Motion Picture News

HAS THE QUALITY CIRCULATION OF THE TRADE

PARAMOUNT PROGRAM

THE NAME OF
LASKY
MEANS
PERFECTION
OF
PHOTOPLAY
PRODUCTIONS

LASKY PRODUCTIONS EXCLUSIVELY ON THE PARAMOUNT PROGRAM

JESSE L. LASKY FEATURE PLAY CO.
120 WEST 41ST STREET, NEW YORK CITY
JESSE L. LASKY PRES. SAMUEL GOLDFISH TREAS. CECIL B. DE MILLE MGR.

LASKY LASKY

VOLUME XII

NUMBER 20

PRICE 10-CENTS

Figure 6-3. Cover. *Motion Picture News*, Jan. 1, 1916.

Sex, Lies, and Branding: *The Cheat*

1915 has long been noted as a pivotal year in film history, primarily due to the release of D. W. Griffith's epic historical drama, *The Birth of a Nation*. But as Ben Singer notes in his introduction to *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (2001), Griffith's film enjoys a reputation among film critics and historians today far higher than that accorded to it by filmgoers who were present at its release. Paging through a trade journal from the period, he writes, "I naturally assumed the film would take the trade journal by storm, monopolizing its ads, editorials, publicity items, and reviews for weeks, perhaps months, to come. I assumed that the film's original exposure would roughly correspond to its contemporary prominence in film history" (4). *Birth* turns out to have generated little, if any, more fanfare than other films, a fact that offers Singer a lesson in the value of carefully situating early films in their cinematic and broader cultural contexts. If such contextualization has a potentially deflating effect on the critical reputations of some films, like *Birth*, it also turns up evidence suggesting the hitherto unrecognized importance of others—like *The Cheat*.

Consequently, while I do not want to exaggerate its significance, I nevertheless maintain that *The Cheat* both represents and resolves particular institutional questions to a degree that distinguishes it from its contemporaries. Specifically, the film makes visible the tension between corporate and star authorship existing at the time of its release. It does so indirectly, by displacing them onto a narrative indebted to film industry conditions of the early and mid-1910s for its themes—investment, celebrity, branding—but containing no direct references to these specific conditions. Brought to

resolution, the filmic narrative offers a lens through which to read the particular historical narratives from which it arises.¹¹

I make this clarification as a means of both acknowledging my debt to and distancing myself from Jerome Christensen's recent allegorical readings of blockbuster films from the late 1980s and 1990s. Figuring the film company as auteur in what he calls the "manager theory of Hollywood film," Christensen treats major Hollywood blockbusters—*Batman* (1989), *JFK* (1991), *You've Got Mail* (1998)—as "corporate speech," functional allegories contrived to accomplish company objectives (or rather, those of top executives; for Christensen the distinction between company and manager is null) ("Time" 593). His analysis is useful in suggesting that an intersection between industry conditions and filmic narrative may be read in the corporate iconography that appears in the film; such iconography then becomes an interpretive link between the historical narrative of the film industry's growth and development and this narrative's own (filmic) narrative product. Where Christensen errs, I think, is in attributing to the film company and its leaders the intention to produce precisely the allegory he weaves.¹² Proving such a claim is nearly, if not actually, impossible—Christensen himself admits that allegory only exists "by fiat" ("Taking" 199). Dispensing with this allegorical hermeneutic, then, but retaining an emphasis on the signifying power of corporate icons, we can ask: in what ways does *The Cheat* comment on the transition in the mid-1910s from business strategies that presumed corporate authorship to those that presumed, and exploited, the developing author status of the star?

The Cheat is, quite literally, the story of a branding. Edith Hardy (Fannie Ward), a glamorous young socialite and the wife of New York stock-broker Richard Hardy (Jack

Dean), belongs to the “smart-set” currently “paying social tribute” to Torii (Sessue Hayakawa), a Japanese merchant who imports small Asian figurines.¹³ As befits her star billing in the film’s *Moving Picture World* advertisement, Fannie Ward as Edith stands at the center of both the film’s action and its luxurious depiction of social life among the Long Island elite. Ward’s introduction establishes her in this position immediately. An iris-in shows her sitting in an ornate armchair with zebra-striped upholstery while petting a small dog. She wears a lavish black gown and matching feathered hat made striking by their contrast with the scene’s plain white background. Rising and walking slowly toward the spectator as the camera gradually irises-out, she pauses just before the iris closes in order to facilitate the spectator’s appreciation of her beauty and opulent dress.

This introduction functions both as a first look at Edith Hardy and as an implicit acknowledgment of Fannie Ward’s widely publicized taste for fashion and luxury. As Sumiko Higashi notes, “Ward personified conspicuous consumption” in her off-screen life. Before appearing in *The Cheat*, she had married a British multimillionaire and created scandal among the British well-to-do by flaunting her extravagant clothes and jewelry (Higashi, *Cecil* 103). In her career as a stage actress, moreover, she had achieved celebrity status, according to a writer for *Motion Picture News*, as “one of the leading high class comediennes of the American stage” (“Miss” 69). Many filmgoers were therefore familiar with Ward’s personal and professional past. Conducted in fashionable ostentation, her introduction in the film imputes to her on-screen character the “high class” traits spectators had come to identify with Ward through her theatrical performances and through the trade press’s fixation on her headstrong personality and

glamorous lifestyle. Fannie Ward, popular actress, needs only to change her name in order to enter the film's narrative as Edith Hardy, fictional socialite.

