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SELLING LOVE: THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF INTIMACY

IN AMERICA, 1860s-1900s

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation uses nineteenth-century personal advertisements to analyze how people created connections in an era of rapid urbanization and commercialization. It analyzes the effect of the market economy, urban growth on intimate relationships, as well as the integration of personal lives into broader society. It centers around the idea of “public intimacy”; that is, the process through which certain Americans – mostly the urban middle class – forged private relationships within the public eye. Doing so allows insight on nineteenth- and early-twentieth century attitudes toward love, marriage, and sexuality in an increasingly anonymous, urban world.

Personal columns at first held the promise of an almost utopian space, in which strangers could experiment with creating new personas, determining their own value, and forming and maintaining relationships. The ads offered freedom, but at the same time, forced users to perform their lives in front of an eager and engaged newspaper audience. The ads gave insight into the lives of neighbors, helping people better understand and adapt to large, anonymous cities. After the turn of the century, however, personals were co-opted by entrepreneurs who used the ads for their own gain. Ads from fraudulent matrimonial agencies offered easy wealth through marriage, while at the same time

brothels and prostitutes began using the columns, cloaking their ads under the guise of massage parlors and matrimonials. Personals fell victim to commercialization; what had been a place that catered to individuals seeking connections in the market became a venue for people selling love, money, and sex.

Until now, personal advertisements have been an entirely unexplored set of sources. This dissertation draws upon thousands of ads from papers all over the country, especially in New York City. In addition, it uses case studies in Chicago and New York to analyze the themes in this project more closely. In the process, it has traced some of the evolutions in American beliefs about the divide between public and private, the institution of marriage, and how the growing market economy affected these ideas. Finally, it moves forward to compare the early history of personals to the growth of online dating today.

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Introduction: Love in the Time of Commerce

At the bottom of the first column on page seven of the *New York Herald*, Saturday, January 11, 1862, sixteen advertisers opened a small portion of their lives to paper's approximately 80,000 purchasers.¹ "Can the lady and gentleman who met by glance at the Boston Express this week meet again? He goes up Broadway every afternoon about 4 P.M.," wrote a man who requested letters be sent simply to "Me, box 109 Herald office."² Another man with the same purpose wrote a lengthier ad: "If the young lady who rode down Broadway in a Fourth avenue stage on Friday morning about nine o'clock, would like to form the acquaintance of the gentleman who sat at the corner and helped her when she came in and bowed to her when he got out downtown, she will either address a note to Alfred, Broadway Post office, stating where a letter can be had, or answer through the 'Personals.'" Two more men printed a much more suggestive ad together: "Miss Fanny and three other young ladies who were accompanied from Amity street and Broadway through Bond street to the Bowery, late on Thursday evening, can make the further acquaintance of the two gentlemen by addressing D, box 256 Post office."

Other ads were between people who already knew each other. "G. – Got note. Are you sure the spell is broken? If anything prevents me from coming at nine to-night, do not leave town till I see you. Ah me! 'the long, long weary days!' L.," said one. Directly below it, an ad in a similar vein read, "H.A.L. – Send small picture. That sweet

¹ Richard Kluger, *The Paper: The Life and Death of the New York Herald Tribune* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 92.

² All newspapers printed the first (and sometimes last) line of classified ads in all-capitals. For the sake of cleanliness, I have transcribed all ads without this capitalization except when necessary or appropriate.

face is not as pale. There is no possible danger of your causing any trouble. Two letters and papers were received. Write often. Send to me. At leisure after the 30th. Bird.”

Two other advertisers announced their desire to find a wives. “A gentleman of undoubted respectability, matrimonially inclined, seeks an introduction to a lady possessing wealth, social position, and loveable qualities,” said the first. The second was more detailed. This author wrote: “A gentleman of a serious turn of mind is anxious to correspond with a lively, good hearted, romping, skating, and withal loveable young lady with a view to matrimony. Those possessing great beauty need not apply.”

By turns flirtatious, arch, romantic, sad, mysterious, funny, and even slightly bizarre – “romping” and “skating” not being two qualities often listed in matrimonial advertisements – these ads managed to encompass a wide variety of emotions and circumstances in just a small corner of the paper. On this particular day in 1862, the personals were buried amidst sales at auction, astrologers, and various medical books, clinics, and cures, but within a few years, the editors realized they had something special; the Personal column (though not the Matrimonial) had moved permanently to the front page by 1867.

Personal advertisements such as these open themselves to inquiry and curiosity. Unlike the historian, blessed with instant gratification through microfilm and the internet, contemporary readers had to wait for each day’s paper, turn its pages, skim the columns, and browse the ads to find out if the young lady ever replied to Alfred through the Personals, as he requested (she didn’t). How late at night were Miss Fanny and her friends strolling through Greenwich Village with two strange gentleman? What was the

broken spell to which “L.” referred? How could H.A.L. cause trouble? Why did a man with a serious turn of mind wish to meet a lively, romping, skating young lady?

Now as then, these ads lead to far more questions than they do answers. It is possible that at the time they were written, the ads may have been more easily comprehended than they are by modern readers. For instance, I had to do research to conclude that “the long, long weary days” was likely quoted from the poem “They Bid Me Nerve My Drooping Soul” by Achsa Sprague, a famous Spiritualist at the time. Contemporary readers, however, may have recognized the allusion instantly. But even then, any conclusions drawn about the people writing and using personals were speculative. Personals live in the realm of maybe, possibly, and perhaps, which is what makes them both appealing and – from a historical perspective – frustrating. These fascinating and intriguing tidbits of nineteenth-century life have not received any serious attention by historians, perhaps because they are such difficult sources to work with; the advertisers slip through our fingers like ghosts. Providing as they do only clues about the authors’ names, sex, age, class, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic background, personals defy examination.

Yet these ads deserve study. The *Herald*, as has been noted, placed its Personal column on the front page from 1867 until it was discontinued in 1907. For forty years, then, these captivating, romantic, silly, mysterious, risqué, and tragic protestations were front page news in one of the most widely-read newspapers in the country. And while the *Herald*’s column was by far the most famous – or infamous, as the case may be – papers all over the country printed similar ads. Short stories, plays, novels, films, scientific inquiries and journalistic exposés all drew upon personal advertisements as

their subjects. Moreover, critics wasted plenty of ink attacking these ads as long as they were in print, for the most part to little avail. In other words, personals may have been lost in history, but they mattered in their time, which makes them worth ours.

This project has much in common with the history of courtship and marriage, which has explored the meaning of marriage in American society and the transformation in how couples have understood love, sexuality, and gender roles over time. I draw heavily on the conclusions of previous studies. Yet the crucial difference is that this study addresses these same concepts by looking at the interactions between people who were unknown to each other. The characters who appear in the following pages are *strangers*: to each other, to their environs, and to me.³

The many different kinds of personal advertisements that appeared from the mid-nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries all highlight the way strangers attempted to forge connections in an unfamiliar world (while ads used for correspondence were between people who did know each other, they nevertheless invited the gaze of strangers, who became silent third parties in the exchanges). Their words and actions indicated perspectives on all of the themes listed above, perspectives that sometimes paralleled and sometimes differed significantly from those expressed by men and women who were

³ While this dissertation does not suggest that most, or perhaps even many, couples met through personals, it is important to recognize that the process of meeting is just as significant as any other aspect of courtship. Matrimonial advertisers may not represent a large demographic, but they do show the frustrations and concerns of single people. Some of the important studies of relationships have been Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History*, Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart*, Ellen Rothman, *Hands and Hearts*, Nancy Cott, *Public Vows*, Norma Basch, *Framing American Divorce*, Elaine Tyler May, *Great Expectations*, Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, and Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Backseat*. These historians have all studied how relationships were contracted, maintained, and in some cases, ended – but rarely how they began. Others have focused more on how gender roles play a role in the creation of intimacy and sexuality within relationships, such as Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons, *Passion and Power*, Helen Horowitz, *Rereading Sex*, Pepper Schwartz and Barbara Risman, *Gender in Intimate Relations*, John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, and Kevin White, *The First Sexual Revolution*, among others. My work attempts not to contradict their conclusions but rather to supplement them.

married or courting. For while many of these estranged advertisers wished to find traditional marriage despite the untraditional method, many others sought unconventional interactions, from harmless flirtations to out-of-wedlock affairs. They all took advantage of the anonymity that personals offered to avoid detection, create new personas, and escape criticism from the outside world.

These strangers, either for lack of better options or because the idea was appealing, engaged in *public intimacy*. My use of this term is not unique; the display of private lives in the public sphere has received attention by several historians and literary scholars. However, they have primarily focused on the political implications of privacy. Scholars have addressed how ideas about what should constitute intimacy have been influenced by public discourse and how the idealization of privacy has affected certain laws and rights.⁴ I am interested in a different, and simpler, question: how intimate relationships are formed when in the public eye. Was it possible for such relationships to remain unsullied by commercialization – and indeed, was commerce inherently dangerous for private affairs? How was a public forum which offered intimacy used and abused, and to what end? And how did the fact that these acts of public intimacy were for the most part between and seen by people who were unknown to each other shape their interactions? Examining these questions provides insight on the way nineteenth-century Americans thought about courtship and marriage, identity, and social convention, and how these notions evolved in and were affected by a modern, urban landscape.

⁴ see Lauren Berlant, “Intimacy: A Special Issue,” *Critical Inquiry*, 24, no. 2, 281-288, and *The Female Complaint: On the Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*; Karen Chase and Michael Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family*; Stacy Margolis, *The Public Life of Privacy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, among others.

This dissertation uses these previously unremarked and forgotten fragments to study how people created connections in an era of rapid urbanization and commercialization. It analyzes the effect of the market economy and urban growth on intimate relationships, as well as the integration of personal lives into broader society. By approaching this as a story about strangers, it is possible to bring together diverse fields of historical research. First, it contributes to the history of marriage and courtship in America by exploring interaction between men and women who found a new means of connection, one which has previously been overlooked. Second, it ties this subject to the history of the market revolution and the anxieties it created about commerce intruding upon private life. These issues were particularly troublesome for a middle class that was in large part made up of recent migrants who came to big cities without social ties.⁵ Similarly, this project studies the effect of urbanization on personal relationships, community networks, and traditional values in an era when conventional means of socialization began to break down. Finally, it intervenes in the history of the penny press by emphasizing the importance of the personal columns; demonstrating the way papers influenced the development and public perception of male-female interaction; and how they allowed readers to browse, explore, exhibit themselves, and better understand their otherwise unknown neighbors.⁶

⁵ The development of the middle class in urban life has received extensive study, with some of the central texts being Mary Ryan's *The Cradle of the Middle Class*, Stuart Blumin's *The Emergence of the Middle Class*, Richard Bushman's *The Refinement of America*, Gunther Barth's *City People*, Paul Johnson's *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, Olivier Zunz's *Making America Corporate*, and Alan Trachtenberg's *The Incorporation of America*, to name just a few.

⁶ The most well-known studies of the penny press include Michael Schudson's *Discovering the News*, Dan Schiller's *Objectivity and the News*, Andie Tucher's *Froth and Scum*, and John Stevens' *Sensationalism and the New York Press*, who have all written about the early years of this new kind of paper and how they created the framework of modern-day journalism. These and other similar histories have paid most attention to the publishers' use of scandals and sensation to appeal to readers and thus focused on lead stories, especially murders, which shaped the future of journalism. Gerald Baldasty, who argues in *The*

This dissertation is divided into two parts. Part I discusses the opportunities personals offered to a general public. Seemingly capable of being a space where urban dwellers could mingle and interact with minimal supervision and no state interference, personals and matrimonials had a utopian promise of offering authentic intimate connections in a public, commercial venue. Part II moves into the first decade of the twentieth century and uses case studies to note how entrepreneurs incorporated the personals for their own gain. Almost predictably, due to their public and commercial nature, the development of the columns as an open space for intimacy devolved into a typical narrative of crime and prostitution.

Chapter One: Private Lives, Public Exposure, and Personal Advertisements,

discusses how the personals column functioned as an urban forum in which strangers could mingle and gain insight into their neighbors' lives, providing a sense of connection in large, anonymous cities. The advertisements between "G." and "L." and "H.A.L." and "Bird" are only two examples of these ads, and they are comparatively tame. "Faith – You err in your belief. Where there is love there can be no 'dread of the future.' Clergymen (of your own denomination) are among those who say, 'She should come to you.' Does anything besides 'lack of consent' cause you to neglect your promise? If consent was given would you keep that promise? While separated there will be no 'rest'

Commercialization of the News in the Nineteenth Century that the biggest influence on how journalism developed was simply the need to make money, has a more comprehensive take on all the features which newspapers included in their early years. David Henkin, in *City Reading*, looks at newspaper development as part of a larger process of public reading in urban culture. These authors recognize the importance of advertising, not only as revenue but as a kind of news, but none of them acknowledge the significance of personal advertisements (indeed, only Henkin mentions them at all) – an oversight that is all the more striking because so many of these authors recognize the centrality of the *New York Herald* in particular and its influence in the shaping the penny press overall.

for either of us. Love,” read a more melodramatic example.⁷ Ads such as these created narratives and stories which audiences could interpret and assign whatever meaning they liked.

People used the column for their own purposes, often using the secrecy to re-imagine the stories of their own lives by taking on new, often romantic, personas. Anyone could take part in this play, either directly as participants or indirectly as readers; it only took the cost of an ad or the paper. Indeed, for “Miss Fanny” and her friends, it only required walking three blocks in the company of two men to have roles. Personals became a way for people to escape social niceties, convention, and control. This chapter argues that the ads blurred the line between public and private by placing intimate affairs into a commercial zone: not only were they in a newspaper, but they were paid advertisements. They were paradoxically a way for couples such as “Love” and “Faith,” presumably in an unsanctioned relationship, to communicate without fear of being caught, yet at the same time were an open invitation to voyeurism. In order to remain hidden, couples had to bare their lives to strangers.

Chapter Two: Intimate Strangers: Matrimonial Advertisements and Public Courtship, turns specifically to marriage ads. Matrimonials became common in big cities as the middle class expanded; they reflected the social and geographical mobility that many men and women experienced during the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Like other personals, they offered a way to find intimacy in a public marketplace, an opportunity that freed urbanites in particular from social conventions and restraints. Eschewing strict rules of etiquette, men and women who felt estranged from society

⁷ *New York Herald*, 24 July 1869: 1.

circulated independently in a literal marriage market – but their ultimate goal was to return to convention. Advertisers made clear that despite the unusual medium, they were looking for traditional relationships.

Matrimonials caused confusion for many observers, who only saw men and women putting themselves up for sale in the classifieds. Fearing that this businesslike approach to marriage would cause the dissolution of society, critics attacked the idea that love could be found in public, and assumed that advertisers were either fortune-hunters or social outcasts. Yet while this may have been true in some circumstances, the ads themselves suggest they mostly came from a highly literate group of people who embraced middle-class values, even though middle-class rules of social interaction had failed them. People's goals are always mixed, but most advertisers believed that the market could bring happiness.

Part II of this dissertation moves forward to the turn of the twentieth century to discuss how the transformation of America to a modern society disrupted intimate relationships. In the mid-nineteenth century, personals and matrimonials, despite the criticisms leveled against them, were spaces that – while located in the market – provided a mostly unregulated place for urban dwellers to interact, find connections, play with new personas and defy social convention. While open to misuse as much as any other institution, personals columns were a relatively egalitarian medium where strangers could determine their own value and define their own identities. But at the turn of the century entrepreneurs began to appropriate the personals for their own gain.

Chapter Three: “The Cupid Trust”: **Matrimonial Agencies in Chicago at the Turn of the Century** focuses on men and women who capitalized on the popularity of

matrimonial advertisements by opening marriage bureaus which they claimed would bring lonely people together – but they were often fraudulent. Advertising in personals columns throughout the country, these agencies appealed to more small town and rural residents. In Chicago, matrimonial agencies became a veritable plague in the first decade of the twentieth century; con men and women promised wealthy spouses in exchange for a small registration fee, thus swindling thousands of Americans from all over the nation.

Some of the dangers of personals and matrimonials in the nineteenth century were likely exaggerated by nervous critics, but matrimonial agencies posed a real threat: matrimonial agents were running very successful scams. This chapter uses the federal trials of two female matrimonial agents who were convicted of mail fraud to examine how matrimonial agencies appealed to the would-be clients they robbed.

A close look at the reaction to these swindles demonstrates that the critics were less concerned about the victims of the crimes as they were about the larger repercussions on society. While lawyers, reporters, and the police expressed indignation with the theft, they also regarded would-be clients of matrimonial agencies with open contempt. Anyone seeking a spouse in public, especially a very rich spouse as the agencies promised, deserved little sympathy. The truly injured party was the institution of marriage itself, which matrimonial agents – even legitimate ones – were reducing to a mere business transaction based on monetary gain. And according to the unhappy observers, the destruction of marriage was only one step away from the destruction of American society.

Chapter Four: The “Red Light Column”: Selling Sex in Turn-of-the-Century

New York concludes the dissertation by bringing this history full circle and chronicling

the downfall of the *New York Herald's* Personal column. An exposé by one of the *Herald's* rivals, the *New York American*, owned by William Randolph Hearst, opened the column to public scrutiny and proved that many of the ads in the column were thinly-veiled solicitations from prostitutes, brothels, and men and women seeking relationships outside of marriage in which people traded intimacy for financial support. The *Herald* (as well as other personal columns around the country) had always included solicitations of this nature, but by the late-nineteenth century, they began to push out all other personals. While the circumstances were not quite analogous, this transformation was similar to the influx of matrimonial agencies in Chicago. Ads from brothels and prostitutes took over a public forum which had encouraged playfulness, experimentation, and romance and turned it into something commercial and tawdry. Ultimately, this forced the *Herald* to discontinue its personals altogether.

At the same time, however, the altered column was not necessarily as dissolute as the *American* exposé implied. While many of the ads were indeed what the articles claimed, many of them were from men and women whose motivations were more complex. The interviews vice investigators conducted and the letters they received after answering ads suggest that people were looking for relationships that may have had financial exchange as a component but were not strictly prostitution. They were consensual affairs that allowed women, many of whom were migrants to the city who could not support themselves otherwise, some control and independence. Moreover, the exposé illustrates the triumph of yellow journalism over the traditional penny press; New Yorkers were not concerned with open exhibitions of vice and sexuality so long as they were presented by newspapers as muckraking public services. The *Herald's* mistake was

not allowing sex to infiltrate its pages; rather, the fatal error was accepting paid advertising for sex. It was not the vice people minded; it was the profit that the *Herald* made from these ads that was unforgiveable.

These ads help reveal the messy and uncomfortable passage of America from a Victorian to a modern culture, in everything from the transformation of newspapers to tabloid journalism to the nature of heterosexual relationships.⁸ Studying personals allows insight into how urbanization and the change from a producer to a consumer economy affected men and women's private lives, especially in how they interacted and mingled in public. They show how people dealt with being surrounded by strangers – what methods they used to connect and become a part of city life, and how they found romance and excitement in the midst of isolation and anonymity.

Working with an unexplored set of sources, especially one that is so ephemeral to begin with, is challenging. The process of finding meaning in fragments of history with little context has been difficult to negotiate. Yet the frustrations have been more than balanced out with the pleasure of bringing to light a collection of materials which are often enchanting, romantic, funny, and above all illuminating. Though personal advertisements give very little concrete information about the writers, they have, for me, brought Americans from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century to life.

⁸ Given the anonymity inherent in these ads, it is possible, even likely, that personals were used by people interested in homosexual relationships and encounters. However, this would be impossible to discover. I am limited to, and focused on, the perceptions and opinions of the observers who wrote about the ads as well as to the stated claims of the advertisers.

PART ONE:

THE PROMISE OF PERSONALS

Chapter One: Private Lives, Public Exposure, and Personal Advertisements

Between 1867 and 1868, Mark Twain wrote a series of letters for a San Francisco newspaper, the *Alta California*, in which he described travels in the United States and Nicaragua. In his mocking but conversational style, Twain told amusing anecdotes about the places he went, including New York City. Writing about the city, Twain focused particular attention on its density and size to invoke a dynamic, overcrowded, bustling, modern city for his western audience. Almost all of his vignettes highlight the overcrowding, the anonymity, and the apparent callousness and indifference New Yorkers had for their neighbors. But in one short piece, he focuses instead on a quiet, though public, moment of middle-class men reading the *New York Herald's* Personal column. "You may sit in a New York Restaurant in the morning for a few hours," the essay begins, "and you will observe that the very first thing each man does, before ordering his breakfast, is to call for the *Herald* – and the next thing he does is to look at the top of the first column and read the 'Personals.'"¹ In evoking New York life, Twain thought it just as important to depict this scene as to describe the crammed, uncomfortable stagecoaches that New Yorkers rode every day; the police force visible all along Broadway directing traffic and escorting women; and the fact that it was a day's journey to visit a friend because of the length of Manhattan island.

Much as Twain's detailed, funny, and intimate letters brought New York life to Californians, so did the personals column bring New York life to its own inhabitants, as well as to national readers. In another piece for the *Alta California*, Twain wrote that the

¹ Mark Twain, "'Personals,'" *Alta California*, 19 May 1867, in Phillip Lopate, ed, *Writing New York: A Literary Anthology* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998), 257.

city was a place where a person was “lonely in the midst of a million of his race. A man walks his tedious miles through the same interminable street every day, elbowing his way through a buzzing multitude of men, yet never seeing a familiar face, and never seeing a strange one the second time.”² Yet in the personals, the stories were familiar, some of the characters returned over and over again, and the little love stories therein revealed the hearts and minds of neighbors.

The place of personal ads has been largely ignored in the abundant literature on the history of advertising and the penny press. This is a surprising fact since many contemporaries believed that, whether they liked it or not, personals were the most beloved columns in any newspaper, even more widely read than the news itself. Because they are unreliable, ephemeral, and cryptic texts, personals have slipped through the cracks of historical scholarship, but far from being an aside, they are a crucial part of the history of journalism. The *New York Herald* was the most widely read newspaper in the country for decades, and it did not reach or maintain that status by placing insignificant advertisements on the first column of the front page for forty years. Rather, the personals were crucial to the *Herald's* success. By offering an inside view into the private lives of city dwellers, the paper drew in a national audience which delighted in learning about the private, secret lives of strangers.

In a city so large that, as Twain wrote, people did not even see the same strangers twice, traditional forms of relating to neighbors broke down. Small towns encouraged gossiping across a neighbor's fence; and with an entire community attending the same few churches and social events, it was easy to gain knowledge about the personal lives of

² Mark Twain, “New York,” *Alta California*, 5 June 1867, in Franklin Walker and G. Ezra Dane, ed., *Mark Twain's Travels With Mr. Brown* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), 259.

the people living close by. Indeed, according to the historian Mary Ryan, at the turn of the nineteenth century, church officials often made it their business to meddle in and lay open the private lives of their congregants, especially their sexual affairs.³ City life did not allow this kind of tight-knit community, at least not for the middle class; not confined to the overcrowded tenements, middle-class New Yorkers lived scattered about the city in single-family townhomes or sex-segregated boardinghouses, had the choice of attending dozens of churches, and clung to certain social conventions that forbade easy acquaintance without formal introductions.

Personal columns offered a new form of interaction and a new outlook on intimacy and sexuality, one which was both alluring and disturbing. They provided a way for people otherwise disconnected from the city around them to get a glimpse into the private lives of their neighbors. But the column also was a new kind of fiction, one that blurred the line between true and false, because even if the ads were sincere, they were often written as stories. The advertisers were free to create narratives where ordinary folk escaped social conventions and played the leading roles: the flirt, the star-crossed lover, the wit, the mysterious admirer. With these ads, the column bridged a gap between public and private: a commercial institution, the newspaper, provided a place for secretive encounters; and the domestic romance stories were read and produced openly by men as well as women. It was a space of public intimacy, and it offered new opportunities for close, personal connections in an anonymous urban world.

Personals provide an insight into how urban dwellers translated and transacted private affairs in public places. Dating as they do from the late 1850s, they complicate

³ Mary Ryan, *The Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 36-41.

mistaken notions about the rigid boundaries between public and private spheres throughout the nineteenth century by showing a prominent venue where those lines were blurred. Moreover, historians have argued that the Victorian middle class clung to strict etiquette as a way to define itself, but personals show an attempt to escape such conventions and niceties.⁴ The often negative reaction to personals demonstrates critics' awareness that the anonymity of the ads provided a way to test and break the boundaries of identity, sexuality, and social norms in urban life.

Personal ads varied in content, length, and style. Some were simple and straightforward, but others were laced with wit or stylized, romantic language. Even in the most unlikely places, advertisers wrote their ads with an eye to humor. For example, upon being robbed, one person printed the following ad: "The 'gentleman' who bought a \$3 ticket for admittance to a charity affair given at a private home on Park avenue, Thursday last, and stole a new \$15 English hat is welcome to it." Similarly, another man requesting the return of stolen property wrote: "If the gentleman who, while laboring under an acute attack of moral insanity, on Saturday, broke into my office and carried away a Package...will inform me, by note or personally, where I can obtain them he will much oblige and no questions will be asked."⁵ Even the most unexpected and undesirable circumstances, such as theft, could provide entertainment.

But it was the correspondences and missed connections – ads where men, and occasionally women, addressed strangers they saw on the streets, in stagecoaches, or the elevated trains – that readers like Twain found the most fascinating. The ads between

⁴ Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); John Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1990).

⁵ *New York Herald*, 22 February 1870: 1; *New York Herald*, 14 June 1874: 1.

lovers could be simple (“Dear of R. – Yes, always for you. Appoint the time when I can see you. C.F.F.” read one), but could become quite eloquent (“Romance – Vouchsafe, divine perfection of a woman, to cheer the heart you have unwittingly doomed to...despair. Cole,” read another). A typical example of a missed connection read: “If the lady with dark eyes and hair, who rode in a Spring street stage on Wednesday afternoon, and got out on Wooster street, wishes to form the acquaintance of the young man who sat opposite to her, she can do so by addressing J.N., Station A, Spring street.” But these ads could also tend toward romance, such as the one placed by the advertiser who wrote, “Blue velvet and blue veil, Third avenue car, eleven thirty – is the gentleman opposite excused for admiring? F.A.R. Box 105, Herald office,” and the numerous men who signed themselves “Romeo,” “Honor,” or other similar names.⁶

Mark Twain’s attitude toward these ads, like much of his writing, was sardonic; he spared little mercy for the advertisers, mocking their overwrought language and romantic pretensions. For example, when in one ad he quoted a female author who wrote to her correspondent: “Don’t kill me. Remember, Fourth avenue car runs all night,” Twain observed, “That is suggestive, to say the least. She don’t want to be killed, but if he is determined to do it, why, he knows where she puts up, and the Fourth avenue car offers every facility for murder.” He was even harder on the missed connection advertisers, calling those “altogether the most nauseating” and heaping scorn on the foolish young men who fell in love with “every old strumpet who smiles a flabby smile at them” on the street or in a coach. But Twain’s criticism did not extend to the column’s readers; on the contrary, he obviously shared their amusement. He saw a distinct

⁶ *New York Herald*, 19 January 1870: 1; *New York Herald*, 2 April 1870: 1; *New York Herald*, 18 January 1862: 3; *New York Herald*, 7 April 1869: 1.

difference between the middle-class men quietly enjoying the personals and the “wooden-headed louts” who placed them.⁷

These personals were, as the *Herald* itself described them, a “phantasmagoria” of city life: an ever-changing array of fleeting, dream-like scenes.⁸ Every day, they encompassed tragedy, comedy, pathos, romance, and mystery all in a single column. The writers were flirtatious, arch, funny, sarcastic, loving, and eloquent – sometimes in just one ad. They covered a variety of issues many New Yorkers would have found familiar: theft, finding lost friends or family members, and, most frequently, love.

Mark Twain – like most other observers of the column – focused almost exclusively on the correspondences and missed connections. These became urban “gossip”; stories about city dwellers appeared every day, with the same characters often reappearing for weeks or months at a time, and these true romances enchanted newspaper readers. According to the *Herald*, they were so revealing that if the Greeks and Romans had had personals columns, they “would be worth more than the serious writings of historians” in giving a truly lifelike picture of people in ancient times.⁹

There is no remaining evidence of who originated the personal columns or why, but they were a natural outcome of the development of a new breed of newspapers. Starting with the *New York Sun* in 1833, the penny press quickly exploded with the introduction of the *New York Herald* in 1835, followed by the *Tribune* in 1841 and the *Times* in 1851. The penny press differed from previous newspapers in a number of

⁷ Lopate, 258-9.

⁸ “The Herald’s ‘Personals,’” *New York Herald*, 22 October 1861: 12

⁹ *Ibid.*

significant ways. Most important in this context was their decision to charge a minimal purchase price (thus the nickname “penny” press) and rely instead on advertisements for revenue. In addition, these papers all chose to downplay dry political and financial news and focus instead on local and personal interest stories.¹⁰ Owners of papers like the *New York Herald*, the *Sun*, and the *Tribune* all recognized that sensation sold newspapers. They printed stories intended to titillate the public – the more scandalous the better. After the murder of the prostitute Helen Jewett in 1836, for example, her life and death became fodder for the press, and the trial of her accused killer received daily attention, inspiring speculation and editorials from enterprising newspapers.¹¹ Even more respectable people were not safe from the newspapers’ prying eyes; the Beecher-Tilton scandal in 1874, in which the minister Henry Ward Beecher was accused of having an affair with the wife of one of his constituents, received regular scrutiny from the press.¹² The press’ willingness to expose every detail even led the *Chicago Tribune* to publish highly personal letters between Tilton and his wife, albeit with Tilton’s approval.¹³

Yet it is worth noting that in both these instances, the papers focused just as much on the characters’ personal lives as they did on the sensational events. The articles about Helen Jewett went into intimate detail about her life, with lavish descriptions of her home, her appearance, demeanor, and style. The murder was sensational, but newspapers

¹⁰ For history of the penny press, see Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Dan Schiller, *Objectivity and the News: The Public and the Rise of Commercial Journalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981); John Stevens, *Sensationalism and the New York Press* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

¹¹ see Andie Tucher, *Froth and Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Ax Murderer in America’s First Mass Medium* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).

¹² see Richard Wightman Fox, *Trials of Intimacy: Love and Loss in the Beecher-Tilton Scandal* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999).

¹³ *Ibid*, 65.

appealed to readers' desire to know more about the life of this high-class prostitute.

Likewise, the Beecher-Tilton affair was scandalous because of the involvement of the famous minister, but the letters predated the affair; by printing the correspondence the *Tribune* was selling not the actual scandal, but the intimate, private lives of the Tiltons.

The papers were dependent on these scandals and excitement to capture readers; by the end of the century, according to Philip Fisher, the sensationalist stories required that “the newspaper itself become news and its daily appearance...[became] the most exciting daily event in the lives of many of its readers.”¹⁴ Yet scandals – about love affairs and otherwise – did not happen every day, requiring editors to find other means of attracting the large number of readers necessary to bring in advertisers – ads being the primary source of a paper's revenue. Editors had to present everything on their front page so that it would attract passersby long enough for them to decide to buy a copy; they had to appeal to people's desire for entertainment as well as news.¹⁵

One successful way of doing this was through advertisements themselves, in particular the classifieds. Several scholars have noted that in the nineteenth century, the distinction between ads and news was far less rigid than it is today. This blurring between the two was deliberate and facilitated in several ways. The physical format of the papers gave the two equal importance; news articles had no preference in layout or print size. The columns for advertisements, some of which were almost always on the

¹⁴ Philip Fisher, “Appearing and Disappearing in Public: Social Space in Late-Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture,” in Sacvan Berkovitch, ed, *Reconstructing American Literary History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 155.

¹⁵ Gunther Barth, *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) 65.

front page, were identical to those of the news.¹⁶ James Gordon Bennett, owner of the *New York Herald*, was so determined to making ads a source of news and entertainment that in 1847 he decreed that no identical ad copy would run for more than two days to preserve novelty.¹⁷

The style of the ads themselves also contributed to their news value. Jennifer Wicke points out that runaway slave ads set a precedent, however unconsciously, of making ads narratives, turning them into short stories. P.T. Barnum wrote reviews for his own shows which looked like news but were really paid advertisements.¹⁸ Therefore, people could read ads in much the same way as they read the rest of the paper: as news. Indeed, by the mid-nineteenth century advertisements were popular enough that the *New York Sun* could devote seventeen of its twenty-four columns to ads without losing its readership.¹⁹

Unlike any other feature in the papers, personal ads guaranteed the paper with income and the reader entertainment as titillating as sensational stories simply by giving readers entre into other people's private lives. Contemporary critics acknowledged the ads' popularity. When the *Herald* removed its personals column altogether in 1907, an employee of Joseph Pulitzer predicted that the paper would suffer as a result. He argued that the personals were "fascinating reading" and later pointed out that the *Herald's* Sunday circulation soon dropped from first to third place.²⁰ According to one reporter

¹⁶ David Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 104.

¹⁷ Stevens, 37.

¹⁸ Jennifer Wicke, *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertising, and Social Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 23, 59.

¹⁹ Henkin, 115.

²⁰ Carlos Seitz, *The James Gordon Bennetts: Father and Son, Proprietors of the New York Herald* (Indianapolis: The Bobs Merrill Company, 1929), 373.

analyzing the personals column in 1880, even Henry Ward Beecher, whose alleged adulterous affair with Elizabeth Tilton provided plenty of material for the newspapers, “said that the most interesting part of the *New York Herald* was the advertisements.”²¹ Frederic Hudson, the *Herald*’s first managing editor, explained that these ads “are a feature. They are fresh every day. It is intended, by its system, that they should be...On this plan the advertisements form the most interesting and practical ‘city news.’”²² As one writer put it more enthusiastically: “these parti-colored, broken and incoherent phrases of human passion shift like the kaleidoscope each day...”²³

The *Herald* was the main paper to hit upon the fact that the personals could be of immense value; it was one of the first to feature the column prominently. “There is a certain element of news in some of this advertising,” argued Whitelaw Reid, a former *Herald* business manager, “and...the newspaper is more welcome to some of its readers which has a moderate amount and variety of it.”²⁴ What made the *Herald* unique was the decision in the mid-1860s to move the personals to the front page and first column of the paper every day. Although the change did not happen abruptly – the personals continued to move around for some time – the decision to place them permanently on the front page coincided with James Bennett stepping down as publisher and his son, James Gordon Bennett, Jr., taking his place in 1866.

All the penny newspapers were the target of attacks by the moral elite; Philip Hone, the former mayor of New York, called them “receptacles of scandal” as early as

²¹ Samuel MacKeever, *Glimpses of Gotham*, 3rd ed. (New York: R.K. Fox, 1880), 11.

²² Frederic Hudson, *Journalism in the United States from 1690-1872* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1873), 470.

²³ “Personals,” *Daily Evening Bulletin* [San Francisco, CA], 10 November 1866: B.

²⁴ Whitelaw Reid, *Some Newspaper Tendencies* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1879), 13.

1837.²⁵ But the *Herald* earned special condemnation. By the 1850s, writes one historian, the *Herald* was “the most sensational, salacious and sardonic newspaper in the whole world.”²⁶ Bennett pushed the boundaries on sexual innuendo, the elaboration of lurid details about high-profile murders such as that of Helen Jewitt, and provided space for the advertisements of abortionists, medical quacks, and prostitutes from the paper’s inception – a choice that eventually led to the paper’s downfall.²⁷

James Gordon Bennett, Jr., who was involved with the *Herald*’s publication from an early age and took over in 1866, was in many ways even more controversial than his father. Something of a playboy, Bennett, Jr. grew up in Paris and spent most of his time there, but when in New York he was famous for his escapades – including using a china vase as a urinal in the midst of a high society ball. Don Carlos Seitz, business manager at the *New York World*, devoted two chapters in his biography of the Bennetts to Junior’s wild antics; another biographer entitled his book simply *The Scandalous Mr. Bennett*.²⁸ Junior extended his outrageous behavior to the newspaper’s pages and applied the same attitude toward his management of the *Herald*, so under his wing the paper provoked even more condemnation. This was not reflected in the paper’s circulation; whatever his faults, Bennett, Jr. knew his audience. When he permanently relocated the personals column to the front page, he was addressing the desires of his readers.

Although Reid questioned if “this [was] the most interesting news with which this space can be filled” the answer, apparently, was yes.²⁹ The extraordinary popularity of

²⁵ quoted in Barth, 73.

²⁶ Oliver Carlson, *The Man Who Made News: James Gordon Bennett* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1942), 168.

²⁷ Stevens, 27-41.

²⁸ Seitz, chaps. 10-11.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 13.

the Personals column was undisputed. Mark Twain was not the only person to observe this, and it was not an interest exclusive to men. “When a young lady takes up a paper she glances first at the marriages and the ‘personals,’” commented one author a few years after Twain’s article.³⁰ Echoing this thought over a decade after that, yet another writer agreed that, “As a general rule the first thing a woman looks at upon picking up a . . . paper is the personal column.”³¹

Evidence suggests that the column was as popular as newspapermen and other observers believed. In 1895, Arthur MacDonald, a criminologist in the United States Bureau of Education published an entire book of letters from women in response to personal advertisements he had used to request female correspondents; the sheer volume, numbering well into the hundreds, indicates how widely read the column was. In many of the letters, the authors admitted to reading the personals for entertainment. “I sometimes clip advertisements from the personal column for a so-called joke-book, with which I amuse my friends,” admitted one woman. “I was amusing myself by looking over the personals in the newspaper this morning,” wrote another to explain her decision to answer his. “I naturally turn to the newspapers for amusement, and [glance] over the personals,” echoed another correspondent. And a twenty-three year-old woman, who described herself as “superior” in “respectability, family, and morality” explained her decision to write because “I have been noticing these ‘personals’ for some time . . .”³² Like the men in the New York restaurants Twain wrote about, these women all routinely read the personals.

³⁰ Untitled, *The Hinds County Gazette* [MS], 8 February 1871: B.

³¹ Untitled, *The Atchison Daily Globe* [KS], 6 September 1886: 727C.

³² Arthur MacDonald, *Abnormal Woman: Girls Who Answer ‘Personals’* (Washington, DC: Self-Published, 1895), 103, 92, 74, 79.

Many people observed that the personals were more popular in urban centers and argued that the lack of connection between city dwellers accounted for this fact. Between 1820-1860, the urban population of the United States grew 797 percent, creating what Lyn Lofland has called a world of strangers, in which “the people to be found within [a city’s] boundaries at any given moment know nothing personally about the vast *majority* of others with whom they share this space.”³³ Personals, therefore, fit well within this urban world because they provided a sense of connection to neighbors as well as the promise of anonymity to those who used them. Observers at the time agreed; as one reporter from San Francisco argued, personal ads “flourish best in thickly settled communities and metropolitan cities. In smaller places, gossip seems to answer the purpose. But there is a solitude and a loneliness in most large cities which permits this public exhibition of feeling.”³⁴ The literary scholar Matthew Rubery explains that the ads provided insight into the private lives of strangers. Personals, he writes, “offered surrogate forms of intimacy in cities with little personal contact, or at least a way to manage the crowds and anonymity of city life.”³⁵ The personals provided an opportunity for harmless voyeurism. Readers not only had the opportunity to peer inside their neighbors’ lives, but were in fact invited to do so. The column gave newspaper audiences license to look into lives that were exciting, romantic, and sometimes delightfully sinful.

³³ Halttunen, 35; Lyn Lofland, *World of Strangers: Order and Action in Urban Public Space* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3.

³⁴ “Personals,” *Daily Evening Bulletin*.

³⁵ Matthew Christopher Rubery, “The Novelty of News: Victorian Fiction After the Invention of the News” (PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 2004), 67.

