

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: NOTHING LADYLIKE ABOUT IT: THE
 THEATRICAL CAREER OF ANNA ELIZABETH
 DICKINSON

 Stacey A. Stewart, Doctor of Philosophy, 2004

Dissertation directed by: Dr. Catherine Schuler, Department of Theatre

In 1864, at the height of the Civil War, twenty-one year old Anna Elizabeth Dickinson (1842-1932) stood in the House of Representatives, before Congress, the Cabinet, and the Supreme Court, and lambasted President Lincoln for his compassion toward the South. She was the first woman ever to speak before Congress. Her performance earned her the title “America’s Joan of Arc,” and she went on to become one of the nation’s most famous, most popular, and most highly-paid orators. Abolitionists, suffragists, and powerful political parties sought to make her the spokesperson for their causes. When the lecture circuit dried up in the wake of the war, Dickinson—flying in the face of her Philadelphia Quaker upbringing—realized a lifelong ambition to go on the stage. Lacking both theatrical training and experience, Dickinson nevertheless wrote a play, *Anne Boleyn, or, A Crown of Thorns*, and attempted its title role. Although many newspapers were generous, the powerful New York critics were merciless in their condemnation of both play and player. But Dickinson continued to

pursue a career in the theatre, writing a half-dozen plays and acting in several—most notably, a controversial performance as Hamlet in 1882.

Having risen to fame as a public speaker while protected by her Quaker heritage and her youth, Dickinson became a troubling figure once she appeared on a theatrical stage. I argue that Dickinson's attempt to establish herself in the theatrical world can be seen as a manifestation of a larger quest for citizenship—for full participation in American culture and society. Through her playwriting, Dickinson both consciously re-
visioned patriarchal history and challenged conventional notions of appropriate feminine behavior. As an actress, she sought to communicate original ideas about character through carefully considered interpretations. As a woman working in the theatre, she demanded satisfactory compensation and working conditions without regard to the norms of the profession—norms that did not accommodate a woman with her goals and expectations (however unrealistic). In a period when “True Women” were expected to be passive and private, Dickinson was aggressive and obstinately public. And there was nothing ladylike about it.

NOTHING LADYLIKE ABOUT IT: THE THEATRICAL CAREER
OF ANNA ELIZABETH DICKINSON

By

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INTRODUCTION

In 1864, at the height of the Civil War, twenty-one year old Anna Elizabeth Dickinson (1842-1932) stood in the House of Representatives, before Congress, the Cabinet, and the Supreme Court, and lambasted President Lincoln for his compassion toward the South. The solution to the bloody conflict, she declared, was not compromise but unequivocal victory in battle. She was the first woman ever to speak before Congress. Her performance earned her the title “America’s Joan of Arc,” and she went on to become one of the nation’s most famous, most popular, and most highly-paid orators. Abolitionists, suffragists, and powerful political parties sought to make her the spokesperson for their causes. When she toured cross-country on the professional lecture circuit, all of her speeches were devoted to variations on the same topic: “universal freedom, universal suffrage, and universal justice.”¹

When the lecture circuit dried up in the wake of the war, Dickinson—flying in the face of her Philadelphia Quaker upbringing—realized a lifelong ambition to go on the stage. Lacking both theatrical training and experience, Dickinson nevertheless wrote a play, *Anne Boleyn, or, A Crown of Thorns*, and attempted its title role. *The Daily Graphic* described her theatrical debut on 8 May 1876 as the “greatest event of the dramatic season in Boston.”² *The Evening Transcript* observed, “Were a play by Anna Dickinson to be performed, without Miss Dickinson involved except as author, the event

¹ Giraud Chester, *Embattled Maiden: The Life of Anna Dickinson* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1951), 92.

² Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, *The Daily Graphic*, 9 May 1876, in the Anna Dickinson papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

would be one of peculiar interest and importance.”³ Although the Boston critics were “generally disposed to regard the representation as very creditable for a first attempt,”⁴ the critical delegation from New York was merciless in its condemnation of both play and player. The subsequent critical furor followed Dickinson throughout her cross-country tour and return to the East Coast.

Despite the dubious success of her debut and the controversy that dogged her every attempt, Dickinson continued to pursue a career in the theatre, both writing and acting. In 1878 she wrote an heroic tragedy, *Aurelian, or Rome’s Restorer*, for the popular tragedian John McCullough. Although Dickinson wrote to her sister to say that McCullough had agreed to do the play opposite herself as leading lady, it is unclear whether he ever actually committed to the project. Dickinson’s agent later reported to her that upon reading it, McCullough had dismissed *Aurelian* as unplayable. Dickinson retrieved her play.⁵ *Aurelian* was never produced, though Dickinson did offer readings of it on the lyceum platform.

In 1879, Dickinson entered into a stormy partnership with Fanny Davenport, one of the country’s most popular actresses. Davenport had admired *Anne Boleyn* and wrote to Dickinson requesting a play written specifically for her. Dickinson began work on *Esther Arnim, or Friend or Foe*, a play about a “Russian Jewess.” Davenport deemed the play unsuitable for two reasons: the two strong female roles would force her to share

³ *Evening Transcript*, 28 April 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁴ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁵ Chester, 200.

the stage with another actress, and the class of the title character disallowed elaborate costumes. Dickinson returned to her pen; the result was *An American Girl*, a comedy that—thanks to its challenging title role and frequent costume changes—met with Davenport’s approval. But the already-strained relationship was reaching its breaking point. In rehearsal, Davenport decided that certain alterations to the script were necessary. When Dickinson refused to authorize them, Davenport made them anyway. Thereafter Dickinson refused to participate in rehearsals or to attend any of the performances. The production nevertheless achieved moderate critical and financial success, with a six-week run in New York and a tour across the country. When the receipts began to dwindle, however, Davenport was unwilling to continue paying the high royalty Dickinson demanded, and after her one-hundredth performance she returned the play to its author.⁶

In 1881, Dickinson provoked yet another wave of national publicity when she announced her upcoming appearance in male roles: Hamlet, Macbeth, and Claude Melnotte in Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Lady of Lyons*. But this new attempt was also fraught with difficulty. When she abruptly canceled her scheduled appearance as Claude Melnotte at Philadelphia’s Chestnut Street Opera House because her demands for rehearsal time and billing were not being met, her decision was met not only with public disgust and critical derision, but by the threat of a lawsuit alleging breach of contract. For all of the fuss, the case never went to court, and Dickinson soon had a new manager.

⁶ See Chester, Chapter 11.

Dickinson did not abandon her plan to perform in male roles, and on 19 January 1882, she made her debut as Hamlet. This performance, like *Anne Boleyn*, was popular with audiences and many critics across the country but was excoriated by critics in New York City, who dismissed such approval as “unmitigated stupidity.” The production received an extraordinary amount of attention from newspapers, both provincial and metropolitan, many of which expressed dismay at the haste with which Dickinson was condemned by the critics in New York. Whether or not they approved of Dickinson’s performance, critics were fixated on her performance of Hamlet’s gender.

Though Dickinson was still trying to get one of her plays, *The Test of Honor*, produced as late as 1893, her theatrical career was, in effect, over with the New York run of *Hamlet* (in repertory with *Anne Boleyn*) in 1883. She attempted a tour of *Anne Boleyn* for the 1883-1884 season but the company did not have enough money to complete it. In 1888, she returned briefly to the Republican stump, but difficulties in booking engagements in New York, combined with her own exhaustion, ended her speaking tour.

In 1891, with the claim that Anna was deteriorating both mentally and physically, Anna’s sister Susan had her committed to the State Hospital for the Insane in Danville, Pennsylvania. After her release Anna sued the asylum doctors for wrongful imprisonment, and after one hung jury (with a decision split eight to four in her favor), she was finally—in 1897—declared sane by another.⁷ From then on she was no longer a figure on a public stage, and she lived the last thirty-five years of her life in relative isolation in the Catskill mountains, dying in 1932.

⁷ See Chester, Chapter 15.

Dickinson's contemporaries clearly viewed her as one of the most influential women in America. Frances E. Willard and Mary A. Livermore, important nineteenth-century feminists, include her in their *A Woman of the Century* (1893), a compendium of biographical sketches of leading American women. Dickinson's entry in *Eminent Women of the Age, Being Narratives of the Lives and Deeds of the Most Prominent Women of the Present Generation* (1869), is written by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Susan B. Anthony described her as "the most passionate affection of her life."⁸ She was also admired—and respected—by men of influence, such as Mark Twain, Civil War General Benjamin Butler (who wanted to marry her), abolitionist Wendell Phillips (with whom she allegedly had an affair), and New York *Tribune* editor Whitelaw Reid.

Dickinson's debut on the stage in 1876 was the theatrical event of the season, attended by "the largest and most brilliant audience ever seen within the Globe Theatre,"⁹ including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Julia Ward Howe, William Dean Howells, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson. And though reviled by the New York critical establishment, she was supported in her endeavors by a number of theatrical luminaries, among them Dion Boucicault, John McCullough, and, until the rift, Fanny Davenport. When in 1873 Shakespearean E.L. Davenport heard of Dickinson's plan to enter "our profession," he wrote, "I rejoice at it for all great and brilliant minds tend to add new lustre to it," and offered to negotiate for her appearance at his theatre,

⁸ Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull* (HarperPerennial: New York, 1998), 116.

⁹ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, *Boston Journal*, 9 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

Philadelphia's Chestnut Street Theatre.¹⁰ When the news broke that she was to appear on stage in male roles, the *Springfield (MA) Republican* called her announcement "the most astonishing piece of dramatic news ever heard."⁵ She received love letters from French tragedian Charles Fechter. Both Rose Eytinge and Mary Anderson requested permission—which Dickinson never granted—to play Anne Boleyn themselves. In addition, Dickinson was friendly with several powerful theatre managers, Stephen R. Fiske of New York's Fifth Avenue Theatre, and Daniel Frohman, who was associated (at various times) with Madison Square Theatre, the Lyceum, and Daly's.

Given her fame as an orator and political activist and the amount of critical attention she received during her short career on the stage, it is surprising that so little scholarly work has been devoted to Dickinson. Giraud Chester's 1951 biography, *Embattled Maiden: The Life of Anna Dickinson*, is the only published survey of her life.¹¹ Judith Anderson's 1934 Master's thesis (Lehigh University), "Anna E. Dickinson 1842-1932, A Biographical Sketch," and James Harvey Young's unpublished manuscript biography (based on his 1941 doctoral dissertation, "Anna Elizabeth Dickinson and the Civil War," and housed in the Special Collections Department at Emory University, where Young taught for more than forty years) are the only other significant studies of her life. Other studies, such as George Philip Prindle's 1971 doctoral dissertation

¹⁰ E.L. Davenport, Bradford Co., Pennsylvania, to Anna E. Dickinson, 7 August 1873, Dickinson papers.

¹¹ It is, perhaps, misleading to refer to Chester's biography as "scholarly work." Chester admits inventing certain conversations and fudging chronology "for the purpose of smoother continuity." The historical accuracy of the book as a whole is therefore dubious. See Chester, 296.

(Stanford University), “An Analysis of the Rhetoric in Selected Representative Speeches of Anna Elizabeth Dickinson,” have examined her rhetoric. *Texts in Context: Critical Dialogues on Significant Episodes in American Political Rhetoric* (1989), edited by Michael C. Leff and Fred J. Kauffeld, includes two essays on (and a newly edited version of) Dickinson’s famous Joan of Arc speech. More recently, Craig A. Magee has considered the politics of race in *What Answer?*, Dickinson’s novel about miscegenation, in his 1998 Master’s thesis (University of Nevada, Las Vegas) “Howells, Dickinson, Lewis: An Exercise in Reading the Interracial Canon.” The smattering of articles published about Dickinson has been largely concerned with her political activism in the Civil War years, though, as historian Eleanor Flexner notes, “Today few Civil War histories refer to Anna Dickinson.”¹² Flexner suggests that the omission may have occurred because Dickinson “throw[s] the accepted historical timetable out. At a time when even the most advanced women were supposedly concerned only with their own betterment or with good works, some of them were active in national politics and playing a not insignificant role.”¹³

Virtually no scholarly work has been done on Dickinson’s brief but significant career in the theatre. Chester devotes three chapters to her work in the theatre in his biography, and there is one brief article about her debut, James Harvey Young’s “Anna Dickinson as Anne Boleyn,” published in *Emory University Quarterly* in 1949. Save for

¹² Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman’s Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Atheneum, 1971; Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1959), 111.

¹³ *Ibid.*

a handful of derisive mentions in Odell's *Annals of the New York Stage* (and other general theatre histories of the nineteenth-century), Dickinson is absent from the annals of theatrical history.¹⁴ Such disregard from theatre historians, especially feminist theatre historians, is remarkable in light of Dickinson's fame and controversial theatrical career. But Dickinson spent her entire career in the theatre battling the disdain of the powerful New York critics, and theatre historians tend to concentrate on primary centers of theatrical activity and to privilege the opinions emanating from them, often assuming that the metropolitan critics were the most sophisticated and experienced and therefore the most reliable judges of a performer's (or performance's) quality. For example, the introduction to *Shakespeare on the American Stage* justifies the limited scope of the study (only what happened in New York City) with the explanation that "ultimately

¹⁴ Dickinson's name appears in Odell's *Annals of the New York Stage* nearly forty times because he chronicles her platform appearances as well. Odell, interestingly, is as contemptuous in his accounts of Dickinson on the platform as he is of her on the stage. In his first mention of Dickinson (in reference to an 1863 platform appearance), he states that "Her later connection with stage affairs forces me to notice her now." (See Vol. 7, 526-7.) It seems likely that Odell's attitude toward Dickinson, acquired through his familiarity with the New York theatrical critics, infused his accounts of her speaking career as well as those of her theatrical work. Dickinson was enormously popular in the 1860s, yet Odell's accounts of her New York appearances in that decade are anything but flattering. For example: "On the 2nd of April, the too, too serious Anna D. lectured on How Providence is Teaching the Nation" (Vol. 7, 534); "With much entertainment in New York, I doubt if it were worth the trip to Brooklyn on a cold winter night to hear Anna D, on February 21st, make her Plea for Labour" (Vol. 7, 707); "Anna D. lectured on Earnestness, with, I fancy, an excess of that virtue in her presentation" (Vol. 8, 106); he notes that her talk was "'repeated 150 times throughout the country.' I make another confession; I can work up no regret at missing any of that century and a half of evenings!" (Vol. 8, 367); "Anna Dickinson was not beautiful, but she could speak in public, and did so, on November 5th" (Vol. 8, 513). See George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, 15 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927-1949).

whatever set the style of Shakespearean playing and production in America came into or came out of the theatrical capital of the country and was well reported there.”¹⁵ It is therefore unsurprising that Dickinson has been largely erased from theatrical history; when her name does appear in theatrical annals, it is often accompanied by a snide dismissal. (Odell provides perhaps the most colorful examples.) Clearly, the scathing opinions of those powerful New York critics had their effect: subsequent historians—including Dickinson’s biographer, writing in 1951—have fixed Dickinson’s career in the theatre as a failure.

Yet the critical response to Dickinson’s performances was not uniformly negative; she received many reviews that were as encouraging as those from New York were vicious. The multiple scrapbooks of newspaper clippings that comprise her manuscript collection at the Library of Congress reveal a much more complex landscape. The picture that emerges is one of a relentlessly public woman in an era that relegated women to the private.

Dickinson began her career as a voice for the disenfranchised. As such, the question of citizenship was central to her self-fashioning from the very beginning of her public life. In *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, Lauren Berlant articulates a notion of abstract citizenship that may be instructive in looking at the trajectory of Dickinson’s career. Berlant argues that from the time of the nation’s founding, “the fantasy of a national democracy was based on

¹⁵ Charles H. Shattuck, *Shakespeare on the American Stage: From the Hallams to Edwin Booth* (Washington, D.C.: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1976), xiv.

principles of abstract personhood (all persons shall be formally equivalent) and its rational representation in a centralized state and federal system.”¹⁶ While this concept of abstract citizenship makes a claim to universality, in fact, “the constitutional American ‘person,’” notes Berlant, “was a white male property owner.”¹⁷ From the time of her first speech, Dickinson contested such a notion not merely by speaking on behalf of those excluded from full citizenship, but simply through the act of speaking in public as a woman. In so doing, she claimed for herself the right of full participation in national culture.

But in early America, “the only ‘public women’ were, as slang neatly indicated, prostitutes.”¹⁸ Although by the nineteenth century, women were increasingly entering American public life in pursuit of education, the vote, equal employment, and, in Dickinson’s case, abolition, the stigma attached to “public women” persisted. Historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has noted, “Nineteenth-century American society provided but one socially respectable, nondeviant role for women—that of loving wife and mother.”¹⁹ Confined to the domestic sphere, this “Angel in the House” was isolated from the public (and therefore masculine) world of business and industry and relegated to the home,

¹⁶ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 18-19.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Faye Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses and Audiences 1790-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 3.

¹⁹ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 212.

where she nurtured husband and children. Americans conceived of women in one of two ways: moral, spiritual, domestic, and pure, or immoral and unchaste.

Anna Dickinson cannot be described as either an angel in the house or a prostitute in the street, but at different moments in her career she was associated with the qualities attached to each. When she began her oratorical career at the tender age of seventeen, her speeches carried special weight, not only because of her passion and intelligence but because they were from the mouth of a young Quaker girl. It was not by accident that in the Civil War period she became known as “America’s Joan of Arc.” As Marina Warner has noted in her book, *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism*, “Innocence is a philosophical and moral position of great strength; it presents an image of integrity needed in times of crisis in a nation. The armed maiden of the Renaissance was reborn in the nineteenth century as a guileless child.”²⁰ The American public, then, came to know Anna Dickinson as the youthful, pure, savior of the nation.

When Dickinson went on the stage, however, she entered a world that few “ladies” frequented and where none participated. While some hailed her advent on the stage because they believed she would elevate its debased status, others lamented that she would only debase herself. And though she had some minor theatrical triumphs, her career was riddled with controversy and she enjoyed nowhere near the degree of success she achieved on the lecture circuit.

²⁰ Marina Warner, *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981), 248.

In a society that only understood women in one of two ways—moral and pure, or immoral and unchaste—Dickinson walked a fine line between the two. Having risen to fame as a public speaker while protected by her Quaker heritage and her youth, she became a troubling figure once she appeared on a theatrical stage. In her recent book, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism*, Susan A. Glenn suggests that between the late 1880s and late 1920s, “female performers became agents and metaphors of changing gender relations.”²¹ She argues further,

Assertive self-spectacle by theater women was of crucial importance for changing concepts of womanhood at the turn of the century. Equally significant was the way theatrical producers made a spectacle of women, positioning them as passive objects for audience consumption. The result was a dynamic tension between women’s desire (on as well as off the stage) to use theatrical spectacle as a vehicle for achieving greater voice in culture and politics, and theater’s countervailing urge to turn female spectacle into a symbolic expression of male mastery.²²

Dickinson did not allow herself to be positioned as the passive female object onstage. Neither was she successful as one of the “theater women who defied conventional notions of feminine comportment” and who brought “a vital and infectious source of iconoclastic energy” to the theatre.²³ On the contrary—she was often punished, not rewarded, for her theatrical transgressions. But although Dickinson’s theatrical debut occurred in 1876, more than a decade before Glenn’s time period, Glenn’s formulation provides a useful model for considering the tensions at play in Dickinson’s theatrical

²¹ Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 3.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 217.

career. How did Dickinson, in her acting and playwriting, attempt to “use theatrical spectacle as a vehicle for achieving greater voice in culture and politics”? How did she manipulate—or fail to manipulate—her public identity in order to achieve that voice?

In order to answer these questions, I situate Dickinson within a number of different contexts. First, I position her in the context of nineteenth-century oratory and the reform movements—abolition and women’s rights—that she supported. Chapter One, “America’s Joan of Arc,” examines Dickinson’s identity as a public speaker, from her rise to fame on the political stump to her professional career as a speaker on the Lyceum circuit. It examines the ways in which Dickinson interacted with the abolition and women’s rights movements that she supported, then characterizes her speaking style, concentrating on her platform performance rather than on her rhetoric. It explores the manner in which the professionalization of the lecture field altered Dickinson’s image from “America’s Joan of Arc” to “Queen of the Lyceum,”²⁴ suggesting that ultimately, she was “more of a performer than a reformer.”²⁵

Next, I examine several of Dickinson’s extant plays with respect to their “feminist” content. Chapter Two, “New Women or True Women? Three American Plays,” focuses on Dickinson’s identity as a playwright, concentrating on those plays that received a public hearing, either through a mounted production or a staged reading: *Anne*

²⁴ Both of these designations are Chester’s.

²⁵ Wil Kinkugel and Robert Rowland, “Response to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s Anna E. Dickinson’s Jeanne D Divergent Views,” in *Texts in Context: Critical Dialogues on Significant Episodes in American Political Rhetoric*, ed. Michael C. Leff and Fred. J. Kauffeld (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1989), 114.

Boleyn, An American Girl, and Aurelian. It evaluates the plays with regard to both their artistic merit and their political agendas, and it is particularly concerned with the ways in which the plays either reflect or contradict Dickinson's feminist politics. It also explores the way in which Dickinson "Americanizes" her historical subjects, and considers the extent to which the plays reflected images of American women in the nineteenth century.

Chapter Three, "Presumptuous Incompetence," positions Dickinson in her theatrical context and examines her identity as an actress on the legitimate stage. Concentrating on her two major roles, Anne Boleyn and Hamlet, it describes her acting style, her goals as an actress, and positions her alongside other actresses of her day who met with greater critical and/or popular success. It questions whether Dickinson's skill in captivating her audience—so remarkable in her oratorical career—simply faded on the theatre's larger stage. It looks at Dickinson's acting career in light of nineteenth-century efforts to professionalize acting, and asks to what extent her identity as an actress was influenced—or dictated—by her identity as an outspoken feminist.

Finally, I examine the manner in which Dickinson conducted business in the theatrical world. Chapter Four, "Nothing Ladylike About It," explores Dickinson's identity as a woman of the theatre, concentrating on the ways in which she attempted to control the trajectory of her career. Although Dickinson never managed her own career, neither would she sign on with any manager who would dictate the terms under which she worked. Indeed, she repeatedly complained about the ineptitude and/or dishonesty of her string of managers. But were her managers inept and/or dishonest? Or did Dickinson's determination to maintain control of her own career—keeping in mind her

utter lack of experience in navigating the theatre world—prevent her from establishing effective working relationships with her managers? And did this determination—from her unyielding demand for complete royalties for *An American Girl*, to her breach of contract over *The Lady of Lyons*—ultimately sabotage her career in the theatre?

In the end, I argue, Dickinson’s attempt to establish herself in the theatrical world can be seen as a manifestation of a larger quest for citizenship—for full participation in American culture. Through her playwriting, Dickinson both consciously re-visioned patriarchal history and challenged conventional notions of appropriate feminine behavior. As an actress, she sought to communicate original ideas about character through carefully considered interpretations. As a woman working in the theatre, she demanded satisfactory compensation and working conditions without regard to the norms of the profession—norms that did not accommodate a woman with her goals and expectations (however unrealistic). In a period when “True Women” were expected to be passive and private, Dickinson was aggressive and obstinately public. And there was nothing ladylike about it.

A Note About Sources

...the great majority of those journalists who presume to print their estimates of histrionic performances are profoundly ignorant of the elements of dramatic art...they victimize [the actors]...their cue is to depreciate and detract, to satirize and belittle, so as...to imply the superiority of their own knowledge and taste...²⁶

²⁶ William Rounseville Alger, *Life of Edwin Forrest*, Vol. II (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1877), 439, quoted in John Rothman, *The Origin and Development of Dramatic Criticism in the New York Times, 1851-1880* (New York: Arno Press, 1970), 1.

This study draws heavily upon the contents of the Dickinson papers, housed in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. Along with thousands of letters (both those written and those received by Dickinson), the collection contains voluminous scrapbooks of press clippings. Most of the clippings cannot be attributed to a known author, and for many the date and name of the publication are also unknown. Certain questions that suggest themselves (for example, what proportion of the critics were women, and did their responses to Dickinson as a performer differ from those of men?) are therefore unanswerable. While there are hazards to relying on these generally anonymous critics, their responses comprise the bulk of the primary evidence related to Dickinson's stage career, and they are valuable as such.

We do know a little about the New York critics who were responding to Dickinson's work. Dickinson repeatedly expressed the opinion that they told "deliberate, willful lie[s]" in a calculated effort "to do me the greatest injury";²⁷ that their proclamations on her performances were "unjust"; and that she was being deliberately singled out for their abuse. Her accusations were not unlike others being levied at the same time. In the mid- to late- nineteenth century, New York theatre critics were

charged not merely with negligence and ignorance, but with the most heinous crimes, ranging from personal animosity toward the actor or playwright who was the unfortunate target of a given review, to large-scale graft, bribery, and other forms of corruption, used at times to enrich the critic himself, at others to coerce some innocent theatre manager or

²⁷ Anna Dickinson, quoted in unidentified clipping, 12 April 1877, in Dickinson papers.

publicity agent to avail himself of the advertising columns of a given newspaper.²⁸

The extent to which these charges were warranted is unclear. According to historian John Rothman, rival papers may indeed have fabricated stories about other papers' employees; there is also substantial evidence that at least one critic—Frederick Schwab of the *New York Times*—was guilty of unethical practices.²⁹ It seems less likely that the critics were as ignorant of the stage as charged. A.C. Wheeler (also known as “Trinculo” and “Nym Crinkle”) who wrote, at various times during the period, for *The World*, *The Sun*, the *Spirit of the Times*, the *New York Star*, and his own *Nym Crinkle's Feuilleton*, wrote plays, coauthoring *Twins* with Steele MacKaye in 1876.³⁰ Dickinson's nemesis William Winter (“Mercutio”) was married to an actress and close friends with such theatrical luminaries as Edwin Booth, John McCullough, Joseph Jefferson, Lawrence Barrett, Ada Rehan, Adelaide Neilson, and Augustin Daly.³¹ Stephen Fiske (“Ariel”) was a playwright whose plays received some positive critical attention; he became a rival

²⁸ John Rothman, *The Origin and Development of Dramatic Criticism in the New York Times, 1851-1880* (New York: Arno Press, 1970), 1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2. See Rothman for an in-depth discussion of the charges levied at Schwab.

³⁰ Tice L. Miller, *Bohemians and Critics: American Theatre Criticism in the Nineteenth Century* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1981), 133.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 76; 94-97. Interestingly, Mrs. Winter—who was a novelist, short story writer, and play adaptor as well as actress—wrote to Edwin Booth in 1869: “I am perfectly aware that it is the hardest profession which a woman can undertake...At the same time it is almost the only one accessible to a woman who wishes to earn an independent livelihood by the exercise of her intellectual faculties.” Quoted in Miller, 77.

of Augustin Daly, who, years later, hired him as his business manager.³² Indeed, one contemporary paper related:

It is alleged that [the dramatic critics of our daily papers] each and all have a drama of their own locked up in their desks, and that they are soured in spirit and exasperated at successful playwrights because they have not themselves won a place alongside of DUMAS, BOUCICAULT, and ROBERTSON. The faces as to this matter we do not know, but we do know that they write with much fairness of theatrical performances, and render both actors and dramatists a service which they are foolish if they do not acknowledge good-naturedly, and without any attempt to disparage the motives of those who celebrate their successes and record their failures.³³

“On the whole,” Rothman notes, “they really form an impressive body of intellectuals.”³⁴

Whatever their credentials, and whatever their biases, these critics were nevertheless eyewitnesses to Dickinson’s career as a performer, and as such their responses are revealing and crucial.

³² Ibid., 105; 109.

³³ *The Sun*, 15 April 1877, in Dickinson papers. It seems probable that this article was written by Wheeler, who was the dramatic critic for *The Sun* in 1877-78. See Miller, 131.

³⁴ Rothman, 2

CHAPTER 1: AMERICA'S JOAN OF ARC

...what are Miss Dickinson's attractions? Do people attend her lectures because they expect to hear a thoughtful and eloquent exposition of a great subject, or is the lecturer looked upon as a natural curiosity like the double-headed girl, the bearded woman, the lightning calculator, the what is it, or the great American pie-biter?¹

When Anna Dickinson began her meteoric rise to oratorical fame in the Civil War period, abolitionists, suffragists, and powerful political parties sought to make her the spokesperson for their causes. Never immersing herself completely in one movement to the exclusion of others, she sometimes frustrated those who would have made her their own. As one newspaper item noted late in her career:

Miss Dickinson has long been pestered and bored almost to desperation by reformers of all stamps. Each can see that her plain duty is to espouse his or her pet scheme, and devote herself entirely to its advocacy. Suffragists have always known she should make her one objective point the ballot. Prohibitionists for years have watched her violate her duty to God and man by not giving their cause the benefit of her matchless eloquence. Every hobbyist, in fact, has thought that his was the one safe, sure and honorable steed for Miss Dickinson to mount.²

But Dickinson "was a free lance. She did not work well within the harness of an organized movement."³ Though she was a passionate advocate for abolition and

¹ *Evening Telegraph* (Philadelphia), 20 October 1869, clipping in Dickinson papers.