Nevertheless, this entry is partially—and crucially—refused. As Ward steps slowly toward the camera in the last few seconds of her introduction, she looks directly into the lens. Her facial expression, which has been fixed in a smile, changes briefly to register her pleasant surprise at meeting an unexpected guest: the spectator (fig. 6-4). In Ward's slightly fallen jaw and dramatically arched eyebrows, the spectator receives a teasing acknowledgment of complicity in the fictionalization underway. Explicit acknowledgment of the camera's presence was a common element of the "cinema of attractions," the dominant film style until about 1907, and it is possible that Ward's greeting derives from this style's lingering appeal.¹⁴ More than just a playful wink at the audience, however, her spectator recognition combines the direct address to the camera common before the rise of feature films (and its concomitant narrative conventionalization of cinematic storytelling) with the recently developed cult of film celebrity. Ward draws attention not to the technological marvels of the cinematic apparatus, but rather to this apparatus's capacity to expand and reimagine subjects of public discourse.

The result is a brief break in the film's presentation of "real" cinematic space (what Craw calls its "illusion") which effectively reminds spectators of Ward's stardom. From the introduction scene, the film cuts to an intertitle ("The Butterfly") and then to the first scene in the narrative, which shows Ward donning a zebra-striped fur coat, a visual link back to the zebra-striped chair in which she sits during the introduction. The narrative continuity this link should generate, however, is undermined by the non-

narrative—or rather, non-filmic narrative—information imparted by the gratuitous greeting Ward extends to her fans as she approaches the camera. With this greeting, Ward disrupts the introduction's transference of character attributes (extravagance, glamour, sociability) from off-screen star to on-screen socialite, and consequently the woman who enters the narrative in the film's next scene plays something of both roles. In communicating to spectators the self-consciousness with which she portrays Edith, Ward invites them to withhold their attribution to Edith of a genuine fictiveness, leaving her, to spectators, simultaneously character and star.



Figure 6-4. Fannie Ward, as Edith Hardy, greets spectators.

This self-consciousness is all the more noticeable in Ward's introduction due to its complete absence from the introductions of Jack Dean and Sessue Hayakawa, which precede Ward's and suggest the terms in which a reading of the film that makes sense of

Ward's self-consciousness might be constructed. If Edith Hardy is introduced as an indulgent consumer of fashionable luxuries for whom consumption is synonymous with display, her husband Richard is introduced as the diligent, hard-working stock-broker whose efforts make such consumption and display possible. Dean is shown seated at a cluttered office desk against a plain black background, diligently studying the ticker tape (fig. 6-5). While the tape spools onto his desk, he keeps his head bent in concentration and turned slightly to the side, as if to highlight the sharp contrast between the glossy black hair on top of his head and the (perhaps prematurely) gray tufts at his temples. One of the figures on the tape prompts him to write a short note; he hands it to someone off-screen, then tucks his pencil behind his ear in readiness as he again studies the tape. Only a second passes, however, before his gaze drifts up and settles abstractly on a spot off-screen, suggesting that he is distracted by worries about his wife and her excessive spending.

As a stock broker, Richard Hardy deals in contracts between buyers and sellers of property and assets of which he has no direct, personal knowledge. His functional conception of ownership is abstract: while in financing certain investments he acquires a stake in them, this stake remains always immaterial, and the success or failure of the investment remains always in other hands than his own. Accordingly, Hardy suggests one position the film company might adopt with regard to the commercial function of author signification in an industry rapidly reorganizing around the star system. Hardy's wife, Edith, is his star: the money he earns from stock brokerage finances her prominent role in the spectacle of Long Island social life. Insofar as he "owns" her, however, his ownership is without a particular mark or symbol, asserting itself instead through the less

iconic (yet no less binding) conventions of marriage and social propriety. Edith's social triumphs among the drawing rooms of the couple's fashionable acquaintances belong also to Hardy only by convention—not by sign. As an investor and manager whose financial resources help create a “scene” from which he receives a valuable return, Hardy strategically concedes authorship of this “scene” to his star-like wife. In addition to the awareness of actual stardom trailing from Ward's performance as a result of her playful spectator acknowledgment during Edith's introduction, then, Hardy's profession and the relation it bears to his wife's social activities invite a reading of the film in terms of the challenge film companies faced during the mid-1910s in adopting strategies for mobilizing authorship as a commercial tool that successfully negotiated the emergence of the star system.



Figure 6-5. Jack Dean, as Richard Hardy, diligently marking the ticker tape.

The film's figuring of Sessue Hayakawa's character, Tori, as the kind of trademark-driven corporate author frequently found before about 1915, an antithesis to the forward-looking, star-driven Hardy, rounds out this reading. In his introduction, Tori is shown, like Hardy, seated at a desk against a plain black background. Several small ivory figurines occupy the desk, along with a brazier of hot coals containing a branding iron. Tori removes the branding iron, tests its heat against the palm of his hand, blows on the coals and replaces the iron, then removes it and brands the base of one of his figurines with the image of a shrine gate (fig. 6-6). Satisfied, he then pulls down a shade, leaving only his face illuminated by the light from the glowing coals. The scene ends with a diagetive fade-out as Tori rises and covers them.



Figure 6-6. Sessue Hayakawa, as Tori, branding the base of a figurine.