The personals had a tantalizing aura of secrecy and danger. “There is such a toothsome flavor of mystery about them!” Mark Twain exclaimed.³⁶ The editors of *Harper’s Bazaar* agreed, writing: “There is to every one a strange and fascinating mystery...it is the old and ever unexplained mystery of the relation of human beings and especially of the sexes, to each other, which appeals to the intense personal consciousness of all.”³⁷ Even the personals’ severest critics could not deny their allure. “The ads in these columns are curiosities in their way,” one writer admitted grudgingly, but others were more honest.³⁸ “There is a spice of wickedness and a suspicion of possible danger in the amusement which makes it truly fascinating,” to young people, complained one paper.³⁹ “There is a fatal fascination in the mystery of surreptitious appointments and meetings,” agreed another author; “Mystery is so suggestive and romantic...”⁴⁰

And indeed, the correspondence ads could be quite cryptic. For example, one lengthy ad read:

ISLE - Received your personal all right; yes, it is safe to address 272 same st.: write: if confronted by “burden,” don't give an inch; there is no proof; deny all knowledge of ever seeing Bay Shore, sheets with corner letter, if shown you. She may say I have confessed. Never! Stand firm and defy production of written documents: there are none in existence; all depends on your pluck and courage to ride the race; threat of separation is all bosh; the worst is over, but you must muzzle your governor and crowd. IRNOB.⁴¹

Such an ad could have meant anything, or nothing. It may have been a communication between a couple engaged in an affair, but it could have just as easily

³⁶ Lopate, 257.

³⁷ ““Personal,”” *Harper’s Bazaar* 14, no. 11 (March 12, 1881): 162.

³⁸ James D. McCabe [Edward Winslow Martin], *Secrets of the Great City* (Philadelphia: Jones, Brothers & Co., 1868), 464.

³⁹ “Personal Ads,” *Daily State Gazette* [Trenton, NJ], 13 September 1872: 1.

⁴⁰ William F. Howe and Abraham H. Hummel, *Danger! A True History of a Great City’s Wiles and Temptations* (Buffalo: The Courier Company, Publishers, 1886), 22

⁴¹ *New York Herald*, 11 September 1892: 1.

been a code, a joke, or something else entirely. Yet whatever readers took away from this ad, the “spice of wickedness” and “possible danger” is clear. Ads such as this revealed juicy little details about the characters’ lives, which may or may not have been true, but which readers consumed eagerly.

Critics found this exposure of sin threatening and most people who reacted to them in print did so to condemn; the column’s survival suggests that the public paid little mind to moral arbiters. But personals had some supporters in the press as well. *Harper’s Bazaar*, for example, saw them as harmless entertainment. “Now and again those sensitive critics whose mission in life is to teach journalists journalism, and the race in general behavior, take offense at the existence of the ‘Personal’ column...and rage at the crass public for reading it,” one article began. But if these critics were right, “then the fact that nine readers out of ten turn first to the offending column testifies to a general coarseness of taste and poverty of mental resources which may well alarm our censors.” On the contrary, the writer declared, if so many people enjoyed the advertisements, then there must have been something redeeming about them. It was the desire to know the inner workings of other people’s hearts and minds that compelled readers regularly to peruse the column, not any crassness or moral deficiency.⁴²

The papers that carried personal advertisements were the most effusive in describing their appeal. “Who is there that does not read the ‘Personals’ of the HERALD, and who can read them without having his mind directed into channels of romance?” asked the *New York Herald* in one article; “[it] is the mystery...given to them which constitutes their chief charm.” Like *Harper’s*, the *Herald* argued that people were simply

⁴² “‘Personal,’” *Harper’s Bazaar*.

fascinated by their neighbors; every day “this column...contains within itself a most curious phantasmagoria of city life, and those who have a taste for real romance need go no farther to gratify it.”⁴³

The *Chicago Tribune*, which carried its own popular personals column, also had plenty of good things to say: “To many readers, the most attractive, if not always instructive corner, of a newspaper, is the modest little square which nestles half bashfully in the advertising columns, devoted to ‘Personal’ matters,” it claimed; “it is sure to captivate the eye by some mystic charm which is contained in the tender hints, and wishes, and wants there stealthily revealed.” Also focusing on the appeal of mystery, the writer claimed, “These delicate intimations and little bites of domestic history; these...artless confessions, whispered surreptitiously into the public ear...have a secret fascination” and the ads provide a “keyhole” through which they “afford us a glimpse into forbidden chambers.”⁴⁴

The ads, observers agreed, allowed readers to let their imaginations run riot, fancying who the men and women were and what their little missives signified; this creative license was both their greatest appeal and greatest danger. The *Herald* and *Tribune* writers, in their self-congratulatory articles, argued that the personals provided fascinating reads for just this reason. “What pictures of life in a great city they open up to the mind’s eye?” asked the *Herald*. “We can only guess and speculate” their meanings, but the man “who does not know the key to the mystery is apt to surround it in his own mind with highly colored attributes, and when he undertakes to sketch outlines, not only for one, but sometimes for a dozen of these romances, in the day, he certainly

⁴³ “The Herald’s ‘Personals,’” *New York Herald*.

⁴⁴ “‘Personal’ Advertisements,” *Chicago Tribune*, 10 February 1867: 1.

has to give a wide scope to his imagination.”⁴⁵ One vocal critic of personals agreed, much to his dismay: “Mystery is so suggestive! Innuendo is so provoking!” he complained. “It is so hard not to get to thinking about the meaning of things that one does not understand!”⁴⁶

As the *Herald* piece suggests, the correspondence ads could be read as little romance stories; in fact, the subtitle of this article was “Materials for Novels.” This was especially true in on-going correspondences, in which whole love affairs could be traced. Couples went from romance to emotional splits to reconciliation, or even to overwrought, tragic conclusions. But even one-time ads could charm; they were “[s]entimental epics condensed into a single square, expressed by one or two unintelligible letters and symbols, [which] have lent a thrilling intent to its columns,” wrote one journalist, and his choice of the word “epic” to describe a few short sentences highlights just how much meaning could be read into the ads. Many of them were “incomprehensible,” admitted this writer; “Yet somewhere lives and breathes the mysterious being who holds the key of this thrilling secret, whose pulse beats quickly, whose heart flutters, or whose cheek burns or blanches at the sight of these ridiculous symbols.”⁴⁷ And the most interesting of these, according to the *Chicago Tribune*, “are to be found among those which convey little love histories, and set us a pondering over their meaning.”⁴⁸

This *Tribune* article spent several paragraphs “pondering the meaning” of a short, simple personal, picked at random: “Will M.B., who corresponded with E.B.,

⁴⁵ “The Herald ‘Personals,’” *New York Herald*.

⁴⁶ Howard Glyndon, “‘Personals’ and ‘Matrimonials,’” *The Phrenological Journal and Science of Health* 51, no. 2 (August 1870): 128.

⁴⁷ “‘Personals,’” *Daily Evening Bulletin*.

⁴⁸ “‘Personal’ Advertisements,” *Chicago Tribune*.

commencing June 18th, 1865, relieve her by writing to her the cause of his strange silence, and be a friend if nothing more?” The writer then spun a tale describing the lives and emotions of M.B. and E.B. in great detail. He started with speculations (“E.B. is evidently in earnest”), moved quickly to declarations (“We know very well the cause of his strange silence”), and finally to total omniscience (“[M.B.] really loved E.B...and every letter of his was burdened with honied [*sic*] words”). M.B., it turned out, “is at bottom a good-hearted, well-meaning, though somewhat too susceptible fellow” and “poor” E.B., who was hoarding his letters, was most likely “a young school marm of very tender age.”⁴⁹

The author created similar fantasies for two other ads, though he spent more time romanticizing the “mild, resigned, and uncomplaining sadness” in E.B.’s appeal, and the “very certain” fact that M.B. had let the “divine flame [flicker] out” and met “some new fair vision of mortal beauty.”⁵⁰ The writer of this article, and by extension, the *Tribune* (which put it on the front page), believed that newspaper readers were imagining similar scenarios as they perused the personal ads – or, at least, wanted them to do so. It is an unusual advertisement for the *Tribune*’s own advertisements, and the same holds true for the celebratory essay in the *Herald* several years before.

These ads functioned in the same way as serial novels that often appeared in newspapers and magazines; readers might follow a story in the personals much as they did fiction.⁵¹ In pointing out that advertising became institutionalized at the same time as the novel was becoming more dominant, Jennifer Wicke argues that “advertising was

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Michael Schudson, 66.

able to take on the status of a mass literature.”⁵² And since most novels were spun out as serials that could extend for months at a time, according to Michael Lund, “their impact on America’s consciousness was gradual, enduring, and open-ended rather than immediate, dramatic, and clearly delimited”; in other words, readers were used to delayed gratification, and the practice of following a story over long periods of time would have been familiar.⁵³ Indeed, as early as the 1850s *New York Herald* often ran serialized romances alongside advertisements.⁵⁴

The correspondence ads functioned as serialized novels; they were much shorter, to be sure, but at the same time – as both the fans and critics pointed out – they gave readers more license to come up with their own interpretations. Matthew Rubery argues in reference to the personals in the *London Times* – aptly nicknamed the “agony column” by the British – that these ads “enabled newspaper audiences to lead a double life through vicarious participation in the...column’s ‘serial romances.’”⁵⁵ The tie to fiction was acknowledged even at the time. As early as 1863, one author claimed that fiction writers “have not been slow to perceive that the [advertising] columns of the daily papers were becoming formidable rivals to quiet novels.”⁵⁶ Some articles explicitly connected fiction to personal advertisements. “The novel-reading school-girl finds in the ‘Personals’... ‘romances of real life,’” one critic wrote, suggesting that ads and novels served similar purposes.⁵⁷ In its defense of personals, *Harper’s Bazaar* pointed out that

⁵² Wicke, 1.

⁵³ Michael Lund, *America’s Continuing Story: An Introduction to Serial Fiction* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 13.

⁵⁴ Schudson, 66.

⁵⁵ Rubery, 92-93.

⁵⁶ “Sensation Novels,” *Medical Critic and Psychological Journal*, quoted in Rubery, 64.

⁵⁷ “The Herald’s ‘Personal Column,’” *New York Times*, 23 February 1862: 4.

even the most respectable people “will lose themselves with delight in the complications of very trashy novels,” so why not the personals column?⁵⁸

Just one example of these “true romances” demonstrates their similarities to the serials that appeared in newspapers and magazines. Without spinning a tale as the *Chicago Tribune* reporter did with “E.B.” and “M.B.,” it is still possible to trace a story. Between March and June of 1885 a couple calling each other “Canoe,” carried on a short but poignant romance: “Canoe - Absence not quite long enough to root out all love: increases it at second sight,” the correspondence began, quickly followed by “Shall expect you with beating heart.” Several weeks later, the correspondence picked up again with: “Nothing yet definitely settled. While my body is here my spirit is with you,” followed by “Am full of thanks for your charming letter. Hot, tired, and weary. I long for the time to come for me to be with you,” said the next ad. Four days later came the next installment: “Your note dispelled the gloom. Shall be with your before long.” A bewildering note followed the next day, reading “Look for note tomorrow, same address; did send, also waited; doubly disappointed; don’t be alarmed, tried and trusted friend from childhood; triple masked and veiled.” A few more personals of similar nature followed, requesting meetings and suggesting dates and times for rendezvous, but the correspondence ended abruptly just a few months after it began, with a confusing but firm dismissal: “Canoe – Be careful, don’t write: Don’t trust any one; these continual and numerous agitations do not come from you and positively not from me. I do not write over six times a year; my name and address are known to you; I have no Post office

⁵⁸ “Personal,” *Harper’s Bazaar*.

or other name or address and will not have any; please leave off, for circumstances compel me to take no further notice. Yours respectfully, but resolutely. Canoe.”⁵⁹

What readers made of this story, assuming they followed it at all, is impossible to say, but it is easy to imagine how an eager audience might await the next letter, perhaps trying to guess what gloom was dispelled, who was “triple masked and veiled,” and why the relationship ended. And correspondences like this one were commonplace; indeed, theirs was short and tame by comparison to that of other lovers. One couple calling each other “Vine” and “Trellis” carried on a dramatic correspondence for over a year and a half (“Vine – Your escort, darling, was never so happy; but oh, the return! Do you believe, dear, in the depth of a true, honorable, manly love? Would I could never, never leave you! Monday. Devotedly. Trellis,” read one typical example). These miniature novellas all followed the same pattern as serial romances, which, like these correspondences, appeared in installments that ran for weeks or months.

Correspondences such as these resembled fictional love stories, but missed connection ads could also resemble romances. For example, one read: “Beautiful eyes, black dress and gloves, white lace shawl, left Fifth avenue stage about 5 o'clock Wednesday, near Society Library - Vouchsafe interview to admirer who sat near by, spellbound. State particulars to avoid mistake. Address Discretion, box 215 Herald office.”⁶⁰ Ads such as these not only had the spice of forbidden romance, but because the encounters took place at specific locations and specific times, readers familiar with the area could picture the exact situation. And some missed connection ads were even more like narratives, such as:

⁵⁹ *New York Herald*, 28 and 31 March, 6, 16, 20, 21, and 30 June 1885: 1.

⁶⁰ *New York Herald*, 3 July 1869: 1.

An introduction is earnestly solicited of the young lady or her friends or family, by the gentleman and his mother who stopped their carriage Friday morning to assist a young lady who had jumped from a stage she had just entered, corner 5th av. And 39th st., to rescue the old gentleman, who had fallen in the roadway. The young lady is about 20 years of age and very beautiful; wears her hair in large brown waves; has rosy complexion and soft blue eyes; wore Persian gilt walking coat and muff. We desire her acquaintance and to present her in our family. Address Mother and Son, Herald Uptown office.⁶¹

These ads resembled novels in more ways than one. Like dime-novel romances, the language in personal ads was often stylized. “Thee,” “thy,” and “vouchsafe,” for example, were all words that were long out of common usage. By drawing on such archaic language, the advertisers were recreating themselves as characters in love stories. Indeed, in some cases, advertisers appeared to be quoting directly from works of literature, as in one ad from 1885 which read, “Albany – Oh! For one of those perfect days! Either there, or where one had ‘a bird from the windy heath, a fish from the river beneath.’ Do you remember?” Even when not borrowing from elsewhere, the writers employed poetic language which would have been more fitting to a romance than a newspaper. The copy could be simple: “with all thy faults I love thee still” read one ad with no opening address or signature. But they could also be quite lengthy, for example: “Mine...yesterday, with a single sentence, you lifted from the threshold of my heart the one shadow lingering there...and to-day [I] renew my homage and love, with added warmth. May I prove worthy of the sweetest woman alive. Thine.” Or, less happily, “I have so many, many lonely hours to think and dream of you, sweet Constance: your

⁶¹ *New York Herald*, 8 February 1880: 1.

voice well remembered; your eyes never forgotten; I live on hope, the fragrant flower of the heart.”⁶²

Many of the advertisers saw themselves as heroes and heroines in romance stories; they gave themselves pseudonyms like Romeo and Juliet or Othello and Desdemona. That all these characters died may have lent to their appeal; since so many of the advertisers appeared to be in unsanctioned relationships, such nicknames let the advertisers imagine themselves as tragic, star-crossed lovers. They also borrowed from more recent fiction, such as the couple in 1872 who used the names Lothair and Corisande, from the 1870 novel *Lothair* by Benjamin Disraeli.⁶³ These monikers were completely unnecessary – in cities as large as New York and Chicago, using initials or first names would have been perfectly safe, and indeed many people did exactly that. The decision to address each other as Ferdinand and Isabelle, Tristan and Isolde, and various other famous literary or real-life couples demonstrates both a wish to be part of a written romance, played out in front of a curious and engaged audience, as well as a desire to recreate their own identity in whatever fashion they liked. Whether or not the advertisers were sincere, their ads still were at least partly fictional; with the stylized language and the pseudonyms borrowed from literature, advertisers were inventing new personas, better selves, and dramatic affairs. The personals were not just similar to the popular genre of romantic fiction; they were a form of romance fiction in and of themselves.

⁶² *New York Herald*, 3 March 1885: 1; *New York Herald*, 5 April 1872: 1; *New York Herald*, 2 February 1872: 1; *New York Herald*, 18 April 1885: 1; *New York Herald*, 9 April 1885: 1.

⁶³ *New York Herald*, 15 March 1885: 1; *New York Herald*, 1 April 1869: 1; *New York Herald*, 9 February 1872: 1.

Indeed, even if the ads were fake, placed by the newspapers themselves to entertain readers, it would not have mattered. As the historians Andie Tucher and Jay Cook have explained, nineteenth-century Americans were fascinated with “humbugs.” For example, the Moon Hoax in 1835, in which the *New York Sun* ran an on-going series of articles claiming that life had been found on the moon, proved that fake stories did not drive readers away; on the contrary, the *Sun*’s circulation was boosted by the hoax. Tucher explains that this “success suggested to...would-be journalistic moguls that readers might well buy wildly if presented with a spectacular story, preferably one slow to unfold, in which a mere germ of plausibility and a great deal of excitement stood substitute for any amount of fact.”⁶⁴ Personal ads were not nearly as sensational or exciting as moon hoaxes, but their unverifiable nature had the same effect on the pleasure of readers; that is, they delighted rather than disappointed the audience. Moreover, Jennifer Wicke argues that the newspaper audience recognized that typical advertisements were “stories about products in which the reader could participate...they learned that the issue of believing or not believing the claims of advertisements was irrelevant to the pleasure of participating in advertising.”⁶⁵ Whether or not they were real did not change the fact that they were present, and that readers were drawn to them.

For advertisers themselves, therefore, the column allowed an opportunity to stand out of the anonymous masses and thus to matter, at least for a day, or even just a morning. The historian David Henkin argues that “newspapers constituted their own public space, an arena of print exchange where strangers appeared, circulated, browsed,

⁶⁴ Tucher, 52.

⁶⁵ Wicke, 76.

and presented themselves before the urban crowd.”⁶⁶ With the middle class in a constant state of evolution, the creation of identity itself was changing; who one was began to be defined by how one appeared, where, and with whom. Michael Schudson writes that city “living became more of a spectacle of watching strangers in the streets, reading about them in the newspapers, dealing with them in shops and factories and offices. On the other hand, as people understood their own ordinary lives to be of value and possible interest to others, they both sought strangers as audiences or publics...”⁶⁷ Personal advertisements provided the perfect outlet: people could expose themselves to audiences numbering in the hundreds of thousands while at the same time remaining completely anonymous.

The novelist Henry James recognized that in some ways, appearing in the personals could be one of the only ways a person might have a claim to notoriety. In *The Bostonians*, the personals became a symbol of the ultimate success for the vulgar Selah Tarrant: “The newspapers were his world, the richest expression in his eyes, of human life; and, for him, if a diviner day was to come upon earth, it would be brought about by copious advertisement in the daily prints.” Hoping to make famous his daughter, a woman’s rights speaker whose eloquence he claimed to inspire, Tarrant “looked with longing for the moment when Verena should be advertised among the ‘personals’...Nothing less than this would really have satisfied Selah Tarrant; his ideal of bliss was to be...regularly and indispensably a component part of the newspaper...”⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Henkin, 104.

⁶⁷ Schudson, 59-60.

⁶⁸ Henry James, *The Bostonians* (New York: MacMillan Press, 1886; Reprint, New York: Penguin Classics, 1986), 120.

While real advertisers did not want the same kind of exposure – indeed, unlike Tarrant, they desired complete anonymity – they may have shared the thrill of appearing in front of such a large audience; being in the paper added value to their lives.

Observers believed that audiences wanted to be on display; even the otherwise celebratory *Chicago Tribune* admitted that some ads were “manifestly a ‘get up’ on the part of some idle person for private amusement, to command attention.”⁶⁹ And some ads were meant for amusement only, as a humorous exchange mocking missed connection ads from 1862 demonstrates. The first read: “If any two young gentlemen who were on Broadway any day last week are desirous of forming the acquaintance of the two young ladies who crossed Fulton ferry one day last month, they can do so by addressing either Lizzie or Clara, at station A.” It was followed three days later by: “Will Lizzie, or Clara, or Julia, or any other handsome and agreeable young lady that was seen on Broadway any day last week, and is matrimonially inclined, send her address, enclosing photograph, to Romeo, Box 144, Herald office?”⁷⁰ These ads could have been between friends or strangers, or by a single individual, but whatever inspired the ads, the purpose was for entertainment, both for the authors and for the reading audience.

Missed connection ads were also alluring because it was not necessary to write one in order to be part of a public story. As one critic, Howard Glyndon, explained the situation, a young girl first “only reads ‘Personals’ from piqued curiosity – just to see what extravagant things are really written and printed. . . . But from this daily reading she falls to thinking how exciting it would be were she to see a ‘Personal’ addressed to

⁶⁹ “‘Personal’ Advertisements,” *Chicago Tribune*.

⁷⁰ *New York Herald*, 5 January 1862, 3; *New York Herald*, 8 January 1862: 3.

herself...she has a sort of wild hope that she shall find herself also described some day.”⁷¹ Of course she means no harm, but her desire to be mentioned in the paper changes her behavior; she “begins to court such looks...and to dress so as to excite attention.” Glyndon assumed the result of this is “an insensible deterioration of that true original modesty...” which would lead girls to answer ads, meet the advertisers, and fall inevitably into ruin and despair.⁷² This may or may not have been true, but even critics could recognize the potential thrill of being seen in public.

And many people printed flirtatious ads that made no pretense of matrimonial intentions but were rather for amusement. Both men and women wrote ads with a note of archness that was more playful than romantic. For example, “If the two gentlemen who followed two ladies down and up Broadway, on Saturday afternoon, and spoke to them, will be at the corner of Twenty-third street, by the Fifth Avenue Hotel, at half-past two next Saturday, they will meet the same ladies. Answer through ‘Personals’ as soon as possible. E & L.” Likewise, another ad stated: “13th street – Monday evening. ‘Do you want me to come in?’ ‘Oh no! No strangers’ Address S.T. Rauger, box 1,341, Post office.”⁷³ One can only imagine the circumstances in either of these incidents, but both give the impression of young people whose intentions were neither entirely honorable nor entirely sinful; rather, they were simply having fun by engaging in risqué flirtations.

Moral arbiters would not have seen these coy missed connections in such a innocuous light, however. Ads such as these were disturbing to critics because they suggested lapses of morality that would be dangerous for young women in particular. If

⁷¹ Glyndon, 128.

⁷² *Ibid*, 129.

⁷³ *New York Herald*, 16 January 1862: 3; *New York Herald*, 28 July 1869: 1.

girls thought the ads were harmless entertainment, they faced dire consequences. Writing about marriage ads as well as missed connections, Howard Glyndon explained that from “reading and becoming interested in such notices, there is but one step to answering. Many a girl who would never dare to write one is yet bold enough to answer one,” and, he firmly declared, “[t]housands of girls...*do* answer them.” Once a girl answered an ad, her fate is sealed. She “walks alone and unadvised into the meshes of a secret acquaintance with a clever and unscrupulous man...Usually nothing but a miracle can save her, and her feet go down into that house whose foundations are built above the chamber of death!”⁷⁴

Glyndon’s warning was not unique. In one article the *New York Times*, pointing out examples of these ads in which men addressed women they had encountered in church, also warned that answering such an advertisement was an action fraught with danger. The writer insisted that “from the church to that ‘devil’s chapel’ there seems to be, for some women, only one step...from the sublime to the ridiculous [and] from religion to sin.”⁷⁵ In another article the *Times* was even more urgent. Again referring to matrimonial ads as well as the missed connections, the author wrote that innocent girls might think that there was no harm in answering an ad, but then “come in order walks on the road to school, clandestine meetings, and then the heart-broken wail of anguish, that is the requiem over the lost soul as it plunges into the gulf of perdition,” it warned. “Those disguised advertisements in the newspapers called ‘Personals’ are...evil,” agreed another writer; “the young girl who, from piqued curiosity, is tempted to dally with

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 129.

⁷⁵ “The Devil’s Chapel,” *New York Times*, 1 January 1874: 4.

a... ‘Personal,’ is an object of commiseration.”⁷⁶ Yet another author summed up the attitude by concluding, “when a young lady seeks to make amusement or gratification in things without the pale of her sympathies, she sets her foot on very dangerous ground.”⁷⁷

Nevertheless, some ads appear to be sincere; for example, in his request for a lady he had encountered on an omnibus, one gentleman concluded that he “asks the lady’s pardon for adopting this means of communicating with her; but can think of no other whereby he is likely to obtain the desired result.” Another wrote that “he regrets that he is compelled [*sic*] to resort to this method of making the request, but trusts that, under the circumstances, she will excuse...him.”⁷⁸ And one observer allowed that while most respectable men would never stoop so low as to publish an advertisement, “an occasion may happen to a man, wherein he sees a lady that he very greatly admires, and can learn her address in no other way without rendering himself offensive and impertinent, hence the apparent necessity of [a] personal advertisement.”⁷⁹

Evidence suggests that people replied to ads; indeed, the assumption was so widespread that at least one etiquette book about letter-writing even gave a model of how best to answer an ad. “It is useless to advise people never to reply to a personal advertisement,” wrote the author. “To do so is like totally refusing young people the privilege of dancing. People will dance, and they will answer personal advertisements. The best course, therefore, is to properly direct the dancers and caution the writers in their answers to newspaper personals.” If a woman believed herself to be addressed, it would “occupy her attention so much...and [her] curiosity [would] become so great” that

⁷⁶ Howe and Hummel, 22

⁷⁷ Joseph Hertford, *Personals; or, Perils of the Period* (New York: Printed for the Author, 1870), 27.

⁷⁸ *New York Herald*, 22 February 1870: 1; *New York Herald*, 19 March 1870: 1.

⁷⁹ Thomas E. Hill, *Hill’s Manual of Social Business Forms: A Guide to Correct Writing* (Chicago: Hill Standard Book Co., Publishers, 1884), 115.

she would have to answer, in order to “relieve her curiosity on the subject.”⁸⁰ Therefore, he offered an example of an appropriate response: short, to the point, and without using either a true name or address.

In addition, there are a handful of ads between men and women who did correspond and perhaps met through these missed connections. One such ad read: “Lizzie. – If you are the lady who, on the 2d of December, in the afternoon, took the small Sixth ave cars on the corner of Varick and Watts streets, and left it at the corner of Waverly place, your note of the 4th of December, in reply to my advertisement, only reached me yesterday...” That same month, another read: “If A.A.B., who wrote to A.B.A., in reply to an advertisement, and made an appointment at the corner of Fourteenth street and Broadway, for Tuesday, at 2 o’clock, will call at the same office where she delivered the first letter, she will find one addressed to her (A.A.B.), explaining the reason why he did not come.”⁸¹

And one pair of ads show that not only did a woman respond to an ad, but that it led to a correspondence and possibly several meetings. The first read: “At fire in 42d St., Thursday evening. - Little lady in sealskin sacque, shall I ever look into those handsome eyes again? If agreeable please address Pressure, Herald office.” A year later, a second ad appeared: “Marie L. - Friday last was the anniversary of our first meeting. One year ago to-day I last sought you through this medium. I have waited long and hopefully for some word from you. Does ‘Pour le present’ mean forever? If not, please write appointing interview or giving address to Pressure, box 125, Herald office.”⁸²

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 115.

⁸¹ *New York Herald*, 25 December 1861: 6; *New York Herald*, 11 December 1861: 3.

⁸² *New York Herald*, 15 February 1879: 1; *New York Herald*, 15 February 1880: 1.

In addition to demonstrating that missed connection ads sometimes met with at least some success, this particular pair also gives a few hints about the people who used them. For example, the “little lady,” Marie, wore a sealskin sacque, at a time when sealskin was a luxury item; a sacque – a loose-fitting women’s jacket – made of this material could have a hundred dollars or more.⁸³ And the use of “pour le present” in the second ad suggests that both had to be well-educated enough to have some knowledge of French. In this case, at least, the couple who met through a missed connection ad were middle-class people who found an unconventional way to circumvent proper etiquette.

But because most personal ads were anonymous and do not include clues about who the writers were, there is no way to know their real intentions or whether any of them can be taken at face value. It is easy to draw conclusions or invent scenarios, as did the *Chicago Tribune* in their story of “E.B.” and “M.B.,” but without the testimony of the people who wrote the ads, their motivations and purposes are impossible to discern. Nevertheless, the very fact that the ads were just as much of a mystery when they were written as they are now demonstrates that they allowed the freedom to speak openly without fear of condemnation that was unavailable anywhere else.

Three examples, two actual and the third fictional, show the degree to which men and women could use the excuse of personal ads to play with identity and create stories about their lives. Personals offered opportunities to escape social convention, loneliness, and isolation that extended beyond the ads themselves. The ads’ ambiguous nature gave people the ability to define and shape whole relationships as they pleased.

⁸³ “Dresses Made of Sealskin,” *The Daily Argus News*, 22 December 1887: 2.

The first example of how personals offered new forms of freedom was the correspondence between Mary Ward Beecher and Louis H.D. Crane.⁸⁴ On January 25, 1862, Mary and a friend placed a personal advertisement in the *New York Herald*. It read: “Two young ladies (a blonde and a brunette), educated in Paris, having property in Cuba, wish to make the acquaintance of two gentlemen sans reproche. Address for one week Marie and Eugenie Du Pont, Brookfield, Mass.”⁸⁵

The advertisement, Mary later explained, came about through her friend, one example of someone who wanted the thrill of seeing her name in print. Eugenie “had been in the habit of reading the Personals and [had] the evil desire...to insert one. We all refused, she continued to coax for a week more when...I consented to write the adv.” with the permission of Mary’s parents. Eugenie looked at the responses first, and passed on those which did not interest her to her friend.⁸⁶

The advertisement resulted in more than two hundred letters, including one from a soldier, Major Louis H.D. Crane from Wisconsin. “Only to think of it! For this long time I have always read Personals – just for the sport of it –” he began without preamble, echoing observers’ assertions, “fancying the looks of the ‘young lady with the plaid shawl who left a Bleecker Street Omnibus at the corner of Grand Street, and the taller of the young gentlemen, who etc’...But I have never had the first idea of amusing my individual self with a correspondence until now.” Bored and restless while recovering

⁸⁴ Mary’s father, William, was the oldest son of Lyman Beecher; unlike his illustrious siblings, however, William had an undistinguished career. Although a minister like his brothers, he was poorly suited for the profession, and the family was forced to move repeatedly to find a congregation that would keep him. See Marie Caskey, *Chariot of Fire: Religion and the Beecher Family* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1978).

⁸⁵ *New York Herald*, 25 January 1862: 3.

⁸⁶ Mary Ward Beecher to Louis H.D. Crane, 17 February 1862, Beecher Family Papers, 1843-1891, the Huntington Library, San Marino, California (hereafter HL).

from a battle wound in Virginia, he begged the two young ladies to “[t]ake pity on me” and “lighten my dull home down here in Dixie.”⁸⁷ His letter prompted what became a lengthy, fruitful, and mutually satisfying correspondence between himself and Mary; the two wrote a flurry of letters over the next six months, altogether totaling over 250 pages, mostly on Louis’ side. But the letters were not what they seemed, and the unique beginning of the correspondence had a powerful effect on the nature of their relationship and, in the end, led directly to its conclusion in July, 1862.

Mary did not reveal her real name until the correspondence was almost at an end, signing herself “Mary G. Leigh” (after “the introduction of a few copies of the odious Herald” made the name Marie Du Pont “unexpectedly and unpleasantly familiar”).⁸⁸ And as the relationship proceeded, it soon became clear that Louis was not being entirely honest about himself either. In describing himself in his first letter, Louis wrote that his sister “Lizzie has called me her old bachelor brother any time these six years,” and mentioned a second sister and his mother who “sends me jellies enough every week to supply a Brigade Hospital.”⁸⁹ Yet after a letter in which he mentioned two sisters with different names, Mary became suspicious, and he finally – after several queries about the missing Lizzie – admitted that he had made her up. “I might as well own it,” he confessed. “I endeavored to romance, in that letter, to my heart’s content, and I haven’t the slightest idea how many whoppers I told in it. I ‘went in’ on the Cuban property style and I have now only a vague idea of flattering myself that I had succeeded. How little I dreamed of the pleasure this racy correspondence would give me, nor to what length it

⁸⁷ Crane to Beecher, 27 January 1862, HL.

⁸⁸ Beecher to Crane, 3 February 1862, HL.

⁸⁹ Crane to Beecher, 26 January 1862, HL.

would grow.”⁹⁰ Having assumed correctly that Mary’s story about owning property in Cuba was untrue, Louis believed that he too could fictionalize his life.

Mary forgave him the lie, but eventually it became clear that Lizzie was not the only fabrication. A letter shortly thereafter described Louis’ sadness upon the passing away of his mother several years before – the same “Madame la Mere” who had supposedly sent him jellies weekly.⁹¹ An offhand and joking comment that he had “learned that woman was deceitful above all things and desperately wicked” led Mary to write that she “now believe[d] you were married long ago.” She did not seem entirely serious, but merely confused; “I do not doubt you,” she wrote, but after “I end this letter I’m going to tell mother about your being married.”⁹²

Ten pages into his reply, Louis finally confessed: “I have no longer pretext for misleading you, and I shall not do so more. So I say to you as what you may believe. That all of my personal adventures have been honestly related to you. You may believe in what I have said of my family, saving of sister Grace...and of sister Lizzie...And, my friend, you may believe, as I do, very thankfully, in a dear, little...woman...who calls me her husband.” Louis justified his actions as only to be expected when an acquaintance was made through the personals column, explaining that “[w]hen I saw your advertisement...I supposed, and pardon me for saying too, that I had a right to suppose, that some romantic boarding-school damsel had been trying to procure a romantic correspondent and...some imp induced me answer it.”⁹³

⁹⁰ Crane to Beecher, 30 April 1862, HL.

⁹¹ Crane to Beecher, 26 January 1862, HL; Crane to Beecher, 15 June 1862, HL.

⁹² Crane to Beecher, 30 April 1862, HL; Beecher to Crane, 30 May 1862, HL.

⁹³ Crane to Beecher, 10 July 1862, HL.

But to dismiss Louis as a cad who took unfair advantage of his correspondent would be too hasty. His lengthy, amusing, and warm letters demonstrate that he had a real affection for Mary. Neither one ever hinted at romantic attachment, so perhaps he felt safe in continuing the correspondence. In addition, prior to the war, he had been a lawyer, the chief clerk of the state assembly in Wisconsin, and by the time of his death in August of 1862, just three weeks after his correspondence with Mary ended, he had been promoted to Lieutenant Colonel.⁹⁴ In other words, he was a respectable member of society. Rather, he believed that the personal column afforded him the opportunity to “endeavor to romance,” and – to a lesser degree – Mary did as well.

Mary’s departure from reality was not so egregious. Her connection to such a prestigious family may have made her more wary about giving her real name even after the friendship grew stronger. And the girls had not intended to reply to any of the letters they received; they designed the romantic personas to see what kind of responses such women would elicit. The choice to become “Marie and Eugenie Du Pont,” with a Parisian education and property in Cuba – characters whose imagined lives could not be more at odds with Mary’s actual circumstances – demonstrates the playfulness that personals allowed. Like so many other advertisers, Mary and Eugenie turned themselves into the heroines of their own story.

But whatever Mary’s deceptions, they paled in comparison to her correspondent’s. Most of his were innocuous enough; the two imaginary sisters were forgivable, as was the flight of fancy in which he claimed (impossibly) that he was the first person ever to have read Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Raven,” a story Mary did not

⁹⁴ Edwin E. Bryant, *History of the Third Regiment of Wisconsin Veteran Volunteer Infantry* (Madison, WI: Veteran Association of the Regiment, 1891), 6.

appear to take seriously.⁹⁵ Lying about his marriage, however, crossed a clear line of propriety; for a married stranger to correspond with a teenage girl – Mary was nineteen at the time – was completely out of the bounds of proper middle-class etiquette, a breach of which both were well aware. Indeed, as soon as she learned the truth, Mary cut off the relationship entirely. Yet Louis was only sorry to lose her friendship – he was never apologetic about his deliberate transgression. For him, the fact that the correspondence had begun through the *Herald's* Personal column justified behavior which would have otherwise been inappropriate.

The criminologist Arthur MacDonald began his experiment with personals in much the same way as did Mary Beecher. Intending to write a book about “abnormal women,” a term he claimed had “no reference to moral qualities; [abnormal] simply signifies deviation from the normal,” he settled on a unique way to find such women in society: through personals columns.⁹⁶ As he believed no normal woman would answer a personal (though he never defined what “normal” was), it stood to reason that only women who were abnormal would; therefore, those who did would be perfect subjects. He published two different ads in papers around the country, one was a matrimonial, the other requested correspondents only. In all, MacDonald published letters from sixty-seven women, though he received many more. How many were in response to the matrimonial versus the request for correspondence is unclear, but judging by the letters themselves, about half were from women who had no expectation of meeting him. The ad requiring no introduction read: “Gentleman of high social and university position

⁹⁵ Crane to Beecher, 15 June 1862, HL.

⁹⁶ MacDonald, xiii.

desires correspondence (acquaintance not necessary) with young educated woman of high social and financial position. No agents; no triflers; must give detailed account of life: references required. Address, Lock Box --.”⁹⁷

MacDonald later did request to meet many of his correspondents, some of whom complied. But because he initially specified that no acquaintance was necessary, many of the women who replied admitted that this unique situation provided them with a rare opportunity to express themselves in a way they felt they could not elsewhere. The letters to a stranger they never intended to meet gave them the freedom to escape social restrictions. As one woman, “Miss H,” wrote: “my position and surroundings will not permit my ever knowing you, and [I] can give no reason for addressing you the first time, except utter loneliness and a desire to break through conventionalities.”⁹⁸

MacDonald did not publish his own letters, so what he wrote can only be gleaned from his correspondents. He avoided giving his own name, despite persistently requesting the women, who like Mary Beecher often used pseudonyms, tell him theirs. And he never told them that he planned to publish their letters, with the names withheld (he justified this by saying that a “woman who answers a public advertisement cannot expect her correspondence with a total stranger to be of a very confidential nature”; besides, it “is difficult to see any serious reason why people in general should object to be studied”).⁹⁹ Therefore, while MacDonald’s sins were more of omission than outright falsehood, he, like Louis Crane, felt that the personals gave him the right to be less than truthful in his intentions.

⁹⁷ MacDonald, *Girls Who Answer ‘Personals,’* (Washington, DC: Self-Published, 1897), viii. All references from MacDonald are from the first edition, unless otherwise specified.

⁹⁸ MacDonald, 30.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, ix-x.

But the women he communicated with enjoyed the nature of the correspondence even without knowing who he was; indeed, while many of them complained that he would not identify himself, they were pleased at the idea of writing a total stranger. “This is a funny letter for a...girl to write; but never mind. It is a luxury to be able to be frank and vent one’s self in a letter,” explained one; “[a]s long as no one *knows* except ourselves...and I enjoy the novelty.” Another young woman’s letter began, “I think I’ll write to you, just for a lark. Am tired of the society act, and fancy I’d like just a tiny bit of bohemianism.”¹⁰⁰

The desire to escape from social conventions is a running theme, as is the sense that replying to the personal was rebellion of sorts, one spiced with mystery and even excitement. For example, one woman explained her reason for writing by saying: “Perhaps I am treading on ‘dangerous ground’ by addressing a stranger with whom I have no acquaintance...but as we are all victims of fate, and...[as] I am enchanted with everything that is flavored by mystery, I will venture...”¹⁰¹ Similarly, another wrote:

I read [your advertisement] several times before I could muster sufficient recklessness – shall I say? to answer it. For the question will present itself: What would father say? What would mother say? What would everybody say? People are ever ready and anxious to censure, therefore one must never suggest an opportunity to be reckless. I think I shall be reckless for a change, - life is so uncompromisingly dull at times. A little mild recklessness would at least break the monotony.¹⁰²

Risking the displeasure of parents or society in general was also a frequent theme. “Miss F,” who told MacDonald that she believed she had done no wrong, admitted that “the social world would not view it in the same light. They would consider our

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 13, 16, 9.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 83.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 3.

introduction a most unconventional one, and...my own action in writing to you would be severely commented upon, were it known.” She added that her family “would never understand my correspondence with a stranger. They would...try to save me from such a mad course.”¹⁰³ Despite this, she wrote at least eight letters to MacDonald and eventually consented to meet him twice (she “writes better than she talks,” was his dismissive conclusion).