² Goshen (NY) *Democrat*, 20 August 1891, in Dickinson papers.

³ James Harvey Young, unpublished biography of Anna E. Dickinson in James Harvey Young Collection, Special Collections Department, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, Ch. 7, 19. Young was chair of the Department of History at Emory University from 1958 to 1966 and the Charles Howard Candler professor of American Social History from 1980 to 1984; he was a distinguished

women's rights, she resisted conforming to the tenets of any one platform, devoting all of her speeches to variations on the same general topic: "universal freedom, universal suffrage, and universal justice."⁴

Female orators in the mid-nineteenth century were generally marked with the long-standing stigma attached to public women: "ladies" did not speak in public. The early abolitionist speakers provoked animosity that lingered well into the second half of the nineteenth century, while the women's rights conventions in the mid-nineteenth century prompted vehement condemnations in the press.⁵ These feminist orators were especially incendiary because they "claimed an equal place in a *fraternal* order of culture...took their political demands to the public platform...[and] raised the hackles of the public about women's proper sexual place."⁶ The popular press responded with antifeminist pamphlets and caricatures that cast doubt on the speaker's gender identity, representing her as an "unsexed woman."⁷ In other words, "they made the woman's

member of the Emory faculty for more than forty years. The biography manuscript began as Young's dissertation, "Anna Elizabeth Dickinson and the Civil War" (University of Illinois, 1941). He has published many articles on the history of medicine (in particular, quackery) and Anna Dickinson.

⁴ Chester, 92.

⁵ Lillian O'Connor, *Pioneer Women Orators: Rhetoric in the Ante-Bellum Reform Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), 40; Claire Kahane, *Passions of the Voice: Hysteria, Narrative, and the Figure of the Speaking Woman, 1850-1915* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 6.

⁶ Kahane, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*

public voice the primary signifier of her problematic sexual being.”⁸ Represented variously as both hermaphrodites and prostitutes, feminist orators were sexually suspect.⁹

But when Dickinson began her oratorical career at the age of seventeen, she—for a time—seemed immune to such charges. The youth and innocence she projected seemed to lend her speeches a special moral weight. And, as one newspaper of the Civil War years related, “Miss Dickinson, unlike most ladies who speak in public, is young, and made a narrow escape from being pretty.”¹⁰ Furthermore, “America’s Joan of Arc” was an apt moniker. As Marina Warner has noted, nineteenth-century images of Joan recast the adolescent warrior maid as a “guileless child.”¹¹ Embroiled in a bloody conflict that pitted brother against brother, Americans were captivated by the young Quaker girl who seemed sent from on high to save the nation. As one paper noted later in her career, “Her reputation as a lecturer is assured for all time. No one who has heard her during the dark and desperate days of the rebellion can forget her fervid, impassioned eloquence, whether uttered in tearful appeals to the patriotic, or in scornful denunciation of slavery and treason.”¹²

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

¹¹ Marina Warner, *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981), 248.

¹² *Scranton Republican*, 8 January 1879, in Dickinson papers.

As Dickinson's popularity and fame swelled, her public identity shifted. Having begun her speaking career wearing the simple black garb of the Quakers, as her fortunes increased she began to appear "in a new phase—as patronized, popular, and wearing point lace and diamonds."¹³ As she toured across the country on the professional lecture circuit, she became one of the nation's most popular and most highly paid orators, with crowds and fees rivaling those of the finest male speakers of the day. At the same time, her new identity as "Queen of the Lyceum" also brought with it the sorts of accusations levied at women (like actresses) who not only worked for a living, but did so in the public eye.

This chapter explores Dickinson's identity and development as a public speaker, from her rise to national prominence on the political stump to her professional career on the Lyceum circuit. It examines the way in which Dickinson interacted with the abolitionist and women's rights movements that she supported; it then characterizes her speaking style, concentrating on her platform performance rather than on her rhetoric. How did the professionalization of lecturing alter Dickinson's image from "America's Joan of Arc" to that of "Queen of the Lyceum"? Was she, as some have suggested, "more of a performer than a reformer"?¹⁴

The Beginnings

¹³ *Springfield Republican*, n.d., clipping in Dickinson papers.

¹⁴ Wil Kinkugel and Robert Rowland, "Response to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's Anna E. Dickinson's Jeanne D'Arc: Divergent Views," in *Texts in Context: Critical Dialogues on Significant Episodes in American Political Rhetoric*, ed. Michael C. Leff and Fred J. Kauffeld (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1989), 114.

Dickinson made her first speech at a Quaker meeting in response to a man's caustic opposition to women's rights. She remembered,

I got madder and madder...and just as soon as he sat down I jumped up like a Jack-in-a-box and began to reply to his tirade. As I spoke I left the pew and walked down the aisle to where he sat, and shook my fist in his face as I continued to answer him. I had no idea of speaking at all, and was as much astonished as anybody at what I did.¹⁵

In her biographical sketch of Dickinson, Elizabeth Cady Stanton provides an account of the occasion:

She poured out such volleys of invective, sarcasm, and denunciation, painted the helplessness of women with such pathos and power, giving touching incidents of her own hard experience, that her antagonist sank lower and lower into his seat and bowed his head in silence and humiliation, while those who witnessed the scene were melted to tears. Never was an audience more electrified and amazed than were they with the eloquence and power of that young girl...Pointing straight at him, and, with each step approaching nearer where he sat, saying, You, sir, said thus and so, she swept away his arguments, one by one, like cobwebs before a whirlwind, and left him not one foot of ground whereon to stand. When she finished, he took his hat and sneaked out of the meeting like a whipped spaniel, to the great amusement of the audience, leaving their sympathies with the brave young girl.¹⁶

¹⁵ Quoted in Major J.B. Pond, *Eccentricities of Genius: Memories of Famous Men and Women of the Platform and Stage* (New York: G. W. Dillingham Company, 1900), 152. In her essay, "'She who would be politically free herself must strike the blow': Suffragette Autobiography and Suffragette Militancy," Maroula Joannou notes that, "The autobiographer's awareness of 'intelligent discontents' is sometimes traced back to formative experiences in girlhood,"--for example, one woman remembered, "my first reactions to feminism began when I was forced to darn my brothers' stockings while they read or played cards or dominoes." In *The Uses of Autobiography*, ed. Julia Swindells (London: Taylor and Francis, 1995): 31-44.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Anna Elizabeth Dickinson," in *Eminent Women of the Age, Being Narratives of the Lives and Deeds of the Most Prominent Women of the Present Generation* (Hartford: S.M. Betts & Co, 1869), 486.

Exhilarated by the effect her words had on her audience, Dickinson continued to attend meetings on subjects that interested her.¹⁷ The child of an abolitionist father who had died of a heart attack after giving an anti-slavery speech,¹⁸ Dickinson—only two years old at the time of his death—had developed firm abolitionist convictions in childhood and published an anti-slavery piece in William Lloyd Garrison’s abolitionist journal, *The Liberator*, at age fourteen.¹⁹ After her first extemporaneous speech on behalf of women, she gained confidence in her verbal abilities and began to make herself heard regularly at meetings of the “Association of Progressive Friends.”²⁰

In 1861, Dickinson was dismissed from her post at the U.S. Mint in Philadelphia for making a speech on the events of the war in which she lambasted General George B. McClellan. In the same year, McClellan, a Northern Democrat, had become the second-

¹⁷ Although Dickinson had little formal education—she had been forced to go to work to support the family at the age of fifteen—she was a voracious reader and was particularly interested in works of history and abolitionism.

¹⁸ “Those who knew him said he was a brilliant speaker...He passed the last night of his life, in making an anti-slavery speech, for he fell dead immediately afterward. I was too young to remember him, but the circumstances naturally appealed to the feelings of an imaginative child.” Anna E. Dickinson, quoted in James Harvey Young, manuscript biography of Anna Elizabeth Dickinson in James Harvey Young Collection, Special Collections Department, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, Ch. 1, 6. The Quakers had been at the forefront of the abolition movement since the 1820s, well before the rest of the country became attuned to the problem of slavery. See Charles G. Sellers, Jr., in “The Travail of Slavery,” in *The Southerner As American* (Chapel Hill: 1960), 40-71, reprinted in Kenneth M. Stampp, ed., *The Causes of the Civil War*, rev. ed., New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 175.

¹⁹ Stanton, 480, 482.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 485.

ranking general of the Union army, celebrated in the press as the savior of the North.²¹ Yet McClellan had Southern connections and often seemed reluctant to attack the Confederate army.²² Dickinson gave her speech shortly after the Battle of Ball's Bluff, a catastrophic battle with many Northern casualties; she believed that McClellan had waited disastrously long to begin the conflict. She proclaimed, "History will record that this battle was lost, not through ignorance and incompetence, but through the treason of the commanding general, George B. McClellan, and time will vindicate the truth of my assertion."²³ At the time, she was hissed each of the three times she repeated her argument. Yet several months later Congress launched a Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War to probe the causes of the defeat, and it soon urged the President and the army to light a fire under McClellan.²⁴ Three years later when Dickinson spoke about the war (when McClellan was running against Lincoln), her reputation had soared to such

²¹ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: the Civil War Era* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 359.

²² *Ibid.*, 363. McClellan also disliked abolitionists.

²³ Quoted in Stanton, 492. See also *A Woman of the Century*, ed. Frances E. Willard and Mary A. Livermore, Introduction by Leslie Shepard (New York: Charles Wells Moulton, 1893), 241.

²⁴ Hans L. Trefousse, *The Radical Republicans: Lincoln's Vanguard for Justice* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 183. Of course the establishment of this committee was highly political. Dominated by radical Republicans looking for a scapegoat, the committee was "damned by its critics as a 'Jacobin' conspiracy to guillotine Democratic generals and praised by its defenders as a foe of inefficiency and corruption in the army." According to Pulitzer-prizewinning historian James McPherson, it was "a bit of both." See McPherson, 362-363.

a level that when she repeated the same statement in the same Pennsylvania town, she was greeted with a vociferous, “And time has vindicated your assertion.”²⁵

In 1862, Dickinson stepped up her efforts on behalf of abolition when she shared the rostrum of the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society with orator and abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison.²⁶ After hearing her speak, Garrison was so impressed with her skill that he dubbed her “The Girl Orator.” Not long after her debut with Garrison, Dickinson spoke before an audience of one thousand in Philadelphia’s Concert Hall, where she “condemn[ed] slavery as the source of all national ills and propos[ed] universal emancipation as the perfect remedy.”²⁷ In desperate financial straits after her dismissal from the Mint, she wrote to Garrison shortly after her success at concert hall, asking to

²⁵ Quoted in Stanton, 493. Indeed, Dickinson’s criticism of McClellan seems to be at least somewhat vindicated by contemporary Civil War scholarship. McPherson notes: “Military success could be achieved only by taking risks; McClellan seemed to shrink from the prospect. He lacked the mental and moral courage required of great generals—the will to *act*, to confront the terrible moment of truth on the battlefield. Having experienced nothing of success in his career, he was afraid to risk failure. He also suffered from what might be termed the ‘Bull Run syndrome’—a paralysis that prevented any movement against the Confederates until the army was thoroughly prepared. McClellan excelled at preparation, but it was never quite complete. The army was perpetually *almost* ready to move—but the enemy was always larger and better prepared.” See McPherson, 365.

²⁶ One of the leading abolitionists of his day, Garrison professed that the Constitution supported the institution of slavery and argued for total emancipation as early as the 1830s. He founded the anti-slavery journal *The Liberator* in 1831. Garrison “judged everything by two standards of moral rights--natural law as expressed in the Declaration of Independence, and Christian ethic as expressed in the Bible...The Bible was the only book he ever really read, and his abolitionism itself sprang directly from his belief that slavery violated God’s law.” See Russell B. Nye, *William Lloyd Garrison and the Humanitarian Reformers*, The Library of American Biography, ed. Oscar Handlin (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 1955), 198-199.

²⁷ Young, Ch. 1, 13.

come give her speech in Boston. He subsequently arranged for her a one-month sponsorship by the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, which afforded her the opportunity to speak in Boston and other Massachusetts towns on “The National Crisis.”²⁸ Garrison also helped publicize Dickinson’s forthcoming visit by writing a glowing account of her speaking in *The Liberator*, as well as by arranging for announcements of her speeches in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*.²⁹ When she arrived in Boston, she stayed in the Garrison home and reported to her sister that the abolitionist treated her like a member of his own family.³⁰

Dickinson made her debut in Boston before a crowd of four or five thousand, when she was a last-minute substitute for Wendell Phillips, the blue-blooded abolitionist.³¹ Her debut in New York City happened only a few weeks later, when she—introduced by Garrison before a national audience—addressed the twenty-ninth

²⁸ Frances E. Willard and Mary A. Livermore, eds., *A Woman of the Century*, with a new introduction by Leslie Shepard (New York: Charles Wells Moulton, 1893; Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1967), 241; Young, Ch. 1, 14.

²⁹ Young, Ch. 1, 14.

³⁰ Wendy Hamand Venet, *Neither Ballots Nor Bullets: Women Abolitionists and the Civil War* (University Press of Virginia: Charlottesville, 1991), 40.

³¹ *Ibid.*; Bernard Baskerville, *The People’s Voice: The Orator in American Society* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1979), 178. Dickinson “had long worshipped Wendell Phillips.” Biographical sketches often repeat the story of how, as a young girl, Dickinson scrubbed sidewalks in order to earn enough money to hear Phillips speak. See Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1999), 116.

anniversary meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society in Cooper Union, probably the highest-profile (next to Congress) speaking venue in the country.³²

Accounts of “The National Crisis” note that she “treated her great topic in a manner and with an ability commensurate with its importance, going to the root of the rebellion, and calling upon the people to demand of the Government the immediate and total abolition of slavery, under the war power, as the only radical method of cure.”³³ As she toured across New England, her public identity loomed large, for partisan politics were a mainstay of newspapers in the Civil War years.³⁴

The Stump

As a result of her success in New England, Dickinson was pursued eagerly by the radical Republicans, who shared her firm and passionate belief that slavery was the crucial issue of the war. They demanded absolute emancipation and resolute military action on its behalf; they swore that the South would not be rebuilt until the freed slaves received their civil rights.³⁵ It was the Congressional radicals who had established the Committee on the Conduct of the War to investigate the causes of the Ball’s Bluff catastrophe. Dickinson’s audiences grew larger and larger as the radicals stepped up the

³² Young, Ch. 2, 7.

³³ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

³⁴ Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 17.

³⁵ Trefousse, 5.

intensity of their campaign.³⁶ As Wendell Phillips remarked, “She was...the young elephant sent forward to try the bridges to see if they were safe for older ones to cross.”³⁷

Shortly after Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on 1 January 1863, Dickinson traveled to New Hampshire to stump for the Republican party at the request of Benjamin Franklin Prescott, secretary of the New Hampshire Republican state committee. In 1862, New Hampshire had gone Republican by only a narrow margin; in 1863, the Republican candidate for governor was abolitionist Joseph A. Gilmore.³⁸ Dickinson delivered more than twenty speeches in small New Hampshire towns: “It is sufficient to say that wherever she has been...her audiences have been the fullest of any during the campaign; and in no instance have they failed to urge her to speak a second time...”³⁹ Though the Republicans only won the election by a slim margin (the Democrats actually received more votes, but a third party candidate prevented them from a clear majority, which sent the election into the state legislature where the Republican majority voted their own candidate into office), the narrow escape did not cast a pall over Dickinson’s celebrity.⁴⁰ Indeed, she was soon stumping for the Republicans in

³⁶ Young, Ch. 2, 3.

³⁷ Quoted in Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman’s Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 108.

³⁸ Young, Ch. 3, 26.

³⁹ Concord *Independent Democrat*, quoted in Chester, 48.

⁴⁰ Venet, 45; Young, Ch. 3, 7.

Connecticut, where she was wildly successful and helped to secure a Republican victory where one had not been anticipated.⁴¹

Though by this time Dickinson had secured herself a place in the public consciousness as a rising star of increasing popularity, she also made enemies—especially of Democrats, and Copperheads in particular, at whom she directed her most vicious criticisms.⁴² At one hall during the Connecticut campaign, the lights suddenly went out thanks to Copperheads who were trying to disrupt the speech. Dickinson responded imperturbably: “I see...that there are those here who evidently love darkness better than light because their deeds are evil.”⁴³ As the hall was being relit, Dickinson continued:

I read my Bible. I read of the Prince of Darkness, and judging from the present display, some of his children are present. (Laughter and great applause.) I read natural history, too. I read of a creature that loves caves and dens and holes in the earth, dank and *dark* places,—and I suppose from the last fact that some of them are in this hall,—copperheads, I believe they are called.⁴⁴

Despite the “tremendous cheering” that followed, the Copperheads continued to disrupt the gathering by cries of “fire!” and the ringing of “an annoying bell.”⁴⁵ When the cries

⁴¹ Chester, 5; Young, Ch. 3, 16-17.

⁴² Copperheads were Northerners, generally Democrats, who were Southern sympathizers. They opposed the Civil War and Emancipation.

⁴³ “A Copperhead Demonstration,” n.d., unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

of “fire” did not cease, Dickinson finally stepped forward: “Yes, there *is* a fire,—by God’s grace we have kindled a fire, which these people by their acts are assisting, that will never go out, till naught is left of the principles they profess, or of their party,—save ashes.”⁴⁶

That was enough. The copperheads slunk down abashed, the house cheered till the roof rang again, and without further interruption Miss Dickinson went on with her magnificent speech. The whole affair has wonderfully strengthened the Union cause in Middletown [Connecticut].⁴⁷

The National Platform

By 1864, Dickinson’s fame—and usefulness to the Republican party—had risen to such a degree that she was invited by the Congressional radical Republicans, on the initiative of Representative Kelley of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to speak in the House of Representatives. Signed by Vice-President Hannibal Hamlin and Speaker Schuyler Colfax, the invitation celebrated Dickinson’s recent successes in state campaigns and asked her to deliver an address at the Capitol so that the Congressional Republicans could convey their gratitude and have the pleasure of hearing her speak.⁴⁸ These Republicans certainly were capitalizing on the Dickinson’s novelty, newly won fame, and success in the state elections; they may also have hoped that she would preach the radical gospel on their prominent rostrum.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Chester, 75.

⁴⁹ Young, Ch. 4, 3.

But the Congressmen could not offer Dickinson any remuneration for her speech—the House could only be made available if the proceeds were used “for patriotic and benevolent purposes.”⁵⁰ Dickinson, who had been receiving fees for her work since early 1861, hesitated. But she was unwilling to speak in an alternate space and finally acquiesced. The proceeds from the speech—more than one thousand dollars—went to the National Freedmen’s Relief Society.⁵¹

In the great hall of the House of Representatives, packed with more than 2500 of Washington’s finest, Dickinson was introduced by Vice-President Hamlin and spoke for nearly ninety minutes. In that time, she decried the legal degradation of black men and excoriated President Lincoln (who arrived late, while Dickinson was in the midst of her criticisms) for what she perceived as his overly compassionate plan for Reconstruction:

Let no man prate of compromise. Defeated by ballots, the South had appealed to bullets. Let it stand by the appeal. There was no arm of compromise long enough to stretch over the sea of blood, and the mound of fallen heroes, to shake hands with their murderers. They suffered that the cause might proceed. Their bodies were shattered that the body politic might be preserved. We must continue the work dropped from their nerveless hands.⁵²

Yet she concluded her speech with a surprising—and puzzling—endorsement of his renomination. One biographer has suggested that she was flattered by the President’s presence and declared her support on impulse, perhaps hoping that mingling criticism

⁵⁰ Young, Ch. 4, 3.

⁵¹ Venet, 125; Young, Ch. 4: 4, 12.

⁵² *Washington Chronicle*, 17 January 1864 [title and date written in], in Dickinson papers.

with encouragement would persuade Lincoln to alter his policies;⁵³ the other, that she simply got caught up in the moment and the occasion and improvised a dramatically effective conclusion.⁵⁴ As another historian has observed, “Castigating the President...then suddenly endorsing his reelection created just the sort of climactic scene for which Anna Dickinson had become famous.”⁵⁵

The public response was electric. The *Washington Chronicle* noted:

It was a wonderful sight, and it was a wonderful success. Joan of Arc never was grander, in her mail of battle, than was this Philadelphia maid in her statesmanlike demand that this war do not cease till slavery lies dead and buried under the feet of the North, and its epitaph is traced with the point of a bayonet dipped in the young blood of the nation;--⁵⁶

She was twenty-one years old, and “[w]ithin a year she had become the most celebrated woman in the North.”⁵⁷ She was called on to reprise her “Great Patriotic Speech” in other cities, including Philadelphia and Boston.⁵⁸

But Dickinson’s reception in the halls of Congress was due not merely to her novelty or skill, but also to the exigencies of the political moment. Not many years earlier it would have been unthinkable for the House of Representatives to host an

⁵³ Young, Ch. 4, 9.

⁵⁴ Chester, 77.

⁵⁵ Venet, 127.

⁵⁶ “Anna Dickinson in the U.S. House of Representatives,” *Washington Chronicle*, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁷ Young, Ch. 4, 13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

abolitionist speech. The *Independent* observed, “neither man nor woman could have made [such an address] without peril of the tar-barrel or the gallows anywhere within two-thirds of the Country’s limits.”⁵⁹

It was not long before Dickinson regretted her impulsive declaration of support for Lincoln’s renomination. The President’s policies remained unaltered. Two months later, she returned to Washington to demand an interview with Lincoln. Afterward she did not hesitate to describe their meeting with caustic commentary. The *Boston Courier* reported that she had told Lincoln that his plan for reconstruction was “all wrong; as radically bad as can be,” to which Lincoln responded, “All I can say is, if the radicals want me to lead, let them get out of the way and let me lead.”⁶⁰ In Boston, Dickinson related to an audience, “When he said that...I came out and remarked to a friend—I have spoken my last word to President Lincoln.”⁶¹ Other accounts of the interview related a very different story—that Dickinson had been largely an observer in a conversation between Lincoln and Congressman Kelley, who had arranged the interview. Dickinson later assailed the press for misrepresenting her account of the interview.⁶²

⁵⁹ *Independent*, quoted in Young, Ch. 4, 11.

⁶⁰ *Boston Courier*, quoted in Young, Ch. 4, 19.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* See also Chester, 80.

⁶² It is difficult to know which account of the interview is more accurate. Young argues that Dickinson’s version of events seems unlikely: “The picture of a determined young lady scolding the president to his face was doubtless not so much Washington reality as Boston make-believe.” In *Neither Ballots Nor Bullets: Women Abolitionists and the Civil War*, Wendy Hamand Venet notes that “In all probability, both Dickinson’s and Kelley’s versions contained elements of the truth.” See Young, Ch. 4, 19-21. See also Venet, 128, and Chester, 80.

Once Lincoln was officially renominated by the Republican party, however, “Then Anna Dickinson entered the campaign, young, eloquent and soul-stirring, speaking ‘as if her lips had been touched with a live coal from the altars of Heaven.’”⁶³ But rather than endorse Lincoln, her campaign oratory vehemently attacked the Democratic platform. These speeches were typical of radical campaign rhetoric: they smeared McClellan’s military record and accused the Democrats of treason.⁶⁴ At the conclusion of the campaign, “[n]umerous Republican leaders gave her frank credit for having turned some of the doubtful states.”⁶⁵ Disgusted by Lincoln’s willingness to negotiate with the Confederates and his overly generous plan for reconstruction, Dickinson continued to be an “influential spokesman for the radical gospel.”⁶⁶

After Lincoln’s assassination in April 1865, Dickinson eulogized him in a speech in which she praised him for attitudes he had never espoused. Although Lincoln had sought reconciliation with the South and the restoration of the Union, Dickinson used her eulogy to argue for “justice”—the crushing punishment of the “traitors” of the Southern slavocracy.⁶⁷

⁶³ Carrie Chapman Catt and Nettie Rogers Shuler, *Woman Suffrage and Politics: The Inner Story of the Suffrage Movement*, with an introduction by T.A. Larson, Americana Library ed., ed. Robert E. Burke (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1923; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), 36.

⁶⁴ Young, Ch. 4, 35.

⁶⁵ Catt and Shuler, 36.

⁶⁶ Young, Ch. 5, 6-7.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, Ch. 5, 9-10.

What! they honorable, high-toned dignified gentlemen who have violated their solemn oath, turned traitors to their country, sought the life of their government, robbed, starved, murdered our prisoners, and all their lives made merchandise of virtue and humanity! Nay, talk not of the honor of such; they are but monsters, murderers, traitors. It is an unspeakable shame to thus forget that manners and position cannot dignify crime. Crime disgraces whomsoever it takes to its foul embrace. Woe betide the day, when evil is put for good. On that day we return to our pro-slavery vomit. The hope of any people is their knowledge and hatred of wrong.⁶⁸

Indeed, many of the radical Republicans, who, like Dickinson, found Lincoln's policies toward the South too conciliatory, welcomed the assassination. They hoped that Andrew Johnson—who had served on the Committee on the Conduct of the War and already exhibited some radical tendencies—would turn out to be a willing radical mouthpiece.⁶⁹ But Dickinson, along with the abolitionists, was not convinced that Johnson's plans for reconstruction made adequate provisions for the freed slaves.⁷⁰ Indeed, if Dickinson had disliked Lincoln, her regard for Johnson—whom she considered a “perjurer, drunkard & traitor”—was far worse.⁷¹ Though she did give speeches in which she bitterly assailed Johnson for being in league with Southern assassins, and passionately desired his removal from office when he was impeached in 1868, she did not speak in public about

⁶⁸ Quoted in Young, Ch. 5, 10.

⁶⁹ Trefousse, 307.

⁷⁰ Young, Ch. 5, 12.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

his impeachment trial while it was still going on.⁷² Rather, she began to shift her emphasis to her other pet cause—women’s rights.

Women’s Rights

Having risen to fame stumping for the Republican party, Dickinson continued to speak about issues of the war, reconstruction, and abolition after Lincoln’s reelection in 1864. Her audiences looked for speeches on the time’s most pressing political issues, and Dickinson depended on them to support herself.⁷³ Because of this expectation, as well as her own interest in wartime matters, Dickinson allowed her concern for the status of women to take a back seat during the war (though she did offer the occasional address on behalf of women’s rights). Her concern was pecuniary as well as political—to make a living, she had to speak on topics of immediate interest to the paying public.⁷⁴

When at the close of the war, the slaves were left free but still disenfranchised, Dickinson had to decide whether to continue focusing her energy on the plight of the freed blacks or to become more involved with the organized women’s movement. Wendell Phillips desired her single-minded support for Negro enfranchisement, but she had also befriended Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who urged her (especially Anthony) to take a leadership role in the women’s movement. As historian Barbara Goldsmith notes, “[A] powerful emotional and political triangle began to form,

⁷² *Ibid.*, 27, 45.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, Ch. 7, 3.

as Anthony and Phillips contended for ‘the possession of her soul.’”⁷⁵ Dickinson hedged on both sides. She declined an invitation to speak at the 1866 Women’s Rights convention in New York, writing to Anthony, “I don’t like to take up any work till I feel called to it...Wait for me a little--forbear, and I honestly believe I’ll do thee some good and faithful service; I don’t mean wait for me, but be patient with me.”⁷⁶ When Anthony encouraged her to become a vice-president of the Equal Rights Association, Dickinson refused again.⁷⁷

When in 1867 Anthony enlisted the support of controversial and disreputable George Francis Train, Dickinson had another reason to hold back.⁷⁸ Train, a Democrat, was:

a showman in the P.T. Barnum mode. He dressed in a purple brocade jacket with a lime-green satin vest and red boots, and people stared at him wherever he went. Train had...achieved fame by traveling around the world in eighty days—a record—thereby inspiring the novel by Jules Verne. Train was the owner of New York’s most successful horse-car line but he had made most of his fortune as the prime organizer of the Credit Mobilier, a holding company for the stock of the Union Pacific Railroad....Train’s speeches advocating the vote for women but not for ‘low-down nigger men’ won the votes of the Irish and other Democrats. But his blatant racism soon alienated many women’s rights advocates. Lucy Stone termed Train ‘a charlatan’ and ‘a lunatic.’ William Lloyd Garrison...wrote that he was ‘mortified and astonished beyond measure in

⁷⁵ Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1999), 117.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Young, Ch. 7, 4-5.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Ch. 7, 8-11.

seeing Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony traveling about the country with that crack-brained harlequin.⁷⁹

Anthony and Stanton had traveled to Kansas, where voters were to decide the fate of two amendments—one that enfranchised Negroes, and one that enfranchised women. Democrats opposed both amendments, and the Republicans—who had been sympathetic to the women’s cause—were hedging for fear that women’s suffrage would jeopardize the Negro ballot. Although in Kansas Anthony and Stanton (along with Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell) had campaigned for universal suffrage, they were “attacked mercilessly by misogynist Republicans who ridiculed women’s claim to full citizenship.”⁸⁰ Knowing that Negro suffrage was paramount for the Republican abolitionists, Anthony began to look for Democratic support and accepted Train’s when it was offered.⁸¹ Described in *The Liberator* in 1862 as a “buffoon, clown, pantomimist, mountbank, thingumbob...; illogical, tautological, hysterical, nonsensical...; vomit[ing] words as Vesuvius does smoke,”⁸² Train nonetheless supplied Anthony with the funds to produce a newspaper devoted to the cause of women’s suffrage, and *The Revolution* began to publish in January 1868, with Anthony at the helm.⁸³

⁷⁹ Goldsmith, 136-37.