Hayakawa's introduction and several subsequent scenes also shot with dramatic low-key lighting received high praise from contemporary reviewers for their striking visual effects. W. Stephen Bush, for example, wrote in *Moving Picture World* that the film's "lighting effects . . . are beyond all praise in their art, their daring and their originality" (2384). More recently, Kristin Thompson has identified these scenes as a landmark in the "great shift in American lighting practice in 1915" for which director Cecil B. DeMille and his studio staff were largely responsible (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 224-25). The film's achievement in innovative lighting is unmistakable. What this focus on visual style tends to overlook, though, is the kind of business in which Tori engages and which the introduction scene, through both its visual parallels with Dean's introduction and its unusual inclusion of a close-up shot, is at pains to make clear.

Identified by the preceding intertitle as an "ivory king," Tori appears in the introduction in a domestic space, rather than a traditional business office, as the kimono-style robe he wears and the act of pulling down the shade (presumably before going to bed) demonstrate. He is shown, like Hardy, in a medium frontal shot, but unlike Hardy he is isolated: his business is conducted alone and in semi-darkness. For Tori, the domestic and the professional merge in a business practice that is distinctly patriarchal—seated at his desk, he rules a domestic space using the tool (branding iron) of his profession. It is also, in a figurative sense, historically regressive. His prolonged demonstration of the branding iron indicates his appropriation for himself of the charged eroticism usually attributed to the stars. Rather than allowing his figurines (stars) to circulate and to accumulate value through exposure to public desire (as Hardy does), he hoards them, thereby incorporating their individual identities and values into his own.

Yet hoarding *objets d'art* does not satisfy Tori: he must also mark them with the sign of his ownership, a point emphasized in his introduction through a close-up shot of the freshly branded base of a figurine (fig. 6-7). The film's interest in showing the brand underscores its corresponding interest in representing Tori as a trademark-driven businessman, both through visual fetishization of the branded object and through an implicit contrast with the business practices employed by Hardy. While Hardy deals in abstractions of ownership, strategically conceding author status in order to maximize the value of his investment, Tori deals only in the physically concrete, proclaiming his author status through an ineradicable visual sign. The close-up shot of the brand, the only close-up to appear in any of the three introductions, helps to establish and clarify this distinction.

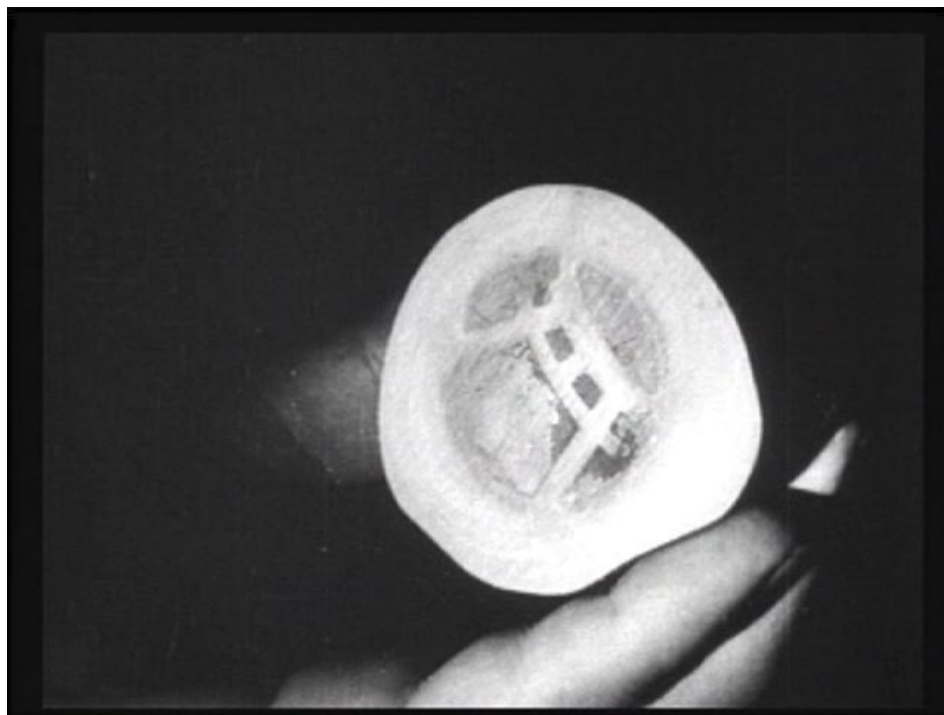


Figure 6-7. Close-up shot of the base of a figurine after Tori marks it with his branding iron. The simple, but unique design evokes trademark symbols used by film companies in promotional materials and embedded in film sets.

It also forecasts the film's plot. When she loses \$10,000 belonging to the Red Cross Fund for Belgian Orphans (the film's only reference to World War I), Edith accepts Tori's offer to loan her the money in exchange for becoming his mistress. Just before the bargain is struck, he shows her how he uses the branding iron to mark his property, declaring, "That means it belongs to me." On the night when she arrives at Tori's house to fulfill her obligation, Edith attempts to repay the \$10,000, which she has obtained through her husband's diligence and hard work in the financial markets. Tori refuses payment, however, and a desperate physical struggle ensues in which he brands Edith on the back of her shoulder, as though she were one of his figurines, before she shoots him and escapes (fig. 6-8).



Figure 6-8. Tori pins Edith to the desk before branding her shoulder with the mark displayed on his imported figurines.