One lengthy letter demonstrates the degree to which the women who wrote MacDonald felt that this kind of correspondence gave them license to be “brutally frank,” as “Miss F” put it.¹⁰⁴ In her first letter, “Miss D” wrote that “I am *very* independent, and I have views of my own which some people do not approve of.” When asked to elaborate, she replied with a letter so long it covered nearly four pages of MacDonald’s book. “In regards to some of my ideas...let me see, it’s hard work to suddenly be obliged to put into words thought which has never taken a tangible form before,” she began. What follows is a detailed explanation of why she did not believe in marriage, based on her frustration with the fact that a woman was expected to be “perfectly pure,” while her husband “may be one of the most awful rakes that ever existed,” something that she believed led most unions to be failures. “I think that either women should be allowed more liberty, in a certain way, or else that men should keep themselves as pure as they expect their wives to be,” she concluded. At the end of the letter, she added: “Remember, I do not flourish these ideas of mine abroad. But few people even so much as suspect them...”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 13, 14.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 14.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 5, 6.

“Miss I” expressed similar ideas. She was a woman who MacDonald described as having “a particularly fine and kind disposition,” and an “aesthetical sense, as manifested in feeling, [which was] noteworthy.” She wrote “in regard to women...society has imposed such a system of reserve upon them, that it is not always easy for them to throw off. If they were as free and natural as men, they would be misunderstood and misinterpreted in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred.” But, “Miss I” explained, she could only say such things to MacDonald because their correspondence was anonymous; she insisted on hiding her identity in order to throw off the “system of reserve” she found so binding.¹⁰⁶

Thus, while their motivations were not all identical, most valued the opportunity to speak freely and honestly. The women who wrote MacDonald were not like Louis Crane, who fictionalized his life; according to themselves they were doing the exact opposite: revealing their true selves without fear of exposure. But they were taking advantage of the personals in the same way; the ads created a space which allowed escape from social conventions and solitude, as well as critique.

The final example of how personals could define relationships is the best-selling novel *The Lure of the Mask*, published in 1908 by Harold MacGrath.¹⁰⁷ A romance thriller, it tells the story of Jack Hillard, an independently wealthy New Yorker, who falls in love with a beautiful young woman named Sonia Hilda Grosvenor. Both were Americans who grew up in Italy, and much of the novel takes place there; MacGrath,

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 42, 39.

¹⁰⁷ “Books in Demand,” *New York Times*, 5 September 1908: BR490; “Magazines,” *Zion’s Herald*, 14 October 1908: 1335. In 1915, the novel was made into a silent film.

who had spent time there in 1906 and 1907, writes about the country in so much detail that the book is almost an Italian travelogue.¹⁰⁸ Told from the perspective of both characters, the story involves adventures across the country: a gondola chase in Venice, betrayals, scandals, seductions, and even murder. Sonia, known only as “La Signorina” throughout most of the novel, is a mysterious figure; it is she who wears the mask two which the title refers. She reveals near the end of the novel that she has been married for nearly five years, against her will, to a wicked Italian prince who wants access to her money. In the end, the prince is killed by the father of a girl he had seduced years before, and while the dénouement is uncertain, the author suggests that Hillard and La Signorina will soon be together.

Hillard falls in love with the lady before he knows her name or sees her face; indeed, he is fascinated by her before he ever meets her. His first encounter with her is not in person; rather, the book opens with him hearing a beautiful voice singing Italian opera below his window in New York, late at night. The “Voice in the Fog,” as he calls it, so intrigues him that, on an impulse born from “his unspoken loneliness striving to call out against...isolation; for he was secretly lonely, as all bachelors must be...” he decides to print a personal advertisement in the newspaper asking the lady to write him.¹⁰⁹

Like Hillard, Sonia replies to the personal ad on an impulse (the author suggests that it is their Italian upbringing that led them both to such thoughtless indiscretions), and agrees to continue the correspondence. “Was it not dreadfully improper and bizarre?” she asks herself before writing her second letter, and yet

¹⁰⁸ “Best Books for Summer Reading,” *New York Times*, 30 May 1908: BR335.

¹⁰⁹ Harold MacGrath, *The Lure of the Mask* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1908), 9, 10.

[i]t was so droll. It was unlike anything she had ever heard of. A personal inquiry column, where Cupids and Psyches billed and cooed, and anxious Junos searched for recreant Jupiters! The merest chance had thrown the original inquiry under her notice. Her answer was an impulse to which she had given no second thought till too late. She ought to have ignored it. But since she had taken the first step she might as well take the second. She was lonely; the people she knew were out of town...¹¹⁰

After this, the two embark on an exciting exchange of letters. She is able to discover his identity, but refuses to give her own or to meet despite his entreaties. Far from being dissuaded, these circumstances make Hillard even more determined to find her. "I am bored; so are you," he writes. "You must understand at once that is the mystery that interests me. It is the unknown that attracts me."¹¹¹

Sonia's insistence on anonymity, it turns out, is a safety precaution. If she can remain estranged from her brutal husband for five years, he cannot lay hands on her fortune, so she is in hiding and on the run. Nevertheless, like her real-life counterparts, Louis and Mary, she takes advantage of this anonymous correspondence originating in the personals column to take on and explore a new persona. Sonia is heartbroken and scared, but her letters are exhilarating and playful; she challenges Hillard to find her while insisting that he never can, and is so charming that "more and more Hillard found himself loving a Voice."¹¹² And while unlike Louis she never claims to be unmarried, she willfully allows her correspondent to draw his own conclusions based on her arch and flirtatious letters.

Finally Sonia surrenders to a meeting, but on the condition that he arrive in a carriage she provides, blindfolded, so he has no idea where she lives. When he gets

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 44-45

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 65.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 66.

there, excited to finally see her face, she is wearing a mask. The entire dinner is a battle of wits; indeed, the author refers to it as a duel and a fencing match.¹¹³ She refuses to show her face, and insists that this one meeting will be the last, but the allure of the mask – both the literal one and the one that hides her identity – only increases Hillard’s fascination and leads him to chase her across Italy in order to find out who she really is.

Jack Hillard, Sonia Grosvenor, and the personal advertisement seeking the voice in the fog were all fictional, but the novel nonetheless highlights what made the personals so intriguing. Missed connections could provide a rare opportunity to see the same stranger twice, a circumstance that Mark Twain had lamented was impossible in the overcrowded city forty years earlier. Hillard, though he knows that there is “not one chance in a thousand” that she will see it, prints the ad with the hope that the lady will reply. And MacGrath recognized the appeal fleeting glimpses could have; Hillard does not see Sonia’s face until late in the novel, but she sees his “in a flash of light” when he lit a cigarette in the dark the night she sang beneath his window. This is what inspires her to respond to his ad: “[s]ometimes,” she realizes, “a single glance is enough.”¹¹⁴

The theme that carries across these three very different stories is the desire to escape solitude, boredom, and convention; Louis replied to Mary because he was “tired, & lonesome & weary, and ennuied.”¹¹⁵ The women who wrote MacDonald did so for the same reasons; “Miss H” explained her decision to write because she was “away from

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 46

¹¹⁵ Crane to Beecher, 10 July 1862, HL.

home and friends, and long[ed] for...companionship.”¹¹⁶ One woman wrote that she was “alone in New York and desire[d] company”; yet another said that she was “very lonesome at times.”¹¹⁷ MacDonald himself admitted in his second edition that the women he corresponded with were less abnormal than they were lonely.¹¹⁸ And both Jack Hillard and Sonia Grosvenor wrote each other out of loneliness and the desire for amusement and adventure. For all of them, personals provided a means of connection that they could not find elsewhere. They opened up a whole world of creative license, escape from social constraints, and the promise of companionship.

Yet at the same time ads offered these men and women opportunities, there was still ambiguity and discomfort with how their relationships were formed. *The Lure of the Mask* does not condemn the use of personal ads, but it does not condone them either. Hillard regrets his impulse to print an ad almost immediately; on a stagecoach coming home from the newspaper office, he sees people reading the column and “squirmed” to imagine his own ad in the midst of the silly ones. He instructs the mysterious singer to address him as “J.H.” at his gentleman’s club, and when the members see the ad, they are furious. A friend of Hillard’s, unaware that he had printed the ad, warns him that members with those initials ““are being guyed unmercifully, and you’ll come in for it presently...the man who would stoop to such tommyrot and tack the name of his club to it must be an ass.”” And when Hillard writes his first letter to the lady after she replies, he begins: “On my word of honor, it was a distinct shock to my sense of dignity when I saw that idiotic personal of mine in the paper. It is my first offense of the kind, and I am

¹¹⁶ MacDonald, 31.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 17, 46.

¹¹⁸ MacDonald, 2d ed., 180.

really ashamed.”¹¹⁹ Although it does not hurt him or his reputation in the end, it is clear that personals were not meant to be used by respectable people.

In the real-life circumstances, the very people who used the ads censured them at the same time. Louis Crane chastised Mary for printing a personal ad, even though he had responded to it. Despite knowing that her parents had given their consent, he still felt the right to criticize. “My good friend,” he wrote, “it was a very foolish act of yours...one which exposes a young lady to more than I would like to mention. The ‘Personals’ column is the exchange of weak women and licentious men. One who suffers herself there exposes herself to suspicion and more than suspicion, by the company in which she places herself.”¹²⁰ Her ad and their letters, even with parental oversight, left her open to scrutiny and risked her reputation. And Mary, who had referred to Eugenie’s desire to place an ad as “evil,” knew that the correspondence was irregular. She had only replied to Louis in a “burst of patriotic feeling” in order to cheer up a lonesome soldier, but was not “without a constant consciousness that in your eyes, and in the eyes of the world, if this world had [known], I was doing a wrong...” by maintaining the correspondence.¹²¹

Likewise Arthur MacDonald justified himself by claiming that he was working in the interests of science, and when he met any of his correspondents, he invariably chastised them for indulging in such a disreputable hobby – never acknowledging that he himself was the instigator. Indeed, he believed he was doing the women a favor; on several occasions he reported with pride that he had informed innocent girls of the danger

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 56, 49.

¹²⁰ Crane to Beecher, 10 July 1862, HL.

¹²¹ Beecher to Crane, 23 July 1862, HL.

they were in by answering ads, and made them promise never to answer a personal again, or publish one of their own.¹²²

In both these cases, the danger was for women, not men. Louis Crane and Arthur MacDonald feared for women's moral purity, because many of the ads were indeed "licentious." They were often laced with sexual innuendo – never explicit, but present nonetheless; for example: "How's your dog? Ready for another spree. Second Edition." Another spicy exchange from 1861 started: "Pope Pius – Are you married? You have looked so cross of late, that I am happy to see you smile once again. Mary." This ad was followed by: "Mary. – Married? No. Meet me this week, same place, day and hour as last week. I may prevail with myself to be less diffident. P.P."¹²³ That the pope the year this was published was Pius IX only adds to the racy nature of the correspondence: the characters not only implied that whether or not one was married is a matter of indifference, but also dragged the Pope himself into an illicit affair.

The ads did not have to be so flirtatious for their meaning to be clear; for example, one ad read: "26th street, Sunday afternoon – Will the lady give a rendezvous to the French gentleman?" Similarly, another said: "'Carrie - The Colonel is in town: leaves today. Must see you at one o'clock. You know where."¹²⁴ These were the weak women and licentious men Louis spoke of; by placing an ad in the personals, Mary's request for a correspondence could be misinterpreted as a solicitation.

Ads such as these were just as disturbing as the more openly flirtatious ones because, as a journalist who called personals "insidious and villainous little paragraphs"

¹²² MacDonald, 3, 46, 47.

¹²³ *New York Herald*, 3 April 1869: 1; *New York Herald*, 19 June 1861: 3; *New York Herald* 20 June 1861: 3.

¹²⁴ *New York Herald*, 20 April 1869: 1; *New York Herald*, 10 May 1860: 9.

wrote: “[s]ociety knows what they mean. There is not a boy or girl of sixteen years of age who is not aware of their object and intent.”¹²⁵ The newspapers with personals “are taken in to many a respectable family” where they are seen by children, one writer pointed out. The vile advertisements therein, agreed Glyndon, “constantly [come] under [children’s] eyes as soon as they are able to spell out words in the newspaper, which lies upon the table in the family sitting-room, or which they find thrown around in the kitchen.” How “is a young girl of fifteen or sixteen who picks up a newspaper and has her attention caught by a [personal] advertisement to know the danger?” he asked; this regular exposure “leads to a...toleration of things that once startled, annoyed, and disgusted.”¹²⁶

The central problem was that the people leading the “vicious and scandalous” lives in the personals were “having a good time of it” and no proof existed to suggest that these advertisers were being punished for their indiscretions.¹²⁷ Critics feared that if boys and girls could plainly see illicit affairs being conducted every day, they too might be open to such a relationship. What followed was inevitable: innocent girls might think that there was no harm in answering an ad, but the story would end with seduction, abandonment, descent into prostitution, and an early grave.

The blame for all this was shifted directly onto the shoulders of the publishers themselves, who – by printing the ads in the first place – were responsible for any evil deed that resulted from them. The solution, therefore, was to ban them altogether.

¹²⁵ Hertford, 10.

¹²⁶ Glyndon, 128.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 128.

“Immoral books can be suppressed by law,” one writer pointed out, “why should indecent advertisements be tolerated? The profligate volume is read by comparatively few, but the more directly pernicious invitation to vice is a two or three line ‘Personal.’”¹²⁸ Critics around the country agreed, sometimes even demanding that the entire newspaper which published the ads should be shut down. “There ought to be some law forbidding the publication of such advertisements,” complained one paper.¹²⁹ Only a few weeks later, another paper echoed this sentiment: “[t]he Legislature of each State should prohibit the publication of that class of newspapers that give place to advertisements of ‘personals,’” it argued.¹³⁰

Critics believed that it was the responsibility of the press to regulate itself. Papers should work “to elevate the condition of society, and not degrade the moral circle by pandering to the tastes of their patrons,” argued one author.¹³¹ But money, they acknowledged, was always the primary motivating factor; “with a steady eye upon the profits to be made by pandering...[the *New York Herald*] has transferred much of its indecency to its advertising columns,” the *New York Times* reported.¹³² One author for the *Christian Union* claimed that “the elder [James Gordon] Bennett is reported to have said, ‘The mission of a newspaper is not to instruct, but to startle or amuse;’ but, primarily, the mission of a newspaper is to make money for its owners.” If being moral meant losing money, he argued rather idealistically, the newspaper publishers should

¹²⁸ Hertford, 10.

¹²⁹ “The Cause,” *Duluth Minnesotian-Herald*, 16 March 1878: 1.

¹³⁰ “Personal Advertisements,” *Pomeroy’s Illustrated Democrat*, 6 April 1878: 4.

¹³¹ Hertford, 8.

¹³² “The Devil’s Chapel,” *New York Times*.

sacrifice the profits.¹³³ Indeed, Bennett received much of the blame for the general degradation of the press. The eminent New York diarist George Templeton Strong likely spoke for many Americans when he remarked, “I suppose that no man can be named who has done as much to blunt the moral sense of the people...as J.G. Bennett...his paper has been, and is, a national curse.”¹³⁴

Therefore, recognizing that newspaper owners were never going to alter without good motivation, critics called upon American citizens to demand change. “It is amazing that newspapers pretending to respectability will continue to receive [personals]; but they do, and probably will until the law or some outraged sufferer steps in and demolishes the practice...” admitted one author.¹³⁵ If people wanted to read a paper but wanted the personals to be discontinued, said another, they “would straightaway send to the responsible editors and owners a note, containing...a protest against these reprehensible features.” If men who dealt regularly with these newspapers would protest, this author suggested, it “might do much to bring about a moral revolution in this matter, and secure for us a daily press [about] whose moral tone we shall not need to blush.”¹³⁶ One writer even called upon the women who prayed for reform to focus less attention on alcohol and more on the personal ads, which “go into many of the virtuous and refined families of the city, to do their work with our sons and daughters – a work so infinitely worse than that of whiskey...that no comparison can be made.”¹³⁷

¹³³ A.L. Crosby, “Correspondence: Needed – Moral Newspaper Owners,” *Christian Union*, September 11, 1890: 344.

¹³⁴ George Templeton Strong, *The Diary of George Templeton Strong: The Post War Years, 1865-1875*, ed. Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1952), 86.

¹³⁵ “Dr. Thomas; Mamie Stevens,” *The Chicago Inter-Ocean*, 6 July 1878: 4.

¹³⁶ “The Cause,” *Duluth Minnesotian-Herald*.

¹³⁷ “‘Personals’ – A Word to the Praying Ladies,” *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, 31 March 1874: 3.

Papers like the *New York Herald* and the *Chicago Tribune*, however, knew their readers and continued publishing their personals without much concern for the useless railings of their critics. But by the early 1890s, personal columns had changed dramatically, especially that of the *New York Herald*. The columns had at least doubled in length, and the ads themselves were different. The Matrimonial column had been discontinued, and marriage ads moved to the front page, but many of them now resembled the advertisements placed by agencies rather than individuals. Missed connection ads were buried, and correspondence ads were virtually nonexistent – perhaps due to new technology which would have made communication easier. For example, one personal in 1894 read: “Telephone me Saturday, about 10:30 if convenient,” which suggests the ads were no longer necessary to communicate without detection.¹³⁸ Worst of all, from the critics’ perspective, more and more advertisements appeared which were open solicitations. “A lady of culture, education and social position (widow) desires the acquaintance and assistance of honorable gentleman of independent means,” was one unmistakable example, notable for its lack of the requisite “object, matrimony,” which would have made the ad more legitimate.¹³⁹ “Gentleman, disengaged, offers confidential services to lady or widow of means,” read an even more risqué male counterpart.¹⁴⁰

This dramatic turn ultimately became too much to ignore, and in 1907 it led to the downfall of the *Herald*’s personal column altogether. In addition, Joseph Pulitzer began promoting splashy front-page headlines that would force advertisements into the back pages of papers, clarify the difference between news and advertisements, and therefore

¹³⁸ *New York Herald*, 7 July 1894, 1.

¹³⁹ *New York Herald*, 29 December 1889, 1.

¹⁴⁰ *New York Herald*, 6 April 1906, 1.

lessen their news value; other newspapers quickly followed suit. But before fading into the background or disappearing altogether, personal advertisements had taken on a central role in urban culture. They provided a playground that enabled people to experiment with new forms of intimacy, and in putting their personal lives on display, advertisers turned private transactions into public currency. Reading them helped newspaper audiences make sense of and adjust to the anonymity of large, overcrowded cities. Through these glimpses into the lives of strangers, readers were able to form connections, even if only imaginary ones, to their neighbors. The exciting, titillating “romances” within the columns provided an escape from isolation, boredom, and constrictive social rules of behavior.

While correspondence ads and missed connections were in the papers of major cities such as Chicago and New York, they were not as commonplace as a more specific type of personal ad that also concerned moral critics. Matrimonial advertisements flourished starting in the mid-nineteenth century, and although they too were concentrated in urban centers, they ultimately had a much wider reach than the ads discussed in this chapter, appearing in small-town papers and appealing to rural dwellers as well as urbanites. They too provoked an outcry, but of a slightly different tone. While correspondence ads and missed connections risked the moral virtue of Americans – young women in particular – matrimonials posed a risk to society as a whole. Their relationship to the market economy signaled to many observers an impending crisis. Marriage, they believed, was becoming a business transaction, centered around money; if this became the norm, civilization itself would suffer.

Chapter Two: Intimate Strangers: Matrimonial Advertisements and Public Courtship

In June of 1864, a man signing himself “Bertram” printed a remarkable matrimonial advertisement. At forty-three lines long and 372 words (but only three sentences), it took up nearly a quarter of a column in the *New York Times*. Describing himself as a “young gentleman in all respects favorably situated in life,” with all the qualities a privileged man should have: “prepossessing appearance and manners...no ordinary capabilities and attainments, independent in thought and action, enlarged, liberal and charitable in views,” he nevertheless lamented that he was “still wanting the essential element of happiness”: a wife. The reason for this lack, he explained, was “the narrow bigotry and conventionalities of society, which, by imposing barriers to the free intercourse of the sexes, and thus limiting our choices, condemn multitudes of even the most favored to lives of celibacy and misery.”

Bertram was convinced, however, that the world somewhere contained his “‘bright particular star’ – the light of whose blessed presence and sweet influence his social confines, extensive as contracted souls would consider them, have shut him out from,” so he turned to “this method as the only one open to him.” Dismissing any “worldly advantages,” he requested only respectability, “agreeable person, expressive face and engaging manners,” and anyone who did not “unite *brains* and *heart* (the latter especially)” need not reply. The only women who should answer were those “with resources of soul and wealth of affection greater than their opportunities...[who could] rise above the prejudice of mode and tyranny of custom...” In conclusion, he hoped to “[escape] the relentless social constriction which crushes our best aspirations within the

folds of its ‘circles’ and thus dooms us to become the helpless victims of mere matrimonial chance or accident.”¹

Bertram took his name from William Shakespeare’s *All’s Well That Ends Well*. The pseudonym is an odd choice; in the play, Helena utters the line “‘Twere all one/That I should love a bright particular star,” in reference to Bertram, who later marries her against his will and runs away across Europe to escape her.² But the Bertram of 1864 may have felt an affinity with Helena; in the same speech she claimed that she was so much in love that she did not even mourn her own father’s death. This advertiser wanted to find a wife he could adore and idolize with the same all-consuming passion.

This ad may have been unique in length, but it was not alone in its sentiment. Bertram spoke for many men when he lamented the “narrow bigotries and conventionalities” of social etiquette that forbid the “free intercourse of the sexes” and which constrained marriage choices to one’s “circles.” Who Bertram really was is a matter of conjecture, but his ad was representative of many matrimonials. Men and women who printed these ads echoed his complaint. Not all of them shared his eloquence, but they expressed the same frustration with the difficulty of meeting a spouse due to restrictive social etiquette as well as isolation in big cities. Whether or not they expressed it as plainly as did Bertram, however, advertisers chose to overcome these obstacles by turning to an unconventional form of public, urban courtship, one which they acknowledged as irregular, but necessary nonetheless.

¹ *New York Times*, 4 June 1864: 3.

² *All’s Well That Ends Well, The Riverside Shakespeare.*, 2d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1997), 505.

Matrimonial advertisements from the nineteenth century have been forgotten, even by newspapers that printed them. The *New York Times*, for example, carried a matrimonial column from 1860 to 1868, but when the paper announced that it was introducing a personals column in 2001, the author of the article wrote that it was publishing them “for the first time in its history.”³ In the latter half of the nineteenth century, however, they were commonplace. They provided a space, for urban dwellers in particular, in which to experiment with a new kind of personal interaction. Matrimonials revealed individuals who were on the move – both geographically and socially – circulating themselves in public in an attempt to find intimacy. In order to do so, they deliberately circumvented middle-class rules of etiquette, and their actions were disturbing to many observers. Where lonely, single people saw advertising as an opportunity to make connections in an anonymous urban world, critics saw people bringing the private institution of marriage up for sale in the public marketplace.

Much has been written about the rocky growing pains of the middle class in the nineteenth century as a result of rapid urban growth and capitalism, and matrimonial ads give a new and unique insight into the way these transformations affected people’s intimate lives. These ads are instructive, because they demonstrate how people in the midst of change adapted to new circumstances. Matrimonial advertisers are excellent examples because they were not people trying to break away from mainstream society; they were not advocating free love or escaping to utopian communities. Rather, they were ordinary men and women who felt forced to find traditional relationships in an unconventional fashion; however, they wanted more than anything to conform to middle-

³ Corey Kilgannon, “The Times Will Publish Personal Ads,” *New York Times*, 31 March 2001: B3.

class society. Even “extraordinary” men like Bertram wanted the same thing: to find a loving partner. The strikingly similar language that many advertisers used shows how alike they were: highly literate, well-educated, and instilled with middle-class ideals about romance, marriage, and love.

Matrimonials date back to at least the late seventeenth century; according to one historian, the first appeared in a British periodical in 1692.⁴ The *London Times* was the first mainstream newspaper to publish one in 1786.⁵ In the United States, articles began to appear referring to matrimonials as early as 1811.⁶ However, they did not become a regular feature in newspapers until the second half of the nineteenth century as personal ads in general became more common. The *New York Herald*, the paper with the most famous matrimonial column, began publishing them on a semi-regular basis in about 1855, becoming a near-daily presence by 1860, and other papers nationwide began printing them with varying degrees of frequency at about the same time. Although these ads were in papers across the country, they were most common in urban areas, and it was only big city papers that carried dedicated matrimonial columns separate from the rest of their personals.

The ads appeared more frequently at the same time as an ideological shift was taking place in middle-class notions of marriage. From a tacit recognition that financial stability was a necessary precondition for a successful marriage, Victorians began to elevate love over any other consideration – indeed, they believed that love was the *only* justifiable reason for marrying. This shift took place as a result of the increased influence

⁴ H.G. Cocks, *Classified: The Secret History of the Personal Column* (London: Random House, 2009), vii.

⁵ Stephen Winkworth, *Room Two More Guns: The Intriguing History of the Personal Column of the Times* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1986), 23.

⁶ “Matrimonial Advertisement, in Reply to Modestus,” *The Freemasons Magazine and General Miscellany*, Vol 2, Issue 2, November 1811: 130.

of the market on all aspects of life. Francesca Cancian points out that although love is a personal experience, it is socially constructed, and with “the transformation from an agrarian to a capitalist economy, love was also transformed.”⁷ The historian Elizabeth White Nelson explains, “market activity was no longer confined to a particular time of the week or the arrival of a peddler or ship”; therefore, “[c]hoices about consumption became part of the rhythm of daily life.”⁸ Yet the more commerce dominated everyday interaction, the more people valued marriage as something separate and distinct from the outside world. Stephanie Coontz writes that “Victorians were the first people in history to try and make marriage the pivotal experience in peoples’ lives... Victorian marriage harbored all the hopes for romantic love, intimacy, personal fulfillment and mutual happiness.”⁹ Previous expectations that people would “[learn] to love someone from within the marriage relation” implied that other considerations – specifically financial ones – were more important than romance in making marriage choices.¹⁰ Although matrimonials reflected these Victorian ideals of marriage, these public courtships were still solicited and arranged in a commercial fashion.

But marriage had always been an institution located in the market and changing values did not lead to a change in practice. Matrimonial advertisements made this clear. Not only did men and women refer to money – both their own and their ideal spouse’s – but they themselves were on the market. Indeed, matrimonials made marriage openly commercial. Advertisers offered their own appearance, social standing, and education as

⁷ Francesca M. Cancian, “Love and the Rise of Capitalism,” in Barbara Risman and Pepper Schwartz, ed., *Gender in Intimate Relationships, A Microstructural Approach* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1989), 12.

⁸ Elizabeth White Nelson, *Market Sentiments: Middle Class Market Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Press, 2004), 2.

⁹ Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History: From Obedience to Intimacy; or, How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005), 177-178.

¹⁰ Nelson, 172.

qualities with concrete value at a time that Victorians believed that love was an “uncontrollable and baffling force,” which was sudden and abstract, according to the historian Karen Lystra.¹¹ The ads were troubling because the authors were taking a relationship that was meant to be sacred and mysterious and giving it quantifiable value.

There are no records of the people who submitted these ads. Except in a small handful of cases that made their way into the news, the ads are completely anonymous. Like the correspondents who used the personals discussed in the last chapter, the people involved used first names only, pseudonyms, or initials, and directed letters to the newspaper or post offices; they are utterly untraceable. In many ways, this makes them questionable sources at best. The cases where advertisers can be identified are often examples of fraud: men and women who published ads, or responded to them, in order to steal money from the other party. The dishonesty could be less dangerous; sometimes people simply lied about their age, physical appearance, or financial status. There were also several cases of intrepid reporters who wrote matrimonial ads to amuse their readers with the replies. Therefore none of them can be taken at face value.

This does not mean, however, that we can draw no conclusions about the authors. Bertram was especially loquacious, but he was not the only person who wrote a lengthy ad and the longer an ad, the more it would have cost. In fact, in 1862, the only year in which advertising rates for the *New York Herald* are available, a matrimonial was double the cost of any other ad, meaning that the authors must have had some disposable

¹¹ Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 29.

income.¹² More important, many of the advertisers were not just literate; they were highly educated. They quoted and adapted famous writers, such as one man who borrowed from Dante's *La Vita Nuova* when he wrote, "Romance will never see its end, nor a noble heart half its treasure. So says the poet." Advertisers referenced works of literature, historical figures, indulged in witty wordplay, and even composed their own poetry. One man wrote that he wished to meet a woman "whose piano is not her only forte, who will make the winter of his discontent glorious summer." Another, who signed himself "A Bashful Man," wrote a twelve-line ad all in rhyme, closing: "I ask not, I offer not silver and gold; a wife I'll not purchase, nor will I be sold. But I have a hand to labor, and I have a heart to love. Lady, wouldst thou win my favor, a true helpmeet thou must prove."¹³ Women tended to be less eloquent in their ads – likely because lengthy ads cost more money – but they too wrote in a style that indicated a genteel background. Critics assumed that even the most romantic ads were at best from social outcasts whom no one wanted to marry and at worst from clever imposters, but even if this was the case, they were highly educated, well-written, and intelligent imposters and outcasts.

Why these highly-educated men found it necessary to advertise for their wives is not always clear; however, matrimonials did represent a populace in motion, both socially and geographically. Many of the advertisers were part of a growing middle class, people who had migrated from smaller towns and rural areas as agricultural opportunities shrank and white collar positions in businesses in the cities increased. According to Stuart

¹² Chas. B. Norton, *Catalogue of a Large and Valuable Collection of Books Relating Chiefly to America* (New York: John A. Gray, Printer, Stereotyper, and Binder, 1862), back page. Presumably this fee remained the same throughout the 1860s and perhaps throughout the nineteenth century, but the *Herald* did not print their fees in the paper and no other record seems to remain with this information.

¹³ *New York Herald*, 15 January 1863: 7. The Dante quote is "Love and the noble heart are but one thing/ Even as the wise man tells us in his rhyme"; *New York Herald*, 14 February 1862: 6; *New York Herald*, 11 February 1860: 11.

Blumin, there were considerable opportunities for promotion for men within business bureaucracies, “for levels of management were expanding even more rapidly than the lower levels of routine clerical work.”¹⁴ Because growth was always possible, the middle class was always on the move, and its members were always trying to move up the social ladder. As a result, argues Karen Halttunen, transition became a permanent condition.¹⁵

Men and women who had migrated to the cities found themselves bereft from family and community ties, and “set adrift in a maelstrom of people,” as the historian Gunther Barth has observed.¹⁶ And they consciously saw themselves as outsiders. The migrants referred to themselves as being “strangers in the city”; this phrase appeared without alteration for decades. For example, in 1860 one man wrote: “A gentleman, a stranger in the city, desires to make the acquaintance of a domestic young lady, with a view to matrimony...”¹⁷ In 1894, another man echoed him, writing: “Gentleman (34)...stranger in the city, wishes to make the acquaintance of a widow under 40; object, matrimony...”¹⁸ Despite being over thirty years apart, these two advertisers expressed the same problem in identical language.

Advertisers moved to big cities from all over the country, sometimes from rural areas, sometimes from smaller towns. “A young man, having recently arrived in the city, with but few lady acquaintances,” published an ad to find a wife. One man wrote he had only “lately returned from abroad.” Another, claiming to be originally from New

¹⁴ Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 292

¹⁵ Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 30.

¹⁶ Gunther Barth, *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 3.

¹⁷ *New York Herald*, 19 January 1860: 11.

¹⁸ *New York Herald*, 8 July 1894: 1.

Orleans, explained that he was “detained North on business, and [had] no lady acquaintances.” A “Virginian by birth” who had recently moved to New York published an ad because he “had but limited lady acquaintance.” A few years later, a similar ad came from a “gentleman from Richmond, going into business here.” Likewise, fifteen years after that, another man wrote that he printed a matrimonial because he had just moved “from San Francisco, Cal.” More poignantly, one ad read: “Is there an intelligent, kindly disposed young lady, or widow...15 to 50, anywhere, matrimonially inclined, who appreciates temperance, loyalty, and truth, who craves the exceptional devotion of exceptional young man? Am stranger everywhere, traveling the world alone...” In addition, with cities changing so rapidly, it was possible to leave and come back to a different place. As one man “recently returned home” after living abroad for several years discovered, he was “himself almost a stranger in his native city.”¹⁹

Women, like men, explained that their decision to print a matrimonial was because they were strangers in the city. For example, a “lady from the East with few acquaintances in the city” published an ad in the *Chicago Tribune* in the hopes of finding a husband, while a “lady from the West, a stranger in the city,” did the same in New York. Nearly twenty years later, a lady in New York “just from San Francisco” advertised to marry a man in business.²⁰

In addition to being isolated due to geographic mobility, men and women were also segregated due to the changing nature of work, which could affect people native to cities as well as new residents. The increasing demands on men’s time in business made

¹⁹ *New York Herald*, 11 April 1861: 7; *New York Herald*, 20 October 1859: 9; *New York Herald*, 19 February 1860: 3; *New York Herald*, 11 December 1860: 6; *New York Herald*, 2 July 1865: 6; *New York Herald*, 19 August 1879: 4; *Washington Post*, 9 November 1902: 26; *New York Herald*, 10 June 1863: 6.

²⁰ *Chicago Tribune*, 16 September 1888: 8; *New York Herald*, 11 April 1865: 2; *New York Herald*, 9 September 1883: 2.

it more difficult for them to have extensive social lives. As many historians have observed, it was in the nineteenth century that work and home life became separate; as more and more men moved to cities and entered the corporate world, the less their time was spent in society. In an era which idealized the “self-made man,” economic success defined a man’s worth. Max Weber writes in *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism* that the work ethic became about “the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life,” so that a man would be “dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life.”²¹

Once that goal was accomplished, however, men were left with little else. In 1892, one author addressed this phenomenon in detail, writing that businessmen went to work everyday until they grew rich; they then hired others to work for them, “but still they go down town through force of habit, perhaps, or because they have accumulated everything except the knowledge of how to rest, and how to spend a holiday. For eight hours of every day they are imprisoned in the business district, chained before roller top desks, or bound down in the arms of swivel chairs...”²² This kind of work ethic would have further cut off migrant men, but even those with larger social networks could become disconnected from society if they were “chained” and “bound” to their desks all day long. As the historian John Kasson explains, the “individual’s very independence

²¹ Max Weber, quoted in Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 104.

²² Richard Harding Davis, *The Great Streets of the World* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1892), 6.

and mobility often brought, not heightened dignity and achievement, but, on the contrary, a sense of anonymity and isolation.”²³

Therefore, it was common to see ads in which a man might write, for example, that his “attention has been occupied with business to the neglect of his social ties”; another explained that “business demands his constant attention.” Similarly, one man wrote over twenty years later that his “business require[d] all his time” and so he felt compelled to use an advertisement “in the hopes of being able to make the acquaintance of a respectable lady.”²⁴ As the writer of one etiquette book commented, “Instances have...occurred where gentlemen, driven with business, and having but little time to mingle in female society, or no opportunity...desirous of forming the acquaintance of ladies, have honestly advertised for correspondence...”²⁵ Echoing this, one man wrote that he “was doing a good business in this city, but [did not have] the opportunity to make the acquaintance of the ladies that he desires.” Likewise, a busy merchant explained that he was “out of society” and lawyer wrote that he had “but limited time to mingle in general society.”²⁶

Both men and women complained frequently of their lack of social ties. One man, who advertised three times, wrote “I take this unusual mode (my lady friends being few and ineligible).” Likewise, a businessman explained that he had “a limited number of female acquaintance.” Yet another wrote that he had “few lady acquaintances.” Other men made the same complaints, claiming their reason for placing an ad was being

²³ John Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991), 82.

²⁴ *New York Times*, 18 April 1862, 1; *New York Herald*, 26 March 1860: 7; *New York Herald*, 6 March 1885, 7.

²⁵ Thomas E. Hill, *Hill's Manual Social and Business Forms: Guide to Correct Writing* (Chicago: Hill Standard Book Co., Publishers, 1884), 115.

²⁶ *New York Herald*, 3 August 1860: 8; *New York Herald*, 4 June 1882: 3.

“deprived...for the past few years of the pleasure of society,” who “through the removal of friends and family from the City, [were] left without female company” or were “by circumstances deprived of the enjoyments of parents and home.” Women echoed them. A young widow wrote that her “acquaintance in the city is very limited,” and another young lady explained that she was “placed in a position which almost precludes the possibility of any acquaintance with the opposite sex.”²⁷

Thus, loneliness was a pervasive theme in many of these ads. A young gentleman wrote that he was “wearied of hotels and boarding houses.” A “lonely” widower echoed him, writing that he was “weary of solitary rooms.” An eighteen-year-old girl agreed, saying she was “wearied of a life of single blessedness,” and a “widowed lady” said that she was “tired of living alone.”²⁸ The few existing letters in response to matrimonial ads reflect the same sentiment. For example, one woman who wrote to Arthur MacDonald, the author of *Abnormal Woman*, said: “I am horribly lonely, having no society of gents outside of business relations...” Another explained “I am very lonesome at times...but [have] not yet seen any [men] that I could trust.” One woman admitted it was “hardly the proper thing for a young lady to do – to make chance acquaintance in this manner”; but despite knowing “so many nice young ladies here...the gentlemen are rather scarce.”²⁹ A woman responding to an ad from a curious reporter echoed her, writing: “[a]nswering a personal is, I realize, rather a risky way of becoming acquainted. However, I plead

²⁷ *New York Herald*, 12 January 1860; *New York Times*, 11 February 1860: 3; *New York Herald*, 11 April 1861: 7; *New York Herald*, 8 April 1858: 9; *New York Herald*, 6 August 1860: 6; *New York Herald*, 19 October 1862: 3; *New York Herald* 24 March 1865: 7; *New York Herald*, 27 November 1861: 6.

²⁸ *New York Herald*, 18 April 1867: 2; *New York Herald*, 11 April 1863: 8; *New York Herald* 15 March 1860: 9; *New York Herald*, 31 August 1873: 13.

²⁹ Arthur MacDonald, *Abnormal Woman: Girls Who Answer “Personals”* (Self-Published, Washington: DC, 1895), 58, 17-18, 61.

loneliness as my excuse.”³⁰ Also in response to a curious reporter, one girl in Chicago explained, “[m]y friends would ridicule me if they knew that I had answered a personal. But I dread the thought of being alone in the world.”³¹

Émile Durkheim addresses this problem in *The Division of Labor in Society* and *Suicide*. He discusses the destabilization of social bonds in industrial societies and explains that the increasing specialization and complexity of labor resulted in more impersonal relationships between people, which led to a decline in coherent communities. The loss of clear guidelines of behavior made it more difficult for people to interact because they no longer knew what to expect from each other, a state he calls anomie. Therefore, men and women, particularly in cities, no longer had functional rules to govern their relationships and were often left to figure out how to connect with the opposite sex on their own.³²

This problem did not go unnoticed; in fact, this solitude could be turned to entrepreneurial advantage. A matrimonial journal out of Kansas City, Missouri, which provided a space for lonely men and women to advertise for spouses, noted that “[i]n this day of travel, when men and women leave home and acquaintances in search of wealth and happiness, the need of some method of honorable introduction between the sexes... is felt by all strangers in a strange place.”³³

Matrimonial newspapers such as this were filling in a void created by the failure of traditional social customs to work in large, anonymous cities. In the second half of the nineteenth century middle-class behavior was still ruled by the strict codes of etiquette

³⁰ “Romance in a ‘Personal,’” *Kansas City Star*, 22 October 1899: 24.

³¹ “Matrimonial Advertisements,” *Chicago Tribune*, 28 December 1884: 12.

³² Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, 1893, trans. George Simpson (New York: The Macmillan Company; Fourth Printing, September 1960), 357, 361, 268.

³³ *The Matrimonial News* [Kansas City, MO], 8 January 1887: 4.

that early Victorians had developed. With the middle class still in a period of definition, proper behavior was essential as proof that one belonged, and in itself could help an individual rise in society. As one etiquette adviser wrote, the “manner in which a person says or does a thing, furnishes a better index of his character than what he does or says...”³⁴ Karen Halttunen explains that by “adhering to ‘sincere’ forms of courtesy...the socially ambitious could demonstrate that they were...true ladies and gentlemen deserving of the higher social place to which they aspired.”³⁵ Good manners were a crucial way to set class boundaries without reference to money.