⁸⁰ Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997 [1989]), 123.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁸² Quoted in Young, Ch. 7, 11.

⁸³ Young, Ch. 7, 12.

Anthony began to chide Dickinson for continuing to address the cause of Negro suffrage to the neglect of the women's fight. But Dickinson continued to speak on behalf of the Negro vote. Like Stone, Blackwell, and Frederick Douglass, who believed that "this hour belongs to the Negro," Dickinson recognized that pushing too hard for women's enfranchisement at this crucial moment could result in defeat for both causes.⁸⁴

In 1869, these divisions over strategy in the women's suffrage movement produced two separate organizations: The National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), founded by Anthony and Stanton, and the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), founded by Stone and Blackwell.⁸⁵ The NWSA, which tried to operate nationally in the interest of efficiency, opposed the fifteenth amendment because it would not enfranchise women, while the AWSA "pledged support for the Fifteenth Amendment which enfranchised all males regardless of color and argued that woman suffrage was best achieved at the state level."⁸⁶

Despite Anthony's continued appeals, Dickinson remained distant.⁸⁷ Strategically it seemed ill-advised to abandon the Republicans in favor of alliances with unorthodox Democrats like Train. She recognized her debt to the radicals who had helped her to

⁸⁴ Evans, 122. Stanton and Blackwell "were likewise outraged that Stanton and Anthony accepted financial support from racist Democrats like George Train who advocated white woman suffrage as a weapon against black political power (i.e., white women could outvote blacks)." See Evans, 123.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 123-124.

⁸⁶ Evans, 123-124.

⁸⁷ See Chester, 95.

establish her career. She wrote to her mother, “It always impresses me the way these old fellows who ever did political work with me, treat me...they hold forth at me as one of their own kind—a political power.”⁸⁸ She was probably also offended by the increasingly racist rhetoric being employed by Stanton and Anthony, who described the enfranchisement of the black man as “another ignorant class of voters” being “placed above [women’s] heads.”⁸⁹ And perhaps even more to the point, Dickinson lectured for profit and could not afford to get involved in conflicts—or controversies—that might jeopardize her fees.⁹⁰

So, interestingly, “the closest Anna Dickinson came to playing an active role in the organized woman suffrage movement occurred at the time that movement was rent by the most acrimonious dispute.”⁹¹ And, oddly enough, despite her passionate support for Negro suffrage, it was the NWSA to which Dickinson finally lent her name and support. After years of refusing to commit on an organizational level, she became a founding member of the new organization and agreed to serve as its vice-president. She delivered its inaugural address on 27 May 1869.⁹²

⁸⁸ Anna E. Dickinson, letter to Mary Dickinson, 5 March 1871, cited in Young, Ch. 7, 14-15.

⁸⁹ Venet, 157.

⁹⁰ Young, Ch. 7, 15-16.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁹² *Ibid.*, Ch. 7, 27.

It is difficult to explain Dickinson's change of heart, but though she and Anthony had not resolved all of their differences, their friendship seems to have been strengthened around this time. Dickinson's biographer suggests that the bond may have been aided by Anthony's friendly letters and the amount of space *The Revolution* devoted to Dickinson's speaking. Another important reason may have been that Anthony's and Stanton's efforts were not focused exclusively on obtaining the right to vote but were also concerned with women's economic well-being.⁹³ Dickinson was less concerned with the technicality of the ballot for women than she was with the economic hardships women endured because of discrimination in employment and unequal pay.⁹⁴ However, because she had risen above such hardships through her own mettle, she also held women partly responsible for their own misfortunes, feeling that often women did not do enough to help better themselves.⁹⁵ At the same time, she fiercely opposed the double standard that condemned "fallen women" and held no consequences for the men, who, in Dickinson's opinion, were equally culpable.⁹⁶ But ultimately,

the most substantial reason for Anna's willingness to assume a position of responsibility in a woman's organization related to her analysis of public sentiment. With the fourteenth amendment added to the Constitution and the fifteenth well launched with bright prospects for acceptance, with reconstruction governments installed in Southern states, Anna could be

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Anna Dickinson, "Work and Wages," (1869) in *Public Women, Public Words: A Documentary History of American Feminism*, ed. Dawn Keetley and John Pettgrew (Madison: Madison House, 1997), 352-354.

⁹⁵ Young, Ch. 7, 18.

⁹⁶ *The Evening Post* (Hartford), 25 February 1875, in Dickinson papers.

optimistic that the battle for Negro rights was nearing victory...[She] could afford to devote more of her attention to the problem of her sex.⁹⁷

The Speeches

That women were seen as naturally and distinctively pure and pious...implied that they were particularly well-equipped to advise on moral matters, and their earliest efforts at public advocacy arose in relation to issues closely related to what were seen as women's concerns—works of benevolence toward the poor and orphaned, and struggles against the moral evils of prostitutions, slavery, and alcoholism. Women felt that gender norms authorized them to address these problems, but those same norms condemned them to silence except within the domestic circle of their homes.⁹⁸

Although it was socially acceptable for women to speak publicly during prayer meetings or in sewing circles where all of the auditors were also women, women who spoke before mixed company were likely to provoke dire predictions of societal “degeneracy and ruin.”⁹⁹ Separate spheres meant that public speech belonged in the masculine realm: “The religious called it unscriptural for a woman, the cultured thought it unseemly, the cynical found in it material for their bitterest sneers, the evil-minded felt free to make a woman orator the target of vulgarity.”¹⁰⁰ Indeed, before the Civil War, major newspapers largely ignored any news related to women speaking in public, and

⁹⁷ Young, Ch. 7, 26-28.

⁹⁸ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “The Discursive Performance of Femininity: Hating Hillary,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 1 (1998), 4.

⁹⁹ Lillian O'Connor, *Pioneer Women Orators: Rhetoric in the Ante-Bellum Reform Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), 24, 32.

¹⁰⁰ Frances J. Hosford, *Father Shipherd's Magna Charta: a Century of Co-education in Oberlin College, 1837-1937*, 81, quoted in O'Connor.

none of them carried the complete texts of their speeches. This was true even of major reform papers such as the abolitionist *National Era*.¹⁰¹

The Substance

Dickinson's speeches themselves were not especially notable for *what* they had to say. As the conservative papers noted, her arguments and ideas tended to reflect established positions.¹⁰² For example, she was sponsored by the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society when she toured New England in 1862. It is therefore unsurprising that her talks were largely attended by abolitionists: "Her hearers met together in a mood eager to wax enthusiastic over a vigorous and eloquent rephrasing of their own cherished convictions."¹⁰³ The same was true of Dickinson's women's rights speeches: she tended to adopt the positions of reformers and politicians she admired and present them in her own distinctive style. The papers most likely to draw attention to such a lack of originality, of course, were those most opposed to the politics contained therein. As a Philadelphia paper noted in 1869:

Miss Dickinson has a certain ability as a speaker, and there her merits end. She has never started a new idea or shed a new light on any of the subjects she has taken up, and her discourses, from first to last, have been made up of the commonest of commonplaces upon the usual topics that occupy the minds of the little knot of female rightists who mistake their own clamor for interest on the part of the public in their schemes...the lecture itself was a mere diatribe on the subject of women's rights, a repetition of which has been said over and over again by the Susan Anthonys, Cady Stantons, Dr.

¹⁰¹ O'Connor, 127. Women's speeches can be found, however, in smaller papers and reform papers.

¹⁰² Venet, 41; Young, Ch. 2, 12.

¹⁰³ Young, Ch. 2, 13.

Mary Walkers, and other aspiring females who are ambitious to wear the breeches, and who are at once objects of ridicule with the men and of contempt with their own sex.¹⁰⁴

It is worth noting, however, that charges of unoriginality were levied at many speakers, particularly after the Civil War. E.L. Godkin, editor of *The Nation*, repeatedly assailed contemporary political speech for its “bogus erudition” and “tiresome volubility.”¹⁰⁵ Following *The Nation*’s lead, many other writers and speakers ridiculed orators for their “verbosity, irrelevance, and rhetorical display.”¹⁰⁶ Although American speakers were praised for their dynamic delivery, their improvisatory ability, and their skill in adapting their words to their audiences, they were criticized for their lack of originality.¹⁰⁷ Dickinson’s contemporary James Bryce, whose *American Commonwealth* is an enormous three-volume compendium analyzing American government and social institutions, observed that American speakers were gifted at stump speaking, a mode which tended to stir audiences rather than educate them.¹⁰⁸ He noted that if American

¹⁰⁴ *Evening Telegraph* (Philadelphia), 20 October 1869, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁰⁵ Barnet Baskerville, *The People’s Voice: The Orator in American Society* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1979), 90.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* In a review in *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (March 1889), Woodrow Wilson wrote, “Mr. Bryce has given us a noble work possessing in high perfection almost every element that should make students of comparative politics esteem it invaluable. If I have regretted that it does not contain more, it has been because of the feeling that the author of *The American Commonwealth*, who has given us a vast deal, might have given us everything.” Reprinted in James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, Vol. 2, with an introduction by Gary L. McDowell (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1995 [1889]), 1584.

orators “sometimes weary the listener...it is rather because the notions are commonplace and the arguments unsound than because...ideas of some value are tediously and pointlessly put.”¹⁰⁹

Dickinson’s first major address after the Civil War was on the subject of “Women’s Work and Wages,”¹¹⁰ in which she condemned women’s enforced idleness, the stigma attached to women who were forced to work, and the wage differential between women and men:

Pardon me for referring to myself, but I comprehend the bitterness of the struggles I have spoke [*sic*] about...The committee of a neighboring school came to offer me a situation. They said they knew me competent, required no examination, and mentioned other particulars, which I said were perfectly satisfactory. Then I was told the salary they paid was \$28 per month. That was also satisfactory. “But,” said one little busy, fussy sort of man, “you see we always had a young man to teach for us. Hum—hum—we have been—hum—giving—hum—him twenty-eight dollars a month; we have concluded to give you sixteen dollars a month.” “Sir,” I said, “are you an idiot? or do you take me for one?” Well, as he was an idiot, and I was not, I went home, and did not take the school...I would rather clean gutters or sweep crossings for the same number of pence they get who do this, than conduct that school for twenty-seven dollars and ninety-nine cents—rather than wrong my womanhood and dishonor my sex by degrading female labor by taking less pay than is given to a man.¹¹¹

In “Nothing Unreasonable,” Dickinson’s speech for the inauguration of the NSWA, she argued that if a woman who is arrested is allowed to speak for herself, there was “nothing unreasonable” in her effort (as a speaker, not a criminal) to speak in the

¹⁰⁹ James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, Vol. 2, with an introduction by Gary L. McDowell (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1995 [1889]), 1461.

¹¹⁰ Young, Ch. 8, 1.

¹¹¹ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

interest of influencing public opinion.¹¹² She argued that as a woman she was subject to taxation without representation, and that it was “nothing unreasonable” to claim that “she had been deprived of her inalienable rights.”¹¹³ She asserted, “Indirect influence is not better than direct action. A power that is so powerful indirectly, should be dragged up into the light, and made responsible,” and that “Man’s protection, and woman’s independence, are the upper and nether mill-stones between which working women are ground to powder.”¹¹⁴ After its initial presentation at the inaugural meeting of the NWSA, Dickinson toured across the country with “Nothing Unreasonable” and was greeted by enthusiastic audiences as far west as San Francisco.¹¹⁵

In “Whited Sepulchres,” Dickinson described what she had witnessed on her trip to Salt Lake City in 1869. Horrified by the debased status of women in Mormon society, she railed against the despotism of Brigham Young:

The houses where the wives are kept are gloomy, cheerless places...When I saw the little, stunted animals stamped with the degradation [*sic*] of women, I cried in bitterness, “Would to God they might be in their graves.” I covered up my face, and wanted to die...The theory prevalent at Salt Lake is that woman was made for man, to help him, to preside over his home, not her own; her principle [*sic*] duty in life to be not a woman, not a human being, but a wife and a mother, not for her own pleasure or profit, but for his satisfaction.¹¹⁶

¹¹² *The Daily Herald*, 17 July 1869, in Dickinson papers.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *The Agitator*, 29 May 1869, in Dickinson papers.

¹¹⁵ *Daily Alta California*, 17 July [1869] (N.Y.), in Dickinson papers.

¹¹⁶ *Boston Post*, quoted in unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

While some commended this lecture for its “earnest, noble purpose,” and suggested that it “is eloquent not alone or chiefly in voice and manner, but because of the true womanhood which prompts to the utterance,”¹¹⁷ others were unspeakably offended: “She rolls up abominable, unwomanly doctrine in the garb of beautiful language, as doctors coat nauseous medicine in sugar, and then try to make people believe it’s all for their good to take it in.”¹¹⁸

When Dickinson took on the unsavory topic of prostitution, in “A Woman’s View of It,” she was accused of “a want of good taste in ever having consented to deliver a public address on the social evil.”¹¹⁹ Arguing that “to men alone all this infamy may be traced, for the great mass of women of evil repute is recruited from the women who fall beneath the deceptions and wiles of betraying men,” Dickinson pleaded for an end to the double standard that victimized women and allowed men complete immunity: “Do away with unjust distinctions, insist that the woman shall be pure, and that the man shall be pure, and teach the young man that ‘he who conquers himself, is greater than he who taketh a city.’”¹²⁰ Although “it is a thing ladies and gentlemen do not wish to touch,” she argued that it was essential to discuss such social questions in plain speech, “since upon such discussion and solution depend advancement of society and of the race.”¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

¹¹⁸ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

¹¹⁹ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

¹²⁰ *The Evening Post* (Hartford), 25 February, 1875, in Dickinson papers.

¹²¹ *New York Daily Tribune*, 6 March 1875 [date written in], in Dickinson papers.

Such plain speaking produced some approbation from those who admired her “rare degree of moral courage...in discussing...a question whose importance is as great as is the difficulty of handling it.”¹²² According to James Redpath, who founded Redpath’s Lecture Bureau in 1868, “She is not afraid to say shirt or legs, and everyone feels as though they were sitting in the presence of a very chaste and pure-minded woman.”¹²³ The Brooklyn *Daily Argus* remarked, “Since the days of Mary Wollstonecraft, the world has not seen a sample of female intrepidity equal to that displayed by Miss Anna E. Dickinson.”¹²⁴ This paper proclaimed that Dickinson:

proved that this subject can be publicly treated, even by a woman, without any infraction of feminine propriety or any forfeiture of womanly delicacy or self-respect. What lips are so persuasive as those of woman, and in what nobler cause can a gifted and cultivated female enlist, than that which seeks to reclaim the degraded of her own sex and to elevate their general condition?¹²⁵

But other papers were considerably less effusive. These asked, “Why should a young woman not destitute of good looks or of the feminine tastes which render her sex attractive go delving in this nauseous and noisome affair?”¹²⁶ Many remarked that “it is a step beyond propriety for a young lady to instruct others in things of which she ought to

¹²² *The Evening Mail*, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

¹²³ Charles F. Horner, *The Life of James Redpath and the Development of the Modern Lyceum* (New York: Barse & Hopkins, 1926), 145.

¹²⁴ *Brooklyn Daily Argus*, 6 March 1875, in Dickinson papers.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

know nothing herself.”¹²⁷ And some accounts, such as the following entitled, “Stirring the Dunghill,” were outright vicious:

The most disgusting spectacle that humanity in its uttermost degradation affords in civilized life, is a woman wholly devoid of shame. We hold that woman to be such, who, throwing aside the instinctive modesty of her sex, seeks, by stirring the stink-pots of the lower strata of vice, to attract attention to her own personality; who strives to raise herself into public sight by standing on...the steps of the brothel, and shouting about the rottenness within; and who claims that the existence of the rottenness is a justification of her act.¹²⁸

There was nothing startlingly new or innovative about the ideas contained in Dickinson’s speeches. Rather, the effect of the speeches derived largely from the force of Dickinson’s personality and the passion with which she delivered them.

The Style

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell has described the rhetorical style of nineteenth-century women speakers as “strategic responses...to two competing sets of cultural norms: gender norms for the performance of femininity and rhetorical norms governing public advocacy.”¹²⁹ Because public speaking was an activity appropriate only for men, women who did so “were expected to reaffirm their womanliness discursively at the same time that they demonstrated the ordinary rhetorical competencies—cogent argument, clarity of position, offering compelling evidence, and responding to competing views—that were

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 6 March 1875, in Dickinson papers.

¹²⁹ Campbell, “Hating Hillary,” 4.

gender-coded as masculine.”¹³⁰ And, in fact, there is evidence that women in the nineteenth century used “the three acceptable modes” in their speeches: *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*.¹³¹

Strongly influenced by Wendell Phillips, who was noted for his blistering vituperation, Dickinson was most powerful when on the offensive.¹³² Phillips had

studied the art of irritation and became an expert in its use. His most effective weapons...were invective and frontal attacks on long-cherished and accepted beliefs. Both methods were so striking and so attention-compelling that his listeners were shocked into attending to what he had to say and irritated into thinking about his ideas, even though not agreeing with them. In his use of invective, he was often charged with using violent and intemperate language.¹³³

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ O’Connor, 225. *Ethos* (from Aristotle) refers to “the speaker himself, whose intelligence, moral character, and good will impressed the listeners favorably”; *pathos* refers to “the emotional excitement or frame of mind induced by the speaker in the audience”; and *logos*, “the logical arguments presented by the speaker in order to persuade.” See O’Connor, 101. The rhetorical ideal in midcentury was a combination of these Aristotelian principles and those espoused in popular British rhetoric textbooks. For example, authors of the textbooks agreed with Aristotle that the logical proof was the most important. But Hugh Blair, author of *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres*, the most popular of these textbooks in America, notes that “the eloquence of the pulpit is of a distinct nature and cannot be properly reduced under any of the headings of the ancient rhetoricians.” See O’Connor 115. O’Connor suggests that this special focus on the eloquence of the pulpit is important in this context because “In a day when women were banned from participation in the deliberations of assemblies and from the activities of the legal profession, it is more than just possible that women who felt they had a message to communicate turned to the only other ‘scene’ of public speaking which had the prestige and carried the approval of the educated people of the times.” See O’Connor 115.

¹³² James Brewer Stewart, *Wendell Phillips: Liberty’s Hero* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 73; Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

¹³³ Willard Hayes Yeager, “Wendell Phillips,” in *A History and Criticism of American Public Address*, vol. 1, ed. William Norwood Brigance (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co, 1943), 357.

In the immediate postwar period, such a tactic also became typical of Republicans, whose “oratory of obfuscation” appealed to the public’s personal or political biases in an attempt to distract them from the real issues at hand.¹³⁴ “Waving the bloody shirt,” as the tactic came to be known, was a hallmark of Republican rhetoric in the postwar period, as the party clung tenuously to political power.¹³⁵ Dickinson was a master of the style—one especially novel for a young Quaker girl. Accounts of her first speaking tour in New England described the effectiveness of such an approach:

To witness the boldness of her manner, speech, and gesticulation, one is almost led to the conclusion that she only needs the sword, the charger and the opportunity, to become a second Joan of Arc, and, placing herself in the stead of McClellan, whom she affects to underrate, lead the ‘grand army’ on to victory and to glory.”¹³⁶

Likewise, when she campaigned for the Republicans in Connecticut, her speaking was hailed as prophetic, inspired, and:

at once a rapid, masterly sketch of the war in the inception, continuance, and prospective end, exhibiting a knowledge and careful estimate of men and measures which constantly astonished her listeners. And as she went on mingling argument, invective, pathos, sarcasm, irresistible appeal, we felt that she had the passion of the South and the brain of the North on fire with inspiration. It was Portia making a statement, it was a Pythia prophesying, it was better than either, an American Woman, cultivated, trained, endowed, devoted to the noblest cause since the Christian era began.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Baskerville, 98.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ *Providence Press*, quoted in unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

¹³⁷ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers (probably referring to “The National Crisis”).

Another glowing newspaper item related: “She appears a chosen medium for the higher light, and wherever conservative owls and bats may be found dwelling in the thick darkness, we know of no one more apt to disperse them than this young woman, in the ministry of God and the good angels, striving unto such darkness.”¹³⁸

But Dickinson’s oratory of attack also provoked considerable hostile commentary in opposition newspapers. The *Mercury* called her “A Crowing Hen on the Rostrum.”¹³⁹ The headline of the New York *Herald* read “Petticoat Politics.”¹⁴⁰ The *World*, a Copperhead organ, declared that one speech was:

the coarse ribaldry of men uttered with the volubility of a woman, the thousand times refuted slanders of campaign orators reasserted with feminine effrontery, the hack arguments of male politicians reiterated in tones an octave higher, the falsehoods of the War Committee set off with the sneers of a virago.¹⁴¹

The *World* continued, “Being a woman unsexed, she was in favor of inciting insurrections...the exhibition was one which no woman of refinement and no man of good sense could witness without blushing for their kind.”¹⁴² Even sympathetic papers sometimes lamented the negativity of her style:

We like to hear her on any subject, but we should really like to hear her once in favor of the subject upon which she was speaking. As a scold she

¹³⁸ Unidentified clipping, 13 April 1862, in Dickinson papers.

¹³⁹ The *Mercury*, [probably 1863], in Dickinson papers.

¹⁴⁰ New York *Herald*, 3 May 1863, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁴¹ The *World*, reprinted in unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

is a great success. As an advocate we have no doubt she would be equally successful. But Anna has always found fault, and we presume she always will. In that line she has developed great talent.¹⁴³

But regardless of their attitude toward her, nearly all accounts of Dickinson's platform style remark on her earnestness and her ability to manipulate her audience:

Miss Dickinson is a born lecturer. She is perfect mistress of the art of swaying an audience, and in earnest and pointed invective she has no superior among the whole range of lyceum celebrities. Her demeanor on the platform is characterized by a modest assurance, and a firmly set persistence toward the end she has in view, which commands the respectful homage of friend and opponent alike.¹⁴⁴

Accounts of Dickinson's vocal ability vary. Many accounts wax poetic about the beauty and power of her voice and the skill with which she commanded it, while others found it harsh, monotonous, and prone to sing-song: "Her voice at first sounds coarse and masculine, but as she proceeds, this unpleasant quality seems to disappear and one has to acknowledge the melody, flexibility and adaptation of her clear and silvery tones to the expression of the tenderer emotions."¹⁴⁵ James Redpath observed, "Her voice is clear, penetrating and musical, but her delivery reminds you at times of the tabernacle; there is a certain sing-song about it."¹⁴⁶ According to one item from 1863, "Her voice is remarkable. It is not a soprano, or a contralto, but sounds very much like a delicate

¹⁴³ *Daily Advertiser*, 2 March 1872, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁴⁴ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

¹⁴⁵ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with James Redpath, *San Francisco Sunday Chronicle*, quoted in unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

barytone [*sic*]. It could be heard distinctly in any part of the hall, and even by those who were compelled to stand outside.”¹⁴⁷

Redpath compared her to the famous minister Henry Ward Beecher, “emotional, and therefore uneven.”¹⁴⁸ Beecher affected a “close, conversational relation with his listeners, together with an impetuosity...in the speaker’s manner.”¹⁴⁹ Like Beecher, Dickinson was at her best when speaking extemporaneously: “Miss Dickinson’s style has the pace of a mustang pony, sturdy, swift and short stepping...her greatest efforts have been unpremeditated.”¹⁵⁰

Dickinson’s Quaker heritage provided her with more than a novel persona on the platform; it penetrated her speaking as well. Redpath noted, “Her verbal style is original,

¹⁴⁷ Unidentified clipping, 19 March 1863 (date handwritten in) in Dickinson papers.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with James Redpath, *San Francisco Sunday Chronicle*, quoted in unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers. Beecher, “by general agreement...accounted the greatest American preacher,” had been such an inarticulate child that his aunt always had to make him repeat things three times before she could understand him. Having overcome his youthful deficiencies through repeated drilling, he became known for his remarkable magnetism in the pulpit—a magnetism so powerful that it sustained his popularity with his congregation even after his scandalous trial for adultery. See Robert T. Oliver, *A History of Public Speaking in America*, (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1965): 373-382. Indeed, theatre manager Daniel Frohman even described Beecher as “one of America’s greatest actors.” Frohman added, “Reading his life and musing over it, it seems to me that besides being an actor, he was one of the greatest dramatists America has ever produced, for constantly and incessantly, he dramatized himself.” See Daniel Frohman, *Daniel Frohman Presents: An Autobiography* (New York: Lee Furman, 1937), 23.

¹⁴⁹ Robert T. Oliver, *A History of Public Speaking in America* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1965), 378.

¹⁵⁰ Interview with James Redpath, *San Francisco Sunday Chronicle*, quoted in unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

or rather it is uncommon now. Her speech betrays her Quaker training; it is studded with such words as ‘divers’ and ‘manifold’ and ‘peradventure,’ and similar Bible words that have gone out of daily use, excepting among the Quakers.”¹⁵¹

Many accounts of Dickinson’s speaking suggest that she had a special dramatic power; that she sometimes would seem overcome by emotion, or that she would dramatically attempt to give voice to her subjects:

Miss Dickinson came forward and began to lecture in a tremulous voice, evidently laboring under deep emotion, which indeed betrayed itself at intervals throughout her discourse, so as at times almost to check her utterance altogether. She said as she went to and fro in the world, she had heard—as in substance she heard this night—voices of penitence, sorrowful voices, despairing voices, voices blaspheming even in death; and, hearing those, she tried for once to gather them all into her voice, and to give them utterance to the world.¹⁵²

Though Redpath praised her argumentative skills, he acknowledged that Dickinson’s greatest strengths in speaking were those qualities likely to produce a powerful emotional response in her audience.

I have heard her deliver lectures that were full of crudities and unequal in parts, not at all bearing out her great reputation, but however faulty they might be, there were always passages full of fire and force that redeemed them. She has a remarkably clear head for political discussions; her arguments are strong, terse, and lucid statements, and whenever she can produce invective, sarcasm, or pathos, she is unequalled among women and has no superior among men; but where the subject does not admit of these attributes of eloquence she disappoints you. This is the reason why so many people who have heard her disagree so greatly about her genius.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² *The Times* (Chicago), 25 March 1874.

¹⁵³ Interview with James Redpath, *San Francisco Sunday Chronicle*, quoted in unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

And disagree they did. Some accounts of her speaking make only minor criticisms, acknowledging her skill but suggesting, for example, that “Miss Dickinson deserves a mild reproof for the inordinate length of her address.”¹⁵⁴

Too much talking is regarded by many as the greatest of all “social evils;” and it is not safe for any one possessing Miss Dickinson’s extraordinary control of language and great vocal power, to trust herself to an unwritten address upon a subject of which her heart is so full. Argument and appeal alike lose strength by undue attenuation, and Miss Dickinson might have introduced her touching peroration an hour sooner than she did, with an increased effect.¹⁵⁵

Others criticized her speaking for being strong on emotional appeal but weak in argument:

She pursued no particular line of argument last night. Ballot for women was the objective of her discourse, but its subjective was very much like a sieve; it let the water of opposition through it in torrents... With infinite powers of observation, wonderful quickness of perception, a rugged earnestness, and a pleasing quaintness of expression, she makes a strong woman’s rightist and a popular lecturer, but the repast she furnishes loses its nutritive qualities on the least attempt at analysis. Like certain kinds of dessert, it is impalpable, or like fashionable calico; it won’t wash.¹⁵⁶

Some critics suggested that she was especially skilled at masking her lack of logical argument with her unique dramatic power:

No platform orator excels her in the felicitous statement of a position and subsequent effective marshaling of facts and fictions that seem to sustain or defeat it, and really have nothing to do with it. Her speeches are all her own, and all alike. She offers a proposition, flings a little epithet at

¹⁵⁴ *Evening Bulletin* (Philadelphia), 24 April 1874, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

somebody as if it were a flower, quotes a sentence from another somebody, in deep tones obliterates still a third somebody, wickedly makes fun of a great journal, arranges a little bit of melodrama, and convinces herself that the proposition is proved. We all laugh at her sharp little dabs at dignitaries, unless we happen to be dignitaries, and then we frown; we all applaud her quick wit and her charm of youth and modesty, and the judicious among us grieve that she falls just short of being great. Good things she says, and true things; but the true things are not always good, nor the good things always true. And not even her pretty bits of pathos and melodrama fill the gaps which the dropped links of her argument had made.¹⁵⁷

The most vicious criticisms Dickinson received were in some way related to her gender. Some felt that she was held to gentler standards of criticism because she was a woman. These argued that she had nothing worthwhile to say and that the novelty of being a woman was not enough to warrant her level of acclaim:

This field is one that is, in many respects, suited to women, but we have a right to demand that female lecturers, like female actresses and female authors, shall be amenable to the same rules of criticism as their male competitors. If women have anything that is worth saying, and if they know how to say it, by all means let them appear as lecturers. But an intelligent public expects that those who do so shall treat us to something more than weak twaddle and coarse vituperation about subjects they do not half understand.¹⁵⁸

Others, not surprisingly, accused Dickinson of being unnatural and unwomanly for venturing outside of her prescribed feminine sphere of home and family. She was compared to an Amazon, “the very name...typical of that *moral cauterization* by which certain women ambitious of being called ‘strong-minded’ unsex themselves, by denuding themselves of those feminine qualities, affections and graces, which constitute the

¹⁵⁷ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers, June 1869 [date written in].