The severity of the violence in this scene makes *The Cheat* stand out even among other early melodramas. But as Gina Marchetti has shown, the Lasky Company's film nevertheless belongs to a distinct group of films—it fits the basic contours of what she calls the “yellow peril” romance, a subgenre it actually helped to inaugurate. “The narrative pattern most often associated with Hollywood dramas involving the ‘yellow peril,’” Marchetti writes, “features the rape or threat of rape of a Caucasian woman by a villainous Asian man. With roots deep within the Euroamerican melodramatic tradition, these fantasies present the white woman as innocent object of lust and token of the fragility of the West’s own sense of moral purity” (Marchetti 10). Through its emphasis on Edith’s gullibility and naiveté as well as its frank, though clearly unsympathetic, portrayal of her sexual attraction to Tori, *The Cheat* boldly exploits Western cultural anxieties about the perceived vulnerability of white womanhood and the menacing power of the East.

The film’s exploitation of these anxieties is most conspicuous during the scene in which Edith agrees to provide sexual favors to Tori in order to avoid the scandal of having lost the Red Cross’s money. Soon after arriving at a Red Cross ball held at Tori’s home, Edith is singled out by her host for a private tour of the house. They enter a room filled, museum-like, with expensive Asian artifacts and curiosities which immediately receive Edith’s attention and admiration. Circulating around the room, her wonder increases until the man whom she had trusted to invest the Red Cross’s money for her suddenly bursts in and reveals that the investment has completely failed. Edith faints, and Tori carries her across the room toward the door. Seizing the opportunity, however, he pauses before a “shoji” screen just inside the door and kisses the unconscious woman.

She then revives, but her desperation grows as Tori conjures dire visions of scandal and humiliation and as Hardy, seen in silhouette through the translucent screen, acknowledges his utter inability to help the unfortunate investor. Faced with the powerlessness of her husband and the threats of the Asian man, Edith chooses to capitulate.

This scene ties together several threads in what Marchetti calls the “narrative pattern” of “yellow peril” romance by transforming powerful anxieties—that an Asian man could desire a white woman; that the woman’s husband could be powerless to counteract this desire; and that the woman could voluntarily yield to it—into disturbing and undeniable realities. Sketched in these broad terms, the Lasky Company’s film seems to mobilize deep-seated cultural fears in a fairly conventional way. What sets the particular “yellow peril” romance in *The Cheat* apart, however, is that, viewed in conjunction with a historical account of corporate authorship’s displacement by star authorship in the early 1910s, the film’s presentation of tabooed interracial desire and its accompanying violence serves as a scaffolding of narrative and thematic conventions through which to make sense of widespread industrial change. The “yellow peril” romance provides a conventional plot, which, reconstituted figuratively in terms the film itself suggests (celebrity, management, iconic signifiers, branding), offers an orderly and predictable shape for a historical narrative of authorship in the early film industry that, in fact, was neither orderly nor predictable.

The Cheat therefore resolves its conflict between two business strategies, one allied to star authorship and the other to corporate authorship, by identifying the latter with a “villainous” (Marchetti’s term) Asian character who, by convention, must be

contained and effectually eliminated from white society. The moment in which Tori, while struggling to subdue Edith after refusing to accept repayment in cash, reaches for his branding iron and brands Edith's body indelibly with the image of a shrine gateway, is significant for two reasons. First, this moment constitutes a melodramatic climax that will be repeated, with certain power reversals, at the end of the film. Second, and more importantly, it marks the initial point at which the film's conventional "yellow peril" narrative and its theme of competing business strategies become inextricably linked.

Tori's action transforms his branding iron—the tool of his profession—into an instrument of racially transgressive desire. Consequently, his fate as a figure for corporate authorship becomes predicated upon his fate as a dangerous threat to white hegemony.

The criminal trial that concludes the film brings these linked fates into focus. Though initially a trial to determine the guilt or innocence of Hardy, who has taken the blame for Edith's shooting of Tori, attention shifts to Tori when Edith responds to the jury's verdict of "guilty" by rushing to the front of the courtroom. She gestures wildly, pleading for the understanding and sympathy of the crowd and hysterically revealing her branded shoulder (fig. 6-9). The packed gallery quickly becomes an enraged mob, and Tori narrowly misses being lynched in the ensuing melee. After the judge summarily throws out the jury's verdict and releases Hardy, Edith and her husband make their way down the courtroom's long center aisle amidst cheering and applause (fig. 6-10). The scene's resemblance to the end of a wedding is striking: the star-driven manager and the star have figuratively reaffirmed their vows, and the camera irises-out to bring the film to a close.

Carried along by a conventionalized “yellow peril” narrative in which Tori cannot help but be condemned, his corporate icon-driven practice of author signification, the kind of practice evinced historically in the film catalogs and trademarks that lingered nearly until the mid-1910s, has been condemned as well. In its place, a less literal and less visible (yet certainly no less potent) practice of author signification has arisen. Represented by Hardy, whose possession of and control over his wife is never more certain than in the film’s final moments, this practice mobilizes stardom as a strategic commercial instrument with which film companies can not only maintain their present success, but also grow and expand. Edith, whose dramatic performance in front of the courtroom crowd solidly establishes the ability of the star to create and authorize new meanings, will continue to bear under her dress the mark—the icon—of a corporate author, just as the fact of an era of corporate authorship will continue to lurk beneath critical accounts of the emergence of the star system. But as *The Cheat* reveals, this era has come to an end.¹⁵



Figure 6-9. Edith reveals her branded shoulder to the shocked courtroom crowd.



Figure 6-10. Edith and her husband exit the courtroom amidst cheers and applause. The scene strongly resembles the end of a wedding ceremony.