One of the most important aspects was the codified interactions between men and women. Members of the opposite sex could not meet without a formal introduction, and for recent transplants from small towns, or for people who lived and worked almost exclusively with members of their own sex, introductions were difficult to come by. The rules that Bertram and his fellow advertisers complained about were very strict: introductions could not be given without prior consent of a lady, and an introduction could not be suggested unless it was certain that the acquaintance would be mutually beneficial. Interaction was so strictly enforced that a man could not even address a woman he knew if he saw her on the street.³⁶ So although city-dwellers actually had more potential marriage partners to choose from, explains Ellen Rothman, “they were more likely...to be choosing from among strangers...The city became both a more open and more hazardous place to find a mate than the small town...far more complex,

³⁴ Quoted in Kasson, 98.

³⁵ Halttunen, xvii.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 112-113, 115-116.

heterogeneous, and dynamic, it was also more divided by class, geography, and gender.”³⁷

Arthur MacDonald made this point several times throughout his book; he wrote that “unfortunately, courtship and love under... favorable conditions are too infrequent... owing to social artificiality, there seems to be little arrangement by which the proper people can meet and become well acquainted in a natural way.”³⁸ The women he corresponded with were abnormal because of circumstances; there was “a class of young refined women who need and really desire a home [but they] are too refined to marry a man who is vulgar or coarse, and so have remained single. This illustrates a want of social arrangements where people of mutual adaptation may meet... Such matters are left too much to accident or incident.”³⁹ As one journalist asked, “[h]ow many young men in large towns are anxious to be married, but have never obtained admission into a circle of acquaintance from which a wife could be chosen?”⁴⁰ Women agreed; one wrote that “[t]here is really little opportunity for an honest friendship... between a man and a woman.”⁴¹ Another woman complained in 1888 that “[w]omen and men must have each other’s society, and as things stand now working women and working men cannot have more than an acquaintance with each other.”⁴² No one offered a solution, but as a young woman observed in 1864, “many a man out of even a very large circle of lady friends will

³⁷ Ellen Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 192.

³⁸ MacDonald, 171.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 44

⁴⁰ “Marrying Made Easy,” *Spirit of the Times* 30, no. 44 (8 December 1860): 526.

⁴¹ Madeleine Wallin, quoted in Rothman, 190.

⁴² Annie Windsor, quoted in Rothman, 191-192.

acknowledge there is not one of them he would marry. This is perhaps the reason why so many matrimonial advertisements find their way into our newspapers...⁴³

Advertisements reflected this sentiment. Like Bertram, men expressed frustration with their inability to move in larger circles. For example, one man wrote that he had decided to print an ad because “the prevailing conventional rules of society in a great degree prevent social intercourse, and acquaintance between the sexes especially in matrimonial matters...” Another admitted that he found “the ordinary formalities too irksome and too little understood” by himself to find a wife in a more proper fashion.⁴⁴

Men justified their decision to write a matrimonial by dismissing the necessity of etiquette; one explained that he turned to a matrimonial advertisement because he did not wish to be a “slave to ceremony.” Another wrote that because he had “sought in vain for a kindred spirit within the circle of his acquaintance he [concluded] to turn to the virtue of advertising to reach the rest of womankind.” And one advertiser claimed that he “spurn[ed] the ‘social lie’ which thinks and says the Press is no fit medium of introduction. ‘If their hearts be right it matters little how they met.’”⁴⁵

Echoing many advertisers, the editor of one matrimonial newspaper explained that:

Civilization, combined with the cold formalities of society and the rules of etiquette, imposed such restrictions on the sexes that there are thousands of marriageable men and women of all ages capable of making each other happy, who never have a chance of meeting... Therefore, the desirability of having some organ through which ladies and gentleman aspiring to marriage can be honorably brought into communication, is too obvious to need a demonstration.⁴⁶

⁴³ Jenny Miller, *American Monthly Knickerbocker*, January 1864: 83.

⁴⁴ *New York Herald*, 5 May 1860: 9; *New York Times*, 11 February 1860: 3.

⁴⁵ *New York Herald*, 8 April 1858: 9; *New York Times*, 18 May 1864: 7; *New York Times*, 15 April 1861: 7.

⁴⁶ *The Matrimonial Reporter and Special Advertiser*, 27 October 1877: 2. Special Collections, University of Virginia.

Advertising for a spouse became a pragmatic solution to a difficult quandary. Most people in cities were surrounded by a growing consumer culture; commerce would have been a daily part of their lives. So when it came time to solve the problem of finding a spouse, with no socially acceptable alternative, they turned to what was familiar: the market. Finding a husband or wife in the same place one might find a job, a servant, or a place to live, while appearing vulgar to many observers, would have made sense in the context in which many urbanites lived; after all, most migrants to the city had come specifically to take part in the market economy.

Matrimonial newspapers provided ones way of finding a spouse in the marketplace. One New York journal explained its mission by saying that “we are fully aware of our responsibilities and the delicacy of our position, while some of our critics may affirm that a journal of this description was not needed. We are of a different opinion. We think that a paper of this kind, properly conducted...will supply the general reader with a much-required want.”⁴⁷

In its debut issue, a journal from Toronto, which published ads from the United States as well as Canada, argued that “we wish to point out that there are undoubtedly many persons of both sexes in the community who are desirous of attaining suitable matrimonial alliances. To these this paper will supply a long felt want.” Therefore, the publishers explained, they had started the paper for people “who have been waiting for years, and who may be fated under the usual conventional conditions, to wait many years longer, for the realization of their desires...”⁴⁸ These papers gave single people the

⁴⁷ *Matrimonial Reporter and Special Advertiser*: 2.

⁴⁸ *Anglo-American Matrimonial Journal*: 1.

opportunity to take the initiative and determine their own fates rather than relying on introductions that might never come and acquaintances that might never suit.

Matrimonial newspapers were comprised of personal advertisements sometimes divided by sex or line of work – farmers, lawyers, doctors, domestics and so forth – and were published on a weekly or monthly basis. Although some papers were longer than others, they printed ads by the hundreds. They also had advertisements for advice books for successful marriages, cosmetic products to make both men and women more attractive, and other similar merchandise or services. In addition, they all published advice columns alongside the ads with titles like “Two Ways of Courting,” “Advice to a Newly-Married Man,” or instructions on how to write a love letter.⁴⁹ Although their success rate is impossible to ascertain – their own promises of guaranteed happiness aside – the fact that so many of these papers existed suggests that there was a substantial market for this kind of service.

Matrimonials and journals promoting them turned marriage into a marketable commodity, often advertised in the same place as cheap patent medicines and cosmetics. A reporter speaking of a matrimonial magazine based in Chicago wrote that he “imagine[d] that there would be just as many marriages without this official matrimonial journal, and we know there would be considerably more decency and purity.”⁵⁰ One author admitted “it is but cold comfort, to the unmated, to be told by those who are happily settled that such a course is improper, and that they must wait,” but despite that, he concluded, using these methods was not an acceptable solution.⁵¹

⁴⁹ *Matrimonial Advocate* [Marine City: MI] April 1884: 1, 2.

⁵⁰ “Marriage Made Easy,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 20 June 1875: 4.

⁵¹ “Advertising for a Wife,” *Phrenological Journal and Science of Health* 59, no. 2 (August, 1874): 132.

Instead of matrimonials, critics suggested that potential advertisers take the same steps that had led to isolation in the first place. For example, while one journalist wrote that he could “imagine that in the whole circle of a gentleman’s acquaintance...there might not be a single lady upon whom he would feel disposed to bestow his hand...this is his fortune or misfortune and if the society in which he moves cannot supply the desired object, he certainly cannot expect to find it through the medium of advertisement.” Rather, “[t]ime and change are the proper remedies for people in his position.”⁵² After all, pointed out another author, “in these days of railways, steamboats, and stage-coaches, it is not difficult to become acquainted with many people.”⁵³ One of Arthur MacDonald’s correspondents, who had responded to his matrimonial out of curiosity, and doubted that any respectable woman would answer one seriously, echoed these remarks, writing, “If you are bored with society, why don’t you travel and meet some fair damsel who would appreciate you?”⁵⁴ The matrimonials themselves, however, suggested that the opposite was true: change and travel pulled people apart rather than bringing them together. Moreover, most people did not have the luxury of picking up and relocating at will.

Yet despite the fact that men and women were flying in the face of proper etiquette to meet, their language demonstrates an attempt to prove, despite their unorthodox actions, that they were true ladies and gentlemen. Karen Halttunen writes that “many middle-class Americans were attempting...to assume a new and better social identity...they were all engaged in the activity that in sociological terms is called *passing*.”

⁵² “A Bad Way to Get Married,” *Knickerbocker*, October 1862 (60, 4): 351-353.

⁵³ “Advertising for a Wife,” *Phrenological Journal*.

⁵⁴ MacDonald, 1.

To lend credence to their claims to higher social status, they thus had to reaffirm continually the sincerity of every...act they performed.”⁵⁵ Men and women promised in their ads that they were “sincere”; indeed, several advertisers directed interested parties to address “Sincerity” instead of a real name or initials. They claimed that they had “first-class positions,” were “refined and gifted,” and had “high social standing.”⁵⁶ Some advertisers went to great lengths to convince readers that they were worthy, such as one man who wrote that he had “unexceptionable habits, Christian principles, culture, some property and high social position.” Another promised “full and candid explanations [for the] manner of proceeding; references of the very highest order concerning character, standing, past life, &c., and every possible assurance of good faith and sincerity.”⁵⁷ These continual guarantees of honesty and integrity suggests that they knew how much they were compromising their gentility by appearing in print.

But the strict adherence to proper behavior was thought necessary; it would prevent imposters from insinuating themselves into high society. In growing cities, where most people did not know each other and neighborhoods were still in flux, there were few ways to identify where a person “belonged” other than their behavior and appearance. Because “advanced capitalism destabilized traditional markers and values of class,” as Peter Stoneley writes, it was easy for people to dress in clothing and live in neighborhoods which had been previously reserved for the bourgeoisie.⁵⁸ “There is no city in the Union in which imposters of all kinds flourish so well as in New York,” one

⁵⁵ Halttunen, 117-118.

⁵⁶ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 29 April 1883: 17; *New York Herald*, 24 January 1875: 3; *New York Herald*, 10 January 1879: 12.

⁵⁷ *New York Times*, 6 February 1866: 3; *New York Herald*, 16 November 1879: 3.

⁵⁸ Peter Stoneley, *Consumerism and American Girls' Literature, 1860-1940* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2003), 2-3.

author argued, and they “find their way into all classes.” These clever swindlers would worm their way into respectable company by claiming to be political exiles or European aristocracy – a status that the “fashionable New-Yorker, male or female, is powerless against.” Over time the word would leak out that he was a millionaire; all the unmarried young ladies would fall madly in love, and by “play[ing] his cards right,” he would marry one of these society belles before anyone found out the truth. Her family would be ruined; the rich father would be forced to pay out a handsome sum to keep his new son-in-law quiet. Even worse, the man might already be married, and the poor girl would be disgraced for life.⁵⁹

Men who advertised for a wife, then, could easily be imposters of the same nature – but they were even more dangerous. They had no need to endear themselves to an entire social circle, only the innocent young girl who answered his ad had to be convinced of his sincerity. What Lyn Lofland calls “apparential ordering,” that is, sorting out the urban population based on how they looked, “allows you to know a great deal about the stranger you are looking at because you can ‘place’ him with some degree of accuracy on the basis of his body presentation: clothing, hair style, special markings, and so on.”⁶⁰ But ads circumvented this process, requiring that all judgments relied on letters alone. In an era that abounded with etiquette manuals with precise instructions on how to write proper letters, anyone with a good education could impersonate a member of the upper class.

⁵⁹ James D. McCabe, Jr., *Lights and Shadows of New York Life; or the Sights and Sensations of the Great City* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1872), 316-17.

⁶⁰ Lyn Lofland, *World of Strangers: Order and Action in Urban Public Space* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 27.

And the reality was, insisted one author, that most advertisers has nefarious purposes in mind, and their “pretence of guilelessness is worn off when it is too late for escape. Then come a meretricious attachment, a league of lawlessness, disgust, a quarrel, and death.”⁶¹ He added that “[s]harpers of both sexes follow it as a trade. Elegant blackguards draw school-girls and sentimental fools of older years...into correspondences, and...use their letters to blackmail them. Many a family has been plunged into deepest misery by the folly of answering an advertisement. It is as true of one sex as of the other.” Indeed, the female swindler “is often the more skilful of the two.”⁶² According to one self-proclaimed investigative journalist, “there are always one or two scamps who contrive to pick up an *indecent* living by this sort of thing.” All matrimonials, he declared, “amount...to one of three items, namely, *Money*, *Passion*, or *Humbug*.”⁶³

Many of these potential imposters and swindlers supposedly had one goal in mind: to marry someone rich and spend all of his or her money. And because many matrimonial advertisers, men as well as women, included wealth as a prerequisite for their desired spouse, critics assumed that such people were mere money-grabbers. In two typical examples, one man wrote that he “desire[d] to meet a lady possessing some means,” while a young lady requested “to correspond with a gentleman of means.”⁶⁴ But by the mid-nineteenth century, Americans were celebrating a material culture based on a mass production economy which encouraged consumption; in other words, everyone wanted more money. People wanted to marry either their equals or someone in an even

⁶¹ “Matrimonial Advertisements,” *Daily Graphic*.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Observations of Mace Sloper, Esq.” *The Knickerbocker; or, New York Monthly Magazine* 47, 2 (February 1856): 173.

⁶⁴ *New York Herald*, 28 June 1874: 14; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 26 June 1880: 26.

better position; members of the middle class – indeed, of any class – were always looking to move up the social ladder, not down. While idealists and moral arbiters believed that love mattered above all else, Americans lived in a society where consumer goods were the key to success (and thus implicitly to happiness), and this influenced men and women’s decisions when it came to choosing a marriage partner.

Writing about this phenomenon in Germany, one author observed in 1892 that the average family would “continually liberalize and sentimentalize, but that is all a farce; when it is time to show their true colors, gold is the trump card, nothing else.”⁶⁵ Writers in America agreed. New York author James McCabe wrote that “[o]nly wealthy marriages are tolerated in New York society. For men or women to marry ‘beneath’ is a crime society cannot forgive. There must be a fortune on one side. Marriages for money are directly encouraged.”⁶⁶ And there was some justification for this argument; although not common, there were matrimonial advertisements which fit this pattern: “Gentleman of 26 wishes to marry lady of means who can appreciate an entrée into high society,” read just one example.⁶⁷ In such a case, both partners would benefit materially – he financially, she socially.

This open desire for wealth was upsetting to observers. One writer insisted that “marriage, to be of value, presupposes...the love which creates its own title to respect...It is no marriage for a settlement, marriage for a title.” People who wed for financial gain were making “bargains struck in the human shambles, where so much flesh and blood is

⁶⁵ Theodor Fontaine, quoted in Peter Borschied, “Romantic Love or Material Interest: Choosing Partners in Nineteenth-Century Germany,” *Journal of Family History* 11, no. 2 (1986), 165.

⁶⁶ James McCabe, [Edward Winslow Martin], *Secrets of the Great City* (Philadelphia: Jones, Brothers & Co., 1868), 84.

⁶⁷ *New York Herald*, 9 January 1881: 1.

bought for so much money...”⁶⁸ When men wrote that they sought the acquaintance of a wife “among the refined and wealthy,” or that they “desire[d] acquaintance and financial assistance of lady of means,” they horrified observers.⁶⁹ As one critic wrote about an ad of this nature, the man involved was “plainly of the opinion that love in the ‘abstract’ may be very well in its way, but matrimony should be based on more substantial considerations.”⁷⁰

And matrimonials did often specify that only wealthy people should respond, especially those from women. Men’s reasons for stipulating that their ideal spouse be wealthy varied. Some frankly stated that they needed the extra income, such as the man who wrote that he “desire[d] to find a lady as a partner in business...with a view to matrimony. One with some means...preferred.” Others admitted that they wanted to be taken care of themselves, as did a “well educated” young man, “of agreeable manners and prepossessing appearance, of a faithful and affectionate disposition,” who wanted to meet “an elderly lady of wealth, with a view to matrimony,” and promised that he was “no trifler.”⁷¹ But most men who requested only wealthy women reply gave no explanation; they merely claimed that they were rich themselves and that they expected their wives to be so as well.

However, there is some evidence that these men were not always motivated by greed. For example, one man explained that he wanted to meet a woman with some means “as a bar to all mercenary motives.” Another man, whose ad rivaled Bertram’s in its length and romantic language, wrote that his wife needed to have “a fortune in her

⁶⁸ “Matrimonial Man-Traps: How Flesh and Blood are Sold on the Modern Marriage Market,” *Georgia Weekly Telegraph, Journal & Messenger*, 16 September 1881: F.

⁶⁹ *New York Times*, 29 February 1868: 1; *New York Herald*, 14 February 1860: 12.

⁷⁰ “Matrimonial Advertisements,” *New Hampshire Statesman*, 10 April 1868: Col C.

⁷¹ *New York Herald*, 5 February 1863: 6; *New York Herald*, 10 February 1863: 3.

own right capable of at least supporting her in independence during life, if she should not marry, as the advertiser is determined not to marry, knowingly, any young lady who marries simply for a home and to be supported.” These advertisers may have been swindlers whose goal was to entrap wealthy women and steal their money, but it is true that there were many women advertising for husbands out of financial distress, or who requested letters from “wealthy gentlemen (none other need reply).”⁷² It is reasonable to suppose that men wanted to be sure that their wives were marrying them for love instead of for support.

Despite what critics believed, however, most men who advertised shared Bertram’s opinion that money was not an issue or, as one man put it, money was “no object, although I should not object to it.” On the contrary, many advertisers indicated that they were seeking a wife at that time because they finally were comfortable enough to support one; one man explained that “having amassed a moderate competency,” he was “desirous of opening a correspondence with a prepossessing young lady with a view to matrimony.” Similarly, another man wrote that “having recently amassed a fortune and safely invested the same, [he] wishe[d] to meet with a young lady or widow...with a view to matrimony.” Many a man was proud that, as one wrote, his “means [were] ample for the comfort of married life, and therefore he is not actuated by mercenary considerations.”⁷³

Unlike men, women almost always had to marry with their spouse’s financial situation in mind. Since middle-class mores discouraged women from working, they

⁷²*New York Herald*, 5 December 1880: 4; *New York Herald*, 3 January 1863: 2; *New York Herald*, 15 March 1860: 9.

⁷³*New York Herald*, 5 April 1861: 3; *New York Herald*, 19 March 1863: 3; *New York Herald*, 9 April 1863: 5; *Chicago Tribune*, 18 April 1861: 1.

were entirely dependent upon their husbands for support, unless by some lucky chance they inherited money or property of their own. But this was not the case for the majority of women, who had to consider seriously the financial stability of potential spouses. Marrying solely for love was not a luxury most women had.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the crusader for women's equality, wrote that because women were dependent on men, they had no choice but to sell themselves in marriage, and in essence became akin to prostitutes. "When we confront this fact...in the open market of vice, we are sick with horror," she railed. "When we see the same economic relation made permanent, established by law...sanctified by religion, covered with flowers and accumulated sentiment, we think it innocent, lovely and right. The transient trade we think evil, the bargain for life we think good."⁷⁴ Her words echoed another critic, who wrote that all "this marrying for money, or for position, or for any other consideration...is essential prostitution."⁷⁵

Women were in the market whether or not they printed or responded to matrimonials; the ads only made it more obvious. One author accused women of being mere gold-diggers; a girl looking to get married "takes her stand in the market place, smiling impartially on all who have the wherewithal to buy."⁷⁶ Girls were brought up from childhood to make themselves good catches. By doing so, one woman wrote, "[y]ou lower [marriage] to the level of the market. You degrade it to a question of political and domestic economy."⁷⁷ The historian Peter Stoneley explains "the girl is

⁷⁴ Quoted in Sondra Herman, "Loving Courtship or the Marriage Market? The Ideal and Its Critics, 1871-1911," *American Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (May 1974): 247.

⁷⁵ *Titcomb's Letters*, 1858, quoted in Zsuzsa Berend, "'The Best or None!' Spinsterhood in Nineteenth-Century New England," *Journal of Social History*, 34, no. 4 (2000): 947.

⁷⁶ "Matrimonial 'Man-Traps,'" *Georgia Weekly Telegraph, Journal & Messenger*.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Berend, 938.

being prepared for the marriage ‘market’ that will initiate her into adult life: in her the boundary between consumer and commodity becomes blurred. The process of buying into womanhood...transforms her into something to be bought...[She becomes] a commodity to be consumed.”⁷⁸ Matrimonial advertisements brought nothing new to this equation – the only change was that the ads put into public view what had always been hidden or masked. Women had little choice but to make themselves as desirable as possible in order to attract mates who could support them.

The matrimonial advertisements from women make it clear that love, while desirable, often – though not always – took a backseat to support. “A widow lady of respectability and agreeable manners desires to meet with a gentleman of good standing and means to support a wife,” read one typical example. Another widow wrote that she wanted to correspond “with an elderly gentleman of means, with a view to matrimony...[who was] able to support a wife comfortably. To such I would offer a loving heart.” Other ads from women followed the same pattern; one young girl, specifically requesting to meet an “elderly” gentleman of means, frankly stated that she would “rather be ‘an old man’s darling than a young man’s slave.’”⁷⁹

Many women suggested or directly stated that some kind of distress, usually financial, caused them to advertise for a husband. One young woman, who wrote that she was “a stranger in the city, alone and friendless,” wanted to meet a “gentleman...to whom she could look to for protection, with a view to matrimony at some future time” and who would “be willing to give her immediate assistance.” Another was equally

⁷⁸ Stoneley, 5.

⁷⁹ *New York Herald*, 26 August 1860: 7; *New York Herald*, 13 January 1863: 6; *New York Herald*, 11 April 1865: 1.

forthright; she promised to be a loving wife, but needed a husband because she was “without friends” and “somewhat embarrassed in circumstances.”⁸⁰

Some observers accepted the fact that women had to marry wisely as a necessary reality; Arthur MacDonald, for example, wrote that if “both man and woman are without means, it is a question whether she should marry him at all; for the truest love cannot always pay debts.”⁸¹ Another writer, attempting to debunk the myth that “unfortunate girls are exposed for sale by their cruel, heartless, and avaricious mothers,” argued that the issue was more complex. “A certain number of women marry solely for love,” he explained, but a “certain, and perhaps larger, number marry for reasons in which love and the desire to have a home of their own are mixed up.” Blaming money-grabbing mothers, he concluded, was not fair; after all, “poverty and virtue” are not better than “riches and virtue,” and who would not want the best for their children?⁸²

As one lady who exchanged several letters with Arthur MacDonald explained, “I look through this unconventional medium, where there are good as well as bad, for a life companion – a suitable husband...I seek love and affection, but I and you have lived long enough to know money is convenient...so I do not want a man with no resources.” However, she added, “I do want a big, warm heart, one who needs just me to round out his life and make it complete; one to whom I could ‘be all the world,’ make his every hour happy, and who would value the wealth of affection I have to dispose.”⁸³ Whatever they might want for themselves emotionally, women had to marry someone who was capable of providing lifelong security.

⁸⁰ *New York Herald*, 25 February 1863: 3; *New York Times*, 31 March 1866: 1.

⁸¹ MacDonald, 2d ed., 5.

⁸² “The Marriage Market,” *Living Age*, 29 May 1897: 624.

⁸³ MacDonald, 94.

And men who advertised for wives seemed to understand and accept that most women married with financial considerations in mind. Like women, they put themselves on the market, with financial status listed alongside all their other desirable qualities. Most men stated their own worth upfront, whatever it was, sometimes going so far as to name their exact salary or the value of their property. Men without as much to offer would admit this fact with some level of apology or self-deprecation; one man described himself as a “gentleman, with some disadvantages, to wit: - Over 40 and of slender means.” Another, with even more good humor, wrote: “A young man, receiving the princely salary of \$5 per week, and has only had his wages lowered once in four years, wishes to find some young lady foolish enough to marry him; beauty and money will not be sneered at.”⁸⁴ Men who printed matrimonials, in other words, were far more pragmatic than the critics who attacked them; they wanted a loving spouse, but they recognized that no matter how affectionate, kind-hearted, and devoted they were, women had to find a husband who could support as well as love them.

In her analysis of nineteenth-century love letters, Karen Lystra argues that men “phrased their identification of love and money in terms of their ambition to provide for women’s comfort and happiness, often insisting that their economic concerns were motivated by the heart.”⁸⁵ As much as women learned to make themselves commodities, then, men understood that their ability to make money determined their ability to be good husbands. For example, one man wrote that he “has a self maintenance, and possesses in brief, every qualification to render an amiable, true-hearted, lovely woman happy in wedded life.” Some advertisers explicitly connected their financial status with their

⁸⁴ *New York Herald*, 3 March 1878: 19; *New York Herald*, 5 January 1862: 7.

⁸⁵ Lystra, 133.

manliness; in one notable example, in 1862 a man who described himself as “nearly bankrupt, for crediting the South” prior to the Civil War, felt obliged to mention that despite his poverty, he was still “every inch a man.”⁸⁶

Whether honest or fraudulent, however, it is clear that advertisers at least felt that marriages formed through the market could be successful, and requesting that potential spouses have money would not be repellent. Nor did advertisers themselves appear to see any contradiction. One man, who published his ad several times, wrote that he had “a good presence, and a kind, loving heart,” and wished “to correspond, sincerely, with an amiable and prepossessing lady of wealth...” Another man claimed he had “a kind and affectionate disposition,” could “render a pure and lovely woman happy,” and wanted to meet “a gently born, pleasant tempered, loving hearted and intelligent young lady...possessing ample fortune, as well as congenial thoughts, tastes and feelings.” Similarly, yet another man wrote, “A bachelor would like to marry – The lady must be like himself – wealthy, cheerful, of undoubted social position, and possess qualities of head and heart calculated to make home happy.” One ad exemplified the conflation of love and financial security perfectly. The man who published it “desire[d] a lady with some capital to form business and matrimonial partnership. Being interested in a lucrative old established business, he wants to buy it out. Rare chance to acquire happiness and fortune honestly.”⁸⁷

And while the method used may have been the market, the goal of many advertisers was anything but commercial. Whether or not money was mentioned, the

⁸⁶ *New York Herald*, 12 March 1860: 3; *New York Herald*, 7 December 1862: 8.

⁸⁷ *New York Times*, 5 March 1866: 2; *New York Herald*, 6 April 1858: 1; *New York Herald*, 5 May 1863; *New York Herald*, 29 December 1860: 11.

primary motivation for most men was the desire for a loving wife. Advertisements varied in their length, specificity, and tendency toward romance, but the men wrote that they wanted to meet someone who was “affectionate,” “kind-hearted,” “loving” or some other variation on the same theme. Bertram is only one example of advertisers who expressed their longing in passionate terms. “The world is so full of poetry, beauty, and glory, and I have no one to share it with me,” lamented one man. Another, quoting Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, wrote: “‘No one is so accursed by fate,/No one so utterly desolate,/But some heart, though unknown,/Responds unto his own.’ A gentleman awaits a response from a lady of culture and refinement.” Another quoted freely from two different authors to express his desire for “‘someone to love in this wide world of sorrow’” who could bring about “‘Two souls with but a single thought/Two hearts to beat as one.’” Even ads that were shorter and simpler often highlighted the desire for love; one such ad read: “A bachelor of means, position, and influence seeks sweet wife with loving, kind heart.” More simply yet, another man merely wrote: “With a view to matrimony, the advertiser wishes the acquaintance of a fair-hair, blue-eyed, kind-hearted girl.”⁸⁸

To a lesser degree, there were women whose ads were purely romantic. Though women never rivaled men like Bertram in length or eloquence – perhaps because money was always an issue even for women who were not in dire straits – there were some who focused on love. One girl described herself as a “young and romantic miss” who hoped “she could meet with one who could excel all her most fond and brilliant imagination;

⁸⁸ *New York Times*, 9 March 1866: 1; *Atlanta Constitution*, 22 October 1899: 10; *New York Herald*, 11 February 1863: 7. The first quote is from a song entitled “Someone to Love,” (New York: H. De Marsan, 1860). The second is from the play *Der Sohn der Wildnes* (1843) by the Austrian playwright Frederich Halm; *Atlanta Constitution*, 3 July 1898: 11; *New York Times*, 21 March 1866: 1.

one whom she could trust, honor, and obey.” Another young lady “of sweet sixteen” requested to meet “one whom she may learn to love.”⁸⁹

Letters from women were more openly idealistic. “I believe in matrimony and mutual happiness, as far as the true love and affection are there, and as sure as there is heaven to gain and a hell to shun, the real true thing in life worth living for is love,” wrote one woman who carried on a long correspondence with Arthur MacDonald. Not all the women who wrote him were so articulate, but they expressed the same feelings. “I can treat a husband good...if I had a good one,” one woman said in her short reply. Echoing her, another wrote: “If I had a real good man I would do all in my power for him to make him happy.”⁹⁰ In response to a reporter posing as a “Western gentleman,” one young lady concluding her letter by saying “You may doubt the reply as not being genuine, but I assure you it is from an honest, petite, lovable *little girl*...”⁹¹ All of these letters and advertisements indicate that, despite critics’ concerns, both men and women were very much desirous of loving marriages. In a sense, they were in, but not of, the market.

Nevertheless, even if there was no mention of money, critics were still concerned that marriage might become just another transaction in the public marketplace. The use of matrimonial advertisements at all put courting at the same level as any other commercial exchange, nothing more. As one writer lamented, “practical people of this age regard marriage simply as a business contract, to be solemnized in a business

⁸⁹ *New York Times*, 24 March 1866: 2; *New York Herald*, 11 February 1863: 7.

⁹⁰ MacDonald, 22, 90, 91.

⁹¹ “Matrimonial Advertisements,” *Chicago Tribune*.

way... This is an age of high-pressure materialism, coarse, realistic, and sordid...⁹² The use of matrimonials, he believed, signified a loss of romance. He added that “the easy process by which a spouse may be obtained is economical. It saves hours wasted in insipid courtship, which to men is a very tiresome ordeal.” On top of that, meeting through a matrimonial ad “curtails the important outlay of cash for tailors’ and laundry accounts, not to speak of the strain on the pocket book for theater and concert tickets and ice cream and the interminable list of items necessary to keep alive the embers of mutual affection.”⁹³ The way ads were written, complained one journalist, “savor[ed] more of Mammon than of Cupid.”⁹⁴ Most critics argued that a marriage contracted in such a fashion could not be successful; the “marriage based upon such [an] acquaintance must almost necessarily be a disastrous one,” wrote one journalist.⁹⁵

And some marriages made in this fashion did end badly. The ads were susceptible to fraud and misrepresentation, which did indeed make them dangerous. Lying about one’s financial status, age, and personality was something that was possible in any marriage, be it contracted through a matrimonial ad or not; however, as one writer explained, “the thing is so liable to abuse, in the hands of the bad, that the good are not likely to adopt it.”⁹⁶

Because many observers did not believe anyone with good intentions would use a matrimonial, they also assumed that people who did insert or respond to a personal advertisement must have something wrong with them. Even some of the women who responded to Arthur MacDonald were dismissive; one woman, curious as to why he had

⁹² Untitled, *Arizona Weekly Journal*, 18 June 1884, 1.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ “Matrimonial Advertisements,” *Chicago Tribune*, 9 December 1866: 1.

⁹⁵ “The Matrimonial Advertisement,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 29 October 1894: 4.

⁹⁶ “Advertising for a Wife,” *Phrenological Journal*.

published his ad, wrote that it “seems impossible that any one with ‘matrimonial intentions’ should advertise in a paper and expect to be suited.”⁹⁷ And it is worth noting that MacDonald, who was a criminologist, drew on “the criminals, and the paupers, and the insane” as the subjects of his companion book, *Abnormal Man*.⁹⁸ If he was equating women who answered personals to men who were criminals, paupers, and mentally ill, people who responded to personal advertisements must have been abnormal indeed.

Observers condemned both male and female advertisers. “The great majority of proposals for ‘correspondence’ come from soft-headed youths ‘between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one,’” asserted one critic, possibly paraphrasing the character in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* who wished “there were no age between sixteen and three-and-twenty” because boys that age caused nothing but trouble.⁹⁹ And at the end of an article about a woman who had traveled from New England to Nebraska to marry a man she had met through a personal, the author wrote “[t]hat any sensible or half-cultured woman would journey half across the continent to marry a man whom she had never seen...seems incredible.”¹⁰⁰

“Depend upon it,” argued Nathaniel Willis, editor of the *New York Mirror*, “such public courtships are tendered only by old bachelors, decayed rakes, and other discarded single gentlemen.”¹⁰¹ Willis’ condemnation of “public courtships” is significant; in his view, the real crime was putting intimate relations in full view of an audience, something

⁹⁷ MacDonald, 10.

⁹⁸ James Gilbert, “Anthropometrics in the U.S. Bureau of Education: The Case of Arthur MacDonald’s ‘Laboratory,’” *History of Education Quarterly*, 17, no. 2 (Summer, 1977): 179.

⁹⁹ “Matrimonial Advertisements. Calls For Correspondence – Fools and Rogues,” *Chicago Tribune*, 6 December 1866: 1; *The Winter’s Tale, The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Inc., 1997), 1585.

¹⁰⁰ Untitled, *Western Christian Advocate*, 10 June 1874: 180

¹⁰¹ “Matrimonial Advertisements,” *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, 12 December 1896: 4.

that respectable men and women would never do. The assumption that advertising for a spouse in public was wrong was so widespread that there was a sense that the people who were so foolish as to trust matrimonials should be left to their own fate. Indeed, one judge in St. Louis expressed his regrets that people swindled through matrimonials could not be prosecuted themselves, apparently for sheer stupidity.¹⁰²

And the willingness to put themselves on public display left those who used matrimonials open to contempt and ridicule. “Matrimonial fever seems to be raging,” observed one reporter with his tongue-in-cheek, and “a score of amorous advertisers may daily be found sighing (in small type at so much a line) for connubial sympathy. Every rank of life seems to be equally smitten with the same passionate yearnings.”¹⁰³

In a 1904 short film entitled “How a French Nobleman Got a Wife Through the New York Herald Personal Columns,” the story lampoons both the advertiser and his respondents for their open, and in the women’s cases greedy, desire for marriage. In the film, the main character, an overdressed, ridiculous man portrayed as a foolish dandy, innocently places a matrimonial in the *Herald*, reading “Young French nobleman, recently arrived, desires to meet wealthy American girl, object, matrimony; will be at Grant’s Tomb at 10 this morning, wearing a boutonniere of violets.”¹⁰⁴ At first, only one woman appears, but then they come in a trickle, and eventually a flood of women, young and old, arrive. Fearful, the nobleman begins to run away, and the rest of the nine-minute film shows the women chasing him across a rural landscape. In the end he jumps into a lake to escape them; only one woman is brave enough to follow, and the film ends with

¹⁰² “Wants to Punish Victims,” *Washington Post*, 6 November 1907: 2.

¹⁰³ “Scotch Matrimonial Advertisements,” *New Hampshire Statesman*, 10 April 1868: Col C.

¹⁰⁴ Ads such as this one did exist, though rarely. No one ever requested a meeting before any written correspondence, but in 1896 there was a matrimonial in the *Herald* that read: “French prince, good looking, very distinguished, independent means, would like to marry rich American,” 7 September 1896: 1.

them embracing.¹⁰⁵ While the film has a happy ending, the image of dozens of women racing after one man, jumping over stiles, fences, and various other obstacles, losing their hats in their rush and hair flying wildly, sends a clear message: women who responded to matrimonial advertisements were desperate.

Following the path of McDonald and the reporters who published matrimonial ads just to see the replies, there were others who took the gambit one step further and arranged to meet their victims, to expose publicly the people who answered and have a laugh at their expense. Several newspaper articles told the stories of men or women who placed matrimonial advertisements in the classifieds just to play a practical joke on the people who answered. One male instigator invited all his correspondents to meet him at the same place in time, but did not introduce himself. Instead, he organized “a grand dress-parade of his forty-one fair friends, and invited half a dozen gentleman to witness it.”¹⁰⁶ A woman in another story played a similar trick; she placed an ad and invited all her respondents to meet her at a restaurant, and then gathered five of her friends to come to the restaurant together, each wearing an identical outfit, which had been described in detail to the unfortunate men. After a short time, the men all dispersed, apparently realizing they had been had.¹⁰⁷

The papers which published these stories did not condone the actions of the instigators – the second article concluded by warning women against using an ad even for entertainment. But the descriptions of the men and women who showed up for their

¹⁰⁵ “How a French Nobleman Got a Wife Through the New York Herald Personal Columns,” dir. Edward S. Porter, Edison Manufacturing Company, 1904; Remastered DVD, Museum of Modern Art and Kino International, 2005. These attitudes did not disappear; an almost identical scene takes place in Buster Keaton’s 1925 film *Seven Chances* and again in the 1999 romantic comedy *The Bachelor*.

¹⁰⁶ “A ‘Personal’ Parade,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 19 April 1883: 12.

¹⁰⁷ “Matrimonial Advertising,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 22 April 1871: 3.

appointments were meant to amuse the papers' audience. The authors derided their physical features and behavior, and never once displayed any sympathy for their plight. Writing about a similar prank, in which one hundred or so men and women were left wandering up and down a sidewalk, looking for their match, a reporter described the scene as "half-comical, half-pathetic."¹⁰⁸ The obvious point was that, having answered a matrimonial and openly offered themselves to potential buyers, the victims set themselves up for ridicule. The indecency of using an ad was as much about openly seeking a spouse as it was about any financial consideration.

Much like the missed connection ads, the matrimonial advertisements could put both men and women at risk for physical danger or ruin. In the late nineteenth-century, there were several reported cases of murder in which the killer had met his or her victims by publishing a matrimonial. This was the ultimate threat, but even if a person was not physically harmed, he or she was facing the possibility of losing all his or her money, of abandonment, or – for women – of the inevitable loss of moral virtue.

Arthur MacDonald emphasizes this; having induced hundreds of women to answer a personal ad, he remarked that it was "a dangerous practice. Few young women are aware of the embarrassing position in which they place themselves...they commit themselves by writing to a stranger at all." Simply by answering, he explains, a girl "places herself at the mercy of the man to a certain extent. She would not for the world have it known that she had answered a 'personal;' but the man knows it, he could tell it; if she desires to dismiss him, it is difficult."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ "The Matrimonial Advertisement," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 29 October 1894: 4.

¹⁰⁹ MacDonald, 181.

Other authors agreed. “We are aware that very many young ladies answer these advertisements ‘for the fun of the thing,’ and without serious intention,” wrote one journalist, “but it is a very dangerous sport, and may end in compromising their characters to an extent they do not dream of at the outset.”¹¹⁰ The reporter who posed as a suitor in order to publish the letters he received warned that if “an unsophisticated girl...should insert a personal advertisement she is in great danger and invariably learns a lesson that prevents such pranks in the future.”¹¹¹ Even men could be compromised. In one supposedly true story, a man went to meet a beautiful young “lady” whose advertisement he had answered, but when he went to her home, he was attacked by a drunk, middle-aged woman (“a perfect she gorilla”) and then accused by her husband of trying to seduce her. Threatened with physical violence, the suitor barely escaped with his life.¹¹²

Matrimonial advertisers risked much the same fate as the naïve girls who courted and answered missed connection ads – which, after all, had a similar purpose. The young lady who answered or printed a matrimonial risked “social ruin,” as one article put it; “there are quite enough evil results therefrom to justify a legal enactment for their oppression.” This author admitted that to “advertise for a husband or wife may seem to be quite as legitimate as to advertise for a man servant or a woman servant, and there would be less trouble if all the world were honest and wise, but there is the hitch. Some young people indulge in this advertising...for amusement...and are led to their own ruin.”¹¹³

¹¹⁰ “A Warning to the Ladies,” *New York Daily Times*, 16 December 1856: 4.