¹⁵⁸ *Evening Telegraph* (Philadelphia), 20 October 1869.

ornament and glory of their sex.”¹⁵⁹ She became a prime example of the

“Gynaekokracry,”

which manifests itself in the absurd endeavors of women to usurp the places and execute the functions of the male sex. It is a moral and social monstrosity—an inversion...of the laws of nature, which have assigned to each sex its appropriate relations and duties; and a subversion, so far as it prevails, of some of the fundamental principles of morality and social order.¹⁶⁰

Lumped in with “socialists, spiritualists, bloomerites, free lovers, Abolitionists; in short, agitators in general,” she too was “bold and unblushing in countenance; roving and restless in...looks; flippant and voluable in speech; unfeminine in attire; bad imitator...of the men.”¹⁶¹

The Professional Lecturer

The American tradition of the public lecture dates to the first quarter of the nineteenth century, when Josiah Holbrook established a lyceum in Massachusetts as “a kind of mutual education or cultural improvement society...featur[ing] informal discussions and occasional lectures delivered without fee by local citizens or visitors from neighboring towns.”¹⁶² As the practice became increasingly popular it was also formalized, and by the 1840s it was attracting the finest minds of the day to speak about a variety of social issues; indeed, by the 1850s, reformers completely dominated the

¹⁵⁹ “Anna E. Dickinson and the Gynekokracry,” *Geneva (NY) Gazette*, excerpted in unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Baskerville, 101.

platform.¹⁶³ After a period of decline during the war years, the Lyceum was resurrected in 1868 by James Redpath, who established the Boston Lyceum Bureau and sowed the seeds of a profession that would become a lucrative business.¹⁶⁴ Major James B. Pond continued what Redpath had started and made the lecture business a highly profitable enterprise.¹⁶⁵

This postwar professionalization of lecturing meant that commercial appeal became paramount. Speakers were judged on their box office draw and their level of appeal for repeat performances. It became necessary, therefore, to dilute or disguise content that might alienate portions of the paying public—lecturers had to cater to public taste.¹⁶⁶ At the same time, lecturers also became performers who were referred to as “talent” and billed as a part of an evening’s crowd-pleasing entertainment.¹⁶⁷ One 1872 article in *Scribner’s Monthly* lamented, “There was a time when a lecture was a lecture. The men who appeared before the lyceums were men who had something to say...Now, a lecture may be any string of nonsense that any literary mountebank can find an

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Robert T. Oliver, *History of Public Speaking in America* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1965), 434.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 435.

opportunity to utter.”¹⁶⁸ Certainly there were those who argued that Dickinson’s popular appeal had more to do with the novelty of her youth and sex (“Miss Dickinson as a Natural Curiosity,” proclaimed one headline¹⁶⁹) than it did with anything she had to say:

If the public like this sort of thing, of course they have a right to patronize it, but if one of the male gender, gifted with twice the oratorical ability of Miss Dickinson, were to make a practice of spouting such stuff, he would not attract a dozen auditors to any one of his discourses. We are, therefore, forced to conclude that Miss Dickinson is not esteemed for the elegance of her style, the splendor of her eloquence, the profundity of her thought, the brilliancy of her wit and humor, for she has none of these, but that the public...experience the same sort of delight in listening to a vituperative woman on the platform as they do in beholding Mr. Pearce putting his hand into the lion’s mouth, the Japanese juggler ascending his ladder of swords barefooted, Lydia Thompson in spangled tights dealing out indecent witticisms, or any of the other monstrous novelties we are afforded under the name of amusements.¹⁷⁰

At the same time, there were those who criticized Dickinson for not being amusing enough, such as the Missouri lecture organizer who feared that her famous speech about “*Jo-ann*” might not be “brisk” enough for the local audience. Dickinson recounts the episode in her memoir, *A Ragged Register*:

“It’s just a historic piece?”

“No more.”

“Well now,” brightening hopefully, “don’t you think you could liven it up by throwing in a few jolly stories and some jokes, and—and—*that* sort of thing?”

¹⁶⁸ J.G. Holland in *Scribner’s Monthly*, Feb 1872, quoted in Carl Bode, *The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 251.

¹⁶⁹ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

¹⁷⁰ *Evening Telegraph* (Philadelphia), 20 October 1869, in Dickinson papers.

“Have an intermission about the middle of it? Sing a song? or perhaps
dance a jig?” I feelingly inquired.
At which with ecstasy the response, “Oh! if you only *would*, Miss
Dickinson!”
Well I didn’t, and was never bidden back to *that* town.¹⁷¹

Many critics called Dickinson’s arguments into question because she was paid for
presenting them:

The lecture abounded in sensible arguments and thoughtful conclusions,
but it was not possible to lose sight of the fact that the lecturer was
devoting her energies to the removal of the obstacles in the way of
women, in the way of making money, as though no other subject but the
mere avaricious one of money getting had any claims upon her as the
apostle of her sex.¹⁷²

She also received letters from those who believed that her speaking for profit was
inappropriate to her sex: “Those speeches of yours seem to me mercenary and
unbecoming a woman.”¹⁷³ One letter to the editor of the *Chicago Tribune* suggested that
Dickinson was not a genuine reformer, but a performer capitalizing on popular reformist
themes for profit:

Can it be possible, Miss Anna Dickinson, that your sympathy for the
wrongs of women is purely commercial in its character? That you are the
paid mute at the funeral, weeping for a nightly salary over female woes?
That you are simply a hired Hessian fighting the battles of women at one
hundred dollars per hour? That the locality and time and extent of your
grief are measured by vulgar dollars and cents?¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ Anna E. Dickinson, *A Ragged Register* (Longs Peak, CO: Temporal
Mechanical Press, 2000; Harper & Bros, 1879), 149.

¹⁷² *Daily Republican* (Decatur, Ill), 5 April [year illegible], in Dickinson papers.

¹⁷³ Dickinson, *A Ragged Register*, 83.

¹⁷⁴ *Chicago Tribune*, 6 March [year illegible], in Dickinson papers.

Probably some of these attacks were stimulated by the enormous sums of money Dickinson was earning at a time when the few jobs open to working women paid very little. At the height of her lecturing career in the early 1870s she was making between \$150 and \$400 a speech—more than \$23,000 a year—almost as much as the President and on par with the earnings of the greatest male speakers.¹⁷⁵

In her memoir, Dickinson repeatedly expresses her frustration with those who did not believe that she had to support herself and her family. She was also continually astounded at the audacity of those who assumed that she would be happy to donate to their cause:

After having spend[sic] fifteen hours of travel and one hundred and fifteen dollars to keep my engagement, and spoken to a crowded house, the members of [the association] modestly suggested that I take half my fee.... “Oh, we thought there was no doubt you would be delighted to contribute to the excellent cause for which this course is given—a new organ for the First Presbyterian Church.”¹⁷⁶

Dickinson wryly noted: “Seeing as I had no personal interest in that special denomination, and never had nor never will enjoy or suffer by means of the desired organ in that particular church, I respectfully declined impoverishing myself in its service, and have—sans *doubt*—left behind me the name of a greedy and avaricious woman.”¹⁷⁷

But although Dickinson was certainly aware of the necessity of making a living, neither did she succumb to the sugar-coating of her messages: “In composing her

¹⁷⁵ Chester, 86.

¹⁷⁶ Dickinson, *A Ragged Register*, 61.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

addresses Anna displayed no reticence, no caution, but rather an extreme forthrightness. This was, as she explained, partly a matter of her conviction on principles. It was also a matter of temperament. She liked to shock her listeners. She enjoyed starting a fight, or keeping one going.”¹⁷⁸ But interestingly, the speech with which Dickinson achieved the greatest popular success was not concerned with an overtly political topic, but with an historical subject who loomed large in nineteenth-century consciousness—Joan of Arc.

From Rhetoric to Drama: Jeanne D’Arc

It is related that Miss Anna Dickinson was about to deliver her lecture on “Joan D’Arc,” in a small western town, and it was considered necessary that she should be introduced to the audience. The task fell upon the chairman of the lecture committee, a worthy individual, but not very well versed in the history of the language of the lamented La Pucelle. “Ladies and gentlemen,” said he, advancing to the front of the platform, “Miss Dickinson will address you, to-night, on the life and adventures of John Dark, one of the greatest heroes of antiquity. We are not as familiar with antiquity as we ought to be, owing to the long time since antiquity; but one thing is certain, and that is that Miss Dickinson can tell us all about the most remarkable man of them all—John Dark.”¹⁷⁹

Dickinson’s “Jeanne D’Arc” lecture was her most popular and most acclaimed. Contemporary accounts suggested that “the speaker’s eloquence would almost have persuaded the very judges who condemned Joan to death, had they heard it.”¹⁸⁰ Dickinson’s representation of Joan occurred at a time when Joan’s image was undergoing a significant metamorphosis: “One of the most fundamental changes that occurred [in the

¹⁷⁸ Young, Ch. 8, 14.

¹⁷⁹ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

¹⁸⁰ *Reporter* (Seward, Neb), 5 June 1884, quoted in advertisement for Joan of Arc at Bijou Opera House, Middletown OH, in Dickinson papers.

nineteenth century], as a legacy from the enlightenment and a visible social force of transformation, was that the concept of nobility was divorced from the class of nobles....[the idea] was deeply democratic.”¹⁸¹ Mark Twain, a contemporary of Dickinson’s, created a Joan—her story told through the voice of her page—who “emerge[d] as a prototype of the democratic hero: unlettered, ‘natural,’ rising by innate qualities of personality alone to a position of wisely exercised power.”¹⁸² Dickinson, who, as a young Quaker girl of humble beginnings, had risen to fame in wartime through her passionate defense of the American Union, had been aptly identified in the press as America’s Joan of Arc, and her lecture was certainly constructed to capitalize on that image. In addition, Joan was a popular figure with feminists. In 1876, American women’s rights advocate Sarah Moore Grimke published her own translation of a French biography of Joan.¹⁸³

In “*La Pucelle D’Orleans* Becomes An American Girl: Anna Dickinson’s ‘*Jeanne D’Arc*,’” Karlyn Kohrs Campbell has argued that despite Dickinson’s support for the women’s movement, the popularity of the lecture stemmed from Dickinson’s transformation of Joan into a “democratic, Protestant populist, [and] also into a ‘true woman.’”¹⁸⁴ Dickinson distinguished her Joan from others’ interpretations of her story:

¹⁸¹ Warner, 248-9. Twain’s book is *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc, by the Sieur Louis de Conte (Her Page and Secretary)*, published in New York in 1896.

¹⁸² Warner, 251.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁸⁴ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “*La Pucelle D’Orleans* Becomes an American Girl: Anna Dickinson’s ‘*Jeanne D’Arc*,’” in *Texts in Context: Critical Dialogues on*

Dickinson's Joan was a real and ordinary person, not a legend, a saint, or a creature of blind fate. She was a patriot who worshipped at the altar of a civil religion; and, despite her mission to see a king crowned, she became a democratic populist. Spiritually, Catholic Joan was shown to be a Protestant. Finally, Dickinson's Joan triumphed in death, giving her life for her country; she was not a threatening, troubling "amazon," but a "true woman," that is, pure, pious, domestic, and submissive.¹⁸⁵

Campbell suggests that no other image of Joan could have achieved popularity in mid-nineteenth century America. The image of the androgynous woman warrior who dressed in male clothes (and enjoyed it) and defied her superiors would have been far too troubling. Dickinson, argues Campbell, "treat[ed] her death as martyrdom, a move that transformed Joan into a 'true woman' whose life was sacrificed for France."¹⁸⁶

Ultimately, according to Campbell,

Joan's transvestism, her skill in battle, her physical strength and endurance, her love of action, and her inviolability—all the qualities that might be claimed as feminist—are transmuted because, in the final conclusion, they are offered on the altar of male supremacy. Like an idealized true woman, Joan became a ministering angel unselfishly devoted to king and country, which here substitute for husband and family.¹⁸⁷

Joan's death was a martyrdom; "Joan did not die to affirm her mission or the authenticity of her voice; she was a casualty of political conflict, crushed by the machinations of the English...Pure, pious, and passive, she was murdered."¹⁸⁸

Significant Episodes in American Political Rhetoric, ed. Michael C. Leff and Fred J. Kauffeld (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1989), 93.

¹⁸⁵ Campbell, "La Pucelle D'Orleans," 101.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

Campbell links the lecture to the rise of “social feminism,” which argued for women’s rights on the basis of a moral influence that could uniquely benefit society.¹⁸⁹

In Dickinson’s lecture, Joan became a character in the plot that decreed that a true woman had to die if she violated her culturally determined role, a plot that confined a woman’s power to dying as a sacrifice to male ends. As a result, Joan, the independent woman warrior, became a symbol reinforcing the sexist values of nineteenth-century America.¹⁹⁰

In their essay, “Response to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s Anna E. Dickinson’s Jeanne D’Arc: Divergent Views,” Wil Linkugel and Robert Rowland examine the claim that Dickinson’s Joan was a “true woman” by holding her up against the emerging image of the “New Woman,” whom they define as:

a woman who did not deny or mortify her femininity; neither was she to be submissive and subservient to the male and bound to stereotypical sexual roles. Rather she was men’s equal, his complement or counterpart, a person who utilized her talents, whether they were the deftness of hand and fingers for sewing or surgery, the mental acuity for teaching or research, or the practical sense for running a family or a business.¹⁹¹

Although Joan possessed many qualities of the New Woman—including bravery, fortitude, perseverance, and physical strength—Linkugel and Rowland argue that such an image would not be profitable for a woman earning her living as a lecturer.¹⁹² They suggest Dickinson could have presented Joan as a New Woman without difficulty but

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 109.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 110.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 111.

¹⁹¹ Linkugel and Rowland, 115.

¹⁹² Ibid., 116.

that she was either “so thoroughly acculturated that she could not embrace the image of the ‘new woman,’” or that “she sacrificed that ideal for commercial gain.”¹⁹³

Linkugel and Rowland also propose an alternate reading of the speech from what they term a “mythic perspective.” They note that although Dickinson strove to represent Joan as a “real person” rather than a “mythic hero,” she also created her with extraordinary qualities.¹⁹⁴ They suggest that Dickinson was attempting to redefine the mythic by fashioning Joan as a heroine for the American woman: “By emulating her strength, her common sense, her will, and her independence American women could become like Joan of Arc.”¹⁹⁵

Linkugel and Rowland explain, “We tell myths to solve problems that cannot be solved through other means. In the mythic narrative, a social problem may be confronted and solved through the actions of the hero. Thus, myths provide the heroes who define a society and solve contradictions.”¹⁹⁶ They note that in Dickinson’s version of the story, Joan wants to return home after her victory at Orleans but receives orders from the crown to remain. She acquiesces and becomes weak; she participates in a battle unwillingly and is unsuccessful. Linkugel and Rowland suggest that as a mythic hero, Joan’s strength stems from her self-determination. Once she denies her own voice and yields to the

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 118.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

dictates of others, her invincibility evaporates.¹⁹⁷ Ultimately, Linkugel and Rowland suggest that Dickinson's Joan can be read not as a martyr but as a paragon of accomplishment and strength—neither of which would be possible without her independence. Dickinson's speech, then, suggests that “independence offers the only avenue for overcoming the plight of women.”¹⁹⁸

A lecture defining the proper role for women might have confronted head-on all of the negative social attitudes toward feminism. But in a story those attitudes at least partially could be side-stepped...in her description of Joan, Dickinson may have sought to solve the contradiction between true womanhood and feminism...Presented as straight-forward argument, Dickinson's message would have violated entrenched social values; she likely would not have won a hearing. Dickinson, therefore, might have masked this radical message both by adapting to conventional values and by placing the message in a mythic context. The lecture, then, might have subtly implied a perspective that so exceeded the norms of the day that it could not have been articulated in propositional form.¹⁹⁹

At least one contemporary account supports Linkugel's and Rowland's argument. One paper noted in 1872 that Dickinson “shows us *not* a prophetess, fanatic, imposter, or witch; but a womanly girl who was at once a heroine, reformer, diplomat, stateswoman and general.”²⁰⁰

Marina Warner notes that Joan's biographers, as well as historians and playwrights, have tended to construct her life in an essentially dramatic (i.e., Aristotelian) way: “first the glory of the hero with an overarching conviction of personal mission, then

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 119.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 120.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 118-120.

²⁰⁰ *Daily Derrick*, 28 March 1872, in Dickinson papers.

reversal, the destruction of hopes and, usually, extinction.”²⁰¹ But Warner argues that the “moral message of the form” is closer to that of a Catholic Mass than that of an Aristotelian tragedy:

There is no hubris in the strict sense, for the drive toward self-destruction lies in a laudable consent to the divine will and God’s call, which raises up the hero-victim, paschal lamb or virgin girl, for the time required to accomplish the vocation. There is no defiance of the gods, nor is the destruction of the hero a defeat, but a victory...The sacrifice of Christ, renewed in the ritual, and its mimesis, in such martyrdoms as Joan’s, are intended to achieve not catharsis, but salvation.²⁰²

Warner notes that Schiller’s awareness of this led him to create his Joan with a flaw.²⁰³

Dickinson, though she admired Schiller’s tragedy for its “most exquisite poetical conceits,” felt that “Schiller represents her as a nondescript in creation. A being neither angel nor human.”²⁰⁴

Although Dickinson’s oratorical style was often described as “dramatic,” her theatrical style was at its most pronounced in the Joan of Arc speech; the dramatic narrative of Joan’s life was rendered even more dramatic in presentation. It was not a

²⁰¹ Warner, 269.

²⁰² Ibid. This moral message could also be likened to that of the melodramatic form. As David Grimsted has noted, “Virtue and the heroine stood almost indistinguishable at the center of the melodrama, the one a personification of the other...Concepts like ‘salvation’ and ‘redemption’ were often affixed to the heroine’s role.” See David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 172-173.

²⁰³ Warner, 269.

²⁰⁴ “Anna E. Dickinson’s ‘Jeanne D’ Arc,’” in *Texts in Context: Critical Dialogues on Significant Episodes in American Political Rhetoric*, ed. Michael C. Leff and Fred J. Kauffeld (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1989), 285.

speech *about* Joan of Arc; rather, to those who gathered to watch her, Dickinson *became* her subject. As one paper noted in 1872,

This is not alone an historical narrative. It is a re-creation. To the modern mind the Maid of Orleans is a myth, a dim vision... This shadow Miss Dickinson invokes from the past; and she causes it to rise before the present a living, breathing entity.... This is a triumph of art... purely a creation of genius.²⁰⁵

Already associated with Joan in the public eye for her stirring oratory during the Civil War, Dickinson had capitalized on that image. She noted in regard to one audience that she “could readily understand why the story was so well liked by them, with its heroic and pathetic central figure, and its tale of a weak and almost crushed people making triumphant headway against a powerful foe.”²⁰⁶ Dickinson’s motto, “The world belongs to those who *take* it,” echoed Joan’s proverb, “‘*Aide-toi, le ciel t’aidera*’ (God helps those who help themselves).”²⁰⁷ And in her speech, Dickinson certainly exploited this identification:

Miss Dickinson possesses a voice of great power, well adapted to expressing the various shades of emotion demanded in the delivery of the discourse. At times there was an intensity of dramatic action, into which the speaker threw her whole soul. Every motion showed that she was thoroughly in sympathy with the character of the wonderful woman, whose life she so vividly depicted. Her gestures were short and intence [*sic*] and the expression of her face changed wonderfully from time to time.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁵ *Daily Derrick*, 28 March 1872, in Dickinson papers.

²⁰⁶ Dickinson, *A Ragged Register*, 153.

²⁰⁷ Warner, 69.

²⁰⁸ *Providence Journal*, 20 December 1892, in Dickinson papers.

As the *Boston Globe* described it,

Its style was strong, clear and pictorial...But the most conspicuous feature of the lectures was what Demosthenes declared to be the one essential of all oratory—its superb delivery. Instead of the strong and magnetic but somewhat monotonous tone which once distinguished Miss Dickinson's oratory—with but few and often very awkward gestures—the audience, last night, were astonished to see in their once quiet quaker haranguer an accomplished dramatic artist, who portrayed a character rather than delivered a lecture.²⁰⁹

The *Globe* went on to suggest, “We believe that no one who heard her, last night, can doubt that on the stage Miss Dickinson will have a career as brilliant as she has had in other fields.”²¹⁰

Conclusion

Civil War historians who have written on Dickinson have often used her speech in the House of Representatives as a centerpiece, implying that her youthful triumph on Capitol Hill—before the most powerful men in America—was the high point of her career. In *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, Lauren Berlant uses pilgrimages to Washington, D.C. to examine “the real and conceptual distances that occupants of the United States have felt the need to traverse: not always because they want to usurp the space of national mastery, but sometimes because they seek to capture, even fleetingly, a feeling of genuine membership in the United States.”²¹¹ It is possible to read Dickinson's journey to

²⁰⁹ *Boston Globe*, quoted in unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.* Although this clipping is undated, it appears that by this point Dickinson had declared her intention to go on the stage.

²¹¹ Berlant, 20-21.

Washington, D.C. as an attempt to do just that. Dickinson's pilgrimage, undertaken with abolitionist zeal, was a citizenship quest on two levels: first, she demanded freedom and rights for black slaves; second, she sought for herself—and achieved—a public voice on a national platform, where she addressed the most pressing political issues of her day. She claimed for herself a space in the national culture that she would spend the rest of her career struggling to maintain.

Yet the evidence suggests that while Dickinson began her career as an earnest and idealistic abolitionist, it is perhaps more appropriate to characterize her as a performer than as a reformer. If so, she was not so different from other speakers of her day. As Barnet Baskerville has noted, the ideal orator before the Civil War could be described as “a happy combination of poet and actor.”²¹² The great orators were frequently hailed for their theatrical qualities. Henry Ward Beecher, the “Shakespeare of the Pulpit,” might be likened to a romantic actor for his sporadic, inspired moments of intense passion.²¹³ And when audiences flocked to hear abolitionist orator Wendell Phillips, “[T]hey did not simply expect to hear a man give a talk about slavery; instead, they were well prepared and eager to participate in a significant dramatic event.”²¹⁴ This seems to have been true of Dickinson's audiences as well.

²¹² Baskerville, 83.

²¹³ One biographer carried the analogy even further: “Beecher never escaped from the theatrical performance of Henry Ward Beecher played by Henry Ward Beecher.” See Robert T. Oliver, *A History of Public Speaking in America*, (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1965): 373-382.

²¹⁴ James Brewer Stewart, *Wendell Phillips: Liberty's Hero* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1986), 185.

Accounts of Dickinson's speaking style vary little over the course of her career, the same strengths and weaknesses elaborated again and again over the years. But her public identity underwent a significant shift. Without altering her themes or manner of speech, Dickinson transformed herself from youthful idealist in Quaker garb to adult professional and celebrity. And although Dickinson felt passionately about the causes she espoused, for most of her career she is most accurately described as a professional lecturer. Her insistence on receiving compensation for her speaking, her tendency to adopt the positions of those whom she admired and to present them in her own style, the repeated allusions in the press to her emphasis on style over substance—all these point to a woman whose primary goal was to secure large paying audiences. Unlike Wendell Phillips, who insisted on a fee to speak about a “noncontroversial subject” but who would speak about abolition for no charge,²¹⁵ Dickinson was not inclined to speak gratis even for causes she fervently supported. This was probably due in large part to her indignation at those who either opposed women speaking for profit or who assumed that she would be happy to speak out of the “natural” womanly goodness of her heart. And there was a more practical reason: with a family living in genteel poverty (at least since her father's death), she felt a responsibility to respond to their frequent requests for money as well as to support herself—she had entered the lecture field, after all, because she needed the income after her dismissal from the mint.

²¹⁵ Carl Bode, *The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 206.

It might seem easy to dismiss Dickinson, as some of her contemporaries did, as a hack entertainer who privileged style over substance and whose absence from the official ranks of organized reform societies prevented her from achieving tangible results for causes that she espoused. But as Wendy Hamand Venet has observed in *Neither Ballots Nor Bullets: Women Abolitionists and the Civil War*, “Dickinson was a dramatic orator first and foremost.”²¹⁶ It was probably not insignificant that Dickinson’s most successful and most frequently requested speech was not one of her political speeches on behalf of abolition or women’s rights. Rather, her Joan of Arc lecture drew upon themes of women’s rights in what was essentially a dramatic presentation during which Dickinson capitalized on her public identity as “America’s Joan of Arc” to create—and seemingly embody—the character of Joan. Her subsequent theatrical career was, perhaps, as Venet has suggested, “a natural progression for her flamboyant personality.”²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Venet, 56.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER TWO: NEW WOMEN OR TRUE WOMEN? THREE AMERICAN PLAYS

Although Dickinson would continue to speak on the lecture platform sporadically through the end of the century, by the mid-1870s she could no longer make a living at it. She turned then to the theatre as the most promising avenue for a career that could sustain her both financially and intellectually while maintaining her public participation in American culture.

Dickinson wrote her first play, *Anne Boleyn, or, A Crown of Thorns*, for her own theatrical debut in 1876. Although both the play and actress met with mixed reviews, the play received enough positive notices and enthusiastic responses from theatre people—popular playwright Dion Boucicault among them—for Dickinson to continue writing plays. Late in 1876 she appeared at Philadelphia's Arch Street Theatre in another play of her own devising, *Laura, or True to Herself*, which was written in approximately one week and barely completed by the time of its opening. Dickinson told a reporter on the eve of its debut: "This play was unwritten a week ago...that is the remarkable point...It is written, rehearsed and acted within a week. It was begun last Thursday evening and it is not yet finished...Oh, but it will be all right. I am on the last scene of the play now. All the rest is thoroughly rehearsed by the company."²¹⁸ Although Dickinson had usually found her most enthusiastic and supportive audiences in her hometown, *Laura* was

²¹⁸ Anna Dickinson, quoted in "A Peep Behind the Scenes," unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers. This play, for which there is no extant text, was "a romantic drama depicting the tribulations confronting a young English actress and her adoring swain." Dickinson's biographer has noted, "Anna had to have a message, even in a romantic comedy," and the message of this play was apparently "the power and endurance of love in a true woman." Young, Ch.16, 4.

reviled by the Philadelphia critics.²¹⁹ Dickinson did three performances and gave up on *Laura*.

But she continued to write plays. Also in 1876 she adapted Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* into a play entitled *Love and Duty*, and wrote a play, *Esther Arnim, or Friend or Foe*, about a "Russian Jewess," neither of which was ever produced. In 1878 she penned *Aurelian, or Rome's Restorer*, which was intended for tragedian (and fellow Philadelphian) John McCullough. It was also never produced, although Dickinson herself did offer it as a solo reading. In 1879 Dickinson wrote the only other play of hers to receive any degree of success—*An American Girl*. Requested by popular actress and Augustin Daly headliner Fanny Davenport, *An American Girl* was a "comedy-drama" that drew good houses for Davenport and supplied Dickinson with a steady income until a bitter dispute between the two women led Davenport to return the play.

The last play Dickinson attempted was another "comedy-drama" entitled *The Test of Honor* (1880). She spent at least thirteen years trying to get it produced, but no theatre ever accepted it. Although some interest was expressed in it in the early 1880s, most responses she received were like the following from manager Daniel Frohman in 1893: "I have read 'The Test of Honor' and while it is an interesting play and is well written, it is not the kind of piece in which I can see any money for you or for myself at the Lyceum Theatre."²²⁰

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²²⁰ Daniel Frohman to Anna E. Dickinson, New York, 18 December 1893, in Dickinson papers.