Hollywood's Corporate Soul

While Edith and her husband's figurative reaffirmation of vows signifies the demise of corporate authorship, I want to emphasize that it does not signify the demise of branding in the film industry. The question confronted in *The Cheat*, and in filmmaking at the time, is not *whether* film companies should brand their products, but *how* exactly they should go about doing this in order to ensure the further growth and development of the industry. What made this an urgent question was increasing spectator enthusiasm for longer narrative films and antagonism toward disruptions of the cinematic space these films created. George Rockhill Crow was not alone in protesting the presence of the "little commercial trade mark" (229) peeking out from a corner of the screen; neither was Epes Winthrop Sargent the only commentator to emphasize the centrality of branding to the success of the film industry as a whole. The emergence of the star system allowed film companies to abandon the practice of branding films through the conspicuous placement of corporate icons in both filmic and extra-filmic settings. Appropriating stars as brands, film companies satisfied both the Crows and Sargents of the press as well as the many filmgoers who shared their views. They also institutionalized stardom and celebrity as dominant influences on the development of modern culture.

In addition, harnessing the star system for branding purposes may have anticipated a need already arising among large companies in other business sectors. As Roland Marchand argues in *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (1998), the ascendance of the corporation in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century threatened a social order premised on the idea that legal persons were also social and moral persons—which

corporations were not.¹⁶ “The pure size of many corporations—their number of employees, the magnitude of their production, their capital resources, their national scope of distribution, and their capacity for political influence—persuaded many Americans . . . that the nexus of social institutions within which they lived had been radically transformed,” Marchand writes (2). Managers of the biggest corporations disavowed any intention of exercising social influence, but the “traditional potency of the family, the church, and the local community suddenly seemed dwarfed by the sway of the giant corporations,” nonetheless (2). Product branding and its slightly younger analog, public relations, served the purpose of constructing a “corporate soul,” perceptually humanizing corporations that undeniably wielded a large amount of social and moral power yet acknowledged no corresponding set of social and moral obligations.¹⁷ They allowed the “great business giants of the early twentieth century . . . to legitimize their newly amassed power within the nexus of social institutions” (3), thereby diffusing the threat to the established social order posed by an exclusively legal personhood.

Corporations’ main strategy for doing so centered on bold and innovative self-representations that attributed to their subjects a firm commitment to “human” values. In print, drawings, paintings, sculptures, and even in the buildings that housed them, corporations sought through formal and stylistic innovation to present themselves as having intellectual, psychological, and emotional, in addition to legal, embodiment. Marchand notes the aesthetic considerations that shaped these self-representations: “Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of the images—verbal, graphic, and architectural—that major corporations put forth in their bid for institutional status was their self-conscious creation as works of art. The designers of corporate imagery did not

necessarily strive to make it 'beautiful' . . . [b]ut they sought to give it the social and cultural status of art" (167). Much of this "art," from the giant electric signs introduced at the turn of the century to the "angular, upthrusting, hard-edged" buildings displayed at the Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago in 1933, participated in "modernist style" (Marchand 265). Constant design innovation rooted in a desire to be perceived as bold, responsive, and forward-looking made corporations key arbiters of aesthetic development. Accordingly, branding at least partly motivated the formal experimentation and inventiveness now seen as integral to modernist art.

Curiously, though Marchand identifies corporations that required concerted attempts at humanization as those that possessed enormous size and scope, he limits his case studies to large manufacturers and service providers such as AT&T, the Pennsylvania Railroad, General Motors, General Electric, E. R. Squibb, and the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, ignoring the cluster of film companies known after about 1916-17 as "Hollywood" entirely.¹⁸ One possible explanation for this omission is that while film companies grew rapidly in the 1910s and 1920s, they never matched the financial and organizational power of these older corporations, much less that of manufacturing trusts like International Harvester and U.S. Steel. Formed in 1902, when film was still something of a novelty, International Harvester, to take one example, consolidated manufacturing operations for 85 percent of the harvesting machinery producers in the U.S. (Marchand 22). Despite rapid growth, no film company could have approached this trust's level of market capitalization.

But another possible explanation is that film companies' transition from a practice of branding that utilized fonts, icons, images, and other graphic self-representations to

one that utilized film stars—actual humans—addressed the problem of the “corporate soul” in the film industry earlier and more effectively than it was addressed in other business sectors. Substituting the signifying power of the star for that of the corporate icon solved a specific formal problem; it may also have preemptively solved a broader social problem concurrently facing companies of somewhat larger size and scope in other industries. By this logic, film companies did not come under pressure to humanize themselves because the star system discursively reconstituted these companies in almost exclusively social terms. This is not to say, of course, that individual stars, films, and even the cinema as a whole never came under fire for their potential or actual social influence. On the contrary, the perception of pernicious social effects dogged the cinema from its very earliest days. But the legal status of film companies seems not to have been a troubling issue. While other companies were forced to answer to the public for the fact of their purely legal personhood, film companies were not. They were humanized by a branding strategy that offered them the closest possible approximation of social embodiment, and consequently their status as social actors was presumed by the public rather than held up as an ideal that the companies could never quite achieve.

Seen in this context, the dramatization of tensions between star authorship and corporate authorship in *The Cheat*—a conflict between new and old forms of branding—locates the film not only within a historical narrative of branding’s function in the film industry, but also within a more encompassing explanation of branding’s role in the history of the corporation in the United States. In this sense, the film’s melodramatic narrative works to clarify a complex transitional moment in the development of early cinema as well as this moment’s complicating effect on one of the dominant critical

accounts of early twentieth-century business history. If film companies set out only to solve a formal problem, they ended up foreclosing the possibility of a larger social problem concerning the status of cinema as a business enterprise. Each of these problems motivates and structures the particular form of *The Cheat*, making this film an important example of modernist culture's development at the intersection of cinema and branding.