¹¹¹ “Matrimonial Ads.,” *Chicago*, 28 December 1884: 12.

¹¹² “Matrimonial Advertisement Adventure,” *Trinity Advocate* [TX], 29 February 1860: 2.

¹¹³ “Matrimonial Advertisements and Social Ruin,” *Daily Evening Bulletin* [San Francisco, CA], 25 May 1878: Col H.

These critics all assumed that no respectable person would use or answer a matrimonial; however, when curious reporters solicited replies, the letters they received, and the women they met (no one tried a similar experiment on men), came from a range of backgrounds and educations. Indeed, some of the ads were so at odds with what the reporters expected that they were incapable of acknowledging that the letters did not bear up their conclusions. One reporter in 1884 who published a matrimonial posing as a wealthy Western rancher in order to reprint the letters he received argued in his introduction that the only women who would respond to matrimonials were silly girls who replied in fun, desperate spinsters whom no one wanted, and shameless flirts with questionable reputations. But while some of the letters he printed matched these stereotypes, most did not.

For example, the reporter admitted that the first letter he printed was written “in a pretty hand, undoubtedly matching that of the writer; correctly spelled, and using good grammar.” The second, like the first, was “also beautifully written in a dainty hand, and it [was] on stylish heavy unruled paper.” The reporter arranged a meeting, and the woman he described was refined, attractive, and well-dressed in a “long seal coat and a brown silk dress.” Another ad, which he called “the gem in an epistolary way of the whole collection,” followed the same pattern. “It is written on the finest and most stylish rough white paper,” he reported. “The handwriting is easy and...every letter and word indicates an educated woman. The spelling, grammar, and punctuation are faultless.” He met this woman as well and found her “lady-like...beautiful and well-bred [with] fine eyes and dark hair...and she wore her clothes like a princess.” Even several of the letters from women less well-situated were nevertheless respectable and sincere. One was from

a girl only “19 years old and alone in the world,” whose sad epistle “went to the heart of the Western gentleman.” Another “breathe[d] sincerity in every word and line”; the woman had a “kind heart” and the reporter concluded that he hoped she would be “pleasantly and congenially situated in time.”¹¹⁴

However, even if matrimonial advertisements resulted in successful matches between respectable people, they were still threatening. Just the idea of finding a spouse through a public courtship in the market could be dangerous to American society as a whole. Writing of increasing divorce rates during the same era, Norma Basch argues that this trend highlighted a major cultural transformation. As the new rules governing divorce developed in the nineteenth century, the practice “derived its symbolic punch from its capacity to undermine the contract of marriage, and marriage was (and is) a metonym for the social order. Divorce thus implicitly rocked the foundation of the social order.” Marriage was the most important contract in American society. “It was the simultaneously private and public contract that defined the obligations between husband and wife, bound their union to the political order, and shaped construction of gender,” she explains; “it was the irrevocable contract that made all other contracts possible.”¹¹⁵ The institution was so central that the Supreme Court itself determined in 1888 that it was the “foundation of family and society, without which there would be neither civilization nor progress.”¹¹⁶

Seen in this context, it is not hard to understand why matrimonial advertisements were threatening. Marriage was the defining moment of people’s lives, especially

¹¹⁴ “Matrimonial Ads,” *Chicago Daily*, 28 December 1884: 12.

¹¹⁵ Norma Basch, *Framing American Divorce: From the Revolutionary Generation to the Victorians* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999): 3.

¹¹⁶ Michael Grossberg, *Governing the Hearth: Law and the Family in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985): 18.

women; indeed, through “marriage and maternity, [a woman] completes her own being,” wrote one author.¹¹⁷ By the mid-nineteenth century, this institution had to be founded on the basis of love, with no other reason being acceptable to the middle class. Therefore, people finding marriage partners in a businesslike fashion would have destabilized the foundations of society itself. As Nancy Cott argues, “[i]f marriage produced the polity, then wrongfully joined marriages could be fatal. The presence of such marriages and their perpetrators might infect the whole body politic.”¹¹⁸

Yet the critics’ concern that people using matrimonials were never marrying for love was unfounded. While there were ads that were strictly business, most people advertised in the hopes of finding a loving spouse, whether or not they included financial qualifications. To be sure, many of those ads could have been dishonest – using romantic language to draw in lonely, lovesick marks. But, despite what contemporaries assumed, there is evidence that many of the ads were sincere. Even some skeptical critics admitted this must be the case; these “advertisements are becoming more and more common in this country...[and] they are bound to succeed, otherwise they would not increase as it [*sic*] does,” wrote one author who nevertheless warned against using them. “For many men and women the ‘personal’ columns of a newspaper have a strong attraction and in some cases have even brought about a desirable change in human fortune,” said another, concluding “that a great many strong friendships, and even marriages are brought about by the answering of newspaper ‘personals’...”¹¹⁹ And another journalist wrote that it “would probably surprise many if they knew that not a few of both those who advertise,

¹¹⁷ “Matrimonial Man-Traps,” *Georgia Weekly Telegraph*.

¹¹⁸ Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000): 155.

¹¹⁹ “The Wife Market: Ambiguous Phrasology of Matrimonial Advertisements – Seeking a Life Partner in the Newspapers,” *St Louis Globe-Democrat*, 14 November 1885: Col E, 7.

and those who respond to such advertisements, occupy very respectable positions in society, with no fear of poverty before their eyes; and...many marriages annually take place from an acquaintanceship formed in this manner.”¹²⁰

And there were verifiable instances of successful marriages through advertisements. Arthur MacDonald reported one widow who met her husband through an advertisement. “When I was a young lady I answered a ‘personal,’” she wrote when MacDonald chastised her about the danger of using matrimonials. “A widower called...We became well acquainted, and finally he went to see my parents...A happier marriage there never was.” She had answered MacDonald’s advertisement out of curiosity, and explained her decision to try again by saying, “I know that these ‘personals’ are not inserted with good intentions, but some are. I thought possibly I might find a suitable husband in this way...A man will go and find a wife, and this is the only method I have.”¹²¹ Marriage announcements in various papers around the country also attested to the success of matrimonials; one reported that the couple was “as happy as two sunbeams.”¹²² Another recorded the “romantic marriage” of a couple who had met through the “‘Personal’ column of a New-York paper.”¹²³ Though not very common, announcements such as these indicate that at least some advertisers were sincere.

Critics of these advertisements saw them as symptomatic of a new era of commercialization and commodification, and feared that the results would be dangerous – not only to individuals but to society as a whole. As the ads multiplied, they only

¹²⁰ “A Bad Way to Get Married,” *Knickerbocker*.

¹²¹ MacDonald, 96.

¹²² “She Came for Him,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 31 May 1891, 7.

¹²³ “Not Young, But So Romantic,” *New York Times*, 12 December 1893, 3.

provided proof that the market was intruding into private life in an unprecedented manner. What critics failed to recognize was that economics had always played a role in private lives, especially marriage. Matrimonial ads, far from an outcome of the growing market economy, were merely part of a tradition that had existed for generations. The only difference was that they were open and public. But while on the surface they suggested that little had changed, and that marriage for financial reasons still dominated despite changing ideals, upon closer inspection, they make it clear that love was an equally important factor. The means of gaining a spouse may have been influenced by the market, but the end goal was exactly what idealists desired. Like anything else, matrimonials were used by all different sorts of people for a variety of different reasons. However, most advertisers at least claimed they wanted to conform to the middle-class ideal; they desired the same thing: a happy, loving, and financially secure marriage.

If matrimonial advertisements had a heyday, it was ending by the mid-1890s. The consolidation of matrimonials with the rest of the personals in the *New York Herald*, putting them alongside the less savory ads that began to dominate that column, dissuaded many advertisers; matrimonials declined precipitously. In addition, recognizing their widespread appeal, agencies began to saturate newspaper columns around the country with ads from innumerable wealthy men and women seeking spouses – all suspiciously similar and many directing interested parties to the same addresses.¹²⁴ Ads that appeared sincere still made their way into the papers, but they were buried under those from matrimonial agencies. Some of these were designed to look like ads from real people – widows worth \$50,000 who desired husbands and millionaire businessmen in search of

¹²⁴ Many other newspapers with matrimonials had always included them with the rest of their personal ads, but their nature changed as well, including more ads from agencies and less from individuals.

wives who were happy to marry poor people cropped up in suspiciously large numbers. A typical example in 1905 read: “Charming lady of fine appearance, loving disposition, worth \$30,000, desires to marry at once; no objection to poor or workingman. Will assist husband financially immediately after marriage.” Others were more direct: “Marry!” read one; “Send 2 cents for monthly matrimonial newspaper; wealthy patrons; personal introductions.” Similarly, another read: “Marry Rich – Big list of descriptions and photos sent free, sealed. Address Standard Cor. Club.”¹²⁵ While these agencies had been around at least as long as individual advertisers, it was at the turn of the twentieth century that they truly took hold of the industry by promising to provide their patrons with wealthy spouses. These entrepreneurs widened their scope to include both urban and rural residents, and as a result received even more widespread attention than matrimonial advertisements. While some were legitimate, many were accomplished con artists, and their exploits became nationwide scandals.

¹²⁵ *Washington Post*, 20 August 1905: F4; *Atlanta Constitution*, 29 April 1900: 10; *Washington Post*, 23 May 1909: CA2.

PART TWO:

THE PROBLEM OF PUBLIC INTIMACY

Chapter Three: The “Cupid Trust”: Matrimonial Agencies in Chicago at the Turn of the Century

Oscar L. Wells was a busy man. Between 1902 and 1905, he was arrested at least five times, mostly in Chicago but also in other cities around the Midwest, each time for running a fraudulent matrimonial agency. He first moved to Chicago sometime around 1902, where he opened a matrimonial bureau, the Bell Advertising Agency, with his wife Alice and partner James P. McGann. All three were arrested in September for fraud; the agency promised to introduce clients to nonexistent wealthy men and women looking for spouses in exchange for a membership fee. It was a successful scam; at the time their offices – shared with several other agencies – contained an estimated 200,000 letters from would-be clients. The arresting police officer, Detective Clifton R. Wooldridge, claimed that Oscar Wells was the “connecting link” between a number of agencies that formed a matrimonial “trust,” but in the end he and McGann were only fined \$200 each.¹

The two men promised to leave Chicago, and shortly thereafter appeared in St. Louis. Wells started an agency there, but by December he had moved on. At the beginning of that month, he was apprehended in connection to a matrimonial agency he had been running in Cincinnati with his wife and another partner, John Carson. Apparently not much concerned with his wife’s fate, he had skipped bail in Ohio, and was attempting to start another agency in Indiana.²

¹ “Oscar Wells From Georgetown,” *Morning Herald* [Lexington, KY], 6 December 1902: 3; “Raid Cupid and Cupidity,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 25 September 1902: 1; “Quarter Million Love Letters,” *Washington Post*, 26 September 1902: 9; “Chicago Love Letter Trust,” *The Sunday News Tribune* [Duluth, MN], 28 September 1902: 2; “Cupid’s Darts,” *Boston Globe*, 28 September 1902: 2.

² “Oscar Wells From Georgetown”; “Raid Marriage Bureau,” *Bellingham Herald* [WA], 23 May 1905: 6; Untitled, *Omaha World Herald*, 9 December 1904: 1.

The Cincinnati bureau had been off to a good start. During Alice Wells' trial, post-office inspectors testified that she had received between 200 and 500 letters every day. Ultimately both she and her husband were convicted of mail fraud, received an unspecified jail sentence and paid a "heavy" fine. But by January 1905, Wells was back in Chicago, where he was arrested and charged for the same crime. Although he paid yet another fine, he still opened a new matrimonial agency "as soon as he got out of the station," using the name Delmonte, according to one reporter.³

Five months later, Wells had two new partners: M. Felcher and "Doc" Moses, an ex-constable. The three men had opened an agency called the Belmont Corresponding club, but the Chicago police arrested them in May 1905 for disorderly conduct. According to Detective Wooldridge, who was by now on a crusade to close all matrimonial agencies in Chicago, the agency received up to 300 letters per day. Police later revealed that they had confiscated a total of 45,000 letters. By this time, Wells had earned the illustrious title of "the king of matrimonial agencies."⁴

The \$200 fine he paid apparently did not serve as much of a deterrent; Wells was back in business, still in Chicago, by October. Yet again with new partners, N.C. Collins and G.H. Cannon, Wells was running the National Employment Exchange. This agency advertised housekeeping positions for wealthy bachelors but, in the letter which required a five dollar fee "as evidence of good faith," confided that to "be candid with you, this position undoubtedly will lead to your marriage with this gentleman." After paying the five dollars, the victim never heard from the agency again. Perhaps finally the police

³ "Mrs. Wells In Jail," *Morning Herald*, 6 December 1902: 3; "Raid Marriage Bureau," *Bellingham Herald*.
⁴ "Raid a Matrimonial Agency," *Omaha World Herald*, 18 May 1905: 7; "Large Sums Paid For Wives," *San Jose Mercury News*, 20 May 1905: 8; "Many of Both Sexes Would Wed," *Bellingham Herald* [WA], 17 June 1905: 19.

succeeded in shutting Wells down permanently after this arrest; his name disappears from the historic record after October 2, 1905.⁵

Wells' rich career in these four years reveals more than just the record of an abysmally bad confidence man. Despite numerous arrests, several hundred dollars in fines, jail time, and constant relocation, Wells determinedly stuck to the same business. Either he and his various partners suffered from a stupendous lack of imagination, or they recognized that they had hit upon something that was so lucrative that it was worth all the risks: taking advantage of people's desire to marry, and to marry rich.

As industrious as Wells may have been, however, he never achieved the level of infamy that two women did who were put on trial for the same crime in 1908. Their separate cases became so famous that their names were known throughout the country. Like Wells, the women, Marion Grey and E.L. Glinn, used matrimonial agencies to capitalize on people's longing, and inability, to find the right spouse. Although their histories prior to their arrests are not well-documented, they became nationally known, with their trials covered by newspapers around the country, as Americans became fascinated by the story of the two women who had successfully swindled both men and women out of their hard-earned money.

These agencies and their proprietors were dangerous, not only because they were fraudulent, but also because they revealed how gullible and greedy people could be when faced with the prospect of instant riches. Matrimonial agencies seemed to offer a chance to game the system – to circumvent the necessity of working one's way up the social and economic ladder. And it only requires a cursory glance at the classified ads of

⁵ "Start to Crush 'Graft' Agencies," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 1 October 1905: 3; "Inquiry Snares 'Agency Experts,'" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 2 October 1905: 3.

newspapers at the time to see that by the turn of the twentieth century, the business was a thriving one. While there are some ads that appear to be legitimate ones from individuals, personal columns were peppered with ads like those of Grey, Glinn, and Wells, as well as from agencies promising that they had hundreds of wealthy gentlemen and ladies eager to wed.⁶ The fact that agencies published ads in papers around the country for years shows that the swindlers found plenty of dupes. Agencies failed, and agents were caught, but the game did not falter; there were always new marks to be had.

Matrimonial agencies were troubling for several reasons. Like the advertisements in Chapter Two, they turned marriage into a commercial transaction, but agencies took this one step further. Marriage itself was now a business – not only that, but a business that was plagued by fraud, theft, and scandal. In addition, they were demonstratively successful confidence games that banked on Americans' greed; they worked because they promised very wealthy husbands or wives in exchange for a small fee. Moreover, matrimonial agencies borrowed Progressive values of order and expertise – the very things that were meant to stabilize American society – to undermine the most basic building block of American society: marriage.

Matrimonial advertisements, according to observers, threatened marriage by bringing it into the market, making private affairs public, and allowing men and women to become independent agents acting on their own behalf without the participation of family or community. Matrimonial agencies went further; what had been a solution for individuals was now a thriving business. Moreover, agencies promoted the idea of

⁶ One very typical personal column was in the *Morning Oregonian*, which on December 8, 1907, contained two ads from E.L. Glinn along with twelve others that were virtually identical in content. These ads were mixed in with others for employment agencies, real estate agencies, medical cures for everything from toothaches to impotence, and various other businesses that were likely run along the same lines as the agencies.

marrying not just for financial stability but for huge sums of wealth. In addition, their ads and literature often failed to mention any desire for love. “Marry – 500 wealthy, many worth \$100,000, paper 10¢ sealed; best bank references; 8th successful year. R.L. Love, Denver, Colo.” was one typical example in a Nebraska newspaper.⁷ Agencies such as these promoted marriage not as a union between loving individuals, but as a business opportunity that could provide a life of leisure and luxury.

These agencies became a stage upon which observers debated, rationalized, and resolved to the best of their ability how men and women were so easily seduced by promises of easy wealth. Indeed, middle-class commentators fretted about the threat of agencies to a degree that seems irrational today. One social reformer claimed that marriage brokers were “directly responsible for 50,000 ruined lives in America.”⁸ A Chicago editorialist, writing about several different kinds of scams, wrote that among “the worst of these frauds the matrimonial agency easily takes precedence.” If this was true, then these agencies were, for him, even worse than the fraudulent theatrical agencies that he describes next which drew young girls into “houses of ill-repute” and “white slavery.”⁹ And the judge in one case, who called the agency pamphlets “bestial,” declared, “To sell women and men in marriage is the height of crime.”¹⁰ The harsh, unsympathetic, and occasionally hysterical opinions expressed by observers underscores how seriously the agencies disturbed the reigning ideals about marriage, and the potential consequences was nothing less than a total breakdown of civilization.

⁷ Untitled, *Omaha World Herald*, September 29, 1904: 36.

⁸ “The Marriage Broker,” *Washington Post*, 15 October 1905: F7.

⁹ “Disreputable Agencies,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 23 February 1908: F4.

¹⁰ “Court Scores Managers of Matrimonial Bureau,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 13 February 1903: 7.

Evidence suggests that there were legitimate agencies; however, they kept a low profile and were rarely mentioned in the press. Detective Wooldridge, who crusaded for years to take down fraudulent agencies, himself claimed that there were eight good agencies in Chicago in 1903, though he never mentioned them by name.¹¹ But counterfeit organizations were widespread, and in Chicago they had been causing problems for decades. Between 1902 and 1908 in particular, reports surfaced regularly about fraudulent agencies that received thousands of letters and reaped large profits from people hoping to find husbands or wives. But these agencies had been around long before this and not just in Chicago; in 1859, two reporters in New York wrote an entire book about them entitled *Matrimonial Brokerage in the Metropolis*.¹² Unlike matrimonials from individuals, these agencies were not trying to appeal to city dwellers; rather, they advertised throughout the country, expanding their reach and therefore their threat.

Despite their longevity, matrimonial agencies, even legitimate ones, never became socially acceptable; very few people rose up to defend them. Observers mocked the clients; reporters explained the mechanics of the scams for the benefit of their readers; editorialists railed against the evils of the practice and the proprietors; and policemen and lawyers joined together in a crusade to close them all. Nevertheless, people continued to fall prey to the exact same swindle, despite the fact that it remained unchanged for years around the country.

¹¹ "Cupid Dodges 'Hands Up,'" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 4 March 1903: 16.

¹² Alfred C. Hills and Alfred J. March, *Matrimonial Brokerage in the Metropolis* (New York: Thatcher & Hutchinson, 1859).

The method of fraudulent agencies was simple, and it was so profitable in the short term that even if discovered within only a few months, the punishments, usually in the form of fines, were still negligible. The agencies would place classified ads in newspapers throughout the country, which either promised to help provide rich spouses, or purported to be from a wealthy man or woman looking for a wife or husband. Examples of Marion Grey's and E.L. Glinn's ads were very typical, and usually read something like, "Wealthy manufacturer wishes congenial, home loving wife – no objection to lady employed," or "Middle-aged widow, good looking, wealthy, tired of single life, would correspond with gentleman. Object matrimony."¹³ Other agencies were often more specific about the person's exact value; an example of Oscar Wells' ads read, "Young widow without kith or kin, but a lover of home and children, is worth in cash and city property at least \$80,000, left her by a deceased husband."¹⁴ When someone replied to the ad, the agents would send back a circular, "testimonials," and an application to join their club in exchange for a two to five dollar fee. Once that had been obtained, the victim would either never hear from them again, or, more frequently, would be provided with names and addresses of people who had fallen for the same trick and were no more wealthy than they.

Many agents attempted to keep people from realizing the scam as long as possible by sending instructions on how to compose a letter that would hide the writers' education and financial situation. "Many of our clients," one letter warned, "write bold, forward letters, such as no [lady or gentleman] would answer...do not allow yourself to become

¹³ Grand Jury Indictment, National Archives and Records Administration-Great Lakes Region (Chicago), Record Group 21, Records of The U. S. District Court, U. S. District Court. Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division (Chicago), Criminal Case Files, 1873-1985, U.S. v. E.L. Glinn.

¹⁴ "Raid Cupid and Cupidity," *Chicago Daily Tribune*.

careless in the matter of the appearance of your letters...[by] using poor paper and writing with a lead pencil, which to say the least is disrespectful..." In addition, "[s]ome of our clients dwell mainly upon the money question, about which nothing should be said until your correspondence has progressed sufficiently to warrant the belief that all other details are promising, as...we do not want [the other person] to think that we have introduced [him or her] to a mere fortune hunter."¹⁵ If complaints did start, the swindlers would have already reaped a healthy profit. It was easy enough to pay a \$200 fine, move to a new location, change the name on the letterhead, and start again. Victims, it seems, were to be had in plenty.

Big cities like Chicago and New York – where officials also fought a losing, though less widespread, battle against agencies – were ideal locations for this kind of scam; the cities were too large for the post office or police to keep track of the various con games. Chicago's population had doubled in size every year between 1850 and 1890, from 30,000 to 1.7 million by 1900 – growth so monumental it was only topped by New York City – making the city chaotic and confusing.¹⁶ And according to contemporaries, Chicago was famous for its open acceptance of vice and crime. Carter Harrison, the mayor throughout most of the 1880s, refused to pass laws against gambling and prostitution.¹⁷ As one London reporter wrote at the end of the century, Chicago "makes a more amazingly open display of evil than any other city known to me...Other

¹⁵ Government Exhibit 16, NARA-Great Lakes Region (Chicago), RG 21, U. S. District Court CCF, 1873-1985, U.S. v. Marion Grey; Testimony of Mary Ellen Quinn, NARA-Great Lakes Region (Chicago), RG 21, U. S. District Court CCF, 1873-1985, U.S. v. E.L. Glinn; "Many of Both Sexes Would Wed," *Bellingham Herald*.

¹⁶ William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 279.

¹⁷ Donald L. Miller, *City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 449.

places hide their blackness out of sight; Chicago treasures it in the heart of the business quarter and gives it a veneer.”¹⁸ It was a city plagued by strikes, a rapidly increasing immigrant population, and, after the end of the World’s Fair in 1893, growing unemployment. The social reformer William T. Stead though Chicago was so rife with crime and depredation that he published an exposé of its vices entitled *If Christ Came to Chicago* in an attempt to force the city to change. In such a chaotic atmosphere, it was easy for enterprising con artists to take advantage of innocent newcomers, especially the farmers and other rural dwellers who came to trade, shop, or travel through the city’s railroad hub.

Matrimonial agencies were just one way of conning people out of their money; indeed, swindlers often worked in various different graft schemes at the same time. When first arrested in 1902, for example, Oscar Wells was involved in several frauds. The first article exposing his and his partners’ arrests noted that in addition to the matrimonial agencies, they also had a racetrack betting scheme, two “turf commissions,” a mutual securities company, and a patent medicine mail-order business.¹⁹

Marriage bureaus fit into this world perfectly because their swindles were built on a concept with which Midwesterners were already familiar. The idea of finding a husband or wife through an advertisement would have made sense in this region; it was, after all, in Chicago that the two largest and most successful direct-mail businesses began: Montgomery Ward and Sears, Roebuck. Marketing themselves to rural residents, both these companies printed book-length catalogues from which customers could buy almost anything they desired. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Montgomery Ward

¹⁸ quoted in Miller, 508.

¹⁹ “Raid Cupid and Cupidity,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*.

catalogue was 1,200 pages long and contained 70,000 items for sale. These catalogues brought the city into the country, allowing farm families a glimpse of city life, and the chance of possessing the same goods that urbanites were able to obtain so easily.²⁰

Matrimonial agencies were capitalizing on a business plan that Midwesterners were used to; once a potential victim was snared, agencies sent catalogues of available men and women highlighting their best qualities (that is, their fortune), promised money-back guarantees if not satisfied, and presented themselves as the modern way of finding a spouse. Just as Montgomery Ward and Sears, Roebuck became the most convenient way of shopping for people outside major cities, so too did matrimonial agencies offer themselves as the most convenient way of finding the most desirable husband or wife.

Smarter swindlers, despite using Chicago as their home base, did not advertise there at all, staying completely out of sight of local officials. They preferred buying space in rural and small-town papers as far away as New Hampshire and California, so that there would be little chance of disgruntled clients knocking on their doors, and to appeal to the same men and women who were already using mail-order catalogues.²¹

People outside of cities became the perfect prey for the agents. The matrimonial advertisements in Chapter Two primarily were to and from urban dwellers, who were adrift in large, anonymous cities. But the flip side of city populations' growth was a depleting rural population, leaving smaller communities and fewer marriage prospects. The proprietors of matrimonial agencies recognized these vacuums and stepped in to fill the void, using it to their own advantage.

²⁰ Cronon, 334-340.

²¹ "Man Searches Arcade for Matrimonial Bureau," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 13 January 1905: 3.

Confidence men were familiar figures by the turn of the century. In the Victorian era, tricksters held a prominent place in the middle-class psyche. The historian James Cook observes that “worries about deception...were positively endemic to the culture of the new middle class” by the mid-nineteenth century.²² The fear of swindlers represented the fears of large social forces that were altering American culture, such as the breakdown of family ties, fewer restraints on single workingmen, and a rapidly growing national economy based on speculative activity in a national market.²³ All this uncertainty made possible a new breed of swindles, forgeries, counterfeiting, and other confidence games.²⁴

Advice and etiquette books told horror stories about young men just arrived in the city befriended by more sophisticated urbanites, who slowly but inexorably drew them into a downward spiral of dissipation and criminal activity. In many cases, however, the confidence man who destroyed people not only financially but also morally was a myth. This kind of warning, Karen Halttunen argues, had its roots not in actual situations, but rather was the manifestation of the middle-class fear that there was no longer any control over young men let loose in urban centers. Without these warnings, boys might let their values of hard work and self-sufficiency slip away.²⁵ While it is possible that susceptible boys did fall prey to such villains, in all likelihood, young men who went wrong did so less from the deliberate temptation of others but from their own mistakes and decisions. Fraud only worked when the proffered rewards were difficult to come by easily, such as financial success, which to acquire honestly required virtue, self-sacrifice, restraint, and

²² James Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing With Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 26-27.

²³ Karen Halttunen, 20.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 7.

²⁵ *Ibid*, Chapter 1.

hard work. Dishonest matrimonial agents were part of a group of people who were taking advantage of a desire to circumvent the arduous climb up the corporate ladder, and with great success. In the process, they provided solid proof that people could be easily misled when tempted by quick riches.

With many, though by no means all, of these agencies directing replies to Chicago, it is not surprising that officials there described the agencies in a manner more fitting to plagues or infestations. Detective Clifton R. Wooldridge admitted in 1903 that they “keep springing up almost as rapidly as they are raided and shut up.” Yet despite his confident claim that the “last raid we made on the bureaus nearly finished them,” they persisted for years.²⁶ In 1908 one newspaper was calling for an “extermination” of all agencies.²⁷ Wooldridge, nicknamed by proud locals as “the Sherlock Holmes of America,” renowned for his impressive arrest record and for single-handedly closing dozens of brothels and gambling houses, could not seem to take down the pernicious marriage brokers.²⁸ Indeed, it took the trials of Marion Grey and E.L. Glinn after his retirement and the revelation of a serial killer who used personal ads to have any real effect on the business.

The trials of Marion Grey and E.L. Glinn are good case studies with which to understand the threat that these agencies posed because they highlight the many concerns expressed by critics. Grey, whose real name was Iva Goodenough, was the first to be arrested and tried. A beautiful twenty-year-old, college-educated woman from Benton Harbor, Michigan, she had been running a matrimonial agency in Elgin, Illinois, a small

²⁶ “Love’s Agents on the Run,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 14 February 1903: 2.

²⁷ “Says Affinity Bureaus Must Go,” *Des Moines Daily News*, 18 April 1908: 4.

²⁸ Wooldridge, Clifton R., *Twenty Years a Detective in the Wickedest City in the World* (Self-Published: Chicago, 1908).

suburb of Chicago. In the three months she had been in business, Grey, who falsely advertised that she had wealthy clients hoping to wed, received about 200 letters per day and made at least \$3,000 in five dollar membership fees.²⁹ Between the grand jury indictment, trial, and appeal, the case dragged on for two years; the appeals court affirmed her conviction, but at the urging of Michigan's attorney general and a petition signed by residents of that state, President Taft, for reasons unknown, commuted her sentence and she only served one month out of her year-long sentence at Bridewell Prison.³⁰ Marion Grey's trial, which preceded by several months an almost identical trial in Chicago of the second woman, E.L. Glinn, attracted the attention of newspapers from as far away as Massachusetts and California.

The two women were unique among the many other matrimonial agents at the time because they were the first people in Chicago who faced jail time rather than fines and because both trials made national news. What made their experiences unusual is hard to say, though their gender made a difference. For a woman to run a successful business was rare, but the fact that it was fraudulent was shocking. Confidence men were familiar, even sometimes admirable, figures in literature and society, but confidence women were aberrations, and female criminals in general were subject to harsher judgment.³¹ For instance, in his book, *Twenty Years a Detective in the Wickedest City in the World*, Detective Wooldridge quotes an expert on the subject, Doctor Cesare Lombroso of the

²⁹ Testimony of Marion Grey and Charles Adamick, National Archives and Records Administration-Great Lakes Region (Chicago), Record Group 21, Records of The U. S. District Court, U. S. District Court. Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division (Chicago), Criminal Case Files, 1873-1985, Case # 3882, U.S. v. Marion Grey

³⁰ "A Chance For Marion Grey," *Grand Forks Daily Herald* [ND], 16 January 1909: 3; "Taft Aids Marion Grey," *New York Times*, 15 July 1909: 1.

³¹ For specific reactions to female con artists, see: Kathleen De Grave, *Swindler, Spy, Rebel: The Confidence Woman in Nineteenth-Century America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995).

University of Milan, who explained that female criminals have the “worst qualities of women [forming] a combination of evil tendencies which often results in a type of extraordinary wickedness,” which was far worse than men’s.³² And Grey and Glinn were not the first women agents to be treated differently; in 1903 two men and a woman were tried simultaneously for running a fraudulent matrimonial agency together, but only the woman was found guilty.³³

Of the two women, Marion Grey had more notoriety and she personally was the object of intense scrutiny. E.L. Glinn (real name A.M. Call) also made national news, but despite the fact that she was in the business much longer, her trial came second and was less of a novelty. More important, she was neither young nor attractive – unlike Grey, who everyone, even her greatest detractors, admitted was “unusually handsome.”³⁴ A young and beautiful con artist was perfect fodder for a thrill-seeking press, and reporters made the most of her.

Reporters dismissed E.L. Glinn as crass and vulgar. What scrutiny she received was two-dimensional and negative. Grey, however, was an enigma. The press could not explain how a beautiful and cultured young lady, well-educated and from a good home, could be the manager of a fraudulent business. Some painted her as an innocent victim who had done the best she could in difficult circumstances, despite the evidence to the contrary; others invented an ugly past, focusing on lurid (and frequently inaccurate) details of her multiple marriages and hinting at a dark and mysterious background.

³² Wooldridge, 167.

³³ “Court Scores Managers of Matrimonial Bureaus,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*.

³⁴ “‘Affinity Bureau’ Girl Is On Trial,” *LaCrosse Daily Tribune* [WI], 10 February 1908: 1.

Grey had no mysterious past, however; she was the daughter of small town, middle-class parents who by most accounts had had a normal upbringing. Her true motivations are impossible to discern, in part because her trial testimony is rendered colorless by the economical court reporter, who summarized witness statements rather than quoting them. And with different journalists writing opposing descriptions of everything from her behavior in court to the expression of her eyes (one called them “soulful,” another “snapping”) there is no one story.³⁵ Whatever the actual facts, she was a lightning-rod in the debate about matrimonial agencies, and most people agreed that the results of her case, as well as E.L. Glinn’s, would serve as a referendum on all agencies. As the biased judge in Glinn’s case put it, ““This is not simply a case against Mrs. Glinn...but a prosecution...to free the United States from fraudulent enterprises... we try to protect...every person in the country.””³⁶

Newspapers recognized how shocking these two trials would be – women successfully manipulating hundreds of Americans with promises of wealth and happiness – and stoked the fires with dramatic stories. In one paper, vivid descriptions of Marion Grey sobbing on a friend’s shoulder were juxtaposed in another against the image of her shaking her fist at an unhappy client in court.³⁷ Some articles portrayed her as penitent, others as defiant. In addition the witnesses were described intimately and quoted at length. These melodramatic stories served to keep the trials, Grey’s in particular, constantly in the public eye and turned what had been an annoying irritant – the plague of

³⁵ “Deals in Affinities,” *Los Angeles Times*, 15 September 1907: 11; “Affinity Agent Faces Foes,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 11 February 1908: 1.

³⁶ “Girl Proves Poor Affinity Finder,” *Fort Worth Telegram* [TX], 23 February 1908: 4; “Love Broker No. 2 Guilty of Fraud,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 18 April 1908: 1.

³⁷ “Affinity Agent Pleads Mercy After She Pleads Guilty,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 27 October 1907: 6; “Affinity Agent Faces Foes,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*.

matrimonial agencies – into a national scandal that had the potential to harm American society as a whole.

Matrimonial agencies stood out amongst the rest of the frauds plaguing Chicago because they made for more entertaining reading than real estate fraud or race track betting, because articles often included quotations from confiscated letters, and newspapers always looked to the bottom line: what would sell. Readers were more likely to buy newspapers which included amusing letters with such lines as “[m]ay this be your valentine, Dear Ducky Darling” and the woman who wanted ““a man who is a lover, with love and affection coming from all its [*sic*] petals.”³⁸ But there was also a subtle difference in the kind of danger matrimonial agencies presented. Turf commissions and other methods of graft tricked people out of their money too, which was reprehensible. But matrimonial agencies suggested a deeper, if only vaguely understood, menace – one that would affect not just the victims but society as a whole. By turning marriage into a fraudulent business, agencies undermined the most basic institution of society, and the men and women who ran the marriage bureaus became the lowest of criminals.

Detective Clifton R. Wooldridge filled seventy pages of one of his many books about crime in Chicago with his attacks on matrimonial agencies in a chapter entitled “How Matrimonial Agencies Prey on the Public – Their Degeneration Into the Worst Forms of Crime.” In vivid language, he declared that “step by step within the past few years we have seen the Matrimonial Agencies turned into a volcano belching forth fraud, swindling, bigamy, desertion, and finally ghastly wholesale murder,” and called the

³⁸ “2,000 Women Would Wed,” *New York Times*, 3 April 1907: 1; “Raid Marriage Bureau,” *Bellingham Herald*.

industry a “plant of hell,” and an “abomination” that “is opposed to the fundamental principles of society.”³⁹

Yet at the same time, the exact dangers of matrimonial fraud were somewhat vague. A crime in which all the victim lost was five dollars was not the worst thing that could happen; other than humiliation, the mark was not much injured. Answering an ad, even paying money for a membership fee, was hardly the first step toward a life of crime or loss of values. In other cities, there was some concern that prostitutes might pose as clients – blackmailing men under the threat of public exposure until they sank into utter depravation – but this idea never gained traction in Chicago. Indeed, there is no evidence that the victims suffered anything worse than public embarrassment, which was caused by a press that was unsympathetic to the victims’ plight.

Rather, the danger was broader than what might happen to the individual. The agencies were a “menace to the American people,” according to Assistant District Attorney Seward Shirer, who prosecuted both the Grey and Glinn cases.⁴⁰ In Glinn’s trial, he claimed that “this heart string industry, if allowed to continue, will...[ruin] the morals of our boys and girls,” although he never actually explained how.

In his closing arguments to the jury in Marion Grey’s trial, Shirer declared, “The sacred institution of marriage is involved in this case. Is marriage a traffic in this great and glorious country? Can love matches be made by a paltry \$5 policy in an affinity agency? If you permit the operation of this kind of business, it will undermine society, break up our homes and place our wives and daughters in danger...It is a disgrace to

³⁹ Wooldridge, *Twenty Years a Detective in the Wickedest City in the World*, 119, 121, 165, 184.

⁴⁰ “Marriage Bureaus Rob By Wholesale,” *Marion Weekly Star* [OH], 10 July 1909: 3

civilization.”⁴¹ By suggesting that matrimonial agencies would turn marriage into a “traffic,” Shirer was drawing a link between paying a fee to find a spouse and white slavery – companionship was something that could be bought and sold. The lawyer had good reason to over-dramatize; as his opposing counsel admitted during E.L. Glinn’s trial, his high-profile convictions could soon land him a federal judge’s chair.⁴² Spearheading the crusade against matrimonial agencies would be a boon to Shirer’s career; even if he genuinely believed they were dangerous, exaggerating their perils would increase his reputation.

But disingenuous or not, Shirer’s rhetoric resonated with his audience, which embraced his campaign. He was widely quoted on the same subject in papers throughout the country for over a year after the two women’s convictions. Americans, he insisted in a lengthy interview in July 1909, thought matrimonial agencies were jokes. However, not only did they rob “the poor and the struggling of hundreds of thousands of dollars,” but they also “debase...and drag...to the dust of tawdry commercialism the ideals of love and marriage...This is practically what the marriage bureau fake does – and he does it with a defilement which is nauseating to the person of wholesome and refined sensibilities.”⁴³ Making a business out of marriage was by itself evil; robbing people was reprehensible, but dragging ideals of love into “the dust of tawdry commercialism” was no less a crime. The would-be clients were not the truly injured parties – the mockery victims received shows how little anyone cared about their fate. It was marriage itself that suffered when people tried to find a mate through an agency.

⁴¹ “‘Affinity’ Girl in Jury’s Hands,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 15 February 1908: 3.

⁴² “Love Broker No. 2 Guilty of Fraud,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*.

⁴³ “Marriage Bureaus Rob By Wholesale,” *Marion Weekly Star*.

Shirer had willing and helpful partners for his denunciations in the judges presiding over the two trials. Both judges upheld every one of his objections, and overruled all of the defense attorneys, allowing irrelevant but damaging testimony for the prosecution and refusing to admit pertinent evidence which may have helped the defendants. For example, upon Shirer's objection, the judge in Glinn's trial ruled that she could not give her version of a conversation she had had with a post office inspector because it would be "self-serving."⁴⁴ He also announced to the jury that all matrimonial agencies were "frauds from their inception and their managers criminals."⁴⁵

Likewise, Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, who presided over Grey's trial, allowed the prosecution to discuss in detail her previous employment at a matrimonial agency in Michigan which had been accused of fraud and whose proprietor was under indictment, but had never been tried – a line of questioning that should not have been allowed in court.⁴⁶ And according to one report, the judge "delivered one of the most scathing arraignments from the bench in the history of the Chicago courts."⁴⁷ In his final summation, he told the jury that "I feel here, gentlemen, that I ought to ask you not to become nauseated by the discharge of your duties by this sickening drivel, nor to allow your abhorrence to the occupation that the defendant concededly engaged in" to sway

⁴⁴ Testimony of E.L. Glinn, NARA-Great Lakes Region (Chicago) RG 21, U. S. District Court CCF, 1873-1985, U.S. v. E.L. Glinn.

⁴⁵ "Love Broker No. 2 Guilty of Fraud," *Chicago Daily Tribune*.