Of the seven plays Dickinson wrote and entered into copyright at the Library of Congress, only three—*Anne Boleyn*, *Laura*, and *An American Girl*—received full theatrical productions. There are no extant texts of *Laura* or *Love and Duty*,²²¹ and only the first two acts of *Esther Arnim* remain. None of the plays were published, though *Aurelian* was printed; the others exist only in manuscript form at the Library of Congress. This chapter, therefore, will concentrate on the two extant plays that received full theatrical productions—*Anne Boleyn* and *An American Girl*—and *Aurelian*, of which Dickinson gave a number of fairly successful readings.

This chapter will explore Dickinson's motives and goals in writing her plays, and attempt to evaluate the selected plays themselves with respect to both their artistic merit and political content. To what extent did Dickinson "Americanize" her historical subjects? To what extent did the plays reflect contemporaneous images of American women, and to what extent did they reflect Dickinson's feminist politics? Did she make a conscious effort to insinuate political motives into her dramatic writing? Or does she make the shift into an entirely new, seemingly apolitical genre in order to make a go of it in the dog-eat-dog world of the commercial theatre?

Which Will Take Best With the Public?: *Anne Boleyn, or, A Crown of Thorns*

²²¹ These plays were apparently casualties of a "pulping" of nineteenth-century plays at the Library of Congress, when a small percentage were selected for microfilming and the rest were destroyed. Dickinson herself apparently did not keep copies of them, or they were lost when the rest of her papers were donated to the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. As far as I have been able to ascertain, the Manuscript Division is the only place the remaining plays exist.

Anna Boleyn of the play is not she of history, but it is the true woman written in spite of historians....²²²

In January of 1875, Dickinson wrote to her sister Susan:

Now I want thee to give thy 'gigantic intellec' a fair chance at this idea—without seeing the plays which is thy idea of a *subject* for me to make a debut in.—all of the plays being new, —or entirely new versions of old subjects—

Katherine of Arragon (of course thee understands, *not* Henry VIII)

Anne Boleyn

Lady Jane Gray

Jane Eyre

Or a romantic, melodramatic love play—

Which will take best with the public, in which will I play best, & which will suit me the best?²²³

Although there is no record of Susan's reply, ten days later Dickinson wrote again to her sister that she had been reading James Anthony Froude's *History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada*. She was thoroughly disgusted with it. She complained, "of all mean, truckling, flunkey, *mannish* spirits I think *he* exceeds. If some one would kick his ----- & do it well, I should feel relieved. His style of treating Katherine of Arragon & Anne Boleyn is alike atrocious, & his method of truckling to Henry is worse than an emetic. Elegant language! But it is as I feel."²²⁴ She was horrified that Froude denied "all of Katherine's beauty, gentleness, long suffering, heroic patience...without shadow of proof" and that he characterized her marriage to

²²² *Boston Times*, 14 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

²²³ Anna Elizabeth Dickinson to Susan Dickinson, Chicago, 10 January 1875, in Dickinson papers.

²²⁴ Anna E. Dickinson to Susan Dickinson, Chicago, 20 January 1875, in Dickinson papers.

Henry VIII as one of convenience rather than love despite the evidence to the contrary.²²⁵ She observed,

He can see no reason save *obstinacy* in a woman holding fast to her place & name tho by yielding them she wrote herself ‘the king’s harlot for twenty four years’ & handed her child with infamy—[be] it understood from henceforth, whenever a man wants a mistress, or thinks it would be better to have a new wife & a new flock of children, the first wife, if she would not be considered unwomanly, obstinate, unwifely, will...at once to get into a convent—or take poison, according to her conscience.²²⁶

Froude’s characterization of Anne Boleyn infuriated Dickinson even more. She accused him of deliberately misrepresenting the truth and felt that his treatment of Anne Boleyn’s character was simply outrageous.²²⁷

As to his gabble about Anne Boleyn, I would like to whack him with a club.—he denies the truth, or falsifies the truth, whenever he so much as alludes to it.—She certainly *never* could have had anything said against her early life, or it would on her trial have been said--& to suppose that

²²⁵ Ibid. Dickinson does not elaborate on what she considers “evidence to the contrary.”

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ In reference to Anne Boleyn’s coronation as Queen, Froude had asked, “Did any twinge of remorse, any pang of painful recollection, pierce at that moment the incense of glory which she was inhaling? Did any vision flit across her of a sad mourning figure which once had stood where she was standing, now desolate, neglected, sinking into the darkening twilight of a life cut short by sorrow? Who can tell? At such a time, that figure would have weighed heavily upon a noble mind, and a wise mind would have been taught by the thought of it, that, although life be fleeting as a dream, it is long enough to experience strange vicissitudes of fortune. But Anne Boleyn was not noble and was not wise,—too probably she felt nothing but the delicious, all-absorbing, all-intoxicating present; and if that plain, suffering face presented itself to her memory at all, we may fear that it was rather as a foil to her own surpassing loveliness. Two years later she was able to exult over Catherine’s death; she is not likely to have thought of her with gentler feelings in the first glow and flush of triumph.” James Anthony Froude, *History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Death of Elizabeth*, Vol. I (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1895), 429.

this woman, having for years resisted the importunities of such an ardent love as Henry, evidently because she was not only chaste, but cold, because she wanted to be a *queen*, would risk all, —would turn into the most vulgar & infamous of wantons, would *buy* men, her own brother among the number, to revel with a small army of them in a few weeks of time is so monstrous an accusation that the man who in this day repeats it ought to be hounded from the society of all decent people.²²⁸

Dickinson demanded, “Why should this *beautiful* woman have to *bribe* men.

Why should she go all her life continent to blaze out in this damning flame for a brother & half a dozen men in scant space of time. Why was every particle of the *testimony* destroyed that was to prove all this infamy.”²²⁹

Dickinson was especially aggravated by Froude’s “truckling” to the King. She felt that Froude’s interpretation of events was designed to protect the image of the King and absolved him of any sinister motives:

Also he finds that it could not have been love or lust that took the King to Jane Seymour but the ardent desire of his lords--& his own desire for a male heir. —& he was getting *old*—about 40!—Certainly he could not wait more than twenty four hours!—Time was pushing.—of course F.F. [Flunkey Froude] knows no man better, that a king could not be married without divers preliminaries, & that these must have been arranged while Anne’s head was unshaken on her shoulders.²³⁰

Furthermore, she took Froude to task for omitting details that might have cast a more positive light on Anne Boleyn, and for omitting them precisely for the purpose of making her look unsympathetic:

²²⁸ Anna E. Dickinson to Susan Dickinson, Chicago, 20 January 1875, in Dickinson papers.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

Also he has nothing to say about Percy save that he had to leave the hall—the sight of the woman he had once loved to whom he might be even married—in such case—being too much for him!—not a word to say about his dumping a [illegible] contract, which in that case would of course have saved her. *But* finds if *she was* married to him that at once disposes of all claims she could possibly have on any one's sympathy or forbearance.²³¹

Overall, Dickinson was incensed by the male historian's apparently sexist assumptions that resulted in a warped interpretation of historical events. She argued that led by his sexist bias—or perhaps even misogyny—Froude saw Anne Boleyn's life through his own ideological lens and described her story accordingly. For example, according to Froude, Henry Norris, who was arrested along with the Queen, had told the Queen that he loved her better than his wife. Froude comments,

I am obliged to say, that conversations of this kind, admitted by herself, disentitle her to plead her character in answer to the charges against her. Young men do not speak of love to young and beautiful married women, still less to ladies of so high rank, unless something more than levity has encouraged them; and although to have permitted such language is no proof of guilt, yet it is a proof of the absence of innocence.²³²

Dickinson observed with disgust,

Flunkey Froude finds it easier to believe her guilt, than to believe that the lords & gentlemen who convicted her were dishonest. What has he to say not alone of *her* guilt but of the other 'high names'—her brother & Norris & the rest that were covered with infamy.—And he himself records, on almost every page, truckling to the king's will by these noble lords & [illegible] as murderous as this.—It was the King's pleasure—that was sufficient.²³³

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Froude, 458.

²³³ Anna E. Dickinson to Susan Dickinson, Chicago, 20 January 1875, in Dickinson papers.

She concluded, “Well! Why should I howl over this—Here’s a great to do, & paper I might have saved.”²³⁴

In Dickinson’s version of Anne’s story, the scheming Cardinal Wolsey plots to obtain Henry VIII’s divorce from Katherine of Aragon so that he can marry Henry to a French princess and position himself to ascend to the papacy. Henry, however, desires Anne Boleyn, who in turn loves Lord Henry Percy. Unbeknownst to Anne, Wolsey and the King force Percy to marry another and send him away to battle. With no word from Percy, Anne shuns the court; the King seeks her return. Wolsey sends Percy a letter seemingly recalling him to court but implying that Anne is already the King’s mistress. Meanwhile, Anne’s father intercepts Wolsey’s messenger to the pope; he then suggests using Anne as a “mousetrap” to foil the Cardinal’s plans. Percy returns and accuses Anne of betrayal; he brandishes her letters cutting off their relationship. Disgusted by his gullibility and faithlessness, she reveals them as forgeries. He discloses his marriage and they part. In her fury, she consents to her father’s plan to exact revenge on Wolsey; she returns to court and seals the Cardinal’s fate (and her own crown) by presenting the traitor’s intercepted letter to the King. Nearly seven years pass. Jane Seymour plots with Cromwell (Wolsey’s lackey) and the Duke of Norfolk to remove Anne from the throne by framing her for infidelity. The King has Anne (and her family members) arrested immediately for high treason. After a fixed trial, Anne, protesting her innocence, is locked in the Tower. Fearing that her execution may spark a riot because of her

²³⁴ Ibid.

popularity with the masses, Cromwell tries to intimidate her into a confession by placing the block in her cell. He sends Percy (unaware of his plot) in, hoping she will attempt escape with him via a secret passage; Cromwell can then arrest both and publicly demonstrate her guilt. All attempts fail. As her family members are led to the block, Cromwell assures their safety if she will sign a paper swearing to a prior contract that will annul the marriage. She acquiesces, but it is too late—their heads are being held up to the crowd. The signature, by annulling her marriage, makes her child, Elizabeth, a bastard. Cromwell offers to tear the paper up if she admits to infidelity, but she refuses, appealing to a higher power.

Although Froude was the main focus of Dickinson's ire—and the historian to whom she was most directly responding—it seems that Dickinson consulted other historians in the writing of the play (though she apparently did not document her usage). For example, George Cavendish's *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey* (1558) was “the principal source for the Percy story, and the only one which gives any detail.”²³⁵ Because the Percy plot is so integral to Dickinson's telling of the story, Dickinson must have encountered Cavendish—or historians relying on Cavendish—in her research. Frank B. Goodrich's *World Famous Women: A Portrait Gallery of Female Loveliness, Achievement and Influence*, published in Dickinson's hometown of Philadelphia in 1871, seems a likely candidate for such a source. Goodrich “dissent[s] from the opinion held by the majority of Catholic writers, that Anne sought to beguile the king, and was herself the first mover in the intrigue which ensued” and argues “that we have every reason to

²³⁵ E. W. Ives, *Anne Boleyn* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 77.

believe her love for Percy to have been her only genuine attachment.”²³⁶ His account of events related to Percy closely parallels what Dickinson presents in her play:

Upon the announcement of their intended marriage, Henry resolved to separate Percy and Anne, and commissioned Wolsey to annul the engagement. The cardinal summoned Percy to his presence, and threatened him with the displeasure of the king for contemplating a union with a person so much beneath him, and likewise intimated the probability of his disinheritance by his father. The unfortunate young man was subsequently dismissed from court, and compelled to marry Lady Mary Talbot, to whom he had been, some time previously, involuntarily contracted. Anne...withdrew to her father's house...threatening vengeance upon the cardinal, to whose interference she attributed her blighted prospects.²³⁷

Goodrich also recounts the dropping of the handkerchief at the tournament as the precipitating event for Boleyn's arrest, just as it functions in Dickinson's play. He notes, “The destruction of the records of the trial leave us without the means of judging of the admissibility of the evidence brought against her.”²³⁸ Perhaps most significantly, the words he attributes to Anne Boleyn upon her sentencing appear almost verbatim in Dickinson's play:

I have ever been a faithful wife to the king, though I do not say I have always shown him that humility which his goodness to me, and the honor to which he raised me, merited. I confess I have had jealous fancies and suspicions of him, which I had not discretion and wisdom enough to conceal at all times. But God knows and is my witness, that I never sinned against him in any other way...As for my brother and those others

²³⁶ Frank B. Goodrich, *World Famous Women: A Portrait Gallery of Female Loveliness, Achievement and Influence, from Semiramis to Eugenie* (Philadelphia: William H. Moore, Sons & Co, 1871), 164.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 165.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.

who are unjustly condemned, I would willingly suffer many deaths to deliver them....²³⁹

In addition, Goodrich's account of Boleyn's final hours is nearly identical to Dickinson's. He recounts that in the Tower, Boleyn sent for Kingston, "to say that she had heard 'she should not die before noon, and was very sorry therefor, for she had thought to be dead by this time, and past her pain.' Kingston replied that the pain would be little, 'it was so subtle.'"²⁴⁰ Goodrich also relates Boleyn's "memorable words which Lord Byron has transmitted to posterity": "'Commend me to his majesty,' she said, 'and tell him he hath ever been constant in his career of advancing me. From a private gentlewoman he made me a marchioness; from a marchioness, a queen; and now that he hath left no higher degree of honor, he gives my innocency the crown of martyrdom.'"²⁴¹

Goodrich's essay on Boleyn concludes with a brief summary of past historiography:

Anne Boleyn having been the recognized cause of the separation of England from the Romish communion, her character has been from that time to this the subject of fierce denunciation on the part of Catholic polemical writers. They have striven elaborately to prove her unchaste before marriage and adulterous afterwards. Protestant authors, on the other hand, urge the fact of her marriage with Henry as conclusive proof of her virtue, and repel the charges upon which the cruel monarch caused her to be condemned to death as slanderous and futile. That she was ambitious and unscrupulous after she had resolved to obtain the crown, will hardly be contested; but it will not be denied either, that had not the king interfered, she would have amply gratified her tastes, her feelings and her ambition, by an unostentatious union with Lord Percy. After her trial,

²³⁹ Ibid, 180-1.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 183.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 184.

her conduct was in every way admirable; and she seems to have been absorbed in indignation at the baseness of her oppressors and anxiety for her posthumous fame.²⁴²

Yet although Dickinson emphasized the newness of her interpretation, to present Anne Boleyn as a wronged and virtuous woman fell squarely within the tradition of earlier dramatic treatments of the Queen. From Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* to John Banks' 1682 *Vertue Betray'd: Or, Anna Bullen*, to several nineteenth-century versions of the story (including Henry M. Grover's *Anne Boleyn: A Tragedy*, 1826, Tom Taylor's *Anne Boleyn, An Original Historical Play in Five Acts*, 1876, and George Henry Boker's *Anne Boleyn*, 1849), dramatists before Dickinson (all British except for Boker), generally portrayed Anne Boleyn as an innocent.²⁴³ With the exception of Boker, who creates a flawed Boleyn who is redeemed upon her death, the earlier Boleyns "never initiate

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 186. Whether or not they were founded in reliable evidence in 1876, some of Dickinson's opinions about Anne Boleyn have been vindicated by twentieth century scholarship. Boleyn biographer E. W. Ives has noted, "It was, in fact, difficult to traduce Anne Boleyn both for promiscuity before marriage and promiscuity after marriage; if she had always been as lecherous as some conservatives wanted to believe, Henry was more stupid than wronged." See E. W. Ives, *Anne Boleyn* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 97. So Dickinson may have been correct about Boleyn's virtue in her early life; Ives notes that "the grounds for believing that Anne remained a virgin [...for nearly all of her six year courtship with the king] are strong...Anne's determination to be a wife and not a mistress meant that self-interest lay in morality." Ives, 213. Furthermore, with regard to Boleyn's trial and execution, "two recent biographers...agree about her innocence" (though for different reasons). Retha M. Warnicke, "Anne Boleyn in History, Drama, and Film," in *"High and Mighty Queens" of Early Modern England: Realities and Representations*, ed. Carole Levin, Jo Eldridge Carney, and Debra Barrett-Graves (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 239.

²⁴³ See Retha M. Warnicke, "Anne Boleyn in History, Drama, and Film," in *"High and Mighty Queens" of Early Modern England: Realities and Representations*, ed. Carole Levin, Jo Eldridge Carney, and Debra Barrett-Graves (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 239-255.

intimate relationships with Henry and remain innocent throughout the marriage; their lives are vindicated by Elizabeth's birth."²⁴⁴

When first produced in 1876, some critics compared *Anne Boleyn* to *'Twixt Axe and Crown*, Tom Taylor's 1870 play about Mary Tudor and Elizabeth I; others were reminded of Schiller's *Mary Stuart*.²⁴⁵ Dion Boucicault wrote to Dickinson the day after he saw the play: "As a piece of work it is—in a literary and artistic regard—equal to 'Axe & Crown'—I might say superior to that play—for thought (in construction) Taylor's piece may have more movement. Your play is far superior to the other in dialogue and in tragic design...."²⁴⁶ Acerbic critic William Winter, on the other hand, observed that "Scenes in 'Henry VIII' and 'Axe and Crown' embody its substance, and are better," and alleged that "the last scene is taken from Tom Taylor's play."²⁴⁷ In a later review, Winter amended his opinion slightly:

In one scene—the last one, and one for which, apparently, the play of "A Crown of Thorns" was written,—Miss Dickinson revealed dramatic instinct. This passage is an imitation of the last act of "Mary Stuart," and it looks very much like a deliberate crib from "Axe and Crown." Miss

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 255.

²⁴⁵ It may seem strange that critics should compare Dickinson's play to *Axe and Crown* when Taylor had written an historical play about Anne Boleyn. However, although Taylor's *Anne Boleyn* was first produced at London's Haymarket Theatre in 1875, it was not published until two years later. In the preface to the 1877 volume of *Historical Dramas*, Taylor notes that *Anne Boleyn* is "the only play in the volume which has not, as yet, been performed in any other theatre than that in which it was produced." See Tom Taylor, *Historical Dramas* (London: Chatto & Windus, Piccadilly, 1877), vii.

²⁴⁶ Dion Boucicault to Anna Dickinson, [date illegible], in Dickinson papers.

²⁴⁷ *New York Daily Tribune*, 8 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

Dickinson succeeded here in expressing quite well the dread of death and the excitation of a soul that conquers this natural cowardice.²⁴⁸

Motives and Goals

One of Dickinson's primary goals in writing *Anne Boleyn*, then, was to rescue the historical Anne Boleyn from the ravages of biased male historians—to create an “entirely new [version] of [an] old subject.” From the moment she first contemplated a stage debut, she aimed to write the story of an intelligent and powerful woman from a woman's point of view. This motive is evident from her initial list of options (Katherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Lady Jane Grey, Jane Eyre) as well as her parenthesis after the mention of Katherine of Aragon—“of course thee understands, *not* Henry VIII.”

Furthermore, Dickinson was dissatisfied with the paucity of good roles for women in the theatre. She would not make her theatrical debut in a role that was weak or insipid, and set out to craft a woman who had “heart, and brains, and a conscience.”²⁴⁹ When the contemporary press inquired about her motivation for writing *Anne Boleyn*, she explained:

Why did I write my play so you mean? Because I could find no character that suited me. Most dramatists are men. And like the male novelists they have all failed in portraying women's characters. If a woman is good she is weak and silly. If she is strong and intellectual she is bad and intriguing. The idea that a woman can be at once clever and amiable, possess both brains and virtue, seems never to have entered the masculine writer's mind. Now I hold that mental strength and moral strength go hand in hand; that a generous, full, free womanhood is made up alike of brains and fine instinct which will keep a woman pure under all circumstances. It is the weak women who fail, not the strong ones. I

²⁴⁸ *New York Daily Tribune*, [date illegible] 1877, in Dickinson papers.

²⁴⁹ *The Commonwealth* (St. Louis), 4 November 1876, in Dickinson papers.

wanted such a character, one who was assailed by temptation and yet kept white and free from soil. I found her in Anna Boleyn, the woman whom history has maligned and traduced, whose name has been dragged through the mire and filth of hundreds of years, and yet who was a martyr to her own spotless innocence.²⁵⁰

Did she succeed? The character of Anne Boleyn herself is certainly good without being either weak or silly. Though not an intellectual, her verbal abilities reveal intelligence. Madge, Anne's faithful lady-in-waiting, is good, devoted, and a bit of a flirt—but certainly not a well-developed or very interesting character. Jane Seymour, the only other female character, is a deceitful and conniving virago who flaunts her position as the King's mistress in the Queen's face. Despite Dickinson's contempt for male playwrights who could conceive of women in only two ways, she highlights that binary with the creation of Anne and Jane; one, a woman of supreme virtue and the other, a ruthless, lying whore. Furthermore, it is worth noting that there are only three roles for women—in a cast of more than twenty. However much Dickinson sought to create positive roles for women, she did not offer them very many.²⁵¹

Neither is the action of play driven by the female characters. The action of the first half of the play is driven by Wolsey's machinations and Henry's desire for Anne; the action of the second half is driven by the conspirators seeking to unseat Anne from

²⁵⁰ *Boston Times*, 14 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

²⁵¹ Contrast this number to Taylor's play, which features ten roles for women in a cast of twenty-five. However, it is worth noting that the models from which Dickinson seems to have been working—certainly Shakespeare and perhaps other Elizabethan or Jacobean playwrights—all feature large male casts with very few female roles. Furthermore, as Dickinson had made her career as a public speaker—a solo performer—it seems likely that she was really most interested in creating a strong role for herself and would not have wanted other strong women with whom to compete on stage.

the throne. Although Jane Seymour plays a crucial role in this conspiracy by first alerting Henry to his wife's "infidelity" and by executing the dropping of the handkerchief—the "signal" for Anne's implied assignation—she is prodded to do so and it is clear that the mastermind behind the plan is not hers. It is Cromwell who provides her instructions:

Hold to the line I have marked for you—tell his Majesty straightly—with no holiday phrases—that the Queen is false to him, that she will give a signal for a rendezvous to one of her lovers before his very eyes, this afternoon at the Tournament—the signal to be a bunch of flowers or a handkerchief, dropped from her hand and (*with significant look & action*) you yourself will stand so close to her arm as to make sure the signal shall not fail. Do this & I promise you Anne shall be out of your way in a fortnight.²⁵²

The subsequent conversation that takes place between Cromwell and Norfolk also indicates that the men are using her as a tool to achieve their ends.

Norfolk. (*Looking after her*) Will she do it?

Cromwell. Yes. She will play her part in this devil's masquerade—never fear.²⁵³

Yet in Anne Boleyn, Dickinson believed she had found a female character who could illustrate what she firmly believed—that a woman could be strong, intelligent, and virtuous at the same time—a woman like herself.²⁵⁴ However, in fashioning the character of Anne Boleyn Dickinson was clear that although she was using, and, to an extent, rewriting history, she was not doing so in an effort to create an historically *accurate*

²⁵² *Anne Boleyn*, III, i.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁴ It is perhaps worth noting that Dickinson (with or without intention) referred to the character as "Anna" Boleyn, as if the two—Dickinson and Boleyn—had merged.

depiction of the Queen. Rather, she noted that “Anna Boleyn of the play is not she of history, but it is the true woman written in spite of historians....”²⁵⁵

Anne Boleyn as “True Woman”?

Who was this “true woman,” created “in spite of historians”? In her famous essay, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” Barbara Welter identifies the central virtues of the nineteenth-century True Woman: “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.”²⁵⁶ To what extent did Dickinson’s Anne Boleyn embody these characteristics? Indeed, as discussed in Chapter One, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell has argued that Dickinson owed most of her success with her Joan of Arc lecture to Joan’s transformation into a True Woman—“a woman with whom nineteenth-century Americans could identify.”²⁵⁷ Was this the case with Anne Boleyn as well?

Campbell points out that Dickinson’s Joan “was loved by the ordinary soldiers she commanded and by the people, but despised by the aristocrats and betrayed by the generals.”²⁵⁸ Likewise, in the play, Anne is loved by the people of England.²⁵⁹ When she

²⁵⁵ Boston *Times*, 14 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

²⁵⁶ Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), 21.

²⁵⁷ Campbell, “*La Pucelle D’Orleans*,” 100.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁵⁹ The extent to which this was actually the case is debatable. According to Ives, there was “opposition to the queen among the nation at large and among the elite”—an opposition linked to the public’s sympathy for Katherine of Aragon and her daughter, Mary. Mary was “adamant in her refusal to recognize Anne and her child, despite her father’s determination that she should do so.” Ives notes, “Henry saw Mary’s behavior as a straightforward case of disobedience and, despite his obvious affection for her, put

is imprisoned in the Tower, a Magistrate of London remarks: “All along the way I did hear the common folk murmuring and grudging. The whole town is of their sort...She is much beloved. In these last nine months she has given to the poor of her own private store fifteen thousand pounds.”²⁶⁰ Anne is also loved by her lady-in-waiting, Madge, who in the end offers to sacrifice her own life for the Queen’s sake: “Oh, my Queen! My dear Mistress! You must not die. You shall not die!...There must be some way—oh, why can I not die for thee!”²⁶¹ But like Joan, Anne comes to be loathed by the King and his court:

The King hates her with a hate equal to the love with which he once loved her. Hates her for her free speech and reckless honesty & her whole upright & downright yea or nay, whether it please or cross his will...Norfolk hates her as Suffolk, & Dorset, & Exeter, & Montagne hate her: because she is in their way. She blocks all their pathways to the throne. For them to fight the Queen is to fight for their own claims to the crown...I hate her with a heritage of hate received from my great master, the Cardinal, even while I admire her courage & dauntless will...You [Jane Seymour] hate her most of all because you have most of all to gain by her destruction.²⁶²

increasing pressure on his daughter to conform. She lost her royal style and her household. She was forced ‘as a bastard’ to join the household of the ‘legitimate’ Elizabeth and give her precedence at all times...Mary was kept away from her mother, isolated from her former friends and servants, and deliberately slighted and ignored by Henry...He was determined to break his daughter’s will. It was Anne Boleyn, however, who got the blame.” And so, “disloyalty to Henry did not seem like disloyalty when it was thought to be support for the rightful heir, and increasingly Mary became the focus for all dislike of Anne and everything she appeared to represent.” See E. W. Ives, *Anne Boleyn* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 245-249.

²⁶⁰ Anna E. Dickinson, *Anne Boleyn, or, A Crown of Thorns*, unpublished manuscript in Dickinson papers, (typed personal copy), 54.

²⁶¹ *Anne Boleyn, IV*.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 44.

“Dickinson’s Joan was a real and ordinary person,” Campbell notes, “not a legend, a saint, or a creature of blind fate.”²⁶³ Similarly, Dickinson takes pains to position Anne Boleyn as an everyday person—by her own choice. Early in the play, Cromwell comments, “It may hap there is a woman who would rather be the wife of an honest poor man, than the idol of a king.”²⁶⁴ As he woos her, Henry VIII observes, “I can see thou art reserved for a lofty destiny,” to which she replies, “My liege, I desire it, not...Wert indeed my friend thou wouldst wish me a quiet fortune—sheltered from wind and weather—rather than an exalted one, exposed to storms, & followed by some dismal fall.”²⁶⁵ Later in the play, her lady-in-waiting, Madge, remarks, “Thou wast in the old times always full of lofty ambitions—What has become of them?” Anne responds, “Ah, child, happiness is a quality of very little ambition. It thinks itself rich enough of itself without any addition of glory.”²⁶⁶ And indeed, all of Anne’s miseries begin when she becomes Queen: “...what right indeed, have I to complain? If I sold myself to the devil of pride & revenge I have not been cheated in the bargain. I have been paid my wages!”²⁶⁷ Thus Dickinson creates a woman who merely sought happiness, not

²⁶³ Campbell, “*La Pucelle D’Orleans*,” 101.

²⁶⁴ *Anne Boleyn*, I, i.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, II, iii.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, III, i.

greatness; furthermore, she implies that the happiness being sought is the typical happiness enjoyed by everyday American women—that of home, hearth, and family.