CHAPTER VI NOTES

¹ According to the *OED*, Richard Huloet, an early English lexicographer, first recorded the noun "brand" to mean marking flesh with a hot iron in 1552. I suspect that the practice, and various terms for it, appears in languages other than English even earlier than this date.

² Lasky's letter to Hodkinson was clearly intended as commercial promotion rather than personal communication, and was probably distributed to trade journals along with other publicity materials for *The Cheat*. The letter is also mentioned in articles and blurbs about the film appearing in *Motography*, *Motion Picture News*, and the *New York Dramatic Mirror* between 11 Dec. 1915 and 25 Dec. 1915.

³ Griffith was crucial to Biograph's success, as Tom Gunning's *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* has demonstrated. Bowser notes that prior to Griffith's joining Biograph, the company's reputation had been second to that of Vitagraph. Afterward, however, "[t]here is no doubt that the Biograph brand stood for the best" (*Transformation* 105).

⁴ I borrow the phrase "corporate expressions" from Jerome Christensen. See Christensen, "The Time Warner Conspiracy."

⁵ The *Biograph Bulletins* were sales documents created and distributed by the American Mutoscope & Biograph Company ("Biograph"). Biograph entered the film industry in April 1896 with the public unveiling of its Vitascope, a rival to Thomas Edison's kinoscope, and soon began producing short films. The "bulletins," or broadsides, the company printed between 1896 and 1912 to describe and promote these films number in the thousands. At first they consisted largely of excerpts and reprints of favorable reviews in the popular press, but after a formal catalog was created and issued in the spring of 1902, Biograph initiated a series of standardized bulletins intended to supplement this and later catalogs and to act as promotional flyers. The two examples I describe are drawn from this later period.

⁶ According to Gunning, 1914 witnessed the “triumph of full-length features” (*D. W. Griffith* 3).

⁷ It is worth noting that, several years earlier, the editors at *Moving Picture World* had explicitly advocated (in response to a warning letter from Charles Urban, appropriately enough) precisely the kind of embedded trademarks Craw complains about. See “How to Prevent Duping.”

⁸ William de Mille records an anecdote that helps put spectator fastidiousness and its role in shaping the film industry in context. Describing his brother Cecil’s production of *The Warrens of Virginia* (1914), de Mille notes that “he [Cecil] added a touch of realism by having the tripod of a field-telegraph system standing, deserted, on a battlefield; but, much to his disgust, many people thought it was a camera tripod, left there by accident. The public was so used to mistakes of this sort that they were merely amused, and not offended; all, that is, except the ‘comma-hounds,’ a group of people who got their sole enjoyment from pictures by discovering flaws and proclaiming them from the housetops. It gave them a great sense of superiority, but, to do them justice, it did help to make the studios meticulously careful.” See de Mille, *Hollywood Saga*, 108.

⁹ For additional, equally enthusiastic discussions of the trademark in Sargent’s column, see the *Moving Picture World* issues for 2 Dec. 1911, 27 July 1912, and 13 Sept. 1913.

¹⁰ See, respectively, the covers of issues of *Motion Picture News* appearing on November 27, 1915; December 11, 1915; January 1, 1916; and January 8, 1916.

¹¹ This kind of film reading is hardly new; see, for example, the many readings of *High Noon* (Fred Zinneman, 1952) and *On the Waterfront* (Elia Kazan, 1954) that place these films in the context of the House Un-American Activities Committee’s investigations of the film industry in the early 1950s.

¹² Christensen’s allegorical readings became the subject of a somewhat heated exchange of views in *Critical Inquiry*. After the article on Time Warner appeared, Peter Havholm and Philip Sandifer (“Corporate Authorship”) responded by challenging Christensen’s argument on logical, chronological, and ethical grounds. Not to be deterred, Christensen addressed these concerns by stretching his claims even further in “Taking It to the Next Level.” For additional film readings demonstrating what Christensen terms “Hollywood’s corporate art,” see Christensen, “Spike Lee” and “Studio Authorship.”

¹³ *The Cheat* was directed by DeMille from a scenario written by Hector Turnbull and Jeanie McPherson and based on an original story by Turnbull. It was reissued in 1918, along with several other Lasky Company films, but with a significant change: “Tori” was renamed “Haka Arakau,” the “Burmese ivory king,” due to Japan’s fighting with the Allies in World War I. The 1918 reissue is the version currently in circulation; this is the print held in the DeMille Archive at Brigham Young University, an untinted restoration

of which is available on DVD (in combination with DeMille's later film *Manslaughter* [1922]) through Kino. However, following the lead of Sumiko Higashi, the foremost critic and historian of DeMille's early films, I retain the Asian character's Japanese identity. For Higashi's work on DeMille's early career and on *The Cheat* in particular, see Higashi, "Ethnicity, Class, and Gender in Film," *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture*, "Touring the Orient with Lafcadio Hearn and Cecil B. DeMille," and "The New Woman and Consumer Culture."

¹⁴ For the original theorization of the "cinema of attractions," see Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions." For glosses on this essay, see Musser, *Emergence* 3-4 and Abel 59-101. For a discussion of how this style relates to the so-called "modernity thesis," see Singer 101-105.