⁴⁶ Testimony of Marion Grey, NARA-Great Lakes Region (Chicago) RG 21, U.S. District Court CCF, 1873-1985, U.S. v. Marion Grey. Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis was one of the foremost judges in Chicago during this time, presiding over a number of important trials, including that of Big Bill Haywood and over one hundred other Industrial Workers of the World members who were charged with violating the Espionage Act of 1917; several Socialist Party leaders; and the black boxer Jack Johnson, who was banned from boxing when Landis charged him with transporting a white woman across state lines. He later became the first commissioner of Major League Baseball. A controversial figure, many of his convictions were later overturned and he narrowly escaped impeachment by resigning his position as a federal judge in 1922.

⁴⁷ "Jail For Affinity Agent," *Grand Forks Herald*, 16 April 1909: 8.

them into finding her guilty, “simply to register your condemnation of such matters.”⁴⁸ Grey’s lawyer, in filing her appeal, argued that in the face of such language, “the jury could do nothing but return a verdict of guilty.”⁴⁹

Shirer’s declaration that the “sacred institution of marriage” was at stake was particularly telling. He wanted to shut down every bureau, “even if advertisements are not fraudulent,” not because their danger lay in theft, but because marriage had become a “traffic.”⁵⁰ He sponsored a city council ordinance which would make it illegal to negotiate marriage for a fee; Chicago, he felt, should “set the example of frowning on marriage mills.”⁵¹ If matrimonial agents had their way, love would become a business. Indeed, in their literature, E.L. Glinn and other agents frankly suggested that it should.

For example, Glinn deliberately promoted herself as a harbinger of modernity. As the literature of her agency explained, “In the modern age progress has been made in this matter [marriage] just the same as in other matters. The modern way – the sensible way...to find a husband or wife is to employ the service of a recognized...matrimonial institution that has the necessary equipment, experience, and incentive to lend valuable assistance.” Former methods of courting were unreliable, she claimed: “people married just like they hunted game – taking the first that presented itself...Luck, not judgment – ruled the selection of a life partner, and the result was that SIXTY PERCENT OF THE MARRIAGES MADE IN THE OLD FASHIONED WAY WERE UNHAPPY.”⁵² Her

⁴⁸ Judge Landis to Jury, NARA-Great Lakes Region (Chicago) RG 21, U. S. District Court CCF, 1873-1985, U.S. v. Marion Grey.

⁴⁹ “A Chance For Marion Grey.”

⁵⁰ “Refuse to Halt Anti-Cupid War,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 29 February 1908: 7.

⁵¹ “Broker Unites 70,000 Souls,” *Grand Forks Herald*, 26 June 1908: 3.

⁵² Government Exhibit 11, NARA-Great Lakes Region (Chicago) RG 21, U. S. District Court CCF, 1873-1985, U.S. v. E.L. Glinn. Grey and Glinn admitted that most of their literature was recycled directly from

literature was virtually identical to that used by earlier agencies, and in this way, they were all aligning themselves with the growing class of professionals at this time, what Keith Ravell calls a “civic culture of expertise” derived from the practices of the Progressive Era.⁵³ They argued that approaching courtship from a business perspective, far from being contrary to the ideal of marriage for love, would actually make love matches more likely.

Deliberately or not, matrimonial agencies borrowed Progressive ideas to promote their businesses. Jackson Lears has argued that the growth of a rationalized, managerial culture based in scientific theories was a way of “taming chance – not by pretending it didn’t exist, but by reducing it to an outlier or a standard deviation.”⁵⁴ It was this exact reasoning that agencies offered to explain why they provided a necessary service: by matching people using modern methods – never fully explained – the agencies would get rid of the chance that a marriage might not be happy. The agencies cleverly drew upon this language, masking their fraud under an ideological framework whose very purpose was to control chaos.

Matrimonial agencies also borrowed modern business practices by presenting their organizations in a professional style that matched other successful ventures at the time. This is best seen through *The Golden Seal Matrimonial Catalogue*, a forty-six page pamphlet published in 1909 which promised to help men “who are seeking congenial

previous agencies, a practice that was apparently quite common. Pamphlets quoted in newspaper articles and evidence from other grand jury indictments during this entire time period were virtually identical.

⁵³ Keith Ravell, *Building Gotham: Civic Culture and Public Policy in New York City, 1898-1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

⁵⁴ Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing: Luck in America* (New York: Viking, 2003), 200.

companions” but could not meet, “scattered as they are over every state in the union.”⁵⁵ Designed in a similar style as Montgomery Ward and Sears, Roebuck catalogues, the pamphlet included pictures of all the women advertised, and promised a money back guarantee on the price of a “key,” which enabled a man to correspond with the lady of his choice, if the subscriber was not satisfied. Each woman was identified by a number rather than a name, and her financial status was always included – indeed, the catalogue was divided into two sections “women with means” followed by “women without means.” Promising to use the “very latest and most thoroughly equipped” methods, the catalogue encouraged men to “Order Today. DO IT NOW” and promised that the dollar spent on the key was “The Greatest Offer Ever Made.”⁵⁶ There is no evidence to discover how well the “Select Club” worked; the catalogue sported endorsements, testimonials, and assurances that it had brought together hundreds of happy couples, but no evidence exists to prove or disprove these claims.

But even if this club was an honest establishment, it would not make a difference; turning marriage into a business was still dangerous to observers because, as several historians have demonstrated, marriage reflected America’s “spirit of republicanism” and civilization itself.⁵⁷ As Nancy Cott explains, genuine, consensual marriage “was especially congruent with American political ideals: consent of the partner was also a

⁵⁵ *The Golden Seal Matrimonial Catalogue*, Special Edition No. 250 (Tekonsha, MI: H.A. Horton, 1909), *passim*. From the Thomas Parks Collection of Parks and McElrath Family Papers (#4463), Southern Historical Collection, Manuscripts Department, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Elaine Tyler May, *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980): 18; Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000): 63. See also Norma Basch, *Framing American Divorce: From the Revolutionary Era to the Victorians* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

hallmark of representative government.”⁵⁸ It is possible that people in Chicago may have been reacting in part to the fact that many immigrant groups commonly used matchmakers to arrange marriages for their children, something that, according to Cott, social reformers considered to be anti-American. “Not putting love first, arranged marriage appeared to bear only a debased likeness to the real thing...[it] represented coercion,” according to these reformers, and those who continued to use it were refusing to give up old-fashioned traditions in favor of American values. The contrast between arranged marriages and love matches came “to stand for the difference between the Old World and the New.” Although matches made through matrimonial agencies may have been consensual, the similarities were too close for comfort. In addition, the fact remained that “the importance of monetary considerations...ran against the American grain,” and forced or not, marriages formed by matrimonial agents always involved money, even if only through the membership fees.⁵⁹

If the republican nature of marriage was the basis of society, observers wondered, what would happen to the country if it did become a business, as Glinn’s literature claimed it should? However, the nervous critics failed to understand that it was too late; people were going to continue to take economics into account when marrying, with agencies or without them. Attacking swindlers was a refusal to accept that reality. In truth, matrimonial agents saw human nature far more clearly than the middle-class observers.

Contrary to Shirer’s dire warnings of what might happen, conjugal relationships had always been entrenched in the marketplace. In newspaper articles about marriage,

⁵⁸ Cott, 3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 150, 151.

even those having nothing to do with matrimonial agencies, writers used the language of commerce. Consciously or not, the idea of marriage as a business transaction was inescapable. One article exploring the problem of why there were so many unmarried women explained that the “old-fashioned girl” did not have “the fitness to survive in these days of sharp competition.” Men were charmed by “fast” women and were “submerging the precious period of courting to the carnal calls of commerce.”⁶⁰ Other writers used words like “market,” “bargain,” “business,” or “price” when talking about people getting married.⁶¹ Even commentators specifically criticizing matrimonial advertising slipped into using the same language; after the failure of long-distance marriage made through an agency, one writer wrote that “a much better grade of the same article could have been obtained at home.”⁶² One contemporary author summed up the method the agencies used succinctly by writing, “Mr. [J. P.] Morgan’s ideas have entered the marriage market.”⁶³

These issues were complicated by the fact that, for a man, making one’s fortune was proving to be increasingly difficult. Victorians believed fervently in the notion of the self-made man. As early as 1844, the Reverend Calvin Colton could declare that America “is a country where men start from a humble origin, and from small beginnings gradually rise in the world, as the reward of merit and industry...this is a country of *self-made men*...”⁶⁴ But by the turn of the twentieth century, this ideal was difficult to fulfill;

⁶⁰ Sarah Draper Quest, “Getting a Husband,” *Los Angeles Times*, 17 January 1906: VII7.

⁶¹ See, for example, “Madam Ida Hunt Tells Young Widows Not to Advertise Their Loneliness,” *Los Angeles Times*, 14 May 1903: A4; “Price of a Wife,” *Washington Post*, 6 November 1904: 6; Untitled, *Dallas Morning News*, 3 March 1905: 6.

⁶² Untitled, *Tulia Standard* [TX], 3 March 1905: 6.

⁶³ “Cupid’s Darts,” *Boston Globe*.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 26.

clerical work exploded in the last several decades of the nineteenth century, and most new jobs were low paid and offered little chance for raises or promotions.⁶⁵ The ideals of self-sacrifice, control, and delayed gratification that Victorians had so cherished did not work in a world of large corporations. “The Self-Made Man...gave way increasingly to the bureaucrat or manager and the salesman, who felt all the more enclosed and confined and limited in the corporation,” as Kevin White explains. The possibility of working for one’s self was shrinking; if a man wanted to be truly successful, he had to find another way.

Matrimonial agencies recognized the dilemma men faced and capitalized on it. The literature sent out to potential victims appealed directly and with little subtlety to men’s desire for success, which was equated with wealth. They presented their services as an alternate, but nevertheless legitimate, method of becoming “self-made.” The text in the circulars provided by Marion Grey was the most straightforward of any agency from that era. It read in part:

To endeavor to acquire money by an legitimate means is praiseworthy and commendable. Thousands of energetic, reliable, capable men are working for others for a bare living that, if they had the means, could come to the front in business...and about the only chance they have to rise from poverty to riches is to marry a woman with money. Marrying a rich woman is perfectly legitimate and why not make up your mind, if you are comparatively poor, to try it...Thousands of enterprising, persevering men have married ladies with means through matrimonial agencies, and...are now happy and prosperous...and are looked up to as respectable, solid citizens....Your chances are just as good as theirs; there are just as many...wealthy ladies looking for suitable husbands now as ever.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989): 291.

⁶⁶ Government Exhibit 1, NARA Great Lakes Region (Chicago), RG 21, U.S. District Court, CCF 1873-1985, U.S. v. Marion Grey.

The text continues by saying that women “with money are not always looking after rich men”; they would rather be with someone who values and appreciates money than with the sons of rich men “who have never earned an honest dollar in their lives.” When you are ready to marry rich, the pamphlet concludes, just send five dollars and “we will keep working for you until you succeed.”⁶⁷

This literature suggested that one could marry for money *and* be a self-made man with no contradiction or need for shame. On the contrary, poor men deserved to marry well after laboring so much for such small rewards. And marrying a wealthy woman in itself was hard work: “success” in winning such a woman “must be sought after diligently... You can never know what you are capable of if you try.”⁶⁸ Apparently this ploy encouraged hundreds of men to join the agency, and no one ever seemed to question why it would work so hard to help find men wealthy spouses and only ask a paltry five dollars in return. Of course Grey had no such wealthy ladies as clients – or if she did, none came forward to defend her at trial, nor could she provide proof that any existed.

Other agents had similar circulars, but they appealed to romance by promising a love match along with wealth. As one newspaper article quipped, the agencies “promised to aid Cupid in mating persons of affectionate dispositions with others having bank accounts.”⁶⁹ For example, E.L. Glinn’s circular asked potential customers, “Would you not be willing to pay a small fee if you could be assured that you would be placed in communication with a helpmate, whose love and respect would be yours as long as you

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ “Cupid’s Aid is Arrested,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 9 February 1904: 3.

live...?”⁷⁰ But the literature, advertisements, and testimonials made clear that this would not be just any helpmate; it would be a very rich helpmate. The men and women promised by agencies were manufacturers worth \$50,000 or widows possessing \$20,000, no small amount in a time when the average man’s salary was less than \$1,000 per year.

False testimonials from satisfied clients were also sent to the victims and followed the same pattern in which love and money went hand in hand. Supposedly married through Marion Grey’s Searchlight club were men such as the one who “two months ago...joined your club and...married a Missouri lady...and we are certainly enjoying life in the very best style. She has a big farm of three hundred acres,” and the woman who claimed that “I have made my choice of a husband...He did not have any money, but I guess I have got enough for both of us.”⁷¹ Other agencies, however, were less romantic. Skipping the bother of producing letters from satisfied clients, they simply sent lists of the supposedly successful matches, such as, “Mrs. Jackson, a Boston widow worth \$65,000, married James R. Kelly, a poor man,” and “Thomas Schaefer, a poor sailor, married a widow in San Diego, Cal., worth \$25,000.”⁷² However, none of these happy couples ever materialized, at trial or elsewhere. Unfortunately for Grey, the prosecution in her trial called as witnesses post office agents from almost every town where the testimonials were from to state that none of the authors were listed in their city directories; all were inventions.⁷³

⁷⁰ Government Exhibit 11, NARA Great Lakes Region (Chicago), RG 21, U.S. District Court, CCF 1873-1985, U.S. v. E.L. Glinn.

⁷¹ Government Exhibit 2; NARA Great Lakes Region (Chicago), RG 21, U.S. District Court, CCF 1873-1985, U.S. v. Marion Grey.

⁷² “Raid Cupid and Cupidity,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*.

⁷³ Testimony of James Byrnes, Chauncey Davis, John Morey, Harry S. Higgins, and Frank Emerson, NARA Great Lakes Region (Chicago), RG 21, U.S. District Court, CCF 1873-1985, U.S. v. Marion Grey.

The agencies linked marital happiness directly to money, hardly a new concept, but the wealth patrons would gain was staggering. In addition, the straightforward and business-like literature and testimonials sent by the agencies suggested that people's greediness had no bounds. By seeking wealth through advantageous marriages simply by answering an anonymous advertisement, the clients were apparently eschewing the lauded ideals of hard work, as well as any interest in romance, which was supposed to be the most important and essential element in a successful marriage.

But with the agencies drawing in such large numbers of clients, there was unavoidable proof that men and women were not only willing but eager to find rich spouses, to the point that "soul-mate seekers flocked to [matrimonial agencies] by the score."⁷⁴ Newspaper reporters and other commentators struggled to understand not only how so many men and women could be fooled, but also why they apparently felt no qualms about acquiring wealth in such a manner.

To explain this mockery of marriage, critics turned to class differences. They claimed that only poor, uneducated, and working-class people would turn to agencies. Middle-class men and women would never stoop so low. Everyone from the judges who presided over the cases to the prosecuting attorneys to the newspaper reporters assumed that the vast majority of victims were from the lower classes. They saw a clear line between their intelligent and discerning (presumably middle-class) audience and the ignorant suckers, who were inevitably painted as uneducated, unintelligent fortune

⁷⁴"Furnished Affinities at So Much Per, Did Marian [*sic*] Grey," *Des Moines Daily News*, 18 February 1908: 6.

seekers. Detective Wooldridge summed up this attitude by claiming that “[h]uman derelicts of a low mental caliber are the dupes of these matrimonial agents.”⁷⁵

Stories quoting victims mocked them with glee and often made a point of mentioning their working-class occupations. For example, one article poked fun at a coal miner from Oklahoma taken in by the Searchlight club who admitted that, “It looked good to me – a millionaire wife for \$5, so I forwarded [the fee]. But I am still looking for the millionaire wife...it’s better pay than coal mining.”⁷⁶ Another ridiculed a semi-literate man, Ben Strange, who decided to “ancer” an ad from Wells’ Belmont corresponding club, reporting that “he was willing to exchange his business as a ‘painter and contractor’ for the job of holding the purse strings of a wealthy widow.”⁷⁷

The papers reprinted “ludicrous letters” from would-be clients at length for the entertainment of readers, criticizing everything from their writing skills to their aspirations. One article, for example, sneered at the “[w]idows with children to support [who] besought the philanthropic advertiser with a fortune...to marry them for the privilege of relieving them of the burden of supporting themselves and the heirs of husbands relict.”⁷⁸ They frequently revealed the names and hometowns of the authors without concern for privacy, perhaps assuming that the authors had lost that claim when they had foolishly written to a bogus agency. The degree to which reporters highlighted the working-class background of many letter-writers, however, also suggests a presumption that the victims were not part of the newspapers’ audiences. The reporters

⁷⁵ Wooldridge, *Twenty Years a Detective in the Wickedest City in the World*, 122.

⁷⁶ “Seek Rich Mates; Find Experience,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 4 March 1908: 14.

⁷⁷ “Many of Both Sexes Would Wed,” *Bellingham Herald*.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

set themselves and their supposedly more intelligent readers apart from the credulous clients.

The hostile descriptions of clients made by reporters (as well as the attorney Stewart Shirer) makes clear that appearance also served as a marker to determine class and worth. Application blanks sent by agencies asked prospective clients to describe themselves physically (“the perfection of their anatomy,” as one reporter quipped), and what people looked like provided markers for outside observers to determine their worth.⁷⁹ For example, in one case, people laughed aloud at a grizzled farmer whose beautifully written love letters were read in court; “one finds it difficult to believe,” said the reporter, that the man, who was “the picture of an uncouth farmer” could have written “these classics of...sentimentality.”⁸⁰ Reporters described Mary Quinn, a housekeeper earning \$2.50 per week who was a witness in E.L. Glinn’s trial, as “dumpy” and “stout,” and mocked her for “hop[ing] to acquire a wealthy husband through the agency.”⁸¹

Likewise, in an interview Seward Shirer related the travails of Katherine Bolin, a young girl who had corresponded unknowingly with a disabled man named John Logan through Marion Grey’s agency. He described in juicy detail the “repulsive human derelict,” with the “pallid face and withered form,” whose romantic letters, read aloud in court, “produced an effect of repulsive horror in the mind of every spectator in the crowded courtroom.” As the man left the court, Bolin entered, and Shirer emphasized the stark difference between the “country girl as wholesome and pretty as a red-cheeked apple” and the “tottering piece of human wreckage,” a difference that was not lost on an

⁷⁹ Government Exhibits, U.S. v. Marion Grey; Government Exhibits, U.S. v. E.L. Glinn; “Many of Both Sexes Would Wed,” *Bellingham Herald*.

⁸⁰ “Council Bluffs People Entertained in Court,” *Omaha World Herald*, 21 September 1905: 3.

⁸¹ “Kimmel Jeweler Tells of His Quest for a \$20,000 Wife,” *Fort Wayne Sentinel*, 16 April 1908: 11; “Uncle Sam to Break Up Matrimonial Agencies,” *Oakland Tribune*, 3 May 1908.

enthralled audience. “Perhaps such a contrast was never seen in a court-room before,” he claimed, and the “effect on the spectators was almost beyond discription [*sic*]; one could almost actually see them shudder.”⁸² This same fate, he concluded, could happen to “[my] boy or your boy, your daughter or my daughter.”⁸³

However, the most vicious treatment toward anyone was reserved for William Grable, a fifty-five-year-old farmer from Missouri, who had been defrauded by Marion Grey’s Searchlight club. After the grand jury hearing, a reporter conducted a lengthy interview with him, focusing mainly on his credulity and ignorance. For example, asked if his new fiancé, Ida Goforth, was his “affinity,” Grable replied, “I don’t understand all these new fangled Chicago terms.” Questioned as to why he was happy with her despite the fact she was not like the lady Grey had promised, he explained that Goforth sent him “a picter of a fat woman with corkscrew curls. She was shore purty. I knowed as soon as I sot eyes on the picter she was the gal fer me. She’s pore, too. I don’t want no rich woman...” an unlikely claim given the fact that he had answered an ad supposedly from a wealthy woman. Finally, in describing his first visit to Chicago, the interviewer paid special attention to the gullible Grable’s visit to a fortune teller, who “told me was that I was a-goin’ to get spliced to... ‘a stout, blonde, middle aged lady.’ ‘Do you suppose,’ says I, ‘that can be Miss Ida Goforth...?’ ‘That’s her name,’ says he...”⁸⁴, at which Grable was astonished that the fortune teller had “guessed” correctly.⁸⁴

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ “Love Broker No. 2 Guilty of Fraud,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*.

⁸⁴ “Farmer Finds His Affinity,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 3 October 1907: 5. Grable’s story is the most bizarre twist of the entire case. He did meet his fiancé through the Searchlight club, but the jury found Marion Grey guilty based on the fraud committed against him, because although the match was successful, Ida Goforth herself was poor and therefore not the woman advertised.

The defendants were judged by the same standard. E.L. Glinn herself was unattractive and coarse, but conversely, her pretty daughter was “a different type of woman,” one writer claimed, explaining that, “She wears good clothes, carries herself gracefully...and acts with decision.”⁸⁵ And the firm connection between status and appearance is likely one of the reasons why Marion Grey was such a conundrum: she was so obviously bad, and yet undeniably beautiful, cultured, and sophisticated. She refused to conform to established conventions. Shirer recognized how intriguing she was, and so took pains to discredit her in front of the jury that he did not repeat in E.L. Glinn’s trial. Her two marriages received the closest attention. Married at sixteen, Grey had divorced her first husband a year later, after having a baby. Approximately two years after that, she had remarried, but never lived with her second husband. The defense attorney protested Shirer’s close questioning of her married life, but the prosecution insisted such knowledge was necessary to assess Grey’s aptitude as a matchmaker – an issue that was irrelevant to the case, which was about fraud, not capability.

But it was a shrewd decision on Shirer’s part; given the social stigma against divorce at this time, the revelation of Grey’s two failed marriages probably did turn opinion against her. Indeed, the marriages became a prime topic of discussion for the newspapers, whose reporters apparently felt no qualms about exaggerating the circumstances – more than one article claimed that she had been married three times. During her cross examination, Grey implied that her first husband had been abusive, but this fact was overlooked by the press. Instead, the most sympathetic of authors tried to curry favor for her cause by portraying her as remorseful about the divorce and desirous

⁸⁵ “Cupid Agent No. 2 Scorns Clients,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 27 February 1908: 2.

of being reunited with her first husband; one article quoted her as saying that her greatest desire was to leave her second husband, reconcile with her first, “and be remarried to him. After that I would settle down and try to make just one little man happy instead of the thousand I have attempted to take care of.”⁸⁶ The less sympathetic cast her as flighty, irresponsible, and most importantly, incapable of being a good matchmaker. If a woman could not succeed in her own marriage, they asked, how could she be qualified to bring others together?

Nevertheless, Grey received more positive press than her victims. Even the defendants could not keep from insulting their clients or laughing at them in court, and they kept good company. In an interview after her grand jury indictment, one article quoted E.L. Glinn as saying, “I wouldn’t marry one of the silly, mushy ‘spooky’ men who seek their wives through matrimonial bureaus.”⁸⁷ Likewise, as former clients appeared to testify at her trial, “Maid Marian [*sic*] looked on and enjoyed it. Behind a jeweled fan she hid her rosy cheeks while her shoulders shook with suppressed merriment.” But she was not alone. Everyone in the court, “which was crowded to the doors” shared her amusement; “Judge Landis himself could not restrain a smile or two. It was difficult to preserve order at times as the sad swains told of their fruitless quests through Miss Grey’s agency.”⁸⁸ Landis also called people who joined matrimonial agencies “inferior mentally and physically” and said that the witnesses were a “procession of mental derelicts.”⁸⁹

⁸⁶ “Marion Grey Jury is in Deadlock,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 16 February 1908: 1.

⁸⁷ “Cupid Agent No. 2 Scorns Clients,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*.

⁸⁸ “Furnished Affinities at So Much Per, Did Marian Grey”; “Mateless Souls Tell of Quests,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 12 February 1908: 3.

⁸⁹ “Marion Grey Sentenced,” *Chicago Daily Herald*, 24 April 1908: 3.

Grable and others like him were the targets of jokes for many reporters; they remarked on his coarse clothing, poor posture, grizzled face, and balding head. But they spared no mercy for any other victim. In all these critiques there was a suggestion that the men were being presumptuous for vainly attempting to rise above their station in life – unspoken, perhaps because America was supposedly a classless society, but only lightly veiled.

Yet the disdain of the middle-class observers for the vast majority of the victims demonstrates a fundamental lack of understanding about the nature of marriage for many Americans. In discussing a similar trial in England a few years earlier, historian Angus McLaren notes a divide between the values of the middle-class audience and the realities of the mostly working-class men who had been defrauded by a matrimonial agency there. The defense's strategy was to paint the victims as greedy mercenaries who determined their own fate; if they were so foolish as to believe that a wealthy woman would marry a poor workingman, then they deserved to be defrauded. The victims of the fraud, as in America, became the laughingstocks of a supposedly more virtuous, superior, and intelligent audience.⁹⁰

Yet McLaren argues that the only difference between the working-class victims and their middle-class audience was a matter of method. Arranged marriages among the middle and upper classes intended to increase a family's wealth were still a matter of course in England, and America was much the same.⁹¹ Financial status remained an issue for the bourgeoisie as much as anyone else; while people may not have used agencies to

⁹⁰ Angus McLaren, *Trials of Masculinity: Policing Sexual Boundaries, 1870-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997): 47.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 57.

match up their children, they did rely on social engagements that would push young people into situations where they would meet others of their own class, as Sven Beckert has demonstrated.⁹² Marriage was a business for everyone; the only difference was how subtly that business was transacted and manipulated.

Likewise, as Peter Borscheid argues in his study of marriages in Nürtingen, Germany, marriage for love was all very well, but love “did not fill an empty stomach.”⁹³ What each partner could contribute financially to a marriage was, for the working class, a crucial component of maintaining a comfortable existence. It was easy to promote romance when money was less necessary, but poorer people did not have that kind of liberty.⁹⁴

In any case, there was the uncomfortable fact that middle-class men, and even a few middle-class women, also used the agencies. Almost half the men who testified in both trials were well-educated and had professional careers, and while the membership rolls presented as evidence in E.L. Glinn’s trial reveal that most clients were working or lower-middle class, a good quarter of them claimed professions or backgrounds that were not.⁹⁵ The press dealt with this by either ignoring them, or by treating them with disdain. In an article subtitled “Two University Men Admit Seeking Soul Mates by Mail Order,” the reporter expressed disbelief that educated men could fall victim to this kind of fraud, and belittled an Arkansas doctor by lampooning his Southern accent.⁹⁶ When a former

⁹² Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001): 33-36.

⁹³ Peter Borscheid, “Romantic Love or Material Interest: Choosing Partners in Nineteenth-Century Germany,” *Journal of Family History*, 11:2 (1986), 159.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 167.

⁹⁵ Membership Rolls, NARA Great Lakes Region (Chicago); RG 21; U.S. District Court, CCF 1873-1985, U.S. v. E.L. Glinn.

⁹⁶ “‘Affinity Bug’ Flies High,” *Chicago Daily Times*, 15 April 1908: 1.

high-school principal complained that the women whose names Glinn sent him “had not the culture and refinement I expected,” a newspaper article from his town retorted that he should have known better: “Wealthy, cultured women generally have enough admirers without engaging the services of a matrimonial bureau.”⁹⁷

But the two defendants justified their agencies by saying they were providing a service to these men and women. Grey explained in an interview that “the country is simply dotted...by couples that we have brought together, who otherwise would have been moping their lives away in solitude, with nothing...substantial for their love to feed on...”⁹⁸ Asked why she started an agency, Glinn replied, “Well, you see...a woman...sees someone she would like to marry. She wants to become a wife and mother. But under our social conditions she cannot ask a man to marry her...There is nothing for her to do but join a matrimonial agency.”⁹⁹

Oscar Wells was much more specific. He “confesse[d] unblushingly to a wide experience and pose[d] as a benefactor,” according to one article. He insisted that “My business is strictly legitimate...In every community there are a number of persons who want to marry, but can not find a person desirable to them. It is common for persons...to wish to marry someone from another community.” He went on to tell the story of a “prominent merchant” in Elgin who wanted a wife, but that the women he liked were “factory girls or working girls,” well-known in town. Therefore, Wells explained, he needed the services of an agency to find him a nice working girl from another community

⁹⁷ Testimony of Werter Dyer, NARA Great Lakes Region (Chicago); RG 21; U.S. District Court, CCF 1873-1985, U.S. v. E.L. Glinn; “W.C. Dyer ‘Stuck’ For \$5,” *Richwood Gazette* [OH], April 23, 1908, 1.

⁹⁸ “Deals in Affinities,” *Los Angeles Times*.

⁹⁹ “Love Broker No. 2 Found Guilty of Fraud,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*.

whom he could introduce into society without anyone being aware of her antecedents.¹⁰⁰ Such a story seems highly unlikely (nor could Wells provide proof that such a match had ever occurred), but it is possible that poor working women may have been tempted to pay the membership fee in the hopes that, for once, the fairy tale might come true.

And contrary to the critics' fears, it is important to note that in reality, neither men nor women focused exclusively on wealth. The most frequently repeated refrain in women's letters was not a desire to live in the lap of luxury, but to be "taken care of." On her application to Glinn's agency, Abbia Nix wrote that she was "getting quite tired" of "toiling...for other people," and wanted a husband who was "able to give me a good home [and] pleasant surroundings." Mary Louise Jacobs wrote that she "would like a nice, honorable husband [who] will love his wife forever and also take care of her." Grace Cook echoed her, saying she hoped to find someone "who is able financially to take care of me regardless of any thing I may have."¹⁰¹ Minor variations on this theme appeared in letters not only to Glinn and Grey, but also to other agencies. For example, in her letter to one of Oscar Wells' agencies, one girl, noting that the advertiser "wanted a true, good, loving wife," wrote that "if you take me I am Yours I am in earnest and if You ar[e] Just a trifler please write and tell me so. I am a working girl...and would be very glad to have a good true husband. hope to hear from You soon...Please ansiter [*sic*] this."¹⁰² In other words, it was emotional and financial security they wanted, not riches.

The reaction to women in general was far more forgiving than it was to men, if still condescending. Newspaper reporters usually spoke of women as "lovesick" while

¹⁰⁰ "Many of Both Sexes Would Wed," *Bellingham Herald*.

¹⁰¹ Government Exhibit 62, Defendant Exhibit 8, Defendant Exhibit 17, and Defendant Exhibit 1, NARA-Great Lakes Region (Chicago) RG 21, U. S. District Court CCF, 1873-1985, U.S. v. E.L. Glinn.

¹⁰² "Many of Both Sexes Would Wed," *Bellingham Herald*.

men were “greedy” and usually agreed that women were more interested in romance. “Women come off better than men, who are mercenary,” wrote one reporter. Women, he explained, want “to love and be loved... There are women who appreciate... a comfortable income... but most of them have always persisted in believing that the principle object to living is to love.”¹⁰³ Such a claim was generous, but overlooked the fact that many women, such as the widow looking for a “wealthy philanthropist” to support her children who had attracted such scorn, often did not have the leisure to marry for love.

And while women may have received less condemnation, they were not presented in an attractive light. For example, a short story about a newspaper reporter who joins several matrimonial agencies to write an exposé about them describes the women he met as “attenuated school teachers, freckled stenographers, and auburn haired spinsters residing at parental homes. I met stout widows and thin divorcees and sighing orphans of uncertain age... The women were all so commonplace and their conversation so inane.” The protagonist finally meets his ideal: a beautiful, intelligent woman, with whom he falls in love despite his reservations about her use of an agency, only to find that she too is a reporter sent to investigate agencies undercover. After their marriage, as a good wife should, she quits her job, “greatly to the gain of a cozy uptown flat.”¹⁰⁴ The point, of course, was that no one who could find a spouse in any other way would ever stoop to use a matrimonial agency. At the very best, the victims might get off for being silly young girls who did not know better. The women, summed up one less tolerant writer, were “pathetic.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ “A Matrimonial Bureau’s Letters,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 21 May 1905: B6.

¹⁰⁴ Howard Devine, “The Trails That Crossed,” *Biloxi Daily Herald*, 14 October 1903.

¹⁰⁵ “Mateless Souls Tell of Quests,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*.

Meanwhile, despite the assumption that men wanted to marry only for money, many of their letters demonstrate that while they may have been happy to marry the rich widow, their ultimate goals were also relatively modest. Often they were merely hoping that they could find a wife whose income would make life just a little easier. One widower in a lengthy letter to E.L. Glinn described his ideal wife as “a woman of unquestioned morality, refinement and honor, one whom I could respect and love, and with means sufficient to employ me in looking after her business and financial affairs for her...” Aware that this might sound too greedy, however, he added in a postscript that “I hope not to have given the impression that I wish some woman to support me in luxury and idleness, nothing of the sort, for I am now and have been always an indefatigable worker.”¹⁰⁶

Other men expressed similar sentiments. One asked in his application for a “lady who is fond of a nice home and a true and devoted husband who is a gentleman, is acquainted in all walks of life, and finds a congenial place in all company except drinking and rowdiness. Yet at present would intertain [*sic*] a money value to some extent as it is just as easy to love a good woman with money as one without.” A man who claimed to be the “Ex-Mayor of the City of Van Wert” in Ohio wrote “I want to marry a good Christian woman with brains such a lady will be treated the very best that possibly could be done. I want a woman with Means to share with mine.”¹⁰⁷ Writing to another agency, one man explained “I desire the acquaintance of some pretty, sweet, deserving, stylish, domestic, affectionate young woman...one who would be companionable as well as a

¹⁰⁶ A.F. Lines to E.L. Glinn; NARA Great Lakes Region (Chicago); RG 21; U.S. District Court, CCF 1873-1985, U.S. v. E.L. Glinn.

¹⁰⁷ Defendant Exhibits 15 and 16, NARA Great Lakes Region (Chicago); RG 21; U.S. District Court, CCF 1873-1985, U.S. v. E.L. Glinn.

helpmate...one possessed of her own property or income, so we could make married life a success and home sweet and attractive.”¹⁰⁸ Money, for all these men, was not about living in wealth and dissipation, but more a prerequisite upon which a successful life could be begun. More importantly, all of them hoped to have a wife they could love; they did not see a contradiction between financial security and romantic marriage. Each one was contingent upon the other.

A few lonely voices hesitantly agreed with the view that agencies could provide a real service. One author, who harshly criticized fraudulent agencies, nevertheless concluded his article by saying that legitimate ones “do the majority of the business” and led to successful matches.¹⁰⁹ Another writer claimed that the agencies provided a “real social want” for people who were unable to meet spouses any other way.¹¹⁰

But for the most part observers dismissed the notion that people needed help finding a spouse. From their standpoint, using a marriage bureau and paying for a spouse could destabilize society as a whole. Women and men were not adhering to the middle class ideal of marrying only for love, but instead were debasing the country for mercenary gain – and by mail order, no less. The popularity of these agencies showed a substantial number of people who were comfortable with marriage being managed in a business-like fashion; whatever the ideal, economics continued to influence marriage choices in common practice. Meanwhile, gender roles were turned upside down by men ignoring their role as providers, and instead proving willing to rely on their wives’ incomes. It is no wonder that matrimonial agencies caused such a furor. The Victorian

¹⁰⁸ “A Wife Wanted,” *Lexington Herald*, 3 March 1907: 5.

¹⁰⁹ “Wives Now in Good Demand,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 19 August 1900: 45.

¹¹⁰ “The Marriage Broker,” *Washington Post*.

image of a society based on self-sacrifice, restraint, and romance was crumbling, and the popularity of these agencies was visible, undeniable proof.

In the wake of the two women's convictions, Seward Shiner boldly declared a campaign to oust all agencies from Chicago, promising to dismantle what he called the "Cupid Trust" by arresting "prominent men" in society who supposedly funded them.¹¹¹ This effort fell through; Detective Wooldridge later concluded that the reason all the agencies looked identical was that they were plagiarizing each other's promotional materials and letterhead.¹¹² What happened to Marion Grey and E.L. Glinn is unknown; after their trials and Grey's release from prison, the two disappeared from the historic record. Given that both women operated under aliases, it is possible that they changed their names to escape continued notoriety.

Despite the two women's conviction, matrimonial agencies continued to flourish, and advertised in newspapers nationwide, including the *Chicago Tribune*. But the same year that Grey's case opened, a court case in New York shut down the most famous personals column in America, the *New York Herald's*, for good.

¹¹¹ "Matrimonial Trust Found," *Grand Forks Daily Herald*, 21 February 1908: 2; "Jail For Big Men Financing Cupid," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 17 April 1908: 1; "Cupid Brokerage By Businessmen," *Grand Forks Herald*, 18 April 1908: 2.

¹¹² Wooldridge, *Twenty Years a Detective in the Wickedest City in the World*, 165.

Chapter Four: “The Red Light Column”: Selling Sex in Turn-of-the-Century New York

When the personals and matrimonials first became popular, they represented an almost utopian possibility: public spaces in which strangers could interact with virtually no supervision, where they could create or maintain intimate relationships that were free from social conventions. By the turn of the twentieth century, these columns had been co-opted. Marriage bureaus corrupted the purpose of matrimonial advertisements by introducing fraud, and, in New York, the *Herald's* famous Personal column was also tarnished. From an amusing array of lovers' quarrels, missed connections, and other targeted notes the column began featuring a more unsavory breed of ads. The Matrimonials column was discontinued and moved to the Personals column. Alongside a few remaining correspondences and missed connections, it began featuring solicitations (“Widower (38) seeks acquaintance congenial young lady; spend occasional evenings”), announcements for so-called massage parlors and trained masseuses (“Mlle. Blanche Durand's elegant parlor: massage, baths, manicuring; new Swedish and Japanese operators”), people looking for generous friends (“Will wealthy gentleman befriend English young lady; refined, educated, lonely?”), and rooms for rent for “discreet couples.”¹ Ads such as these turned a column whose genesis had been in playfulness and experimentation into explicitly commercial classified advertisements which exposed sex rather than romance. This transformation had fatal repercussions.

After a failed gubernatorial campaign in 1906, which he blamed in part on negative editorials by James Gordon Bennett, Jr., in the *New York Herald*, William

¹ *New York Herald*, 14 January 1906: 1.

Randolph Hearst sent a reporter from one of his papers, the *New York American*, on a mission to reveal the true nature of his rival's personals.² In an exposé full of shocking copy, Hearst's enterprising reporters published a series of articles revealing the true nature of the column, which they dubbed the "Red Light Column." Working in concert with the police and various anti-vice societies, the *American* followed investigators as they visited massage parlors and corresponded with men and women who claimed to be looking for spouses but were in fact either hoping to find wealthy patrons or merely a good time. In one of the most damning articles, the reporters proved that the *Herald* forced its advertisers to end ads looking for companionship with the phrase "object, matrimony" to provide a veneer of legitimacy.³ (Though many slipped through, such as "Is a charming lady willing to improve in French language with a young, refined, chic French gentleman – correspondence, conversations, amusements? Gigolo."⁴)

Spanning two months, with lengthy, often full-page articles appearing almost daily, the *American's* exposé was a huge success. A federal grand jury indicted Bennett and the *Herald* for the crime of sending obscenity through the mail, something made illegal by the Comstock Law of 1873, and in April 1907, Bennett pleaded guilty to avoid a trial. He and the Herald Corporation were fined a total of \$31,000.⁵ Hearst's revenge was likely quite satisfying: the personal column was shut down, and the fine was minimal next to the enormous loss of revenue the *Herald* suffered. According to one biographer,

² Allen Churchill, *Park Row* (New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1958), 163-165.

³ "'Object Matrimony' Lie Only Veils the Worst 'Personals,'" *New York American*, 10 June 1906: 1.

⁴ *New York Herald*, 1 April 1906: 1.

⁵ "J. Gordon Bennett is Fined \$25,000," *New York Times*, 11 April 1907: 4.