Indeed, as Anne Boleyn faces her execution in the Tower of London, Dickinson emphasizes her status as a mother. In an agonized moment in the final scene, Anne invokes the image of her soon-to-be motherless child: “Oh, my child! My child! My little one! Elizabeth! My baby! My baby! What is to become of you?”²⁶⁸ And in the end, Anne acknowledges her motherhood as the one identity remaining to her: “I am a mother. Stripped of every other dignity and right that remains.”²⁶⁹ She resigns herself to her impending death with the thought that “Other times will know me innocent. My child will live in other times.”²⁷⁰ Certainly there was never a period that more highly valorized motherhood. (Indeed, some feminists, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, argued for the ballot on the basis of its value to improving motherhood.²⁷¹) This emphasis was clearly

²⁶⁸ Ibid., IV.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Charlotte Perkins Stetson [later Gilman], “The Ballot as an Improver of Motherhood,” NAWSA Convention, Washington, D.C., January 23-28, 1896, in *The Concise History of Woman Suffrage: Selections from the Classic Work of Stanton, Anthony, Gage, and Harper*, ed. Mari Jo and Paul Buhle (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 363. Stetson asked, “What is suffrage going to do for motherhood? Women enter upon this greatest function of life without any preparation...the life and death of the whole human race are placed in the hands of utterly untrained young girls. The suffrage draws the woman out of her purely personal relations and puts her in relations with her kind, and it broadens her intelligence...A woman will no longer be attached solely to one little group, but will be also a member of the community. She will not neglect her own on that account, but will be better to them and of more worth as a mother.” Other feminists argued, “In so far as motherhood has given to women a distinctive ethical development, it is that of sympathetic personal insight respecting the

intended to play on the sympathies of an audience that saw the bond between mother and child as a crucial component of a civilized American society.

Dickinson also catered to her audience's dominant religious sympathies. Just as "Dickinson exploited the opportunity to present [Joan] as a Protestant,"²⁷² so too did she make a point of affirming Protestantism in Anne Boleyn. As Dickinson well knew, nineteenth-century American society, threatened by "widespread fears of a Catholic political and military conspiracy," was virulently anti-Catholic.²⁷³ The historical Henry VIII, of course, had broken with the Roman Catholic Church when the pope hesitated to annul Henry's marriage to his first wife, Katherine of Aragon. Henry then established the Church of England, free of papal authority, and had his marriage to Katherine declared null by the Archbishop of Canterbury—but not before secretly marrying Anne Boleyn, who was already pregnant with Elizabeth I. Dickinson, in her zeal to prove Anne both pure and pious (in an American Protestant sort of way), has Anne affirm the legitimacy of her own marriage by declaring Katherine's void:

needs of the weak and helpless, and of quick-witted, flexible adjustment of means to ends in the physical, mental and moral training of the undeveloped. And thus far has motherhood fitted women to give a service to the modern State which men can not altogether duplicate." Rev. Anna Garlin Spencer, "Fitness of Women to Become Citizens from the Standpoint of Moral Development," NAWSA Convention, Washington, D.C., February 13-19, 1898, in *The Concise History of Woman Suffrage: Selections from the Classic Work of Stanton, Anthony, Gage, and Harper*, ed. Mari Jo and Paul Buhle (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 365.

²⁷² Campbell, "La Pucelle D'Orleans," 104.

²⁷³ Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 304.

Katherine?—She was not the Queen. Every prelate in the realm declared her marriage null. Her place was vacant, her crown reclaimed, her title withdrawn with intent to offer them in King's palaces when your Majesty was graciously pleased to bestow them, an unsolicited gift, upon me. The space beside your throne was clear ere I set foot on it.²⁷⁴

In so doing, Anne asserts the validity and correctness of Henry's break from Rome.²⁷⁵

Anne's piety is perhaps most vividly demonstrated in the play's final scene.

Pressed by Cromwell to confess to adultery, she repeatedly proclaims her innocence and refuses to confess because to do so would be a sin: "As to my brother & those others, who are unjustly condemned to loss of life & loss of honor, I would gladly suffer, were it possible, many deaths of the body to deliver them, but not one of the soul."²⁷⁶ In the play's concluding moments, she prepares to meet her executioner—flinging herself on her knees and declaring that she will make her final appeal "To the King of Kings. From Court & peers & King & people yea from this present time & the great unknown time to come I appeal to Him."²⁷⁷ In the final image, she rises and proclaims: "And there (*points*

²⁷⁴ *Anne Boleyn*, III, ii.

²⁷⁵ Boleyn biographer Ives argues that "Anne Boleyn was not a catalyst in the English Reformation; she was an element in the equation...she was the first to demonstrate the potential there was in the royal supremacy for that distinctive English element in the Reformation, the ability of the king to take the initiative in religious change...The breach in the dyke of tradition which she encouraged and protected made the flood of first reformed, and later of more specifically Protestant Christianity, unstoppable. Catholic hatred of Anne damned her for the break with Rome and for the entrance of heresy into England. It was right on both counts." See Ives, Chapter 14, "Anne Boleyn and the Advent of Reform," 302-331.

²⁷⁶ *Anne Boleyn*, IV.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

upward) mercy and truth await me. Doubt not that at the same great judgment...for thee & for those who sent thee—Also awaits justice.”²⁷⁸

In a sense, Dickinson’s ultimate goal for the play was to establish Anne Boleyn’s purity. She did so in part by proclaiming Anne’s marriage to the King legitimate and Katherine’s false, and in part by making Anne steadfast in her resolve to avoid even the appearance of wrongdoing. When seemingly given the opportunity to flee the Tower with Percy, Anne refuses, preferring “to stand condemned of all that I have been wrongfully accused because by this, I would seem guilty...I would rather have my child live & die a beggar than wear the Crown of England, stained not by her mother’s accused but proven shame.”²⁷⁹ Dickinson takes great pains to establish that she has been framed by those who consider Anne Boleyn in the way; her innocence is proclaimed by the virtuous to no avail. Even in the face of death, Norreys refuses to testify against her: “I never have seen aught but goodness in the Queen...Sire, she is innocent! I would rather die a thousand deaths than utter so foul a lie against her.”²⁸⁰ In the play’s final moments, the Magistrate reports that Norreys and the others accused “will die protesting the Queen’s innocence,” though their lives had been offered them three times:

Twice in their prison & again in the presence of the people who cried to them to stand firm to which Norreys, speaking for all, answered—Fear not, good people, we are true knights & loyal gentlemen who would rather

²⁷⁸ Ibid, IV.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., III, ii.

die than wrong an innocent woman—tho' she were but a simple maiden—how much more when she is our dear friend & gracious Queen.²⁸¹

It seems, then, possible to see in the character of Anne the cardinal True Woman virtues of piety, purity, and (at least the implied desire for) domesticity. The fourth virtue, however—submissiveness—is a bit more problematic. Dickinson, of course, actively campaigned against the submissiveness of women for most of her public life. Furthermore, in writing *Anne Boleyn* she made it clear that her interest was in demonstrating that piety and purity could coexist with strength and intelligence. “As a self-made woman,” notes Ives, the historical Anne “saw no percentage in bloodless simpering. Her attraction was that of challenge; she had not won the king by being submissive.”²⁸² And early in Dickinson’s play, Anne is set up as a woman who knows her own mind when Cromwell asks the King: “But, my lord, will Mistress Anne be moved on this chess-board of yours, as it may serve your purposes? She hath a right royal will of her own.”²⁸³ Shortly thereafter the King remarks, “She hath candor, high spirit, fearless courage, generous honor, keen intellect.”²⁸⁴ In the second act, Anne does not agree to serve as her father’s “mousetrap” for the Cardinal until she receives evidence of the Cardinal’s treachery from Percy. And although she makes a “despairing gesture” and “sinks down with a cry of agony” after she and Percy have parted “Forever!”, a mere

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, IV.

²⁸² Ives, 178.

²⁸³ *Anne Boleyn*, I, i.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

four lines later she is proclaiming: “Ambition & revenge?-Yea, it shall be so. These will I take for the guardian spirits of my life & will follow where they lead—but first, Revenge! I will crush this Cardinal. I will repay him in full for the wrongs he has done. The cup of bitterness he has put to other lips he shall drink to the dregs.”²⁸⁵

Yet Anne herself—despite Dickinson’s intentions—is a largely passive heroine. Her crucial action is in her decision to return to the court to unmask Cardinal Wolsey. Up to that point, she defers Henry’s attentions because of her love for Percy, and stays away from court, but she is barely a participant in the action. Indeed, she is onstage probably only about fifty percent of the time; she does not really own the stage until Act IV, sc. 2, when she is imprisoned in the Tower on the eve of her execution.²⁸⁶ Indeed, throughout the play Dickinson emphasizes Anne’s lack of agency. She uses Anne’s first entrance to forecast her certain doom. Anne enters reading her horoscope, which portends terrible things:

(Throwing down book) Tchee!—why should I care for the book!—‘tis but a bauble! *(Looking at it.)* A horoscope! My horoscope—the shadows of things to be *(throwing it down.)* Why! To believe would be to make them! One says—thus it must be & it follows—thus, it is. No, no. What does Master Bulstrode know of Fate more than I? He pictures—I decide. Which is on surer foundation. *(Again looks)* Happiness —none. Power—all. The end—anguish, despair, death. A pretty tale, truly! *(Enter King*

²⁸⁵ Ibid., II, iii.

²⁸⁶ More than two-thirds of Act I has passed before she makes her first entrance. She does not appear in the second act until the substantial third scene, and then disappears again until the end of the second act when she returns to expose Wolsey. She is present in about half of Act III.

*from gardens, going with impatient manner towards.) I myself can tell a better one! (King turns, sees her with delight & comes down.)*²⁸⁷

When the King, having entered to woo her, asks her about the horoscope, she scoffs at it, arguing that human choices determine fate.

King. Canst interpret the signs?

Anne. Well enough to read them—after a fashion.

King. Dost believe in them?

Anne. No sire.

King. You are above superstition.

Anne. Rather, your majesty, I am not so vain as to believe that the stars in their courses watch over me, nor sufficiently humble to be willing for them to control me.

King. You deny, then, the omnipotence of fate?

Anne. Fate? I believe our own deeds are our doomsmen.²⁸⁸

Yet the events of the play prove Anne wrong. Her own deeds throughout the play are largely benign. In fact, like the typical melodramatic heroine, she doesn't do very much at all. It could be argued that she has only two actions that contribute to the plot—the unmasking of Wolsey (which her father would have made happen anyway) and her refusal to confess, which is more a complication that creates an obstacle for the characters who do propel the plot. Indeed, she is not all that steadfast in her refusal, as she caves in the end and signs a paper that acknowledges a prior marriage contract with Percy (thereby freeing the King to marry Jane Seymour) in a vain effort to save the lives of the others accused. This choice is a self-abnegating and sacrificial one in which her honor is subordinated to her desire to save innocent lives. Despite her belief that “our

²⁸⁷ *Anne Boleyn, I.*

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

own deeds are our doomsmen,” it is not Anne Boleyn’s deeds that doom her. Rather, it is her own powerlessness to control the world around her.

Like Dickinson’s Joan of Arc, Anne is a strong and virtuous woman who is crushed at the hands of the men whom she threatens. As Campbell has argued, Dickinson “treat[ed] [Joan’s] death as martyrdom, a move that transformed Joan into a ‘true woman’ whose life was sacrificed for France.”²⁸⁹ As Campbell has observed, in Dickinson’s speech, “Joan did not die to affirm her mission or the authenticity of her voices; she was a casualty of political conflict, crushed by the machinations of the English...Pure, pious, and passive, she was murdered.”²⁹⁰ Similarly, Anne’s death is presented as a martyrdom, as she is also crushed by the “machinations of the English” and a casualty of aristocratic lust for power. Indeed, Anne’s martyrdom is most powerfully and obviously signaled by the play’s full title: *Anne Boleyn, or, A Crown of Thorns*. In comparing Anne Boleyn to Christ, the ultimate martyr, Dickinson both makes Anne a sacrificial lamb and endows her with the highest level of moral authority. Unwilling to confess to save her life, she goes to the scaffold a champion of the truth: “God knows, & He is my witness that I never failed towards my husband...& I shall say no other at the hour of death...I have nothing to confess & nothing to conceal & living or dying I will not lie.”²⁹¹

²⁸⁹ Campbell, “*La Pucelle D’Orleans*,” 107.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

²⁹¹ *Anne Boleyn*, IV.

Ultimately, though spirited and strong willed, the Anne Boleyn of Dickinson's play is a True Woman—and a victim. She is given a choice that allows her little agency: sign a false confession of guilt to ensure her child's accession to the throne, or maintain her innocence and integrity and die a martyr's death. When she chooses her honor, she makes the strongest choice available to her, but her moral victory is a corollary to her victimhood. Unlike Joan, the transvestite warrior, she had not “violated her culturally determined role”²⁹²; nor did she die to “plac[e] a French King on the throne of France,”²⁹³ but to make way for wife number three—still “a sacrifice to male ends.”²⁹⁴

It is important to remember that Dickinson's motives in writing *Anne Boleyn* were not entirely political or ideological. While she genuinely desired a transformation in the way women were represented on stage, and sought earnestly to reclaim a much-maligned historical woman, it was perhaps even more important to her to fashion a theatrical heroine who would have the requisite popular appeal to launch her on a lucrative career as an actress. Her turn to the theatre was not merely a career change, but an effort to earn a desperately needed living now that she could no longer sustain herself on the lecture platform. As she asked Susan at the end of her letter, “Which will take best with the public, in which will I play best, & which will suit me the best?”²⁹⁵ Clearly from the first

²⁹² Campbell, “*La Pucelle D’Orleans*,” 111.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁹⁵ Anna Elizabeth Dickinson to Susan Dickinson, Chicago, 10 January 1875, in Dickinson papers.

she aimed to combine her artistic goals and desire to write revisionist history with a commercially viable product. In this sense, *Anne Boleyn* did not meet her expectations. Although the play was admired, Dickinson did not have the acting ability to make the play a hit in the long run. She was also so attached to the play that she was unwilling to sell it to more experienced and skilled actresses (among them, Rose Eytinge, Fanny Davenport, and Mary Anderson). It therefore never provided her with the much hoped-for financial rewards.

In Which Will I Play Best?: Aurelian, or Rome’s Restorer

I am an American with over-much national pride.
—Anna Dickinson²⁹⁶

Dickinson wrote *Aurelian* for tragedian John McCullough (“Genial John”), a popular actor noted for his performance of heroic roles, “characters conspicuous for manliness and nobility”—among them Virginius, Brutus, and Spartacus in *The Gladiator*.²⁹⁷ According to theatre historian Charles H. Shattuck, “He was the last actor of consequence to play these old-fashioned roles” and persisted in them, with success, into the 1880s.²⁹⁸ He had developed his career by modeling himself after the heroism of Edwin Forrest and was at the height of his career when Dickinson wrote *Aurelian* for

²⁹⁶ Dickinson, *A Ragged Register*, 26.

²⁹⁷ Shattuck, 125.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

him. In January 1879, she wrote to her sister Susan, “McCullough agrees to bring out the play in the spring in New York & to have me play in it.”²⁹⁹

It is unclear whether McCullough ever actually did agree to such a proposal. On 29 January 1879, Dickinson received a letter from Leander Richardson (later editor of the *New York Dramatic News*), who was acting as her agent at the time. The letter began rather discouragingly: “As I anticipated, I found John in bed this morning at the time of our appointment.”³⁰⁰ When Richardson inquired about the play, McCullough’s response was even more discouraging:

That play can never be acted in its present shape, in this world. It is one thing to write a play that will read well, and another to make one that will play well. There are some good things in it, but as a whole it is weak. It lacks breadth. It is too small. It wants push, action, and greatness. The end of the last act is something terrible. What does anybody care who is next Emperor of Rome? No, I don’t know how to remedy it. If I did, I’d write the play myself. It’s no use. The play can’t be done as it is. It can be altered, but that must be the work of somebody who knows what he’s about.³⁰¹

Richardson remarked, “The idea of that fellow attempting to analyze a play, is something monstrous. But of course all this stuff isn’t original with him. Somebody...has been filling him up with this kind of rot.”³⁰² He continued:

²⁹⁹ Anna E. Dickinson to Susan Dickinson, Philadelphia, 12 January 1879, in Dickinson papers.

³⁰⁰ Leander Richardson to Anna E. Dickinson, 29 January 1879, in Dickinson papers.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Ibid.

...there is one certain conclusion to be drawn. Clearly, he does not mean to do the piece at all. He went out of his way this morning to tell me you couldn't act, and that the reason you couldn't get along with him was that he "told you so, and damned plainly." He added: "O, we fight like Hell!" He wasn't going "to help you commit suicide a second time."—and a whole lot more of stuff. All of it was entirely uncalled for, because I suggested nothing which could lead him to think I had any interest in the matter, further than regarding your lecture-business. Clearly, he was ill at ease, and anxious to justify himself in my eyes by lying.³⁰³

Richardson recommended,

Under these circumstances, the best thing to do, I should think, is, first, to lash him like blazes with your tongue, and then to take the play away from him. He will see the day when he'll wish he had it back again. And while there is nobody who can do the piece as he can, still, there are actors who can do it and make Aurelian a great part. Therefore do not despair. It is a play that will make itself, and will carry any good actor to the top with it. John is not vitally necessary to it, although he would unquestionably help it.³⁰⁴

Dickinson retrieved her play.³⁰⁵ But Richardson was overly optimistic: "But remember above everything that the end is not yet. There is stuff in 'Aurelian' and its author; and both of them have got to come to the top!"³⁰⁶ Yet although a number of newspapers announced that Dickinson herself would soon be appearing in the title role, *Aurelian* was never produced.³⁰⁷

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Leander Richardson to Anna E. Dickinson, 29 January 1879, in Dickinson papers.

³⁰⁵ Chester, 200.

³⁰⁶ Leander Richardson to Anna E. Dickinson, 29 January 1879, in Dickinson papers.

³⁰⁷ See clippings in Dickinson papers. What actually transpired between Dickinson and McCullough remains a mystery. I had hoped to explore their failed

Dickinson did, however, offer readings of *Aurelian* on the lyceum platform with some degree of success.³⁰⁸ Although some argued that it was “a play to be read rather than acted,”³⁰⁹ most critics praised the play and Dickinson’s reading of it. The Toledo *Blade* called it “*one of the most remarkable dramatic productions of the century*[italics in original].”³¹⁰

In conception and execution it is in the highest degree artistic—a tragedy with a plot; not only a grand poem in itself but a play in which the characters are thrilling with individual personality and dramatic action. It is full of telling situations, of rich surprises, all of them simple as well as strong. As a reading play it is quite equal to any in the language, excepting the best of Shakespeares’ [*sic*]; and having heard it from beginning to end we dare affirm—rank heresy though it may seem—that it is abreast with those, while it has also the rare merit of being equally good as an acting play...it will hold the boards as long as any that has ever been acted....It is not extravagant to say that Miss Dickinson has contributed a permanent addition, to English literature. “Aurelian” will be read long after the author is dust, and it will be enrolled among the few great works that were not born to die.³¹¹

The Detroit *Free Press* called it “a noble piece of literature. There are times when it reaches the height of grandeur, and the entire play reveals a depth of feeling, a tragic power and an aptness of expression that entitle it to sincerest admiration.”³¹²

collaboration in greater depth, but the available evidence does not yield enough useful information to do so.

³⁰⁹ *The Sunday Times* (Philadelphia), 7 November 1880, in Dickinson papers.

³¹⁰ Reprinted from Toledo *Blade*, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

³¹¹ Reprinted from Toledo *Blade*, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

³¹² Reprinted from Detroit *Free Press*, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

Dickinson's play was based on the Roman conquest of Palmyra in A.D. 273-274. The historical Aurelian, Emperor of Rome, was a brutal soldier who maintained rigid order among his troops and within his territories.³¹³ He was noted for introducing sun-worship to Rome and putting statues of the sun-god into a new temple. In *Palmyra and its Empire: Zenobia's Revolt against Rome*, Richard Stoneman has noted, "Aurelian's introduction of sun-cult can be seen as an anticipation of Constantine's later and more successful attempt to unite the empire under a single head by giving it a single god."³¹⁴

The historical Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra, characterized in subsequent literature as everything from a beautiful innocent to a fierce warrior to a brazen decadent, did in fact lead a rebellion that nearly cleft the Roman Empire in two.³¹⁵ Although she was merely the regent for her son, Wahballath, after the murder of her husband and king, Septimius Odenathus, by 271 she appears on the coinage (traditionally, the manner in which a ruler established a claim to the throne) with her son, demonstrating that she was positioning herself opposite the Roman Emperor.³¹⁶ Palmyra, however, was soon under siege by Aurelian's forces, which quickly staunched the rebellion and recovered Zenobia's lands.³¹⁷

³¹³ Richard Stoneman, *Palmyra and its Empire: Zenobia's Revolt Against Rome* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 5.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

³¹⁶ Stoneman, 2.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

Dickinson was not the first to dramatize the events of Zenobia's uprising. Although the first use of her character in Western literature appears in a non-dramatic text, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, the fifteenth century Italian playwright Fulvio Testi used the story of Aurelian and Zenobia in a play. Two centuries later, Abbe d'Aubignac Hedelin wrote a lengthy prose drama with the title, *Zenobie Tragedie, ou la verité de l'histoire est conservée dans l'observation des plus rigoureuses riegles du Poème Dramatique* (1647).³¹⁸ There were also two nineteenth-century dramatic versions of the story that predate Dickinson's play: J.H. Wilkins' *Zenobia Queen of Palmyra* (produced in London in 1851, revised as *The Egyptian* in 1853) and W. Marsham Adams' *Zenobia or the Fall of Palmyra* (1870).³¹⁹ Stoneman describes Wilkins' play as "far from a bad play...somewhat determinedly Shakespearean in its use of comic, lowlife subplot and mechanicals; in the eventual suicide of the queen; and in the nomenclature of its principals, which looks forward to the days of Asterix—the greedy merchant of Palmyra, Hujus, is matched by a character called Bulbus, and even a Roman soldier named

³¹⁸ Ibid., 198. Indeed, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced several plays (from Italian to Portugese to English) featuring the name of Zenobia in the title, but "in all these Zenobia is the name of an Armenian princess married to one Radamistus."

³¹⁹ It is also interesting to note that sculptor Hatty Hosmer, a member of Charlotte Cushman's circle in Rome, had achieved both fame and controversy in 1859 with her massive statue of Zenobia. The statue was exhibited for thousands in both England and the United States, and according to Cushman biographer Lisa Merrill, "Published photographs of the diminutive Hatty at work on the seven-foot statue fueled the lingering prejudice against woman sculptors, and many people were incredulous that a woman could accomplish such an enormous work on her own." See Lisa Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and her Circle of Female Spectators* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 200.

Spontaneus.”³²⁰ Adams’ play, however, is “much less good,” and “written in the most intolerant fustian (“Peace, prating dotard, peace,” etc), though its portrait of the villainous bishop Paul has its appeal to lovers of high camp.”³²¹

In Dickinson’s play, Aurelian sends his senators to Palmyra to see if the proud and independent Queen Zenobia pledges allegiance to Rome. They return with the message that she will engage with Aurelian “as an ally, not as a subject.”³²² Aurelian, not wishing to destroy a land of “beauty, order, dignity, elegance,”³²³ disguises himself as a Roman senator and goes to Palmyra to meet with Zenobia in person, in an effort to persuade her to yield her authority to Rome: “She was Rome’s best friend before she was Rome’s worst foe. She is a great soldier. I would spare her pride.”³²⁴ But Zenobia will not yield, and Aurelian leaves sadly. Very shortly after his departure, Claudius Pompianus, son of Tacitus, the first of the nobles and advisor to Aurelian, enters. He exposes Aurelian’s disguise and tells Zenobia that if she helps him murder Aurelian, he will then be declared emperor and “yield thee back thine own, and give indemnity for all that thou hast suffered at Aurelian’s hands.”³²⁵ But Zenobia sees Claudius for who he is,

³²⁰ Stoneman, 198-199.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 199.

³²² *Aurelian*, I, 19.

³²³ *Ibid.*

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 35.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

and orders her guards to seize him, bind him, and return him to Aurelian with a note informing him of the situation, adding, “I will conquer thee, but not by treachery.”³²⁶

But Claudius bribes the soldiers guarding him with jewels—they take Zenobia’s note and fling Claudius, in chains, at Aurelian’s tent. Claudius tells Aurelian that Zenobia is responsible for his current condition, and Aurelian flies into a fury, swearing that “her pride shall fall as low as he lies there!”³²⁷

However, Aurelian’s soldiers, on an open field near Palmyra, are angry and hungry; they talk of mutiny. Mucapor, Aurelian’s general, is in league with his brother, Sejanus, to put Claudius on the throne; they plot to murder Aurelian’s troops at Palmyra but make it look like Zenobia’s doing. A Palmyrean citizen accuses Sejanus of raping his young daughter and leaving her “soiled and broken. So that with her own hand, having in brief gasps told her dismal story, she let out the life that would, if it remained, but be a shame to her.”³²⁸ Mucapor has his soldiers seize the man and drag him away, but Aurelian stops them and inquires into the situation. Convinced of the citizen’s integrity, Aurelian condemns Sejanus to death, over the protestations of Mucapor. Word then arrives of the destruction of Aurelian’s garrison at Palmyra, with the false report of Zenobia’s responsibility. Aurelian swears “Death to Palmyra! License without restraint! Death without mercy!”³²⁹ and cries “[Zenobia] shall be the common property of the

³²⁶ Ibid..

³²⁷ Ibid., 52.

³²⁸ Ibid., III, 63.

³²⁹ Ibid., 68.

whole camp!...No. Take her alive. She shall go to Rome! I will drag that proud head of hers in the dust, to make sport for the whole city, and die in the common amphitheatre!”³³⁰

As Zenobia enters, however, prepared to die, Aurelian cannot bring himself to kill her. He tells her to flee; she swears to him that the destruction of his garrison was not done on her command. The soldiers, led by Claudius, demand Zenobia: “Ye were promised.”³³¹ Aurelian answers, “Take her then.” He flings her on her knees behind him and draws his sword: “But over me!”

Later, Aurelian asks Zenobia for her forgiveness and her hand in marriage. She answers that she will if Aurelian can “restore Palmyra and its dead.”³³² Claudius’ treachery is revealed to Aurelian. Zenobia finally confesses her love for him, and when Claudius and Mucapor come to assassinate Aurelian, Zenobia flings herself in the path of Claudius’ sword and dies. Aurelian seizes Mucapor’s dagger and fatally wounds Claudius; in the scuffle he too is wounded. He falls on Zenobia’s lifeless body, calling for Tacitus to be the next Emperor, as the play ends.

Roman Emperor or American Hero?

In *Anne Boleyn*, Dickinson Americanized her historical subject by transforming her heroine into a True Woman; in *Aurelian*, she constructs the ancient emperor as a democratic everyman. In *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theatre and Culture, 1800-*

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Ibid., 70.

³³² Ibid., IV, 78.

1850, David Grimsted notes, “The need to work drama around the lives of fairly ordinary people, increasingly the center of society, was especially clear in politically democratic America.”³³³ In the opening scene, Faustina sneers at Aurelian’s humble roots:

Why,—what has he done for Rome? Degraded our order; made the rabble rich and the nobles poor; banished elegance and luxury; condemned feasting and gaiety, and scorned even the gods by his prohibition of divination and the mysteries of the seers! Truly, if his days be prolonged, Rome will have to thank him that it has been relegated to the rudeness of its primitive manners and barbarian youth! Is it for this that you, Tacitus, a scholar, a philosopher, first of the senators, oldest of the nobles, are grateful—more than content, that this Pannonian peasant, this savage, whom they say has slain in battle with his own hand *a thousand men*, holds domination over us and fills the chair of the Caesars?³³⁴

Early American melodrama, with its casts dominated by royalty and peasantry, reflected the new democratic nation’s ambivalence toward class stratification.³³⁵ Grimsted observes, “Audiences wanted to hate their nobility and have it too. Insisting on the natural equality of all was something that appealed to the common man, but he also liked to find the superiority of the simply virtuous made definite by being outfitted with the trappings of aristocratic rank.”³³⁶ Aurelian is revered for his visionary leadership: “I have still the vision to see, and the virtue to adore, a spark of the divine fire, though it

³³³ David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800-1850*, with a foreword by Lawrence W. Levine (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 204.

³³⁴ *Aurelian*, I, 3.