¹⁵ If Ward's performance solidifies her figuration as the film star, Sessue Hayakawa's restrained manner throughout the film signifies a more managerial concern with economy and efficiency—traits that the *New York Dramatic Mirror* singled out for special praise: "Fannie Ward, as the featured lead, is a surprise and a delight. She has been given a wonderful opportunity and has seized upon it with avidity. Her tragical moments were well handled and her emotionalism served to emphasize and sharpen the contrast of the excessively repressed portrayal of Sessue Hayakawa, as Tori, the Japanese villain. The latter, by the way, deserves a line all to himself, for he has displayed a new method of portraying villainy, a method that many of our Western actors would do well to emulate. It was comprehensive, convincing and effective, and throughout his whole characterization there was not an unnecessary gesture or expression. It was a thoroughly enjoyable piece of acting" (40).

¹⁶ The legal personhood of the corporation under the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution was established by the Supreme Court in *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad* (1886).

¹⁷ Distinguishing between branding and public relations is not always easy, but, especially in Marchand's argument, branding might be seen as the shaping of public perceptions about products and public relations as the shaping of public perceptions about their producers.

¹⁸ As Shelley Stamp notes, the consolidation of filmmaking operations in Hollywood was closely linked to the rise of feature-length narrative films: "As cinema's narrative vocabulary became increasingly codified, filmmaking companies shifted to more streamlined modes of production. Continuity shooting scripts and the division of labor within large filmmaking studios began to facilitate a rapid output of film titles to meet the ever escalating demand. The decision of several outfits to relocate to Hollywood in the early teens only confirmed the popularity of mass-production techniques, since the Southern California landscape provided varied locales, year-round shooting conditions, and large, inexpensive tracts of land where elaborate indoor filmmaking studios could be built" (*Movie-Struck* 5). As for the selection specifically of Hollywood, as opposed to

another nearby location, DeMille's decision to make it his base of operations for the filming of *The Squaw Man* (1914), his first motion picture, has been seen as decisive.

EPILOGUE

HENRY JAMES, ERNEST HEMINGWAY, AND THE “GREAT NEW FORCE”

While writing and revising this dissertation, I have found it necessary at times to deliberately push from my mind persistently recurring ideas and assertions about two major literary figures. My initial lack of success in this endeavor may be noted in the fact that Henry James, the first figure, appeared at the end of my original drafts of no less than three different chapters—one addressing realism, one naturalism, and one modernism. In wondering why James seemed a logical endpoint for such widely varying arguments, I discovered, even as I exorcised my discussions of him, that his fiction embodies my conception of this dissertation as bridging nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideas about literature and culture. To put it broadly, James kept popping up because of his role in representing and mediating the complex shift in relations between narrative form and its cultural sources that occurred between the Victorian and modernist eras. His fiction has long been seen as a kind of fulcrum across which the dominant concerns of these two periods have alternately balanced and tipped. In making my case for branding as a crucial, yet hitherto understudied turn-of-the-century cultural problem, James has repeatedly surfaced as the figure whose fiction seems to tie together the literary responses to this problem I have presented.

In “The Real Thing” (1892), a story about a painter’s choice between competing forms of realism, for example, James closely associates the form the painter ultimately rejects with branding. This form is represented by the Monarchs, a faded aristocratic

couple who one day unexpectedly offer their services to the painter as models. From the beginning, these two appear remarkably like commercial caricatures:

What struck me immediately was that in coming to me they had rather missed their vocation; they could surely have been turned to better account for advertising purposes. [...] There was something in them for a waistcoat-maker, an hotel-keeper or a soap-vendor. I could imagine 'We always use it' pinned on their bosoms with the greatest effect; I had a vision of the promptitude with which they would launch a table d'hôte. (236-37)

Here the typical figures and scenarios deployed in product narratives threaten to hijack the painter's tale. The longer his gaze lingers on the Monarchs, the more concrete his impression that they have strolled out of an advertisement becomes. From sensing "something in them" that satisfies "advertising purposes," he begins to "imagine" a specific product narrative situation; the sequence ends with a "vision," not of the Monarchs per se, but of a "promptitude," or readiness to perform, they might possess. The narrator's vision consequently positions the couple not merely in an advertisement, but rather specifically in a product narrative, or brand. By allowing this positioning to condition the painter's choice of another couple as more befitting his notion of realism, James suggests branding's role in producing the specific properties that came to constitute this narrative form.

My reading of "The Real Thing" attributes to James the same antagonistic relation to branding evinced by Howells in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. Reading later texts, however, James appears quite differently, apparently espousing Ferber's commitment to a narrative form constituted not in opposition to, but rather *as* branding.¹ June Hee Chung has recently argued persuasively that the form of James's late novels, and particularly that of *The Ambassadors* (1903), derives to a significant degree from "an emerging business culture that increasingly relied on pictorial representation" (307). According to

Chung, “James’s innovations with figurative language reflect the new set of pictorial styles circulated in advertisements, posters, illustrated newspapers, and other popular art forms that were becoming fashionable as publishers attempted to sell in quantities and to retain popularity” (308). While his uneasiness concerning the proliferation of popular media and art forms at the end of the nineteenth century has been extensively documented, and is generally cited as an impetus for the development of his “high” style in the late novels, Chung breaks down this opposition by demonstrating that James “tried in his novels to emulate . . . [the] mixed-media print images” (309) that made up product narratives in order to make his fiction more saleable in the literary marketplace. Accordingly, she claims, *The Ambassadors* “documents the evolution of advertising into the premier American art form” (307) by registering product narratives and literary narratives’ formal convergence.