Bennett wrote a letter to Hearst stating: “I shall never forget you in this matter,” to which Hearst replied: “I hope you never will.” The *Herald* never printed Hearst’s name again.⁶

The narrative as told by the *New York American* and biographers of these newspaper giants seems straightforward, but a closer examination of the case suggests something more complicated. The *American* tells a triumphant tale of ministers, preventive societies, and the police joined together in an all-out and successful war against the personals column and prostitution, led by its own brilliant investigative journalism. But between the lines, and outside the *American*’s self-congratulatory copy, a slightly different story emerges. The newspaper claimed that the New York Society for the Prevention of Crime, headed by Charles Parkhurst, was heavily involved; yet the internal reports of that society, which detailed its major accomplishments from each year, made no mention of the event. Other newspapers around the country only referred to the story briefly when they reported Bennett and the *Herald*’s conviction the following year; in fact, most articles written about Bennett in 1907 – the year he was convicted – focused only on his involvement in yachting clubs.

While the paper portrayed the heroic police carrying out daring raids against massage parlors, even the *American* admitted that city officials did not actually prosecute the women, settling for closing up the shops and letting everyone – including the madams – go free, except in a few rare cases. In fact, annual police reports show a *decrease* in the number of vice-related arrests in 1906 as compared to 1905.⁷ The most trumpeted sting

⁶ John K. Winkler, *William Randolph Hearst: A New Appraisal* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1955), 154.

⁷ In 1905, 1,469 people were arrested for keeping or enabling a “disorderly house” and 328 people were arrested for solicitation. In 1906, those numbers were 822 and 231, respectively. *Annual Report of the Police Commissioner* (New York: Martin B. Brown Company, Printers & Stationers, 1905), 46-47; *Annual*

operation, in which a man was arrested for supposedly soliciting young girls in a personal ad, had to be dropped for lack of evidence.⁸ And in 1913, one investigator of vice reported that there were still over 300 massage parlors in Manhattan, mostly covers for brothels – many of which openly advertised in an unnamed Saturday paper.⁹ Finally, while the paper claimed that all the men and women who used “object matrimony” ads were indulging in careless lives of sin, their own words indicate that many of them had motivations that were much more complex.

The story that the *American* told, therefore, was only loosely connected to what actually happened. Yet this detailed exposé is nevertheless revealing. At the same time the *American* condemned the *Herald*'s tawdry business practices, it was capitalizing on the very advertising it attacked. The *American* reprinted the exact personal ads listed in the indictment as proof of the *Herald*'s obscenity, and in addition published intimate details of the lives of the scandalous advertisers. Indeed, both Bennett and Hearst were selling sex and the public's fascination with it to boost their circulation and steal readers from their competitors. Flirting with strict obscenity laws, both papers offered titillating peepshows into a thrilling urban underworld of vice and excitement.

Moreover, the *American* asserted that it was uncovering the deeds of wicked men and loose women, and while many of the ads were as “vicious” as the paper claimed, underneath the moralistic rhetoric, the articles also show men and women experimenting with new and more complex ways of interacting in a post-Victorian era. These interactions were enmeshed in a commercialized culture that encouraged financial

Report of the Police Commissioner (New York: Martin B. Brown Company, Printers & Stationers, 1906), 142-143.

⁸ “Lurer of Girls by ‘Personal’ Arrested,” *New York American*, 27 May 1906: 1.

⁹ George Kneeland, *Commercialized Prostitution in New York City* (New York: The Century Co., 1913), 45-46.

negotiation, but they allowed a modicum of control and independence for women in a male-dominated world. Finally, though it claimed to be providing a public service by revealing the *Herald* ads, what the exposé really did was show just how inured New Yorkers were to vice; the personals were nothing new, not especially troublesome to most readers, and, by themselves, not even particularly obscene.

The *New York Herald* had, in its peak, been the most widely read newspaper in America. Under the elder Bennett, it had been famous for its sensationalist reporting, its flirtations with sex and scandal, but also for its astute political and financial news.¹⁰ Bennett, Jr., increased the paper's circulation in the 1870s and 1880s; despite living abroad, he ran the business successfully and profitably. But by the late 1890s, the *Herald*'s circulation had begun a precipitous slide. The paper had remained almost exactly the same in its format and management, but journalism had changed, and Bennett failed to change with it.

The *Herald*'s slide began with Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*. Within four years of purchasing the *World* in 1883, a struggling paper with few readers, Pulitzer had increased its circulation from 11,000 to 350,000, bypassing the *Herald*'s in less than a year and a half.¹¹ Where the *Herald*, despite its reputation for sensationalism, stuck to a straightforward style of reporting the news, adhering to the traditional tiny print and rigid columns, Pulitzer appealed to the masses. While the format did not change at first, he featured splashier headlines, sensational copy, and numerous illustrations, focusing on

¹⁰ Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1978), 54.

¹¹ Richard Kluger, *The Paper: The Life and Death of the New York Herald Tribune* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 146, 148.

lurid details of violent crimes.¹² This combined with simple text and a low purchase price won over working-class readers. To secure their loyalty, the *World* became the only major paper to take note of the conditions in which poorer people lived and worked.¹³ The *Herald* went largely into middle-class families, but the *World* targeted a larger audience: the millions of immigrants pouring into New York, and their children.

Pulitzer also moved advertising off the front page and replaced it with exciting news stories, but at the same time charged less money and allowed advertisers to use more space inside the paper and insert more creative copy, including images. Here again, the *Herald* failed to keep up with the times; its advertising columns – however disreputable the content – looked exactly the same as they had for decades. Merchants were only allowed to use the paper’s standard font and text size, with no imagery. As a result, advertising dollars began shifting to the newer paper.

William Randolph Hearst’s arrival in New York City in 1895 drove the *Herald*’s circulation even further down. His management of the *New York Journal* and *American* led to his war with Pulitzer, in which the two men vied for dominance by stealing away each other’s editorial staff and undercutting prices. Both papers appealed to the lowest common denominator, pushing the envelope as far as they could with their scandalous stories, in order to win the most readers.¹⁴ Between them, they invented “yellow journalism,” named for a comic strip both papers carried, “The Yellow Kid.” Elevating sensation over truth, yellow journalism used lavish pictures, exaggeration and scare headlines. The *World* and the *Journal* “constructed a mass audience by focusing the

¹² Ted Curtis Smythe, *The Gilded Age Press, 1865-1900* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 109.

¹³ Kluger, 147.

¹⁴ Churchill, Chapter 5.

public's attention" on the seamier side of urban culture. The two papers "pioneered...a new style of journalism that portrayed itself as the nonpartisan defender (and definer) of the 'public interest'...and paid extravagant attention to...the most 'sensational' aspects of the urban underworld," which became a commodity that "helped mark the boundaries of acceptable public sociability."¹⁵ By seeing what was bad, middle-class New Yorkers could define themselves as good.

By 1906, Hearst had routed his rival by pouring money into his own venture which Pulitzer – suffering from chronic illnesses – could not afford.¹⁶ Bennett, living abroad and more interested in the *International Herald* which he had established in Paris in 1887, had little chance to compete. Thus, when Hearst began his exposé against the *Herald* that year, he was not attacking the great paper that had once dominated the newspaper industry. Nor, despite the sanctimonious claims of the *American*, was the *Herald* the salacious newspaper it had been in the nineteenth century. Hearst's papers were the most scandalous, sensational, and "indecent" news venues in the city.

The *American* exposé focused on three kinds of ads: those from massage parlors and manicurists, ads for companionship or marriage placed by men, and "object, matrimony" ads from women. Each of these types allowed the reporters to connect the *New York Herald* to different forms of vice which were of concern to moral reformers at the time. In this way, Hearst cleverly tied his exposé to an already existing campaign to wipe out prostitution. While prostitution was hardly new, by 1900 the need for its eradication had taken on new urgency. According to the historian Ruth Rosen,

¹⁵ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 39.

¹⁶ David Nasaw, *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 90-91, 147-148.

reformers' focus on prostitution allowed them to express "discontent and anxiety about changes that were corrupting and invading traditional American society."¹⁷ The institution came to symbolize all the ills of urbanization: increased anonymity, the fear of moral decline, and the dangers of a large influx of immigrants, which had increased the city population 126.8 percent between 1890 and 1900.¹⁸ So at the same time as he profited off the *Herald's* ignominy Hearst was able to join a popular cause; he painted himself and his paper as muckrakers revealing widespread urban crime. As one Brooklyn minister said, it was the *American* alone which "deserve[d] the thanks of this community for the moral courage it has shown in breaking through the traditional demands of newspaper courtesy and bringing the attention of all good people to the remedying of...evil."¹⁹

The first part of the exposé focused primarily on the massage parlors and manicurists, two kinds of establishments which were replacing traditional brothels at the turn of the twentieth century and causing new problems in the battle against prostitution in New York. These businesses became fronts for prostitution as "Raines Law hotels" were shut down. In 1896, the New York State Legislature passed the Raines Law with the intention of curbing alcohol consumption by placing restrictions on when and where it could be sold. It prohibited selling alcohol on Sundays, except in hotels (establishments defined as having ten or more furnished rooms to let), where it remained legal to serve guests. Poorly conceived, the law encouraged saloons to add furnished

¹⁷ Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 40.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 42, 39.

¹⁹ "Women in 'Personal' Raid Held for Trial," *New York American*, 27 June 1906: 8.

rooms – sometimes just beds divided from each other with makeshift partitions – and apply for a hotel license.²⁰

These “hotels” quickly became ad hoc brothels, thus turning a well-intentioned regulation into one of the greatest assets in increasing the ease of prostitution in New York City. The repercussions of the law were soon apparent, and concerned citizens organized preventive societies to overturn it.²¹ As these groups began successfully to expose the failures of the Raines Law, and forced numerous “hotels” out of business, brothels needed new locales to survive. But brothel owners were malleable; they simply reinvented their establishments in new locations and under new fronts, especially call-girl services, massage parlors, and manicurists. Many of them began to use the *New York Herald* to advertise their services. In fact, the paper was so open to accepting such ads that it earned the nickname “The Whore’s Daily Guide and Handy Compendium” amongst the rest of the city’s newspapers.²²

As the Raines hotels began to close down, massage parlors attracted the attention of reformers, and because of their advertising practices, they became ideal fodder for the *American*’s crusade. William McAdoo, the New York City Police Commissioner in 1904 and 1905, wrote that the “most despicable form of vice of late has been the massage parlor.” Because they presented a legitimate front, he explained, when “the police begin to clean up a precinct and drive the ordinary and well-known places out of business, these massage parlors at once begin to flourish.” Although McAdoo and other observers acknowledged that some of these businesses were legitimate, they also told lurid stories

²⁰ Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 243.

²¹ *Ibid*, 245, 303.

²² Churchill, 164.

of “elderly men” who were victimized by the parlors. “Some of them were scenes of unspeakable orgies,” McAdoo insisted, where these men “were subjected to vile and unprintable treatment and robbed of their money.”²³

The *American* was less rigid in what it considered unprintable; in one of its exposé articles, it repeated the story of an old man who was supposedly tortured in one so-called massage parlor which advertised in the *Herald*. He had gone to the parlor as part of treatment for gout on his feet, but once there the girls put his feet in a tub of scalding hot water mixed with mustard and would not release him until he agreed to pay twenty-five dollars. If he reported the parlor, they threatened to tell his wife that he had gone to a brothel.²⁴

But although McAdoo claimed that he had “called the attention of the newspaper proprietor to the effect of these advertisements and the character of these places,” the *Herald* continued to print them “openly and flagrantly, and with very little reservation in the wording...column after column.”²⁵ They were especially treacherous for girls, who might innocently answer an ad which would lead to their downfall. The *American* claimed that letters were pouring in from parents with stories of how their daughters were “led astray by the alluring offers of the ‘personal’ column.” One particularly “pitiful” letter was from a young woman speaking of her own experience. According to the article, she “was a victim of the two words which so often accompany the advertisement of ‘fake’ manicure and massage parlors – ‘Operators wanted.’” The girl was an actual manicurist, who had responded to ads in the *Herald* in the hopes of finding a job. “Out of

²³ William McAdoo, *Guarding a Great City* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1906), 92-93.

²⁴ “Raids Terrify ‘Personal’ Patrons,” *New York American*, 23 June 1906: 5.

²⁵ McAdoo, 92.

all the places, none desired a real manicure or massage operator,” she reported. “They were all vile...God help a poor girl that enters one of these...parlors. They are dens of vice.”²⁶

How frequently such incidents took place is impossible to judge, but the *American* was not alone in suggesting such scenarios were possible. In 1913, a prominent vice investigator, George Kneeland, who attacked the massage parlors – which had clearly survived without the aid of the *New York Herald’s* column – described a similar circumstance. A madam, he explained, would get new girls by advertising in daily papers for women interested in learning about massage or for experienced operators. “Many unsuspecting girls, answering advertisements, come into personal contact with well-dressed and apparently respectable proprietors,” and, if they were weak, the madams would gradually win them over by promising large sums of money in return for being attentive, jolly, and not “too particular.”²⁷

The *American* cleverly tied these parlors that advertised in the *Herald* to “white slavery,” a new threat in which evil men were seducing innocent girls and forcing them into a life of vice. Undoubtedly there were women who became prostitutes unwillingly, but the fear of a syndicate of white slavers abducting girls was less a widespread phenomenon as it was a reaction to the lack of middle-class control over the city and its residents.²⁸ The supposed white slavery epidemic had its origins with the Italian and Eastern European and Russian Jewish immigrants; by the turn of the twentieth century, nearly half of New York City’s population was foreign-born and these new immigrants

²⁶ “Agreement Proposed to End ‘Red-Light’ Columns,” *New York American*, 9 June 1906: 12.

²⁷ Kneeland, 47.

²⁸ Christopher Diffie, “Sex and the City: The White Slavery Scare and Social Governance in the Progressive Era,” *American Quarterly* (Vol 67, No 2, June 2005), 416.

became scapegoats to explain urban vice. As one observer argued in *McClure's Magazine*, it was “the Jewish dealer in women, a product of New York politics, who has vitiated, more than any other single agency, the moral life of the great cities of America.”²⁹ These Jewish slavers, reformers warned, would entrap innocent, rural, Protestant women who had migrated to big cities in search of a better life or work, but were unable to make ends meet; lost and alone, they would become easy prey to wicked men. However, the victims of white slavery were also often immigrants, supposedly captured by men of their own ethnicity who literally waited at the docks to intercept girls who alighted from Ellis Island unaccompanied by family members.³⁰

There is no evidence that the massage parlor workers were “white slaves,” but this did not stop the *American*. In one example, a reporter told of a “most glaring instance” of a woman who kept “six to eight girls virtually her slaves...who used the Herald personal regularly.” Wicked madams would buy girls whatever they wanted and make it impossible for them ever to repay the debt, keeping them in virtual bondage. “Here is a picture of the most prevalent form of white slavery as practiced in New York,” one article declared dramatically. “It is not the brutal slavery of grated windows and belted doors...[but it] is enmeshing...and... profitable with the assistance of the ‘Red Light Column’ to attract visitors.”³¹ Yet Kneeland observed a few years later that the exact opposite was true; massage parlors had a distinctly “better class of women,” who were not white slaves or drug addicts and were paid reasonably well.³² While they may have been lured and manipulated into the parlors, the girls had not been captured and forced.

²⁹ Quoted in Egal Feldman, “Prostitution, the Alien Woman and the Progressive Imagination, 1910-1915,” *American Quarterly* (Vol 19, No 2, Part 1, Summer, 1967): 195.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 197.

³¹ “Herald’s ‘Red Light’ Column a Decoy for ‘White Slave’ Houses,” *New York American*, 2 June 1906: 4.

³² Kneeland, 48.

Such a contrast highlights the *American's* penchant for exaggeration when it served the story.

Whatever their evils, however, when it came to shutting the parlors down, the police were lenient. Vice investigators and the *American* reporters took the lead in pressuring the police to take action, implying that for years the force had ignored the sinful behavior going on right underneath their noses. One critical reporter wrote that “[a]ltogether, the story of the police investigation of the ‘personal’ columns forms an unwritten chapter of recent New York police history that is almost beyond belief.”³³ George Kneeland later explained that far from shutting down brothels, the police benefitted from them by requiring them to pay protection fees.³⁴ And although the police who finally shut down these massage parlors were painted as “heroic” and the raids as “sensational,” the *American* also hinted that the force only did so under pressure. The first case had to be “laid before Captain Zimmerman” who only then took “instantaneous action.”³⁵ The second case was “inspired” by the Anti-Vice Society, whose inspectors’ “affidavits were sufficiently conclusive to bring about a raid.”³⁶ While the articles praised the policemen involved, they were also pointing out that the vice societies (and the *American*) had done the legwork for them.

Even then, the raids were not effective. Captain Zimmerman forced one massage parlor to close, but did not arrest anyone – he merely gave the women a warning to leave.³⁷ When he returned a week later, the women were all still there; he arrested four

³³ “Raids Terrify ‘Personal’ Patrons,” *New York American*.

³⁴ Kneeland, 147.

³⁵ “Police Raid ‘Personal’ Massage House,” *New York American*, 21 June 1906: 4.

³⁶ “Police Raid Two ‘Beauty Parlors’ Advertised in the ‘Red Light’ Column,” *New York American*, 22 June 1906: 5.

³⁷ “Police Raid ‘Personal’ Massage House,” *New York American*.

of them, but other than the madam, let everyone go free. This was acceptable according to the newspaper, however, because the target was not the women; rather, the goal was “to make advertising of vicious resorts absolutely unsafe.” In fact, the reporters implied, it was the *Herald*’s advertising policies that made these parlors capable of functioning. The owner of the parlor claimed that “I may have been wrong to advertise in the Herald,” she said, but so long as the paper made it so easy to find brothels, it “was impossible to regulate illegal houses.”³⁸

Vice societies wanted to eradicate prostitution entirely, not just the ability to advertise it, so whether or not they were pleased with the outcome is difficult to say, but the raids served the *American*’s penchant for sensationalism. They provided fodder for reporters: courageous officers breaking down windows to arrest the skimpily-dressed women. In one case, an investigator reached into a closet “and came into contact with the body of someone biding [in her]...lingerie,” who was then “dragged from the closet.”³⁹ Some of the girls “were in all conditions of décolletage and from their appearance only one conclusion could be drawn as to the character of the house,” as one observer noted.⁴⁰ According to the *American* articles, all of these parlors, with their disgraceful tenants, were frequent advertisers in the *New York Herald*. And the reporters argued that the *Herald* was doing more than just advertising; it was working in concert with the owners and might even help them if they were put on trial. The parlor owners were “[c]onfident in the protection they thought they had procured by advertising their pernicious trade” in

³⁸ “Crowds See Women Take in Patrol Wagon in Fourth ‘Red Light’ Page Raid,” *New York American*, 26 June 1906: 11.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ “Police Raid ‘Personal’ Massage House,” *New York American*.

the paper.⁴¹ Indeed, the proprietor of one parlor supposedly “muttered that she would ‘see the Herald people’ first” before vacating her establishment.⁴²

Although massage parlor raids made for thrilling news, as evil as they may have been, the *American* reporters did not consider them the greatest danger women faced or the worst advertising which the *Herald* permitted. “If any one sort of ‘personal’ is worse than another in the opinion of the officials of the Parkhurst Society,” according to one article, “it is those which declare ‘object matrimony,’ where the advertiser has no intention of entering into wedlock.”⁴³ The reason, as the exposé made clear, was that the men and women who paid for them were using this phrase as a cover to meet members of the opposite sex for companionship and “good times.”⁴⁴ The primary concern was what could happen if a girl responded to such an ad believing it was sincere. “The danger in many of the ‘fake’ male ‘matrimony personals,’” explained a reporter, “lies in the careful way in which the real object of the advertiser is hidden. Girls, temporarily dissatisfied with their lot, easily might be led into acquaintances that would prove their ruin.”⁴⁵

To demonstrate how many men were intent upon seduction, one reporter followed up on several advertisements by men, which, the paper claimed, were designed to rope young girls who answered matrimonial advertisements into illicit relationships. A woman investigator responded to several of these advertisements, and found that these men “made it quite clear that they wanted a good time and not a helpmeet. All sections of the city and all walks of life seemed to be represented in the advertisers.” And the letters the *American* published from men were spicy. For example, when the investigator

⁴¹ “Raids Terrify ‘Personals’ Patrons, *New York American*.”

⁴² “Police Raid Two ‘Beauty Parlors’ Advertised in ‘Red Light’ Column,” *New York American*.

⁴³ “‘Object Matrimony’ Lie Only Veils the Worst ‘Personals,’” *New York American*, 10 June 1906: 1.

⁴⁴ “Homeless ‘Red Light’ Column,” *New York American*, 8 June 1906: 6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

instructed one man to tell her honestly what he wanted, he wrote back: “Your note at hand. I am ashamed to tell you what I want. I must whisper it in your ear. Can I?” Another praised the investigator for having “said much in saying little” in her letter and described himself as a man with “broad ideas.” Although they did not carry inquiries further, the *American* warned that the men’s names were “in the possession of the investigators and will be used should it become necessary.”⁴⁶

Five days after the event, the *American* tied the murder of Stanford White to the personals column by suggesting that the cabaret where White’s former lover Evelyn Nesbit had worked used the *Herald* to advertise. One article quoted the chief vice investigator as saying that “the murder of Monday night undoubtedly has aided the crusade against the personal. Many of the worst ads that have been brought to our attention were inserted by men of the same type of [Harry] Thaw’s victim [Stanford White]. I cannot say that he actually used the column, but friends of his are known to have done so.”⁴⁷ This unnamed source continued by explaining:

They are men of education and wealth and they were able to word their personals in the most skilful manner imaginable. They advertised as “Broker” or “Clubman” or “Wealthy Youth.” When forced to do so they inserted the word matrimony... Sometimes they made this point even stronger than the Herald office demanded, hoping to secure more interesting answers and trusting to their skill in such intrigues to get away without going through a ceremony. Many an innocent girl has been sent to the streets by men of this class, with the assistance of the Herald.⁴⁸

Reporters expressed shock at discovering the wide range of men who turned to the ads, both as advertisers and respondents. “This investigation has shown that men in

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ “Clubman’s Girl-Trap Found in ‘Personals,’” *New York American*, 30 June 1906: 7.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

all walks of life [use] the Herald's vicious personals," wrote one author. "Several lawyers have nibbled at the bait of a neatly worded 'personal' successfully place in the 'Red Light' column...A physician of some prominence seriously compromised himself with his propositions to a woman investigator."⁴⁹ And the *Herald* was to blame for all of this, the paper intimated, responsible for enabling lecherous men find an easy way to prey upon innocent women.

Men could use a variety of methods to draw in girls even without promising matrimony. The first person arrested for publishing an ad, an event which also sparked the *American's* long series, was accused of trying to pick up young girls by pretending to advertise for a secretary. His ad read: "I want fifteen year old miss as secretary and matinee companion; am wealthy retired bachelor, splendid opportunity; write particulars own hand. Address Matinee, Herald, Bklyn." This ad was "one of the boldest personals ever printed," according to an officer with the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children, whose agents "are said to keep track of these personals."⁵⁰ To snare the author, Christopher Burns, one of their investigators posed as a girl and wrote a letter to appoint a meeting. They were never able to get proof that Burns was really intending to seduce young girls, because they "did not desire to corrupt a girl's morals" by using a fifteen year old to take on the correspondence and meet Burns herself. However, they still hoped to show that "such advertisements are a...menace to girls."⁵¹

Yet the letters that the *American* printed in fact suggest the exact opposite scenario. As the paper stated itself, the men "made it quite clear that they wanted a good

⁴⁹ "Many Ignore 'Personal' Expose," *New York American*, 25 June 1906:7.

⁵⁰ "Lurer of Girls By 'Personal' Arrested," *New York American*.

⁵¹ "Jail Threatens Man Who Used Personal 'Ad,'" *New York American*, 28 May 1906: 5.

time and not a helpmeet.” They may have been placing the word “matrimony” into their ads, but none of the men whose letters the *American* quoted ever claimed to want marriage only to change his story later. Rather, they were using the column to meet women with a shared interest in a good time; “it was well understood to the public what such an advertisement meant,” as one woman commented.⁵² And although the *American* never acknowledged it, many of the matrimonial ads from men hinted that they were willing to support financially the women they met. One typical ad read: “Refined wealthy gentleman desires meeting refined young lady, 21-25; matrimony. Very Generous, Herald.”⁵³ Seduction was not always the issue; while women, as ever, held a more precarious position, they could benefit from such relationships.

For example, a minister supposedly wrote to the *American* with a story from his own congregation that was meant to illustrate the fine line girls walked between innocence and sin. Amongst his parishioners was a widow and her two teenage daughters, who were all required “to work to keep up the little flat in which they live, and there is a constant struggle to make ends meet...” One day, one of the daughters came home with a fancy dress; she had learned that it was possible to make quick money by answering a personal. Following the advice of a friend, she answered an ad, and met several young men, one of whom had given her the money to buy a dress fit for the theater. Her mother, who discovered the truth, and the minister felt that this misstep could have led to disaster; it was just one short step from a dress and the theater to the descent into prostitution. Indeed, the minister concluded his letter by writing that it “makes me shudder...every time my eye falls on that first page of the Herald, to think of

⁵² “Agreement Proposed to End ‘Red-Light’ Column,” *New York American*.

⁵³ *New York Herald*, 14 January 1906: 1.

the hundreds of girls who must have been tempted through reading and answering these awful advertisements.”⁵⁴

The daughter’s real motives are hard to discern underneath the *American’s* rhetoric, which was one-sided. But even with the bias, a less sinister story is visible. By the turn of the century, a younger generation of women – particularly among the working class – was ignoring the Victorian rules of heterosexual relationships. Not only was social interaction between men and women much more casual, but it almost always involved money. There was a fine, but distinct, line between trading sexual favors for money versus accepting gifts or admission into dance halls or other commercial entertainments. Young people saw a more complex dynamic than just “respectable” versus “promiscuous”; they were more lenient than older generations.⁵⁵

Vice reformers failed to distinguish between actual prostitutes and young women who did not share their own moral code. The working-class women, often children of immigrants, did not fit the white, middle-class model of womanhood. Victorian women were supposed to be “passionless”; they were to be passive receptors of male attention and sex was a burden rather than a pleasure.⁵⁶ This ideal was nothing like the reality of most middle- and upper-class women’s lives, but the vision was a powerful one.

However, there was a new generation of girls who lived alone in boarding houses or had little family oversight, and openly enjoyed commercial entertainments. These girls wanted to be involved in public life, or at least in public pastimes, and usually with male

⁵⁴ “Eight Columns of Personals Flaunted Before the Public,” *New York American*.

⁵⁵ Peiss, 108-110.

⁵⁶ Cott, Nancy, “Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850,” in *A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of American Women*, ed. Nancy Cott and Elizabeth Pleck (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).

companionship. The “young women and their men, as they carried on the courtships formerly overseen by watchful parents and neighborly eyes, rewrote the code that governed their natural relations...After the turn of the century, some young women sought, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to engage in...intimacies with men they had no intention of marrying.”⁵⁷

For most of the Victorian era, middle-class youth were supposed to court in a highly ritualized and chaperoned fashion. The institution of “calling” was private and formal; young women would receive potential suitors in their homes and by extending invitations or rebuffing men’s attention maintain some level of control.⁵⁸ These rituals made sense in a society which valued the “separate spheres” ideology; the tawdry public sphere of business and competition, theoretically, stopped at the front door and had no place in courtship.

At the turn of the century, young people overthrew these traditions. Courtship moved out of the home and became a more male-dominated, commercialized, and public institution. The country as a whole became consumer-oriented, and this transformed interactions between men and women. The marketplace became “the controlling context for courtship rituals,” as Beth Bailey writes. At the same time, working-class entertainments, almost always conducted outside the home, became popular in the middle and upper middle classes, making the staid and old-fashioned method of calling obsolete. Therefore, courting became a much more casual affair that took on economic overtones;

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Psychiatric Persuasion: Knowledge, Gender, and Power in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 190.

⁵⁸ Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 16.

it “privileged competition” and “the vocabulary of economic exchange defined the acts of courtship.”⁵⁹

But this transformation was not instantly acceptable, especially because the new style of dating was so rooted in the working class. To reformers there was only a short step from innocent enjoyment to a life of degradation. Thus, when investigators saw girls flirting with young men in cabarets and dance halls, they did not see a distinction between casual dating and casual prostitution. Whatever the actual views of the *American* reporters, they echoed the shocked tones of reformers’ rhetoric to increase scandal. Reformers and reporters equated any monetary exchange with prostitution, but the reality was that women who accepted gifts, admission to dance halls, theater tickets, and even the occasional dress, were making the best of the situations which presented themselves, and the personal column in the *New York Herald* was just one method which made these new kinds of interactions possible.

So there is nothing to suggest that the offending daughter in the minister’s story was doing anything inherently immoral or dangerous. Allowing men to pay for drinks, entertainment, even occasionally clothing, was common. According to the historian Kathy Peiss, there was “tacit legitimacy of treating as a means of gaining access to the world of amusement.”⁶⁰ Rather than the tale of a girl on the verge of becoming a prostitute, then, this story is an example illustrating a generational shift in acceptable behavior for adolescent, working-class girls that was taking place at the turn of the century. What the mother and minister saw as dangerous – being treated by a young man – was, according to Peiss, a widely-used practice. This is not to suggest that there were

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 5.

⁶⁰ Peiss, 54.

no dangers involved – sexual assault was always a possibility young women faced – but it was nevertheless a system that was deliberate and acceptable amongst peers. And while responding to personal ads from men might have been less common, it makes sense within the context of working girls’ lives. With the rise of commercialized entertainment, working girls were enmeshed in the market economy and consumer culture. Girls were surrounded by advertising which plied beauty products, paperback romance novels, and cheap clothing.⁶¹ Personal ads, as we have already seen, were a familiar and popular form of entertainment, and could be one more way of entering this new world of leisure.

While the men who printed matrimonial ads and the young girls who answered them were topics of much discussion, the favorite subject of the *American* exposé were the fake matrimonial ads from women. These revealed a fascinating group of women offering to become mistresses in order to gain financial stability. They defied Victorian notions of femininity and as a result turned the typical narrative of women’s roles upside down. Unlike the “white slaves,” these were women who had willingly chosen to become mistresses, even claiming that they had no interest in marriage. They had not been tricked or seduced, and while they may have felt that they had few other alternatives than to trade companionship for monetary support, they had made their decisions with their eyes open.

Therefore, “object matrimony” ads from women were not easy to dismiss or explain in a way that conformed to predominant stereotypes of women, who were supposed to be uninterested in sex and never aggressive. The ads printed by men fell into

⁶¹ Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Leisure, Girls of Adventure* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 19.

the seduction storyline; innocent girls might respond to an ad thinking the man really wanted to get married and suffer terrible consequences. But reconciling the female advertisers was more difficult; young women – often pretty and refined – who wanted to meet gentlemen companions without marrying them fell outside any acceptable definition of femininity. Reformers liked to blame urban amusements and institutions for seducing young girls, but the women advertising for companions did not fit the description of the innocents enthralled by “glittering dance halls” until they irrevocably fell into vice and sin.⁶² They were independent actors; even if they were looking for gentlemen patrons because they could not afford to pay the rent or afford new clothes, they displayed no interest in changing their circumstances to a more virtuous lifestyle – a decision which made for captivating reading.

A typical “object matrimony” ad read, “Attractive French young widow wishes acquaintance of middle age gentleman; matrimony. Marcelle 603 Herald.”⁶³ Others were more explicit in offering companionship in exchange for financial assistance, such as “A discreet young lady, cosey [*sic*] home, appreciate meeting generous gentleman; matrimony. Edna, Herald.”⁶⁴ The addition of the word “matrimony” was a sop to respectability, but the editors of the *Herald* claimed that there was no way to know whether or not the ads were genuine or not. According to the *American*, the “‘righteous’ publishers who receive hundreds of thousands of dollars a year from their personal column,” insisted that the “‘advertiser declares that he or she desires to marry, and the

⁶² Gilfoyle, 196; Peiss, 98.

⁶³ *New York Herald*, 4 February 1906: 1.

⁶⁴ *New York Herald*, 4 March 1906: 1.

promotion of marriage is surely no crime. Indeed, marriage is to be encouraged by every possible means.”⁶⁵

But the *American* claimed to find evidence that the *Herald* forced its advertisers to include the word matrimony in their ads if they did not already do so. One woman an investigator met explained that “they won’t take the ad at the Herald unless you put that in...I’ve talked it over with the clerks there, and they say it’s necessary to keep from violating the law. They know I don’t want to marry, and most of those who answer know it, too.”⁶⁶ Multiple women attested to the fact that “object, matrimony” was a well-known code; some even expressed surprise when investigators pretended to take the ads seriously (“What a joke!” exclaimed one such girl when the investigator brought up marriage).⁶⁷ One woman investigator, according the *American*, provided even more “positive proof” that the *Herald* insisted upon altering the ads that “are obviously vicious” by going to the newspaper’s advertising department and trying to submit an ad that said “happy hours,” where the clerk forced her to change the wording to “matrimony.”⁶⁸

But even if the newspaper was enabling them, the fact remained that there were women (and men) interested in pursuing this alternative way of life. And given that the personals did take up the entire first page of the *Herald*, and matrimony ads appeared throughout that space, New York appeared to be full of loose women trying to meet generous men to support them. The women did not all have identical motivations; some appeared to be straightforward prostitutes, while others just seemed interested in casual

⁶⁵ “‘Object Matrimony’ Lie Only Veils the Worst Personals,” *New York American*.

⁶⁶ “Herald ‘Personals’ Exposed as ‘Ads’ for Lowest Forms of Vice,” *New York American*.

⁶⁷ “Herald’s ‘Red Light Column’ a Decoy for White Slave Houses,” *New York American*.

⁶⁸ “‘Object Matrimony’ Lie Only Veils the Worst Personals,” *New York American*.

dating. Others had more complicated goals; for example, at least one woman who advertised but never “had any intention of entering into a state of wedlock” used the ads as a way to manage a call-girl service.⁶⁹

The investigators met women who “had no idea of matrimony” but whose “evenings were free”; or who printed ads including phrases like “leisure afternoons and evenings,” something they considered “sufficient proof” that the nature of the ads was questionable.⁷⁰ However, without seeing the actual comments of the women involved themselves, the meaning behind “afternoons and evenings free” is ambiguous at best; the women were not necessarily as depraved as the *American* suggested. After all, if “‘prepossessing widow’ is the clause to which investigator’s [*sic*] point as the one that should have indicated to a Herald office boy that the advertisement is open to question,” then almost anything could be sinister.⁷¹ The reporters put an ominous spin on such phrases, but in and of themselves, there is nothing to indicate that they were not meant to be taken at face value.

Between the lines, there are a few indications that in many cases the women’s motivations may have been more innocent, or at least less tawdry, than the reporters claimed. One girl that an investigator met just wanted someone to take her to the theater.⁷² Another wrote a letter saying she was looking “for a good time in every way,” but when the investigator met her she refused to stay out late, resisted his advances, and insisted upon going home immediately after dinner.⁷³ Finally, another girl explained that

⁶⁹ “Woman in ‘Personal’ Raid Held for Trial,” *New York American*.

⁷⁰ “Clubman’s Girl-Trap Found in ‘Personals,’” *New York American*.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² “Herald ‘Personals’ Exposed as ‘Ads’ for Lowest Forms of Vice,” *New York American*.

⁷³ “New York Clergymen Will Take Concerted Action to Stamp Out Vicious Personals,” *New York American*.

she “‘just advertised to so as to meet a nice fellow and have a good time,’” but added that she thought “‘it was a good thing for every woman to get married.’”⁷⁴

Nevertheless, the majority of the women interviewed – reflected by the style of the ads in the *Herald* – were neither prostitutes nor girls just wanting to have fun. By and large, as they frankly admitted themselves, they were more interested in looking for a gentleman “protector.” Using the *Herald* for this purpose was a widespread and generally understood practice. According to one reporter, even people from out of town knew that “matrimony” was just a cover; in an article subtitled “Even Strangers Know of ‘Personals,’” he wrote that women came to New York looking for protectors “and if their own statements are to be believed they know of the Herald and turn to it at once.”⁷⁵

It was these women who became the *American*’s primary focus in its exposé. The newspaper devoted more articles and space to these women than anything else. However shocking massage parlors may have been, these individuals were even more fascinating – and ultimately more dangerous. The narratives of white slavery, seduction, desertion, and starving steamstresses all portrayed women who had no other choice and who became prostitutes either by force or as a last resort. But women who deliberately “entertained” men – who in fact might even have moved to the big city with that exact goal in mind, rather than finding a job or a husband – were completely inexplicable.

The reporters’ ambivalence toward these women is clear. Some were easy to dismiss; the angular, forty-year-old woman who advertised as a pretty young girl became

⁷⁴ “Every Form of Vice Makes Free, Easy Use of ‘Personal,’” *New York American*, 3 June 1906: 38.

⁷⁵ “Agreement Proposed to End ‘Red-Light’ Columns,” *New York American*.

the butt of one reporter's jokes.⁷⁶ Another investigator told of meeting a girl who came out to meet him "negligently dressed" and explained that she "would like a protector...and you'll do if you can support me properly."⁷⁷ Women such as these were portrayed as thoroughly degraded. But despite the unforgiving attitude, reporters could not help but to acknowledge that many of the girls were in situations that were more complicated.

In a subsection entitled "Two Samples of Viciousness," one article reprinted two matrimony ads followed by the investigators' experiences with the women who had published them. The first read: "Attractive, respectable girl, reduced, appreciates acquaintance, broad minded, generous gentleman; matrimony. Alone, 333 Herald." In response to the investigator's letter, the woman replied, "I should like to meet a permanent friend who would appreciate a quiet, refined girl, willing to be friendly if congenial if [he] is in a position to assist her financially." The other, whose ad read: "A pretty and charming little lady desires acquaintance of generous gentleman, matrimony," explained that she needed money to support her son.⁷⁸ Another woman wrote to an investigator that she felt "the constant care of life and loneliness [*sic*] too much for me. Therefore I would like to meet a gentleman that would be willing to...[assist] me. True friendship in return for my affection and love. I am all alone and wish to meet a friend who would respect me and appreciate a woman like me."⁷⁹

The most poignant story was of a girl who lived in a tiny room that the investigator described as only large enough to contain a bed, trunk, dresser, and chair,

⁷⁶ "New York Clergymen Will Take Concerted Action to Stamp Out Vicious Personals," *New York American*.

⁷⁷ "Agreement Proposed to End 'Red-Light' Columns," *New York American*.

⁷⁸ "Every Form of Vice Makes Free, Easy Use of Personals," *New York American*.

⁷⁹ "'Object Matrimony' Lie Only Veils the Worst 'Personals,'" *New York American*.

leaving barely any floor space. She explained that “I am employed as a telephone girl by the Crane Company in the St. James Building, at Broadway and Twenty-sixth street...and as I only get \$6 a week and have to pay \$3 for this room I need financial assistance and must entertain men.”⁸⁰ Sympathetic figures such as these were hard to dismiss as hardened, greedy prostitutes; their circumstances were “vicious,” but the girls themselves were not.

The women discussed here were distinct from the working-class girls just looking for a good time. Almost all of the women interviewed who used the matrimonials to meet a protector were from out of town. They were not the daughters of immigrants breaking away from their parents’ strict mores; rather, they were migrants from outside the city – much like the “strangers in the city” who advertised for spouses throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. Reporters claimed that the women came to New York deliberately to seek a gentleman friend, but it is more likely that they were typical country or small-town women who thought they could find a better life, or a more lucrative job, in the big city. For example, one woman claimed to be from a good Southern family, and the investigator’s report bore out this claim: he described her as particularly refined, pretty, and intelligent, with a “charming” accent. Likewise, the young woman in the tiny room grew up in eastern Pennsylvania, and her rural family believed she was supporting herself respectably in New York City.⁸¹ She may have been exploited by her employer, but she was not a factory worker; a telephone girl not only needed to be fluent in English, but also free of any ethnic accent that could tie her an immigrant background. But although mentioning the full particulars of the girl’s place of

⁸⁰ “Many Ignore ‘Personal’ Expose,” *New York American*.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

work may have a subtle outing of the company that paid her too little, reporters in general failed to investigate the women's situations more fully.