³³⁵ Grimsted, 208-9.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 209.

burn in eyes of a peasant, and glow through the body of a legionary soldier and common man.”³³⁷ He is a hard worker, not a sedentary aristocrat: “Toil is his Saturnalia.”³³⁸ He is considerate: “He comes to study on some parchments that lie within, and knowing I hold them dearer than priceless gems, he comes to them lest carrying them to him should cause me a moment’s pang.”³³⁹ Such an act earns him more of Faustina’s contempt: “’Tis the act of a common person.”³⁴⁰ But Aurelian champions freedom, lamenting, “The sight of an unmasked face, and the free sway of an unbridled tongue, are sights and sounds so rare at Rome as to fright its senators.”³⁴¹ When asked by Faustina, “What profit, then, hath king or emperor beyond the beggar?” Aurelian responds, “None, save that he hath wider service...He rules best who serves best; not the follies, but the needs of his kind.”³⁴² He then proclaims that “Your only sense worth living by is common sense,” to which Tacitus replies, “Which is to say, the rarest of all genius is the best! For the rarest of all genius is the sense called *common* [italics in original].”³⁴³

Aurelian also demonstrates a certain contempt for aristocrats. He remembered fondly one man who died in battle because “He was a *soldier*, spite of his patrician blood

³³⁷ *Aurelian*, I, 3.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*

[italics in original].”³⁴⁴ He comments about the man’s son: “‘Tis a good boy, for a patrician! Have these nobles, even the best of them, so long crept in servitude to their fears and their emperors that even if their masters abdicate, they know not the uses of liberty?...Alas! how much easier it is to conquer a whole nation, than to make of one *slave, a man!* [italics in original]”³⁴⁵ Later, Aurelian declares, “I was born to be a soldier and walk with a *free* step [italics in original].”³⁴⁶

...thou likest not the freedom of my speech, and liberal manner with the legionaries...Thy pride strangle thee! What e’en *thou*,—in spite of the puny poverty of the patrician blood and courage, will flaunt in my face the intolerable insolence of thy pernicious order. What! Had I crept from the withered loins of princely penury, I could abase myself, but be exalted; while, if I shoot from the soil an oak of strength, a cedar of majesty, I must not e’en droop my leaves towards the fresh mould, and juicy earth that yield me sustenance! I tell thee and all of thine, whose state is propped by a pillar of gold, and staid with pride, *nature* takes care of her own majesty.³⁴⁷

The model of American melodrama described by Grimsted (featuring heroes notable for their virtue and manliness) had all but faded away by the time Dickinson wrote *Aurelian*. (In the 1860s and 1870s, popular playwrights such as Augustin Daly provided “potboiling action” while “compel[ling their] audience to experience the tensions of an urban society embroiled in the process of redefinition as the forces of

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 17.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., II, 49.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 30.

capitalist industrialization rework the nation in the wake of the Civil War.”³⁴⁸) Yet John McCullough, for whom *Aurelian* had been intended, maintained his “immense popularity in [such plays] well into the 1880s” (though, as Charles Shattuck notes, he was “the last actor of consequence to play these old-fashioned roles”).³⁴⁹

During a time when the nation was ruthlessly expanding its territories, its resources, and the bank accounts of unscrupulous financiers, simple-minded manliness, uncriticized and sentimentalized, continued to be exhibited in the theatre and in the books of Horatio Alger, not only as the national ideal but as a true reflection of the national way of life. In some quarters the delusion persisted much longer.³⁵⁰

Had Dickinson been able to secure McCullough’s cooperation, *Aurelian* might have stood a chance in the theatre. Although by 1878 the genre was largely passé, McCullough had built his career playing such roles and managed to sustain interest in them perhaps longer than any other actor. An actor any less established than McCullough, however, could not forge (or sustain) a career in a role that belonged to another era.

Women of Rome: “True” or False?

Like *Anne Boleyn*, *Aurelian* offers only three female characters worthy of note in a cast of more than twenty-three: Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra; Faustina, niece of Tacitus; and Zarah, “an old Jewess.” (Zenobia and Faustina also have female attendants but they serve no substantial purpose.) In Zenobia and Faustina, Dickinson reestablishes

³⁴⁸ Gary A Richardson, *American Drama from the Colonial Period Through World War I: A Critical History* (New York: Payne Publishers, 1993), 122.

³⁴⁹ Shattuck, 125.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

the binary of Anne Boleyn and Jane Seymour in *A Crown of Thorns*—one virtuous woman, one deceitful.

In the manuscript of her curtain speech for *Aurelian*, Dickinson described Faustina as “a proud, insolent beautiful woman who is eager to become the wife of Aurelian not because she loves the man but because she wishes to be Empress of Rome. In reality in love with her cousin Claudius—the son of Tacitus—as base & ignoble a character as his father is everything that is the reverse.”³⁵¹ Despite her contempt for Aurelian’s humble origins and his policies hostile to aristocrats, Faustina’s desire to be Empress drives her to pursue him: “Will await him, *ornamented*, here, and conquer him. I will make this serf my slave, and *seize* the sceptre that by right should have *fallen* to my hand.”³⁵² She consorts with Zarah, an old Jewess who, as described by Faustina, makes her living, “Lying and cajoling, wheedling people out of their last sesterce, and cheating them of their very eyes,—*that* is thy trade.”³⁵³ Zarah acknowledges that she:

has not lived in the world two-and-seventy years for naught. Whoso helps another to live hastens his own death. Why should I thrust on people naked truth and get turned out of doors for my pains, when I shall have princely entertainment, if I bring with me a whole troop of gilded lies? Go to! Let us live with the living, unless we be fools; in the which case, we may be humble and thank the fates we are of some use, that others may live upon us.³⁵⁴

³⁵¹ Manuscript of Curtain Speech for *Aurelian*, in Dickinson papers.

³⁵² *Aurelian*, I, 5.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

It is Zarah who cultivates a (false) sense of competition between Faustina and Zenobia. Although Faustina refuses repeatedly to look at the jewels Zarah has brought her, once Zarah tells her that Zenobia had sought after “the rarest diamond in the East,” Faustina inquires about it eagerly:

Zarah. . . . The great queen herself did strive to own this jewel, but ‘twas in the hands of one of my own people, and I won it, as I said, for thee. Thou wilt not make me a liar by proving thyself a fool, and leaving it in my hands.

Faus. Zenobia sent to purchase it?

Zarah. Aye.

Faus. And was disappointed at not gaining it?:

Zarah. Vexed nigh to a green sickness.

Faus. Now thou jeerest me! She disdains such follies.

Zarah. As flies do honey.³⁵⁵

With Zarah’s urging, Faustina gradually constructs Zenobia as an enemy and competitor. When Zarah shows her a portrait of the Queen, Faustina responds with cutting criticism: “This Zenobia? She hath no fairness that should make men bow to her, and women fear her! Call you her beautiful? Where does her beauty lie? I see it not. In cheek, or lip, or eye? Find it, and show it me. . . . She a beauty! I have seen handsomer creatures among our beggar girls! She a queen! Fortune bestows her gifts unwittingly.”³⁵⁶ Zarah urges Faustina to seduce Aurelian with her feminine wiles.

Women like it delicately tempered and spread out thin, to last long, like candied fruits upon a child’s dry crust; but your masculine palate will swallow the whole dish, platter and all, at a single mouthful, tho’ it be so hot of spices as to make the tears start, if a fair hand hold it. . . . What do you fear, my princess? He is cold, say you? A volcano sleeps beneath that rock,—and why do such men as he sleep, but for such women as you

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 7.

³⁵⁶ Ibid, 8-9.

to wake them?...Put on the tiara; blaze in the diamonds, (*putting them on,*) blind his eyes, enchant his senses....³⁵⁷

But later in the act, after her encounter with Aurelian, Faustina is incensed by his lack of attention to her. She fumes:

Rome! Rome! He is an insensate beast with his eternal Rome....He has no eyes, no ears, no sense save for this something he calls Rome! As I sat here he saw me not, nor noted me more than the couch,—the embroidery within my hands....Had I been one of his soldiers—a thing whose blood would help cement his power—I would have been as patent to his sense, and as pleasing, as perfumes of Arabia to mine. He, a man! I tell thee, in him the lust of domination burns with a flame so fierce as to consume all other passions. Save for this fire, he is ice.³⁵⁸

Zarah mocks Faustina for preferring Claudius to Aurelian, asking, “Why is one Empress, if one cannot have lover as well as husband? The poorest she in all the city may possess one or the other.”³⁵⁹ Faustina disappears from the play until Act IV, when she returns to plot the death of Zenobia, who by this time is Aurelian’s prisoner.

Zenobia, on the other hand, is presented with the strength, intelligence, and pride of Anne Boleyn, but with greater ambition and a position of independent authority. As the leader of a beautiful land endowed with arts and culture, Zenobia thinks, behaves, and expects to be treated as Aurelian’s equal:

I wished well to Rome; would fain have clasped its hand; made common cause with it in all good work and warfare; stood its equal and its ally, seeing no just reason why Rome and Palmyra should not halve the world. Aurelian will not have it so; demands submission, not alliance; asserts

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁵⁹ *Aurelian*, I, 15.

that peace cannot exist beside division,—that the two must be one, and that one, Rome.³⁶⁰

When Aurelian argues that Rome and Palmyra must not be split because “for centuries Rome has been the heart of the world,” she responds defiantly: “Spoken like a Roman! So thinks Aurelian. Why should not Zenobia think so of Palmyra? Shall that master passion of ambition be accounted a virtue in him, that he declares a crime in me?”³⁶¹ She swears, “I will not bow my head to him,” leaving Aurelian to lament, “Thou, brave Queen, art stripped of all extraneous aid,—must fight thy fight alone, with none to help thee and thy people. I would thy courage were less,—that but a small ingredient of fear were mingled in thy nobler dust, that thou would’st yield the terms of peace.”³⁶²

Indeed, Zenobia laments her own solitude:

When am I *not* alone? Whether it be amid the throng or in the white heat and stillness of the desert, pressed by a crowd or compassed round with solitude, when am I not *alone*?—Oh, to find one hand that mine could grasp to stay me, one arm to lean upon, one voice to guide! Out of the multitude of adorers, enviers, suppliant, followers, advisers, slaves, to find one friend...’tis the doom of greatness; that must be borne alone.³⁶³

But Zenobia is not willing to subordinate herself to be relieved of her isolation. When her attendant, Valeria, suggests, “Madame,—if you could love,” Zenobia replies, “If thou wast born to love a chain, why wear it; but for Zenobia!—what has an eagle to do

³⁶⁰ *Aurelian*, II, 42.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, ii.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 43

³⁶³ *Ibid.*

with men's cages, being meant for the sky?"³⁶⁴ When in Act IV Aurelian first proposes to her, she is incredulous: "[T]hou would'st make me thy wife? Wherefore? To add one more trophy to thy triumph? That the world may say she was conquered, now she assents to her own degradation? She was a captive, now she consents to be a slave."³⁶⁵ Zenobia refuses to acknowledge her love for Aurelian until the very end, when she rushes to tell him of the imminent threat on his life posed by Claudius and Mucapor.

While in some ways Zenobia represents a more progressive image of a powerful woman than did Anne Boleyn, still Dickinson endows her with certain characteristics of the True Woman. After her initial encounter with the disguised Aurelian, she expresses a desire to relinquish her worldly responsibilities to the man's more capable hands:

"Fortune bestows her gifts blindly. Had she given such an one to be Rome's Emperor, I might be content to hold but mine ancient state, and leave the empire of the world to hands steadier and stronger...Mine grasps and relaxes,—his is the sort that grasps and *holds*."³⁶⁶ Like Anne Boleyn, she guards her virtue steadfastly: "if the choice rested 'twixt the loss of my whole empire and a deed of shame, I would lose my crown."³⁶⁷ She finally yields to Aurelian: "But to *know* my heart. From the first hour, it dumbly *felt* thee its master, and struggled blindly 'gainst its chains."³⁶⁸

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 45.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., IV, 77.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., II, 45.

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 47.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., IV, 92.

Indeed, one might argue that Dickinson's representation feminized Zenobia.

According to Goodrich's 1871 account of the historical Zenobia,

Her voice was strong...Her manly understanding was strengthened and adorned by study...She accustomed herself to fatigue, usually rode on horseback clad in military attire, and sometimes led the troops on foot. She often harangued the army, her fine head surmounted by a helmet of fur, her breast covered with a coat of mail, and her arms left bare, that she might more freely use them in gesture....In peace, she attended Odenatus in his favorite pursuit of hunting, and hurled the javelin at the lions and panthers of the desert with as much courage and the same skill as he.³⁶⁹

Dickinson's Zenobia, though described in the text as "a great soldier," is made to express inner feelings representing a "naturally" more feminine perspective. After her meeting with the disguised Aurelian, she observes, "looking at him, thou didst see a *man*: in all the universe, the rarest sight thine eyes can rest upon. Likenesses of men, there be by millions,—here and there, a *man*...something spoke through him that did touch my soul...I must know his name."³⁷⁰

It is probably not coincidental that Dickinson expresses her own personal philosophy through the character of Zenobia (though somewhat ironically through the lips of Claudius). Speaking of Zenobia's compassion for the Jews, Claudius recounts that she had "said only, the world belongs to those who *take* it; if a Jew can grasp a piece of it, to him it doth belong, not to another."³⁷¹ Dickinson often inscribed the motto, "The world belongs to those who *take* it" on engravings and autographs; it was a fitting mantra

³⁶⁹ Goodrich, 59-60.

³⁷⁰ *Aurelia*, II, 45.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, IV, 73.

given her passionate support of universal suffrage and universal education. And of course, she had written the role of Zenobia to be played by herself.³⁷²

In the characters of Zenobia and Faustina, Dickinson recreates the foil presented in *Anne Boleyn* by the characters of Anne and Jane Seymour: a strong woman of great virtue opposed to a scheming virago. Zenobia behaves honorably toward her enemies; she refuses to harm Claudius even once she apprehends him, and she fights a fair fight against Rome. Faustina, however, balks at nothing in her zeal to destroy Zenobia; she is evil personified.

The character of Zarah, however, is an interesting one because ambiguous. Although she is a witch or sorceress tainted by her association with Faustina, Dickinson treats Zarah with a degree of sympathy. Zarah wishes no harm to come to Zenobia because Zenobia has treated the Jews with compassion: “she doth respect all faiths, and folly of belief, has granted them protection.”³⁷³ Furthermore, Zarah is redeemed in the end when she reveals Faustina’s plot to Aurelian; he tells her, “The good thou hast done so shines upon the evil as to blind my eyes to it.”³⁷⁴

³⁷² “Though to all outward appearance a Jewess in religion, and constantly erecting synagogues for the propagation of her faith, she never interfered with the liberty of conscience, and afforded equal toleration to both Jew and Gentile. No Christian church was closed during her reign.” See Goodrich, 62. In the play, Claudius notes, “In the whole world, no sovereign power has used its hand save to crush the Jews, with the one only exception of Palmyra. Zenobia, whether it be that, as ‘tis said, she hath a strain of Israelitish blood, or that she doth respect all faith, and folly of belief, has granted them protection...”” *Aurelian*, IV, 73.

³⁷³ *Aurelian*, IV, 73.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

It is striking, perhaps, that Dickinson of all people should entitle her play *Aurelian* and tell the story primarily from the Roman emperor's point of view. The earlier dramatic works had used Zenobia's name in the title, and given Dickinson's feminist politics and the artistic goals she had laid out when writing *Anne Boleyn*, it seems curious that she chose a male protagonist. But as with *Anne Boleyn*, she was factoring in practical issues: she wanted the play to make money. The way to do so was with a star in the title role, and John McCullough happened to be the interested star.

When their collaboration fell through, Dickinson gave dramatic readings of the play herself. These performances seem to have carried a much lower profile in the press than her theatrical appearances; they also seem to have been considerably more successful. More like political oratory than theatrical performance, a solo reading of a play requires not skills of *impersonation* but those of oral *interpretation*. Furthermore, it is a *solo* performance. Dickinson having established her national identity as a solo performer, it seems likely that she simply functioned best in such a context.

Which Will Suit Me the Best?: *An American Girl*

...I have always thought a true woman, and you are that, cared nothing for the world's praise.

*An American Girl*³⁷⁵

In 1880, Dickinson wrote *An American Girl* for Fanny Davenport (1850-1898), the daughter of tragedian and manager E.L. Davenport and actress Fanny Vining. Davenport had begun her career in the theatre as a child performer with her father's

³⁷⁵ Anna E. Dickinson, *An American Girl*, unpublished manuscript in Dickinson papers.

company. After appearing in the famed 1866 production of *The Black Crook*, she joined Mrs. John Drew's theatre company at Philadelphia's Arch Street Theatre and "established herself as a charming, vivacious comedienne."³⁷⁶ Then theatrical impresario Augustin Daly saw her perform at the Arch Street Theatre and hired her for his company.³⁷⁷ Daly subsequently wrote *Pique* for her, which ran for 238 consecutive performances in 1876 and established Davenport as a major star.³⁷⁸ Although she was still performing in *Pique* in 1879, she had wearied of it. Eager for new material—and having been impressed by *Anne Boleyn*—she contacted Dickinson to request a play written for her. The result was *An American Girl*.³⁷⁹

The plot of *An American Girl* centers around Kate Vivian, a beautiful, intelligent, and witty young woman with a natural talent for acting. When her sickly father is threatened with financial ruin and disgrace—despite the stigma attached to women in the theatre—she goes on the stage in order to earn enough money to save his reputation. Although Julian Reiridon—a playwright bitter that Kate had both scorned his love and refused to make her debut in his play—tries to blackmail her into marrying him, she is saved in the eleventh hour by Allyn Cromarty, journalist and lover with a secret. He has

³⁷⁶ Garff B. Wilson, *Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre from Ye Bare and Ye Cubb to Chorus Line*, 2nd ed (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982), 168.

³⁷⁷ De Witt Bodeen, *Ladies of the Footlights* (Pasadena: Pasadena Playhouse Association, 1937), 84.

³⁷⁸ Wilson, 169.

³⁷⁹ The details of this collaboration will be discussed at length in Chapter 4.

inherited bundles of money but concealed his good fortune so that he can find someone who loves him for himself and not his money. He discloses his sudden fortune after Kate confesses her love for him, and the play ends happily.

Most critics found the play deeply flawed. The *New York Herald* sniffed:

Judged as a piece of dramatic writing for the acting stage which should reflect faithfully certain phases of human life, picture accurately and always consistently a clearly outlined type of character, through the medium of a series of scenes, in which dialogue and action shall indicate the regular and natural progression of the main theme toward the climax, it was not satisfactory.³⁸⁰

This critic suggested that it “lacked something of the warmth it would have assumed and sympathy it would have roused had it been less precise in its rhetoric, and, though rough hewn, as it were, been more natural, and consequently more effective, when expressing the emotions of the ordinary men and women of the day.”³⁸¹ Arguing that Dickinson was unable to craft the drama in such a way as to reveal the moral through the play’s plot, this critic observed a certain “dramatic fogginess” in the working out of the action.

It is just here that the line is sharply drawn between the writer of an excellent essay and the composer of a good drama—the difference between a book article and an acting play. And the capacity to translate character by a series of actions, while it can be acquired in a measure by experience, is only to be absolutely relied on when it comes as a natural gift. Miss Dickinson’s ability as a writer is evident in every line of her play; her occasional weak points as a dramatist are betrayed in sundry places where the action is slow or unnatural in movement, and where her characters seem to contradict themselves because there is no apparent or at least sufficient reasons for their, at times, peculiar course.³⁸²

³⁸⁰ *New York Herald* 21 September 1880.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*

³⁸² *Ibid.*

The *New York Daily Tribune* was more brutal: “Miss Dickinson has here written a little story, the fervent, judicious acting of which, by Miss Davenport [et al]...and by some excellent scenery and dresses is made to look like a play.”³⁸³

Some critics seized upon the play’s romance to illustrate its problems in plot construction.

To show how timidly Miss Dickinson has grasped a subject upon which she has apparently spent a good deal of thought, it is only needful to point that the love episode between Kate and Allyn—the dramatic kernel of the piece—does not excite the slightest emotion until the third act is reached. The first two acts are, therefore, unquestionably weak and spiritless, for they merely serve the analytical purpose of the author, and do not get well into the story of the play. From the beginning of the third act, the interest, though slight, is real, and is maintained until the close of the play. If this interest had begun earlier, if it had been developed in a fuller and more dramatic fashion, if the useless characters of the play had been fitted with positive missions in the story, and if the superabundance of dialogue that now hampers the action had been brought out by this story and not by the didactic aims of the author—then Miss Dickinson would have written a drama which, whatever its faults might have been, could be honestly described as admirable, not alone in its central idea, but also in its treatment.³⁸⁴

And in contrast to those who admired the language of the play, one critic argued that the “dialogue is of a uniform texture, and not discriminated as to the characters, and it is made rather tedious with prolix small talk and with divers smart speeches, which seem to portend more than they convey.”³⁸⁵

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ *The New York Times*, 22 September 1880.

³⁸⁵ *New York Daily Tribune*, 21 September 1880.

Several papers criticized Dickinson's treatment of her villain. "The villain, of whom we were led to expect much, is a disappointment. Miss Dickinson's own goodness has not enabled her to do him full justice, which is no discredit to her. She has simply produced a cynical, clever man of the world who is occasionally led to say some very true things in a very solemn way."³⁸⁶ "The contemptuous manner in which the villain is ignored," remarked the *Evening Post*, "is also inartistic and weakens the conclusion of the piece."³⁸⁷ Another even less charitable critic observed, "The villain of the plot of preposterous in all that he says and does, and the author drops him before his discomfiture—which is bad dramatic art."³⁸⁸ The other characters also came under attack: "There are eight characters in the play, and the only one of these—with the exception of the heroine—that rises beyond dullness is Kate's lover, Allyn Cromarty."³⁸⁹

One critic, in "Health in the Drama," went so far as to accuse the play of being symptomatic of everything that was wrong with the contemporary American drama:

It is to be regretted that the new American plays presented this Fall are so trashy in tone and text. Their characters are weak and insipid and their dialogues feeble, the ideas of life given being unnatural and false. It is a libel to represent the American girl as the over-dressed, blasé character drawn by Miss Dickinson...if the drama is written to show off fine millinery and furniture, it is one thing; if to interest, amuse, and point a moral, it is another. Elaborate costumes are suitable on some occasions

³⁸⁶ *The Daily Graphic*, 21 September 1880.

³⁸⁷ *The Evening Post*, 21 September 1880.

³⁸⁸ *New York Daily Tribune*, 21 September 1880.

³⁸⁹ *New York Times*, 22 September 1880.

and simply absurd on others. They are admirable in one instance and badly out of taste in another.³⁹⁰

Although inconsequential in plot and (for the most part) character, *An American Girl* is interesting to the extent that it seemingly presents Dickinson's response to her own troubled theatrical debut as well as some revealing discussion of how the theatrical world operated. Furthermore, the play contributes to the conversation surrounding the propriety of the actress that had been circulating for much of the century.

In Act I, a group of men discuss Reirdon's yet-to-be produced play. The delay, apparently, is because the producer does not have an appropriate leading lady in his company and knows not where to find one. The sought-after heroine is "a thorough bred lady. She needs to be played by a grand dame of society and a perfect comedienne combined."³⁹¹ Fred Gower, "a wholesome sprig of Wall St.," suggests that Kate would be the perfect choice to set New York on its ear. Another family friend, Dr. Camp, observes, "It's a thousand pities she's not poor, with her own bread to make—I mean for other people's pleasure—not her own sake—God bless her!" Fred agrees, "She can take the shine off of any star in the regular theatrical firmament—don't you make any mistake about that!—Oh, there's no doubt in the world she'd be twice as happy if she were poor."³⁹²

³⁹⁰ New York *Commercial Advertiser*, 21 October 1880.

³⁹¹ *An American Girl*, I.

³⁹² *An American Girl*, I.

And so *An American Girl* embarks on a consideration of women, class, and the theatre. It is clear from Dr. Camp's remark that the foregone conclusion is that the theatre is a place for women of another (i.e., disreputable) class. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has noted, "Nineteenth-century American society provided but one socially respectable, nondeviant role for women—that of loving wife and mother."³⁹³ In *American Actress: Perspective on the Nineteenth Century*, Claudia D. Johnson has noted "the ambiguity of the actress's position: she was able to anticipate professional rewards which few other women in the age enjoyed, but only at considerable sacrifice of intangibles precious to nineteenth-century woman—personal esteem and social acceptability."³⁹⁴ As Johnson observes,

The values of nineteenth-century society were those that grew from and strengthened the family: fidelity, to protect the union of husband and wife; duty, to preserve the bonds between parent and child; respect for and acceptance of the traditionally assigned places of wife, husband, and children; reason and moderation, to encourage virtue and order. Individuals and other social institutions that reflected these domestic values were beneficial; those associated with opposing values—adventuresomeness, rebellion, excitement, and unconventionality—were deemed to be injurious to the home and the family and, therefore, to be avoided.³⁹⁵

When Dickinson made her own theatrical debut in 1876, her primary motive was profit. Although she had long harbored theatrical aspirations and held the stage in great admiration, it was her desperate need to make a living that propelled her onto the boards.

³⁹³ Smith-Rosenberg, 212.

³⁹⁴ Claudia D. Johnson, *American Actress: Perspective on the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1984), 4.

³⁹⁵ Johnson, 13.

She saw no shame in performing for profit; from the earliest days of her speaking career, she had demanded adequate compensation for her services, believing that she offered something of great value. Dickinson often told of how she rejected a teaching job because she was offered twelve dollars less a month than the men who had previously occupied the position (see Chapter One). The anecdote aptly illustrates Dickinson's convictions on the subject of women's work.³⁹⁶

Dickinson well knew that despite the stigma it carried, the theatre could be a far more profitable livelihood for women than the more reputable options.³⁹⁷ And unlike other professions, the theatre offered equal pay for equal work; actresses were paid comparably to actors of the same rank in the company.³⁹⁸ In the days before settling down to write *An American Girl*, Dickinson wrote to her sister, "It is pretty nearly settled that I let Fanny Davenport have a play for next season—& in that case I am about sure of a hit & a lot of money.—There are but two ways to make money—that is by writing & acting plays."³⁹⁹ The letter goes on to recount a conversation she had recently had about "the absolute deadness of platform & books...the English reprints are killing everything

³⁹⁶ Stanton, 484.

³⁹⁷ Johnson, 56.

³⁹⁸ Johnson, 57.

³⁹⁹ Anna E. Dickinson to Susan Dickinson, Bay City Mich., 22 April 1880, in Dickinson papers.

in the way of regular writing & book making....American authors in self-defence will have to take to the war method of subscription books....”⁴⁰⁰

Dickinson’s faith in the potential of the theatre as a profitable career for women is illustrated through the actions of her heroine, Kate Vivian. Indeed, in *An American Girl* she depicts the fulfillment of her own real-life struggle to forge a lucrative career on the stage. Like Dickinson, Kate is a respectable woman⁴⁰¹—with no theatrical training or experience—whose decision to go on the stage prompts great discussion in her community. Dr. Camp describes her decision as “setting all the world at defiance,” as Kate attempts to defend the actress’s profession from unwarranted insult.

Dr. Camp (*Business*) You mean you are going on the stage for money?—You?!

Kate. You are right.

Dr. Camp (*Shaking head.*) You should have a better reason than that for setting all the world at defiance.

Kate. All the world? Doctor? You too in the midst of it? Surely you are not so narrow minded as to think it a crime to be an actress—if foolish people do say so.

Dr. Camp I saw you have need of strong reasons to defend it.

Kate. If you knew all my reasons you would say they are strong ones.

Dr. Camp (*Starting and walking impatiently*) Very like! Very like! The knowledge that they are in the wrong is a very strong reason to some women to continue in it.⁴⁰²

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Indeed, as an accomplished lady of leisure, Kate exceeds Dickinson in respectability. As discussed in Chapter One, although Dickinson’s reputation was primarily that of a virtuous woman, she was tainted by her outspokenness and status as a public figure.

⁴⁰² *An American Girl*, II.

Later in Act II, Cromarty also suggests that he is troubled by Kate's impending theatrical debut.

Cromarty. How strange it seems.

Kate. Strange? Why, strange? I think people like to do whatever they can do reasonably well.

Cromarty. And be praised for it?

Kate. Without doubt. For then one knows one's work has given pleasure, or profit, to somebody else as well as to oneself.

Cromarty. But pardon, I have always thought a true woman, and you are that, cared nothing for the world's praise.

Kate. Why not? Since she cares, and is made to care so keenly, for its blame. It is in human nature, anyone's nature, to like to be praised and admired.⁴⁰³

The True Woman, of course, did not invite praise or admiration by abandoning her own sphere of home and family to put herself on display in public.⁴⁰⁴ Reirdon accuses Kate of only the basest, most unnatural motives:

Reirdon. ...Surely if she had been satisfied with her social distinction she would not have jeopardized it by this outre outbreak.

Dr. Camp She had a motive. (*Pauses abruptly. Business afterwards*)

Reirdon. (*Business*) assuredly. Al the world can see it. 'Tis self-evident. Love of admiration, love of notoriety! The professional instinct. All the curb of habit and surroundings could not restrain it. Curious—very—these vagaries of genius and temperament. Decidedly interesting for a student of character and human nature.⁴⁰⁵

Dickinson was not the only nineteenth-century woman to examine the vexed relationship of women to the theatre. In her 1873 novel, *Work: A Story of Experience*,

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Smith-Rosenberg, 199.