Like the other authors I have examined, then, James’s fiction both exemplifies a particular relationship with branding and, in a manner, theorizes this relationship. In *The Ambassadors*, one particularly telling moment occurs toward the end of the novel, as Lambert Strether and Chad Newsome discuss the possibility of Newsome’s returning to Massachusetts from Paris in order to take over the family business.² When Newsome reveals that he has been gathering information about advertising, Strether affirms its value, telling him that “[a]dvertising is clearly at this time of day the secret of trade” (505). For Newsome, however, speaking of advertising exclusively in terms of “trade” dulls the mystique it inherently possesses as a wide-ranging influence on modern beliefs and behavior: “He appeared at all events to have been looking into the question and had encountered a revelation. Advertising scientifically worked presented itself thus as the

great new force” (504). “Advertising scientifically worked,” of course, is a concise description of branding, and Newsome’s referring to it here as a business practice to be deployed “scientifically,” with precise data collection, controlled experimentation, and close scrutiny of results, speaks to branding’s central position in the emerging fields of industrial psychology and market research. Its appearance in a “revelation,” however, invests branding with a certain aura of almost cosmic power—omnipotent, raw, overwhelming—that testifies to a cultural impact much deeper than its specific business use at first suggests.

James’s ability to theorize and to exemplify this cultural impact in both realist and modernist forms suggests a capacious, evolving understanding of the “great new force” that captures Newsome’s interest. Spanning the two historical and literary endpoints of my study, James’s status as an important transitional figure receives confirmation in the context of the emergence of branding. One way of viewing this dissertation, then, is as an account of how the evolution of James’s responses to branding actually occurred across the work of a range of other authors and cultural figures between 1890 and 1915.

* * *

And after 1915? Another way of viewing this project is as an explanation of how the relationship between branding and literature developed to the point of making possible the career of the second figure who has loomed invisibly over my research: Ernest Hemingway. Michael North has noted that “[a]s the bearded literary icon of *Life* and *Parade*, [Hemingway] became the twentieth century’s most prominent example of a

writer transformed into a mere signboard for himself, one whose writing style was so recognizable it inspired an adjective that became virtually a brand name” (186). This adjective—presumably “Hemingwayesque”—formed just one part of an unprecedentedly forceful and compelling use of a product narrative that remains very much in effect even now.³ As Matthew J. Bruccoli writes in his introduction to *Hemingway and the Mechanism of Fame* (2006), a recent collection of the author’s introductions, blurbs, endorsements, and other public statements, “Hemingway’s fame was not a spontaneous response to his books. He deliberately cultivated and manipulated his public images. Ernest Hemingway’s best invented fictional character was Ernest Hemingway” (xviii-xix). Bruccoli adds that this author’s “evolving public persona” stemmed from his ability “to project the image that the time or occasion required” (xxi). Acutely sensitive to the stories circulating about himself and his exploits, both literary and otherwise, he “gave the customers what they wanted” (xxiv). He understood that branding had effected a change in the relationship between authors and readers, and he consciously shaped both his fiction and his public image with this change in mind.

In a manner, then, Hemingway can be seen as an heir of *The Cheat* and of Ferber (and therefore also of Wharton, Crane, Twain, and Howells). Like the Emma McChesney stories, albeit with a starkly different style and voice, Hemingway’s fiction imparts a narrative about itself which is intended to address readers’ demand for distinctiveness and personality in an age of cheap, standardized, and widely available products. Recognizing that consumers more and more conflated products and their manufacturers, moreover, Hemingway extended his product narrative to include his own sailing, drinking, war reporting, and womanizing, knowing that these activities would

become part of the perceived history of his fiction. As Bruccoli writes, “it was somehow understood that Hemingway was fishing, hunting, boozing, wenching, and brawling for the eventual enrichment of American literature” (xix). Yet it is crucial to recognize that while Hemingway’s lifestyle furnished the material for his fiction—several visits to Pamplona preceded *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), reporting in Spain preceded *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940)—it also has been commonly perceived as producing his fiction’s terse, understated form. For Hemingway, as for many other modernists, form implied a distinguishing narrative, and this narrative in turn served as a brand in the twentieth century’s culture of consumption.

It could not have done so, I am suggesting, without the crucial period of theorization and reflection on the relationship between literature and branding that began with this practice’s emergence around 1890 and continued during its growth and development over the next quarter century. From its beginning, branding was experienced as more than simply something businesses did in order to sell additional products; it was always as much a cultural as a business concern. Early attempts to think through the literary consequences of branding’s emergence contributed variously toward the appearance in the U. S. of realism, naturalism, and modernism. In providing a detailed account of these contributions, this dissertation clarifies the beginning stages of the path branding took toward the attainment in the twentieth century of an inextricable role in literary and cultural production.

EPILOGUE NOTES

¹ This view of James contrasts directly with the one presented by Ferber, which I discuss in chapter 5.

² The nature of this business has remained a hotly debated question since the novel's publication. Recently, however, Joshua Glenn has argued persuasively that the object manufactured in Woollett is the toothpick. This argument accords with Newsome's interest in advertising; as a cheap, nondescript, and mass-manufactured consumer good, the Newsome toothpick would require aggressive branding to have any advantage over that of its competitors. See Glenn and Petroski.

³ Aaron Jaffe discusses the relationship between modernism and author names turned to adjectives—"Hemingwayesque," "Poundian," "Eliotic," etc.—in *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity*, 58-62. Inasmuch as "Hemingwayesque" has become a brand name, it has also become a category of scholarly analysis, as is indicated by the title of a recent article, "'Bitched': Feminization, Identity, and the Hemingwayesque in *The Sun Also Rises*." See Onderdonk.

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