One bizarre story highlights the difficult situation in which women might find themselves. In an article entitled "'Personals' Aid Inhuman Mothers. A Daughter Sold for \$4,000 a Year," the reporter conjured up the image of a vicious and hardhearted mother who wanted to meet a wealthy man who would pay money in exchange for her daughter's companionship. However, when actually described the woman did not appear evil; she was elegant and attractive, claimed she had lost all her money in "Wall Street" and could no longer provide as she would have liked; unable to entertain because they were so poor, the mother could not present her daughter to high society. Therefore, she explained, "I want her to meet someone who will get her out of the rut and brace her up."⁸²

Her daughter had not met a man that she "cared to marry," but that was not much of an obstacle; if "you are unhappily married...[my daughter] Mary would not let that stand in the way," confided the mother. On the face of it, such a situation would be heinous indeed. But in the course of her conversation with the vice investigator, it became clear that the daughter was a willing participant in this exchange. "'We are both of the world,'" the mother explained, "'I told her that she might find a man who, while he could not...marry her, might treat her even better than many married women...She said if she could only find someone who could appreciate her for herself, she would be glad to

⁸² "'Personals' Aid Inhuman Mothers: A Daughter Sold for \$4000 a Year," *New York American*, 5 June 1906: 12.

meet such a man.”⁸³ He would be especially welcome if he could provide her (not her mother) with four thousand dollars per year for her living expenses.

Being the mistress to a married man was hardly any woman’s idea of a happy ending. But while the mother’s involvement might be unusual, the story is not. Mary may have been much like Theodore Dreiser’s protagonist in *Sister Carrie*, a migrant from the outskirts of Chicago who ultimately found that the only way she could live in any kind of comfort was by involving herself with men who could support her, married or not. Given the *American’s* willingness to play fast and loose with the truth, Mary’s story may have been exaggerated or even entirely fabricated. But the circumstances she was in were not unique. Like Carrie, these women’s aspirations for respectability fell victim to the need for stability.

To varying degrees, all of the girls investigators met were in difficult situations. Hoping to find generous men who would support them was not a very reliable way to survive. Yet the choices that these women made did allow them a small measure of independence. To be sure, they relied on male financial support for survival – but given how underpaid women were, if they could work at all, most were already dependent on men. Yet if the investigators and reporters were telling the truth, most of the women were not facing the dire straits described by the girl from eastern Pennsylvania. They had their own apartments, and were often attractive, well-dressed, even elegant. Most of them claimed that they received dozens of replies to their advertisements – to the degree

⁸³ “‘Personals’ Aid Inhuman Mothers,” *New York American*.

that one investigator got an answer to his letter from a friend of the advertiser, who had herself gotten more replies than she could manage.⁸⁴

No one asked why a woman who wanted a “permanent friend” would not want to marry, “under any circumstances.”⁸⁵ Perhaps the women believed being the mistress to a wealthy man would be better than marrying a poor one. Whether or not any of them found a patron willing to support them indefinitely is impossible to say – but although the women’s motivations will never be fully known, they almost all seemed to believe this life gave them some small amount of freedom they could not have found elsewhere. Sister Carrie’s success as an actress ultimately gave her full financial independence, but even when she was a mistress and totally reliant on men’s support, she was better off than she had been as an underpaid factory worker. One woman, who had moved to the city from Newburgh, New York, but could not make ends meet as a stenographer, frankly explained, “there is nothing I can find to do that would make as much money.”⁸⁶

Nevertheless, the girls were painted as sinful. Of course, the *American*’s goal was not to write an exposé about underpaid or lonely women, but rather to paint the *Herald* as a medium for prostitutes to meet prospective clients and vice versa. Spending too much time describing the plight of lost girls would have deflected attention from the primary goal: to humiliate Bennett. The newspaper’s decision to paint women who were not particularly depraved as “vicious” reveals more about Hearst’s journalistic expertise than about the women’s actual lives. Stories about negligently-dressed young women would

⁸⁴ “Agreement Proposed to End ‘Red-Light’ Column,” *New York American*.

⁸⁵ “New York Clergymen Will Take Concerted Action to Stamp Out Vicious Personals,” *New York American*.

⁸⁶ “Every Form of Vice Makes Free, Easy Use of Personal,” *New York American*. While in some ways these women fit the definition of the “New Women” who began to appear at this time, this term implies deliberate involvement in a developing feminist ideology. The women here do not articulate any conscious sense of being part of any movement and thus the categorization is not applicable.

have been more entertaining for the public the *American* wanted to reach. The newspaper painted itself as muckraking and reformist, but Hearst's main goal was to sell copies, and the best way to do that was through articles that were exciting and scandalous – not serious examinations of why women were incapable of surviving without financial assistance.

As the exposé continued, Hearst and his reporters painted the *Herald* into a corner. “This is a terrible position for a newspaper like the New York Herald to find itself in,” one investigator mourned, and he was right.⁸⁷ It is unclear why Bennett and the *Herald* allowed themselves to enter such a precarious position; unfortunately, no contemporary records exist to shed light on why the *Herald* began printing advertisements from prostitutes and massage parlors when the management must have known it was a risky business decision.

Indeed, one publisher who had printed similar ads was sent to jail in 1896. The *Chicago Dispatch*, a small-time paper that had changed ownership in 1895, contained ads from “baths” and “massage parlors” which were really “disorderly houses and other vile resorts.”⁸⁸ These ads were so “obscene, lewd, lascivious and indecent” that when the paper's editor, Joseph Dunlop, was brought to court, the grand jury refused to include any examples in the indictment.⁸⁹ Dunlop was tried and convicted of sending obscenity through the mail, though one newspaper argued that the real “contamination” was not through the “comparatively small number of copies” that were mailed to rural areas, but

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *N.W. Ayers & Son's American Newspaper Annual* (Philadelphia: N.W. Ayers & Sons, 1896): 126; “Gets His Just Desserts,” *Wheeling Register*, 9 February 1896: 1.

⁸⁹ Grand Jury Indictment, NARA-Great Lakes Region (Chicago), Record Group 21, U.S. District Court Criminal Case Files, 1873-1985, Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division (Chicago), *United States v. Joseph Dunlop*.

“on the streets of Chicago.”⁹⁰ His lawyers appealed the decision, but it was affirmed by the Supreme Court, and Dunlop served two years in Joliet prison.⁹¹ The story made national news and the *Herald*'s staff must have known of it, yet they chose to print the exact same kind of ads on the front page. In case anyone had forgotten the earlier affair, the *American* made the connection explicit; if Bennett did not suspend the column, several reporters stressed, he might suffer the same fate as Dunlop, who “WAS SENTENCED TO TWO YEARS IN JOLIET FOR PRINTING OBSCENE AND VICIOUS MATTER IN THE ADVERTISING COLUMNS OF HIS NEWSPAPER.”⁹²

However, critics suggested that the revenue stream the personals generated was pocket money to fund Bennett's extravagant lifestyle. The *American* speculated that the column brought in about \$200,000 per year, and claimed that “the enormous revenue” was “the only thing in the way” of an agreement amongst all the papers in the city to ban any advertising of a suspicious nature.⁹³ Less biased observers made the same claim. William McAdoo commented that “[t]his class of advertising must be immensely profitable,” and *Printers' Ink*, the advertising journal, remarked that the column, which was “one of the most attractive and alluring [columns] that appears in any paper anywhere” was “profitable to the *Herald* in a money-making way.”⁹⁴

Living almost exclusively in Paris, Bennett may have considered himself untouchable by American obscenity laws. And, “no stranger himself to the courtesan's

⁹⁰ “The Sentence of Joseph Dunlop,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 9 February 1896: 30.

⁹¹ “Editor Dunlop in Joliet,” *Alton Telegraph* [IL], 6 May 1897: 12.

⁹² “Every Form of Vice Makes Free Easy Use of Personals,” *New York American*, 3 June 1906: 38.

⁹³ “Herald's ‘Personals’ Exposed as ‘Ads’ for Lowest Forms of Vice,” *New York American*; “Agreement Proposed to End ‘Red-Light’ Columns,” *New York American*.

⁹⁴ McAdoo, 92; “The ‘Red Light Column’ and Fake Advertisements,” *Printers' Ink* (Vol LV, No. 13), 27 June 1906: 12.

trade, he defended the ads as a public service,” according to one historian.⁹⁵ Later, biographers claimed that his editors had warned Bennett that the ads were dangerous, but public criticism was muted before Hearst’s revelations.⁹⁶ Moral arbiters decried the personals throughout the nineteenth century, but the general populace did not echo their concerns; if they had, the papers would not have continued printing them. It was not that people failed to understand the nature of the ads – indeed, this was why critics were so worried about their visibility. Rather, common readers enjoyed the risqué undertones of the personals.

But the *American*’s exposé changed that; once their nature was publicly revealed, the relatively harmless amusements became sinister and a public menace. All at once, the *American* claimed, the investigation “has opened [the public’s] eyes to many of the evils of the ‘Red Light’ column with which they were not before familiar.”⁹⁷ And the exposé subtly implied that citizens were responsible for letting this state of affairs continue; it was shocking, according to one article, “that a public as respectable as ours has so long tolerated the situation.”⁹⁸ The *Herald*, of course, was the “really guilty party,” but the *American* would no longer allow the public to indulge in the illicit pleasure of reading the personals without accepting responsibility for their presence.⁹⁹

In the early years of the personal columns, observers – whatever their individual views on the matter – recognized that the ads served as a form of city news. Journalists themselves saw the ads in that light, and the *Herald* and *Chicago Tribune* even promoted

⁹⁵ Kluger, 184.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ “New York Clergymen Will Take Concerted Action to Stamp Out Vicious Personals,” *New York American*.

⁹⁸ “Herald ‘Personals’ Exposed as ‘Ads’ for Lowest Forms of Vice,” *New York American*.

⁹⁹ “Police Raid ‘Personal’ Massage House,” *New York American*.

their own columns as entertainment. They may have been full of vice and traps for innocent youth, but the critics who made these claims were in the minority; the persistence of the columns for decades is a testament of their popularity. “Vicious lives,” as even the most stringent critics admitted, were fascinating. The *Herald* was, by the latter half of the nineteenth century, a respectable newspaper that respectable people read. Thus respectable audiences could participate in the exciting underworld of the city without themselves being tainted or tarred with the same brush. With the *American*’s exposé, this tacit acceptance of vice was no longer possible – a problem that was exacerbated by the fact that the *Herald*’s ads were indeed more tawdry than they had been and therefore more open to attack. What had been a guilty pleasure was now too closely associated with sin.

The ads had too negative an influence to ignore, according to observers; because the *Herald* was a respectable paper that was widely read, children who had no idea of its evil nature could see the personals column. Echoing complaints of nineteenth-century critics, William McAdoo explained that these “suggestive” and “flagrantly indecent [advertisements]...come into respectable homes with the family newspaper.”¹⁰⁰ And, as one investigator explained, “Young girls and boys who might never in any other way be led from a decent life are bound to read them. If the *Herald* comes into their homes they have only to look at the first page to see the columns that may result in their moral destruction.”¹⁰¹ One “angry parent” who supposedly wrote the *American* to thank the paper for its heroic exposé agreed, adding that the *Herald* “unquestionably falls into the

¹⁰⁰ McAdoo, 92.

¹⁰¹ “Herald ‘Personals’ Exposed as ‘Ads’ for Lowest Forms of Vice,” *New York American*.

hands of our sons and daughters, breeding germs of vice in most seductive ways.”¹⁰²

Although critics had been making the same complaints for years, the *American* exposé was the first time that anyone had ever proven that some personals had unsavory purposes.

When Bennett and the *New York Herald* were indicted in October 1906, the charge on the first several counts was for the publication of “certain obscene, lewd, lascivious and indecent matters...of too great length and of too indecent character to be here set forth in full.”¹⁰³ In the last several counts, the grand jury was less coy; the indictment included “certain obscene, lewd, lascivious and indecent advertisements” which it then laid out in full. Some of these ads did state their purpose blatantly, such as “The little girl cannot meet this month’s expenses. Hopes Mr. W – will see this and embrace opportunity he requested at lunch. The Fascinating Baby, 140 Herald.”¹⁰⁴

But others were quite vague, or at least well-veiled. Legally, obscenity was determined by “whether the tendency of the matter charged as obscenity is to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to immoral influences, and into whose hands a publication [containing obscene material] may fall,” even if the original intention was not meant to be obscene, a standard borrowed from Great Britain and applied by the Supreme Court in 1879.¹⁰⁵ However, matrimonial advertisements, in and of themselves, did not even fit this broad description. Whatever the meaning behind them, massage parlors, rooms for rent, and most of the other personals that the New York grand jury objected to

¹⁰² “Every Form of Vice Makes Free, Easy of Personals,” *New York American*.

¹⁰³ Grand Jury Indictment, National Archives and Records Administration – Northeast Region (New York City), United States vs. James Gordon Bennett and Manley W. Gilliam, Case # 3893.

¹⁰⁴ *New York Herald*, 4 February 1906: 1.

¹⁰⁵ Nicola Beisel, *Imperiled Innocents: Anthony Comstock and Family Reproduction in Victorian America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 91-92.

contained no pornographic language, made no overt allusions to sex or nudity, or any other objectionable trait that could be justifiably labeled “obscene.” In fact, some of the ads had nothing whatever to do with prostitution or even financial gain in exchange for sex; for example, many ads listed in the indictment were typical missed connections that had appeared for decades, such as: “Will beautiful lady gowned in black and white checked suit and who accompanied elderly lady Saturday morning to Hoboken train, grant interview to admirer on boat...?”¹⁰⁶ In 1867, Mark Twain had called these ads “nauseating” and mocked the men who used them, but they were not obscene. Whatever the actual intentions of the advertiser, there was little in such an ad that could deprave or corrupt anyone’s mind.

Many of the ads were indeed used as covers. In that regard, if Bennett knew their real purpose, he may have been subject to prosecution for aiding and abetting prostitution – a crime, however, for which he was never indicted. But while the publisher’s argument that the *Herald* could not tell the difference between a real matrimonial and a solicitation may have been disingenuous, on paper, the claim was true. In fact, several months after the exposé, the *American* itself published an article about a couple who had met through the *Herald*’s personals – albeit in order to highlight the fact that the marriage had ended poorly.¹⁰⁷ Whatever the *American* claimed about the meaning behind the phrase “prepossessing widow,” there was no code that distinguished real from fake.

And even after the revelations, criticism was not universal. *Printers’ Ink* lamented in the midst of the affair that if “the column were discontinued it would be

¹⁰⁶ Grant Jury Indictment, NARA – Northeast Region (New York City), United States vs. James Gordon Bennett and Manley W. Gilliam; ad itself in the June 3, 1906 edition of the *New York Herald*.

¹⁰⁷ “Slighted Wife Seeks Alimony,” *New York American*: 18 September 1906: 16.

sadly missed.”¹⁰⁸ And Don Carlos Seitz, the business manager of the *New York World* at the time, claimed that the loss of the personals made the paper less exciting. He wrote that “[n]ot the least item in the *Herald*’s success was its personals column... These little ‘liners,’ full of mystery and suggestion, were closely read. That the column was used much as a means of making assignments is also true [but the] date-makers added zest to the classification.” The personal column, he concluded, even at its worst, was the *Herald*’s “most interesting feature.”¹⁰⁹ Whatever the *American*’s claims, therefore, there were likely plenty of other people who were disappointed when the column was shut down.

Moreover, despite the claim that the only goal of the exposé was to perform a public service by outing the evils of the personals column, Hearst and his reporters were selling sex as much as the *Herald*. In many ways, the *American* contained more “obscenity” than its rival. An ad ending with “object matrimony” could be (and often was) innocent; a story about women offering themselves as companions in exchange for financial support was far more explicit.

Possibly the most intriguing ads that appeared in the *Herald*, which the *American* largely chose to ignore, were those from men offering “confidential” services to women. One such example read: “A lonely young bachelor, discreet, refined, offers his services in confidential capacity to large, stylish miss or widow, 25 to 30, financially independent; no others; object, matrimony. Thoroughbred, 416 Herald,” which appeared in the January 1, 1906 edition of the paper. Only one investigator followed up on one of these

¹⁰⁸ Printers’ Ink, 12.

¹⁰⁹ Don Carlos Seitz, *The James Gordon Bennetts, Father and Son* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1928), 125.

ads. She received a letter on “heavily gilded note paper of the Waldorf-Astoria” which read: “I am somewhat at a loss to know how to reply to your note of to-day. Do I hire out my services to rich women or do I have leisure for a good time? I might say: ‘Both.’ I must admit that I often have leisure for a good time. Now let me hear from you, and tell me, so that I will understand, just what you propose.”¹¹⁰ Why the newspaper did not explore these ads with anything close to the level of attention that they gave to those from women is unclear. Perhaps the notion that women might have such a strong desire for male companionship that they would pay for it was so foreign to anyone’s understanding of femininity that they simply lacked the language to explain or comprehend it.

Thus, when it came to the actual language and imagery, the *American*’s articles about the personals column were far more lewd, lascivious, and indecent. The *American* reporters dropped heavy hints about the experiences investigators had when meeting women advertisers, leaving very little to the imagination. Girls dressed only in robes at the massage parlors “told disgusting stories,” and admitted having no knowledge of their alleged professions.¹¹¹ An investigator who went to a massage parlor said that his experience was “not printable; suffice to say that the ‘personal’ was a defusion, and that a massage could not be obtained there.”¹¹²

Reporters barely hid the real purpose behind the massage parlors and described the scanty clothing and living arrangements of the women they met in great detail. For example, one story about a woman who offered massages out of her own apartment left concluded: “The only furniture in the room was a raised cot, a stand on which there were

¹¹⁰ “Homeless ‘Red Light’ Column,” *New York American*, 8 June 1906: 6.

¹¹¹ “‘Personals’ Merely Baits to Vice,” *New York American*.

¹¹² “Herald ‘Personals’ Exposed,” *New York American*.

three boxes of talcum powder and a basin of water... The details of the massage which the woman practiced are not printable.”¹¹³ Even more racy was the story of an investigator who was brought into a bedroom with a massage table, and “on the bureau nearby was a whip.”¹¹⁴

If the “filthy trash printed as...advertisements” could create “a morbid appetite” and have a negative influence on the morals of young people, the *American*’s lurid descriptions should have been even more contaminating.¹¹⁵ (And the *Journal* and *American* both had plenty of unsavory ads of their own; one writer who approved of the exposé complained that Hearst papers advertised “obscene sexual remedy ads” and “abortion-promising pills,” which also deserved prosecution.¹¹⁶) Hearst’s exposé was therefore doubly successful because in addition to destroying Bennett, it allowed him to feature stories that were filled with more sexual references than the *Herald*’s personals, but to claim they were a public service rather than a public disgrace.¹¹⁷ This is not to suggest that Hearst never faced criticism for his brand of “news.” Unlike Bennett, however, he was never convicted nor even indicted for the scandalous content. Indeed, the irony, which Bennett surely would have realized, was that it was Hearst and Pulitzer’s yellow journalism – far more lascivious than the *Herald*’s short and simple ads – that had eaten away at his circulation over the last two decades.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ “‘Redlight’ Page Patron Raided by Police,” *New York American*.

¹¹⁵ “Advertisements in the General Press,” *The Pennsylvania Medical Journal* (Vol XXXV, 1906): 741.

¹¹⁶ “Sauce for the Goose, Sauce for the Gander in Advertising Decency,” *St. Louis Medical Review* (Vol LIV, July-December 1906), 3 November 1906: 415.

¹¹⁷ This was not a new phenomenon. When Victoria Woodhull printed her editorial about Henry Ward Beecher’s alleged affair with Elizabeth Tilton in 1870, she was jailed for obscenity, but the other papers which reprinted her article word for word were not.

The *Herald*, however, was incapable of fighting back; even if Bennett had been in New York to oversee damage control, attacking Hearst's paper for its obscenity would not have changed the fact that the personals column was a haven for prostitution. And ultimately, what tarnished the *Herald* but not the *American* was money. Bennett knowingly accepted advertisements that promoted vice because they brought in so much revenue – a point that the *American* and other observers made repeatedly. The sin was not necessarily of exposure – most turn-of-the-century papers regularly featured articles which talked openly about vice, but claimed to be doing so in order to combat it. Conversely, Bennett was actually promoting it. Selling love through the personals had always been the *Herald's* motivation in featuring them so prominently on the front page. It was when the paper began to sell sex that it crossed a line which made it open to attack. Perhaps Bennett did not see – or did not care about – the difference. But when the United States grand jury decided that personal ads were lewd, they were not really condemning the language; they were condemning *Herald* for putting profit above respectability.

When first indicted, Bennett, still in Paris, pleaded not guilty, and gave no indication that he intended to come to New York for his trial. The *American* gleefully predicted on its front page that Bennett would become “a fugitive from justice” if he tried to avoid his punishment. Hearst's paper also pointed out that if Bennett, his advertising manager, and the Herald Corporation were convicted on all eight counts of the indictment, as owner he could be sentenced up to forty years in jail as well as getting slapped with a \$40,000 fine.¹¹⁸ Another article reminded readers that “Bennett Faces

¹¹⁸ “U.S. Indicts Bennett and the Herald,” *New York American*, 23 October 1906: 1.

Charge That Sent Dunlop to Prison,” and reiterated that man’s unfortunate saga in detail.¹¹⁹

Perhaps for this reason, among others, Bennett changed his tune and his plea and returned to New York in style, arriving by way of Havana in one of his yachts.¹²⁰ The judge, after labeling the personals “a stench in the public’s nostrils,” fined him \$25,000, the Herald Corporation \$5,000, and his advertising manager \$1,000. According to the *New York Times*, Bennett then contemptuously “produced a large roll of bills, and stripped from it six of the \$5,000 denomination and one of \$1,000.”¹²¹ Bennett immediately returned to his yacht the same day and sailed back to Europe.¹²² The paper never really recovered from the blow; Bennett rarely returned to the States after this incident and focused all his attention on the increasingly successful international edition. The era of the *New York Herald* and its famous personals column was over.

¹¹⁹ “U.S. Indictments Call Herald Personals ‘Too Indecent to Set Forth,’” *New York American*, 23 October 1906: 4.

¹²⁰ Richard O’Connor, *The Scandalous Mr. Bennett* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 275

¹²¹ J. Gordon Bennett is Fined \$25,000,” *New York Times*, 11 April 1907: 4.

¹²² O’Connor, 275.

Conclusion: The Lost Promise of Personals?

William Randolph Hearst's revenge on James Gordon Bennett was likely as satisfying as he could have hoped. But any vice investigators who believed that discontinuing the *Herald's* personals column would help close down massage parlor brothels in New York City would have been sorely disappointed. George Kneeland noted their presence in 1913, and indeed, such establishments still exist, and still advertise. For example, it is easy to find ads such as: "Pretty Asians – Unwind and rejuvenate – Swedish Health Spa," "GORGEOUS – ASIAN – MASSAGE," and "The Perfect Massage – the Perfect Place – Azalea Spa."¹ These ads could have been right beside "Massage and bath; Japanese and American attendants; private house" or "Announcement. – English Institute; scientific Swedish massage; expert operators," two ads from the *New York Herald* in 1906.² But they were not. Rather, they come from New York City's Craigslist.org in 2010.

For the last several years, Craigslist has been increasingly under fire for its "adult services" (originally "erotic services") section, which provided a thinly-veiled haven for sex workers. In September 2010, the company caved to public criticism and discontinued the column altogether; but this has done nothing to the "spas" offering massages, table showers, and various other services from "pretty Asian" masseuses who now peddle their wares under "therapeutic services." As vice investigators would have quickly discovered

¹ <http://newyork.craigslist.org/thp/> retrieved 10 September 2010.

² *New York Herald*, 15 July 1906: 1; *New York Herald*, 1 April 1906: 1.

in the wake of the *New York Herald's* forced decision to discontinue its personals, prostitution will always find a way to thrive.

The history of Craigslist's personals has an eerie resemblance to the trajectory of the *Herald's* Personal column – indeed, this dissertation borrows the term “missed connections” from the Craigslist personals section of that name. Begun as a casual email listserv in 1995 with the purpose of announcing local events in the San Francisco Bay area, Craigslist blossomed into a free, web-based, user-defined classified service that includes job listings, home and apartment rentals and sales, buy/sell ads, and – of course – personals. Like the *Herald*, the personals in Craigslist started out somewhat innocently; a section for “casual encounters” was meant to contain personals between people seeking unpaid, consensual sex, while all the other personals sections (missed connections, men seeking women, women seeking women, and so forth) would have the more serious attempts to find relationships and romance.

Like the *Herald*, however, Craigslist lost its innocence. The “erotic services” page came into being because the dating pages had been taken over by offers for sex in exchange for “roses.”³ All the personals, even the “strictly platonic” ones, now include a disclaimer warning that ads might include sexually explicit content and require agreement that readers are eighteen or older. And as in the *Herald* scandal, exposure by outraged moral arbiters led the website to close one of its sections. Echoing the former police commissioner, William McAdoo, and various vice investigators, the Attorney General of Connecticut, Richard Blumenthal, said that these “prostitution ads enable human trafficking... They are flagrant and rampant.” Using language that might have

³ Douglas Quenqua, “Recklessly Seeking Sex on Craigslist,” *New York Times*, 17 April 2009: ST1.

come directly from an *American* article in 1906, Blumenthal wrote that the “increasingly sharp public criticism of Craigslist’s Adult Services section reflects a growing recognition that ads for prostitution...are rampant on it.”⁴

Thus, when one looks at ads on Craigslist and its recent run-in with public opinion next to the history of the *New York Herald*’s personals, the similarities are striking. Both were victims of their own success, yet the very fact that they were taken advantage of reveals just how popular and successful the columns were. People exploited the personals because they knew the column was widely read and that their own ads – for matrimonial agencies, brothels, or prostitutes – would be seen. Craigslist’s founder consciously attempted to create a free, unmoderated forum for social interaction while nineteenth-century personals columns were money-making ventures from the beginning, but they followed a similar path. From providing an open, public space which allowed personal interaction largely free from supervision and social convention, both became tarnished by intrusions of the market.

The early history of personals, then, provides just one example in a larger and continuing story about the possibilities and problems of finding intimacy in public and how a consumer ethos affects private relationships. Part I of this dissertation revealed how personals and matrimonials offered a chance for people to reinvent social interactions to fit the changes of urban life. Using a commercial means, newspaper advertising, men and women carved out a space in which they were free to mingle,

⁴ “Adult Services censored on Craigslist,” CNN, 5 September 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/CRIME/09/04/craigslist.censored/index.html?hpt=T2>, retrieved 10 September 2010.

reinvent themselves, and break through as well as use the anonymity created by the growing populations of big cities.

Correspondences and missed connections served as a unique kind of city gossip, one which both enabled ordinary people to become an important part of the news for a day, while at the same time allowing strangers a limited view into the private lives of their neighbors. Personals were a way to create connection between individuals and the city as a whole. Similarly, matrimonials offered a chance for people who were isolated by social and geographical mobility to circumvent etiquette in order to join conventional middle-class society. Men and women were able to determine their own worth and make independent marriage choices without regard to family or community expectations.

This public intimacy was not met with open arms, however; observers feared that personal ads compromised female virtue, put private affairs in the market, and led to a deterioration of moral standards. But the persistence of these ads throughout the nineteenth century and beyond shows how little these critics influenced the decisions of newspapers, audiences, and advertisers.

Part II of the dissertation demonstrated how personals and matrimonials were co-opted by opportunists who used the columns for financial gain. Personal advertisements provided a way to use the market to create relationships, but the commercialization of intimacy had a downside as well; it was open to exploitation. Fraudulent matrimonial agencies took advantage of people's desire to gain easy wealth by promising rich spouses in exchange for a small fee. Drawing on Progressive Era language and modern business practices, the agencies conned victims by offering legitimacy to the idea of finding a rich mate in public.

Matrimonial ads were exploited by more than just con artists; men and women used them as a cover to find or offer intimacy in exchange for financial support. The *Herald's* personals also became a haven for prostitution, particularly in the form of massage parlors, which were often fronts for brothels. Correspondences, missed connections, and even legitimate matrimonials remained, but they were overwhelmed by these new kinds of ads. Although some of the ads were not as vicious as the exposé made them out to be, the column was still too risqué for the public to tolerate once Hearst and his reporters forced the issue into the open. Before that, however, New Yorkers were indifferent to this exposure of vice.

The allure of personals columns was their ambiguity. Help wanted, rooms for rent, lost and found, and other classifieds are not easy to manipulate. Nor was it necessary to use any of these sections for other uses when the purpose of the personal column was so conveniently vague. Almost anything could be defined as “personal,” and almost everything was. These columns were free-for-alls – a fact that made them appealing while at the same time opening them to abuse.

Yet it is not the ads which are meaningful but rather what they symbolized and how they were used. For many of the people observing them in the mid-nineteenth through early-twentieth centuries, they represented the dissolution of Victorian morality; they were a sign of the dangers of urbanization, the market economy, and the confusion both engendered, and they suggested a loss of control over personal behavior – especially that of women. But for the men and women using them, the personals meant something else: a way to use the public market to create and maintain private, intimate relationships.

Personals may have become less prevalent after the *Herald* affair, but they never disappeared entirely. Matrimonial agencies continued to print ads much like Marion Grey and E.L. Glinn's in newspapers throughout the 1910s, and a few scattered articles about matrimonial advertisements appear as late as the 1930s.⁵ On an airplane from Dallas, Texas, I met a man who, upon hearing about the nature of my project, was delighted to inform me that his mother's best friend met her husband through a matrimonial advertisement in the late 1940s. Computer dating had its origins in the 1960s, with services such as Data Mate and Phase 2. Both these programs required clients to fill out lengthy questionnaires demanding precise, detailed answers, which were then fed into a computer, in a time when computers were the size of a small room. Through mathematical analysis, the computer would match clients together, at least sometimes successfully.⁶ (Computer dating never had a positive image, however; decades after these services were established, the 1992 film *Sneakers* mocked the trend as the purview of the socially inept and undesirable.)

City papers such as New York City's *The Village Voice*, *Observer*, and the *Chicago Defender*, amongst others, ran personals columns starting in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1985, the singer Madonna starred in *Desperately Seeking Susan*, a film which took its name from a series of personal ads the title character's boyfriend used to find her as they both traveled around the country. In 2001 the *New York Times* reinstated its personals column after an approximately 135 year gap. Nevertheless, it was not until the

⁵ "Maine Convicts Yell Six Hours as Letter Writing is Limited," *New York Times*, 30 March 1931: 15. This article is the last I found using the actual phrase "matrimonial advertisement" in the *Times*; the Maine convicts yelled for six hours after they were forbidden from answering personals in newspapers.

⁶ Iris Shur, "The Shur Thing: Computer Dating, '60s Style," *Naples Daily News*, 22 March 2010, <http://www.naplesnews.com/news/2010/mar/22/shur-thing-computer-dating-60s-style>, retrieved 9 April 2010; Iris Shur, "Re: Data Mate," email message to the author, 13 April 2010.

advent of online dating that advertising for a partner became widely acceptable – and has spawned a few movies as well, such as *Must Love Dogs* in 2005.

The content and usage of many personals have not changed dramatically: “missed connection” ads in Craigslist now are almost identical to the ones published over one hundred years ago. For example: “Booth’s Theatre, Monday night, afterwards at Delmonico’s. – Will the lady who noticed her admirer grant an interview?” read an ad in the *Herald* on April 20, 1870; “...Monday night. You were a dark-haired *beauty* ...sitting near me...I kept stealing glances at you & your gorgeous hair & smile. Let’s grab a drink sometime,” read one on Craigslist on April 20, 2010.⁷ Meanwhile, eHarmony and Chemistry both are run on the same model as the agencies run by Glinn and Grey, though these modern-day versions are legitimate and successful.

According to a recent study commissioned by Match.com, one in six couples who were married between 2007 and 2010 met online, and “more than twice as many marriages occurred between people who met on an online dating site than met in bars, at clubs and other social events combined.”⁸ The website also brags that almost twice as many recently married couples met on its website than on the second largest dating site. Meanwhile, eHarmony claims that from “January 1, 2008 through June 30, 2009 an average of 542 people were married every day in the United States” who met through its service.⁹

⁷*New York Herald*, 20 April 1870: 1; “I saw you at Black & White... - m4w - 34 (East Village),” <http://newyork.craigslist.org/mnh/mis/1701564509.html>, 20 April 2010, original ellipses, retrieved 21 April 2010.

⁸ Match.com and Chadwick Martin Bailey 2009 - 2010 Studies: “Recent Trends: Online Dating,” http://cp.match.com/cppp/media/CMB_Study.pdf, retrieved 10 September 2010.

⁹ Match.com and Chadwick Martin Bailey; eHarmony.com and Harris Interactive, “Study: 542 People Married Every Day in U.S., On Average, Through eHarmony,” <http://www.eharmony.com/press/release/31>, retrieved 10 September 2010.

This data demonstrates just how much dating through personals is now part of mainstream life, and given the outrage personals once elicited, it is worth discussing what led to this transformation. First, although women still earn less as a whole than men, they are no longer financially dependent on husbands or fathers as they once were. Therefore, while financial stability and even gain still plays a role in many marriages, it is not as crucial a factor and money does not appear prominently as an important quality a potential spouse must possess (except in websites such as MillionaireMatch.com). One of the most oft-repeated criticisms of matrimonials was that people used them to marry for money; if money only rarely plays a role in personals today – at least openly – such a concern is no longer at issue.

In addition, in a post-Victorian era, women's virtue is neither as fragile as it once was nor as in need of protection from male predators. Most Americans are more tolerant extramarital relationships than the Victorians were, so the illicit affairs that peppered the personals column are longer shocking – and with so many other ways of communicating, all correspondence ads are obsolete in any event.¹⁰ Even extramarital affairs, while deeply frowned upon, are widely known (and there are even dating services catering to them, such as DiscreetAdventures.com). Ultimately, alongside the increase of gay marriage, some conservative concern over premarital sex, skyrocketing divorce rates, and

¹⁰ Though similar ads do still appear on Craigslist; in the “missed connection” section, people frequently post messages to former friends or lovers whom they do not believe will see the ads. For example, “I wish there was a way for me...to let you know how utterly irreplaceable you are...and it isn't for lack of trying...I'm tired of not talking to you anymore...I miss you....” read one such ad on September 13, 2010. <http://www.newyork.craigslist.org/brk/mis/1951257787.html> (original ellipses). While these ads obviously differ in that they are not expected to reach the person being addressed, they still offer some of the same possibilities: the opportunity to be seen in public anonymously and to create oneself as a character in a tragic romance.

various other “threats” to the “sanctity of marriage,” the use of personals seems comparatively harmless.

So what do we learn from studying these ads? For one, they demonstrate that anonymity in urban life did not always have to be stultifying or isolating; rather, it could create opportunities for freedom, self-expression, and escape – both for the participants and observers. Matrimonials, correspondences, and missed connections allowed for flirtation, romance, playfulness, and even fame while at the same time protecting the users from exposure or criticism. In addition, the ads show how commerce could be manipulated to suit individuals’ needs. Judging by the content of the personals in the early 1850s, the original purpose of the columns was providing a way for people to find each other: most ads were requests for information about missing family members or heirs to estates. Perhaps influenced by the *London Times*, which had an “agony column” by the 1840s, people began to use the column to suit their own agenda.¹¹ Having an ad in the personals was not guaranteed; one had to pay for the right, and newspapers did refuse ads considered inappropriate for publication, but with a little ingenuity, advertisers could say, and offer, almost anything.¹²

Finally, the ads are a crucial part of newspaper history. A newspaper which at one time had the largest circulation in the country, the *New York Herald*, published the ads on its front page and first column for approximately forty years. This made the personals visible to thousands of readers across the country, and placing them so prominently indicates that the editors themselves considered the ads a vital factor in the

¹¹ Matthew Rubery, *The Novelty of News: Victorian Fiction After the Invention of the News* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 52.

¹² “Personal,” *Chicago Daily*, 26 May 1883: 11. In a sanctimonious article assuring readers that it refused to publish inappropriate ads, the *Tribune* then proceeded to print ten examples of the kind of ads it considered indecent, apparently rendering them harmless by not including contact information.

Herald's continued success. The ads helped boost the paper's circulation and the column's demise had the reverse effect: the *Herald*, already suffering, saw a hastened decline after the personals were removed. Indeed, the clash over the *Herald's* column also helped solidify William Randolph Hearst's dominance over the industry. But in their prime, personals helped inure the public to what later became tabloid journalism by encouraging a fascination with the private lives of others.

Discomfort with personals still lingers, although the stigma is shrinking daily. In 2003, the *New York Times* announced that "Online Dating Sheds Its Stigma as Losers.com," but seven years later in 2010, the *Chicago Tribune* was only just making the same discovery, stating that "[o]nline dating grows [and] sheds its stigma."¹³ Couples who have met online are still occasionally embarrassed to admit it; single people who sign up for accounts often feel the need to justify their decision. Whatever the *Times* reporter wrote in 2003, online dating still has a slight taint of "Losers.com." What makes this significant is the degree to which people offer the exact same reasons why using personals is shameful today as they did over a hundred years ago. One critic wrote in 1896 that the only people who used matrimonials were "old bachelors, decayed rakes, and other discarded single gentlemen."¹⁴ Echoing him, a writer in the *Washington Post* argued in 2010 that the same view persists: online dating is still seen by some as "the realm of the desperate."¹⁵

¹³ Amy Harmon, "Online Dating Sheds Its Stigma as Losers.com," *New York Times*, 29 June 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/29/us/online-dating-sheds-its-stigma-as-loserscom.html?pagewanted=1> retrieved 10 September 2010; Wailon Wong, "Online dating grows, sheds stigma," *Chicago Tribune*, 22 July 2010, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-07-22/business/sc-biz-0723-online-dating--20100722_1_dating-online-meeting, retrieved 10 September 2010.

¹⁴ "Matrimonial Advertisements," *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, 12 December 1896: 4.

¹⁵ Ellen McCarthy, *Washington Post* "Meredith Fineman, blogging past the stigma of online dating," 9 August 2010,

This uneasiness with online dating is not a holdover from when personals were reviled by mainstream critics – very few people are aware that personals existed before the late twentieth century. So it is significant that the stigma associated with personals now is much the same as it was over a hundred years ago; the negative connotations associated with online dating developed independently and yet are identical. The problem with personals, therefore, is that they are at odds with a fundamental sense that finding romance in a public place – putting oneself on display for others to accept or reject – is wrong. Public courtship is the last resort: if a person could meet a partner anywhere else, he or she would not be browsing or publishing personals. In addition, there is also a lingering sense that marriage is still a sacred institution that should be unsullied by crass commercialism, and most online dating services promote marriage, or at least long-term, committed relationships, as the end goal.

Nevertheless, with social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, as well as a plethora of online dating sites that each offer their own special methods of finding Mr. or Ms. Right (or at least Mr. or Ms. Right Now), there is no doubt that personals, despite their rocky origins and occasional snafus, will sooner or later make the stigma of finding intimacy in a public market disappear. I have plenty of friends and family who met their significant others or spouses online, through eHarmony, the Onion, MySpace, a Yahoo chat room, a discussion thread on the Internet Movie Database, and J-Date. I have met or know of other couples who met through websites like Match, Plenty of Fish, OkCupid, and Craigslist. Indeed, almost everyone I know who has been single in the last five years has dabbled with online dating – myself included. It is hard to condemn a trend that has

been consistently and demonstratively successful. As one of the co-founders of one recent dating site, OkCupid, has pointed out, “[O]nce you have a friend who’s in a relationship that started online, you’re at a crossroads...Either your friend is weird and you’re friends with weirdos, or it’s not weird.”¹⁶

So, the anxious critics of the nineteenth century proved to be wrong; personals, matrimonial advertisements, and agencies did not lead to the dissolution of society. The people who used and continue to use the ads are not the dregs of society or the “mental derelicts” that Judge Landis claimed during Marion Grey’s trial. On the contrary, as the research funded by Match and eHarmony makes clear, personals have helped bring people together. “Bertram,” the extraordinary advertiser from 1864, and others like him were far ahead of their time. This dissertation was written, in part, for them, with the hope that, despite the obstacles they faced in their unconventional searches for husbands and wives, they all found their bright particular stars.

¹⁶ Wong, 2

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