⁴⁰⁵ *An American Girl*, III.

Lousia May Alcott had also addressed the perceived dangers of the theatrical life for a True Woman. Her heroine, Christie, tries to escape the degradation and drudgery of domestic service through a theatrical career, but she grows

selfish, frivolous, and vain,—intent on her own advancement, and careless by what means she reached it. She had no thought now beyond her art, no desire beyond the commendation of those whose opinion was serviceable, no care for any one but herself.

Her love of admiration grew by what it fed on, till the sound of applause became the sweetest music to her ear. She rose with this hope, lay down with this satisfaction, and month after month passed in this feverish life, with no wish to change it, but a growing appetite for its unsatisfactory delights, an ever-increasing forgetfulness of any higher aspiration than dramatic fame.⁴⁰⁶

Yet despite its attractions, Christie willingly abandons her life in the theatre, having discovered that "an actress could rarely be a true woman."⁴⁰⁷

After Kate has made her theatrical debut, Reirdon remarks, "She has changed so much since October, in looking at her one sees only the actress and entirely forgets the lady. Which is, of course, what she desired." Dr. Camp chides, "Which is, of course, what no lady ever desires."

In the United States, "ladies" were women who conducted themselves according to the proprieties of their sphere. Unlike in Britain, where "ladies" were aristocratic women, American middle-class ladies were not necessarily rich—though they were not supposed to *look* poor or as if they worked. As women's historians have noted, the

⁴⁰⁶ Louisa May Alcott, *Work: A Story of Experience* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 49.

⁴⁰⁷ Alcott herself had a "long cherished dream of a stage career" that she never realized. Sarah Elbert, Introduction to *Work: A Story of Experience* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), xxviii.

United States democratized the concept of “lady,” which became a function of economic class. Any woman whose husband supported her could be a lady, which meant that women who had to work—immigrants, farm women, black women—could never be considered ladies.⁴⁰⁸ Formerly a sin, idleness became a mark of social status.⁴⁰⁹ The way to become a lady was to stay home, devote oneself to husband and children and other domestic affairs, and cultivate feminine niceties.⁴¹⁰ Women were aided in this endeavor by increasing circulation of newspapers and ladies’ magazines like *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, all of which provided apt advice on becoming a lady; she was a coat rack on which her husband displayed his wealth.⁴¹¹

Like Dickinson herself, Kate Vivian is accused of being “material—and mercenary.”⁴¹² To this Kate replies, “Material and mercenary? So. You are right, Monsieur, I am material. One can have but one life in this world. I believe in living it. It will be time to become spirituelle when one is a spirit.”⁴¹³ She continues,

—And mercenary—what does that mean? Fond of money? (*To Dr. Camp and Fred, who nod*) Just, so. Again, you are right. I am

⁴⁰⁸ Carol Hymowitz and Michaela Weissman, *A History of Women in America* (New York: Bantam, 1978), 68.

⁴⁰⁹ Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 26.

⁴¹⁰ Hymowitz and Weissman, 67-68.

⁴¹¹ Lerner, *A Majority Finds Its Past*, 26.

⁴¹² *An American Girl*, I.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*

mercenary. I am fond of money. Oh yes, for if one has money, one can do just what one pleases. When I say one, I mean everybody.⁴¹⁴

When Fred jokingly remarks, “If everybody means the ladies, I thought they managed to do that in any case,” Kate retorts,

No. There isn't a girl among them who can do what she pleases unless she has plenty of money. She can't even be decently civil to—well, a man with a cheque book, we'll say—without every one of you (*wild dissent—of Fred*) sneering behind her back about fortune hunters! Do as she pleases? Oh, yes. She must dress just so, and behave just so, and talk just so, or she will be ostracized-set out in the cold, banished to the boundaries, whereas she can wear Russian boots on her feet, clap a [*coal-hod? illegible*] on her head, do as she likes, and talk as she pleases, and it will be regarded as a delightful eccentricity and so charmingly original!—if she can draw on her own bank account.⁴¹⁵

Kate's frank discussion of the realities of and necessity for money relates to Dickinson's longstanding critique of the Victorian ideology of separate spheres. From early in her oratorical career, Dickinson had railed against the societal strictures that condemned women to the home and stigmatized those who had to work.⁴¹⁶ With the emergence of a new middle class in the urban centers of the northeast United States, “home and family [had come]to be seen as separate from the world of work and

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ See Anna Dickinson, “Women's Work and Wages,” unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

money.”⁴¹⁷ Men traveled on business to provide for their wives and children who remained at home.⁴¹⁸

Maleness and femaleness came to symbolize a series of oppositions characterizing these spheres. Work, as defined by men, meant the competitive, changing world of wage labor and entrepreneurship. Women’s efforts in the home, though physically arduous, were no longer “work” both because women were unpaid and because of their increasing invisibility from the perspective of men.⁴¹⁹

As the world of commerce deepened the divide between home and work, women had become increasingly associated with and defined by the private, domestic sphere. This “Angel in the House” was isolated from the public (and therefore masculine) world of business and industry and relegated to the home, where she nurtured husband and children.

There is evidence in children’s books, child-rearing manuals, marriage guides, and books of etiquette that women were sharply discouraged from expressing competitive inclinations of asserting mastery in such “masculine” areas as physical skill, strength, and courage, or in academic, scientific, or commercial pursuits. Rather they were encouraged to be coquettish, entertaining, nonthreatening, and nurturing.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁷ Hymowitz and Weissman, 64.

⁴¹⁸ In eighteenth-century America, the nature of farm labor had demanded that men and women work as partners. Hymowitz and Weissman, 64. In the first half of the nineteenth century, this model of partnership began to fade away as business opportunities, provided by the growth of industry, began to distance “work” from “home.” Sara M. Evans, *Born For Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 68.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

⁴²⁰ Smith-Rosenberg, 212.

When Kate remarks, “It will be time to become spirituelle when one is a spirit,”⁴²¹ she also challenges the prevailing ideology in which women were conceived as moral and spiritual beings by nature. In nineteenth-century America, it was a middle class woman’s divinely ordained job to exist as a spiritual being to tame the man’s “natural” lusts and maintain an orderly Christian civilization: “‘Naturally’ self-sacrificing and self-regulating, this domestic deity radiated morality because her ‘substance’ was love, not self-interest or ambition.”⁴²² Etiquette books and child-rearing guides all insisted that women unselfishly subordinate their own interests and desires to those of her husband.⁴²³ When Kate eschews spiritual matters in this life, she calls her femininity into question.

“’Tis a pity she has never known a mother,” remarks Reirdon, implying that Kate has been ruined by her exposure to the masculine sphere of “business and money.” “It has spoiled her,” he continues, “Nature met her for something better.”⁴²⁴ In the end, in the letter with which he blackmails her, Reirdon notes, “You know for how long a time I have loved you...that I have borne with your caprices, vanities, tempers, even your insults, because it has pleased me to know how sometime I would find unending

⁴²¹ *An American Girl*, I.

⁴²² Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 8.

⁴²³ Smith-Rosenberg, 213.

⁴²⁴ *An American Girl*, I.

enjoyments in giving you the right discipline of a wife.”⁴²⁵ Significantly, Dickinson places this endorsement of separate spheres ideology into the mouth of the play’s villain.

Kate Vivian or Anna Dickinson: Whose Theatrical Debut?

In *An American Girl*, Dickinson also seems to be attempting a Utopian rewrite of her own embattled theatrical debut. I have already noted a number of the ways in which the character of Kate Vivian resembles Dickinson herself; there are others. When Kate vehemently states her opinion on the subject of women and money, her tirade is so alarming to the others that Dr. Camp cautions, “Take care what you are saying.” The stage direction notes, “*warningly*.” Reiridon dismisses her remarks: “Of course you don’t mean it, but if you talk in that defiant fashion, people will say you are ‘strong-minded.’”—an adjective frequently used to describe Dickinson in the press. And Kate’s response, again, echoes Dickinson herself: “Will they indeed? I will be very much the debtor of ‘proper’ I am sure. I would be sorry to have them think me weak-minded—‘weak-minded’? You may think it a compliment to call a lady an idiot—I don’t!”⁴²⁶ Later in the play, Dr. Camp exclaims, “You talk like a man!”⁴²⁷

Kate Vivian the actress is also subject to some of the same criticisms Dickinson received when she first went on the stage. Many critics were affronted by Dickinson’s lack of theatrical training and her nerve at assuming she was above such things.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., IV.

⁴²⁶ Ibid, I.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., II.

The very daring of the attempt, while it moves our fears, should at the same time provoke our sympathy. To essay an utterly untried art is in itself sufficiently courageous, but when the art in question is confessedly the most difficult of any in the world, and the instantaneous position aimed at the highest attainable therein, the endeavor seems to savor of absolute rashness...The almost insuperable obstacles to success with such a bodeful confronting can hardly be over-estimated.⁴²⁸

The Boston Times observed, “Her confidence is magnificent...she has determined at the very outset to test her abilities under the most exacting conditions possible to be conceived of. And this seemingly in no spirit of bravado; neither in any spirit of trepidation...”⁴²⁹ Other critics were piqued that Dickinson had presumed to become an actress so late in life at a time when many actresses had grown up in theatrical families:

Those who have a genuine mission in art show an early bias towards it, and it is as impossible to stop them from following it as it is to stop an avalanche. The lives of all truly great artists sufficiently prove this fact. Had Miss Dickinson been swayed by the impulses of genius to become an artist, she could not and would not have waited so long before obeying the promptings of this genius.⁴³⁰

Some critics felt that “the dramatic art is a difficult one, which no amateur can learn in a season, and no one can master it who does not begin the study in early life.”⁴³¹ Ambition and brains were not enough. One paper lamented, “There is altogether too much of a feeling among Americans that anybody can do anything, from making a newspaper to

⁴²⁸ *Boston Times*, 7 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁰ *The Gazette* (Boston) 21 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁴³¹ *The Daily Graphic*, 11 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

running a church or filling a seat in Congress.”⁴³² Others intimated that her first attempt onstage—in a starring role—smacked of hubris: “No allowances are to be made for lack of experience, for that is exactly what we object to in one who voluntarily assumes a role whose proper performance calls for a skilled and a well-trained artist.”⁴³³

Similarly, in Act I of *An American Girl*, Reirdon asks Kate, “Whatever the part you think you could act it. Would it be politeness or the truth to suggest it is necessary to learn an art before you practice it?”⁴³⁴ In a characteristically Dickinsonian response, Kate retorts, “If art is needed, Monsieur. We are not talking of Rosalind—nor yet of Mesdames Teazle or Macbeth—In these days, it is not necessary to know how to act to make a success. If you want the proof—go to the theatres!”⁴³⁵

One might argue that in Kate Vivian, Dickinson came the closest to achieving her goal of creating a heroine with “heart, brains, and a conscience.” Certainly it is through Kate that Dickinson was best able to communicate her political views concerning

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ *The Gazette* (Boston), 14 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁴³⁴ *An American Girl*, I.

⁴³⁵ Ibid. Dickinson’s letters reveal her own harsh criticisms of the contemporary stage. One letter remarks, seemingly about Henry Irving, “If I have not twice the stuff in me this “great actor” has—whom I saw last night) I will retire to a hole & stay there.” Anna E. Dickinson to Susan Dickinson, Palmer House Chicago, 9 January 1884, in Dickinson papers. In 1879 she noted, “I went to see Wolfert’s Roost...& whether [*Fawcett* ‘s] idiotic version or the performance was worst I have not yet decided. The house was nothing--not a hundred people & yet because it is Wallacks the papers are talking about the ‘success.’” Letter from Anna E. Dickinson to Susan Dickinson, New York 11 July 1879, in Dickinson papers.

women, work, and the theatre. Kate can also be considered the most progressive of the three women characters discussed in this chapter.⁴³⁶

Yet although Kate Vivian falls well short of the criteria for a “True Woman,” in some ways she is no more progressive than Anne Boleyn. Despite all of Kate’s talk about defending women’s need for money and for praise, when she takes action to make her debut on the stage it is not for her own artistic or pecuniary fulfillment—but for the sake of her ailing father. And in the end, Kate is saved by the chivalry of her millionaire lover and will presumably embrace her “proper” calling of marriage and motherhood. Like Anne Boleyn and Zenobia, Kate Vivian’s transgressive tendencies are neutralized; her final acceptance of domesticity leaves the audience comfortable in the knowledge that she has taken on her appropriate role in American society.

Dickinson, of course, was attempting to advance her own career in the theatre by writing a profitable hit for a popular actress. As Faye Dudden has noted, beginning with Laura Keene’s success in *Masks and Faces* in 1855, plays about the troubling figure of the actress became ubiquitous in mid-century America.

In each case a play’s double-masking—actresses playing actresses—was tied explicitly or implicitly to the genuine difficulties of representing oneself and knowing others...every work featured a “real-life” heroine. The plays offered a kind of special pleading against the sexual reputation traditionally accorded the actress: she is either misunderstood or, despite her missteps, a good woman. They also thematized the masking process, suggesting—since there was no comparable spate of plays about actors—that its powers and its dilemmas were particularly female. In these actress plays the main characters are often misread and mistreated by others, but they know and reveal themselves as matter-of-fact and good-hearted.

⁴³⁶ Certainly the fact that Kate Vivian was a contemporary, nineteenth-century woman rather than a historical figure aided in the construction of her progressiveness.

They use their acting abilities to negotiate and manipulate the discrepancies between appearance and reality but do so only for benign purposes. They do not suggest danger, let alone demonic possibilities, but they do insist that self-definition is more important than the perceptions of others.⁴³⁷

In the character of Kate Vivian—whether intentionally or not—Dickinson also created an admirable, virtuous heroine who went on the stage for all the right reasons and whom the audience could not help but recognize as herself. More than forty years earlier, Charlotte Cushman had done much the same thing in a short story she wrote for *Godey's Lady's Book*. In “The Actress,”

Charlotte created a protagonist most likely to win acceptance from “respectable” readers who might have been disparaging of women onstage. Readers were told that Leoline [her heroine], “gifted in the intellectual accomplishments of her sex,” was, prior to her father’s death, a member of a family so respectable and wealthy that members of the audience for her debut had “but a few months since...welcomed her coming in their social circles.” In other words, Leoline was much like *Godey's* readers might be in less fortunate circumstances. Charlotte knew her readers would identify her—as an actress herself—with Leoline, and she maximized any circumstances which might cast her, or Leoline, as their social equals while simultaneously attempting to challenge their prejudices against the theater.⁴³⁸

Like Kate Vivian, Cushman’s heroine went on the stage only for the financial support of her family. Bent on portraying the theatre as a reputable profession for women who had

⁴³⁷ Faye Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses and Audiences, 1790-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 136.

⁴³⁸ Lisa Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 35.

to earn a living, Cushman used Leoline's story to respond to critics who assailed actresses for impure motives.⁴³⁹

Actresses of Dickinson's own generation used similar means to establish their own respectability with the public. In Clara Morris' novel, *A Pasteboard Crown: A Story of the New York Stage*, a young, stagestruck girl asks established actress Claire Morrell, "is it very difficult to get upon the stage?" The actress responds:

Oh, no! If a woman has been party to a particularly offensive scandal, or to a shooting, or has come straight from the divorce court, then she turns quite naturally to the stage-door, which seems to open readily to her touch—such is the baneful power of notoriety. But your respectable, clean-minded girl, who wishes to enter a theatre of high standing, will find it easier to break through the wall, removing brick by brick, than to open unaided the door closed against her.⁴⁴⁰

Morris' actress also recounts a story of desperate financial straits:

I am very comfortable now, it is true. I have sufficient to eat, to wear, but I have known the time when I had neither... You think you know poverty? Well, have you ever wandered about the city streets, clinging to the fingers of a mother who staggered with weakness, while she searched for work—for shelter? Have you felt the pinch of cold, the gnawing, the actual pangs of hunger? Once Death and I were kept apart by a single slice of bread.⁴⁴¹

Audiences of *An American Girl* certainly did identify Kate Vivian with Dickinson, for when the play opened the *Evening Post* reported that "The audience laughed readily whenever a sentence characteristic of Miss Dickinson was uttered."⁴⁴²

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁴⁰ Clara Morris, *A Pasteboard Crown: A Story of the New York Stage* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904), 68.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁴² *Evening Post*, 21 September 1880.

But unlike Charlotte Cushman, whose “demure, ‘ladylike’ pieces...help[ed] create a public persona audiences might recognize and equate with the actress,”⁴⁴³ Dickinson could not—despite the conventional outcome of her plot—reinvent herself in her play as a True Woman; her public persona and political positions were simply too well known to be submerged. According to *The World*, “the dialogue in ‘An American Girl,’ is a series of sub-editorials on things in general—the rights of women, the status of actresses, the importance of ‘money-grabbers’ in the body politic, and the advantages of a bank account—the conclusion of all being the commonplace truism that ‘money is money.’”⁴⁴⁴ Likewise, the critic of the *Evening Post* noted that “the discussions between the different personages concerning the abilities and character of women, the social position due to an actress and other questions of a similar sort, impede the action of the play”—and then accused Dickinson of “simply availing herself of an opportunity to make public proclamation of her own views on these subjects.”⁴⁴⁵ “A lecture in four acts,” proclaimed the New York *Dramatic News*, and not half as smart a one as Miss Dickinson was accustomed to deliver on the platform herself.”⁴⁴⁶

Indeed, if in the public consciousness the American Girl and True Woman were one and the same, the play failed because critics could not accept Dickinson’s reconception of the ideal. The *New York Times* attributed the play’s failure to

⁴⁴³ Merrill, 35.

⁴⁴⁴ *The World*, 21 September 1880.

⁴⁴⁵ *Evening Post*, 21 September 1880.

⁴⁴⁶ New York *Dramatic News*, 25 September 1880, in Dickinson papers.

Dickinson's method of character development, which, according to this critic, produced a heroine who was "more of a study—in the style of the Balzac novel—than a genuine American Girl."⁴⁴⁷

The girl in this case is Kate Vivian, and her nature is supposed to combine many of the weaknesses of a luxuriant youth with the power of innate nobility. Such a character, drawn with a proper regard to its surroundings, colored in a fashion that makes one realize its vividness, and brought forward amid the situations of a brisk and interesting story, would fill a large niche on the stage. But to be entertaining, a character of this kind must be a live being, a sympathetic personality...She is well analyzed, but she moves, not from the inspirations of her own heart, but from the will of the author...⁴⁴⁸

For the *Times* critic, it was not plausible that Kate should deny her love for Cromarty in her attempt to save her father single-handedly: "Miss Dickinson's heroine assumes a heartlessness toward her lover, which, though effective theatrically, is absurdly out of place; for a girl of her sincerity and honesty of purpose would not stoop to a subterfuge when frankness would have been in keeping with her situation."⁴⁴⁹ Presumably a True American Girl would have confessed her love immediately and allowed her lover to handle the situation.

It is ironic, perhaps, that Dickinson never had the opportunity to play Kate Vivian, for it was she, of all of Dickinson's characters, who best suited Dickinson herself. And she suited Dickinson because—as all who saw Fanny Davenport in the role could attest—she gave miniature speeches on subjects about which Dickinson felt passionately. When

⁴⁴⁷ *New York Times*, 22 September 1880.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Dickinson had performed (as) *herself* on the lecture platform, she had been brilliantly successful. It is tempting to wonder if her theatrical career would have taken a different turn if she had debuted in *An American Girl*, a play in which the line between heroine and actress was already blurry.

Which will take best with the public, in which will I play best, & which will suit me the best?⁴⁵⁰

Of Dickinson's plays, *Anne Boleyn* "took best with the public." Perhaps more significantly, it "took best" with theatre people—actresses, in particular, who saw in its title role a potential starring vehicle. If more a True Woman than a New Woman—despite Dickinson's intentions—*Anne Boleyn* was nevertheless an intelligent and virtuous woman whose situation provided ample opportunity for pathos. As a performer, Dickinson fared best with *Aurelian*, probably because she presented the play not as an actress but as a *reader*. Newspaper accounts of her readings are reminiscent of those of her lectures years earlier: "For two full hours Miss Dickinson held her audience's closest attention, at times fairly electrifying it by a magnificent burst of eloquent passion, and not once, during the extended monologue, dropping into tediousness or commonplace."⁴⁵¹ As she wrote to her sister, "Luckily, *Aurelian* is the sort of thing that it is mighty hard even for [*illegible*] to attack, & the readings take."⁴⁵² The readings "took," most likely,

⁴⁵⁰ Anna E. Dickinson to Susan Dickinson, Chicago, 10 January 1875, in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁵¹ *Grand Rapids Democrat*, reprinted in unidentified clipping in Dickinson collection.

⁴⁵² Anna E. Dickinson to Susan E. Dickinson, Bay City Michigan, 22 April 1880, in Dickinson papers.

because Dickinson was ultimately a solo performer with excellent skills in oral interpretation. In the *Aurelian* readings she was apparently able to recapture a dynamic similar to that of her illustrious speaking career. And ironically, it was the play in which Dickinson never appeared that would have suited her best. Being semi-autobiographical—if a utopian rewrite can be considered so—it is in *An American Girl* that Dickinson’s own voice can best be heard.

In one sense, Dickinson’s plays were wholly unremarkable. Cast in largely conventional frames (certainly there was nothing unusual or original about them formally), they drew upon prominent ideas circulating in American society in the mid-to-late nineteenth century—a vogue for fictionalized history, the valorization of the True Woman, a fascination with the questionable lives of actresses.

Yet Dickinson’s agenda is apparent. She seeks to demonstrate “that a woman can be at once clever and amiable, possess both brains and virtue”⁴⁵³—or rather, she seeks to redefine the True Woman so that purity and piety no longer walk hand in hand with submissiveness. Rather than capitalizing on the public’s fascination with plays focusing on women and questionable sexual behavior, Dickinson’s women are spotless: Anne Boleyn is scrubbed clean to become the True Woman—the wronged wife and mother; Zenobia is noble, proud, and pure; Kate Vivian is a wholly respectable “American Girl” and an actress (the antithesis of respectable!) without a hint of sex. Through these women, we can see that Dickinson viewed the stage as a forum through which she might

⁴⁵³ Boston *Times*, 14 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

continue to participate in a national conversation about the proper place of women in American society.

But Dickinson had another agenda—to make money. It seems likely that this imperative affected the extent to which she could express her progressive politics through her plays, and it can perhaps account for some significant weaknesses—in particular, the sense that her female characters are straining against the conventional frames in which they exist.

CHAPTER THREE: PRESUMPTUOUS INCOMPETENCE

“She can never accomplish it in the world,” said a New York critic...
“But why not?”...
“Nobody ever did such a thing in the world. It’s as plain as a pike staff that she will fail.”
“Isn’t success possible?”...
“It’s an absolute impossibility,” was the reply.
“Then she’ll succeed,” was the triumphant rejoinder, “Miss Dickinson *always* accomplishes impossibilities.”⁴⁵⁴

“American acting,” according to one theatre historian, “was born in the nineteenth century; it developed, matured, and gained world attention during that period.”⁴⁵⁵ The theatrical world into which Dickinson debuted was a challenging one for a novice. Many professional actors and actresses had grown up in theatrical families and knew the life; most began as chorus girls or supernumeraries and worked their way up the ladder. For the greater part of the nineteenth century, actors trained through apprenticeships in stock companies, where they would ascend to

an established “line of business,” and eventually to “possession of parts” which they would hold for a significant portion of their professional lives. During this journey through the ranks, actors acquired skills by practicing, rehearsing and performing a wide range of gradually more demanding roles, observing experienced actors and “stars,” taking the occasional supplementary class in dance or fencing, and perhaps an occasional visit to the elocutionist for study of a particular role.⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵⁴ Unidentified clipping in the Anna Dickinson papers.

⁴⁵⁵ Garff B. Wilson, *A History of American Acting* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 3.

⁴⁵⁶ James H. McTeague, *Before Stanislavsky: American Professional Acting Schools and Acting Theory 1875-1925* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1993), xii.

With daily changes of bill, there was little opportunity for “character work” or honing technique; actors concentrated on learning their lines. In addition, actors were rarely able to analyze the meaning of a play as a whole because they received only their own parts and cues in the form of “sides.”⁴⁵⁷ Although the system provided actors with a great variety of roles, there was no organized procedure or method for studying acting or realizing a character.⁴⁵⁸ This system was, “with very few exceptions, the *only* means available for entering the profession and the *only* source of actor training.”⁴⁵⁹

By the 1870s, longer running shows enabled actors to devote more time to the study of their roles. However, the long run also signaled the demise of the repertory system with its daily change of bill and simple staging.⁴⁶⁰ With the rise of the star system and an increasing demand for spectacular scenic effects, the stock company was a dying tradition by 1880.⁴⁶¹

This decline of the resident stock company prompted the need for another type of actor training: “the pervasive ideology of professionalism compelled consideration of

⁴⁵⁷ Gay Gibson Cima, *Performing Women: Female Characters, Male Playwrights, and the Modern Stage* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 23.

⁴⁵⁸ Mary C. Henderson, *Theater in America: 200 Years of Plays, Players, and Productions*, with a forward by Joseph Papp (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1986), 145.

⁴⁵⁹ McTeague, xii.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*

systematized instruction.”⁴⁶² In 1871, Steele MacKaye, who had studied with Delsarte in France, published a pamphlet, *A Plea for a Free School of Dramatic Art*, in which he proposed opening a school of acting:

There can never be a healthy vital drama until there is a safe and sure school where the dramatic aspirant may go as a student, and where he will be guaranteed the best social and moral associations, as well as the most thorough practical and aesthetic preparation for the profession...this theatre...will be a school for the player and public, having no less a purpose than the elevation of both...⁴⁶³

MacKaye opened the St. James Theatre and School in the fall of 1871—arguably the first attempt at systematic actor training in the United States. There is little evidence of its activities, but it remained open for approximately six months and probably consisted of little more than the members of the acting company.⁴⁶⁴ (MacKaye also lectured all across the country in an effort to popularize the Delsarte system in America, an effort that was slow to achieve results.) Yet by the end of the century, the *Dramatic Mirror* was declaring, “The theatre is an institution in which exact knowledge is as necessary as it is in other institutions. This profession can make no better headway without schools of instruction than can the profession of the law, or that of medicine, or that of painting.”⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶² Benjamin McArthur, *Actors and American Culture, 1880-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 99.

⁴⁶³ Steele Mackaye, *A Plea for a Free School of Dramatic Art*, quoted in James H. McTeague, *Before Stanislavsky: American Professional Acting Schools and Acting Theory 1875-1925* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1993), xiv.

⁴⁶⁴ McTeague, 17-18.

⁴⁶⁵ *The Dramatic Mirror*, 1895, cited in McArthur, 99. This vogue for training, however, also received some harsh criticism. McTeague notes, “The attacks were precipitated principally because much of the acting profession and some critics were

Already a celebrity, Dickinson began her theatrical career with a unique set of advantages and disadvantages—the most obvious disadvantage, of course, being that despite her extensive experience as a platform performer, she had no theatrical experience. Furthermore, having risen to fame protected by her Quaker heritage and her youth, Dickinson was a troubling figure by the time she appeared on a theatrical stage. Known for her personal magnetism and force of intellect on the platform, where she manipulated her audience with passionate and articulate arguments, she was unable to captivate her theatre audiences, who expected something entirely different of a female performer.

This chapter examines Dickinson's identity as an actress on the legitimate stage. Concentrating on her two most significant roles, Anne Boleyn and Hamlet,⁴⁶⁶ it describes her acting style and her goals as an actress. Did Dickinson's skill in captivating her audience—so remarkable in her oratorical career—fade on the theatre's larger stage? Were her abilities simply more suited to the platform? At a time when efforts to

deeply suspicious of the idea that acting could be taught, much less in a school. And, what was worse, that acting should be based on a "speculative" theory was untenable, unthinkable, and preposterous." See McTeague, xiv.

⁴⁶⁶ Although Dickinson did play at least two other roles—Claude Melnotte in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Lady of Lyons* and the title character in her own play, *Laura, or, True to Herself*, there is an extreme paucity of evidence for both. *Laura*, for which there is no extant playtext, had no more than three performances when it was produced in Philadelphia in late 1876. Dickinson's performances as Claude Melnotte seem to have been greatly overshadowed by those of her Hamlet—she certainly played the role many fewer times. Although at various times newspaper notices announced her appearance as Macbeth, Richard III, and Camille, and her papers contain portions of a marked script of Boucicault's *The Corsican Brothers*, there is no evidence that those performances ever occurred.

professionalize acting were only just beginning to gather steam, would Dickinson's success as an actress, with no training or theatrical background, have undermined these fledgling attempts? In addition, might her acting have deliberately flouted conventional style—and conventional representations of women?

“An Event of Peculiar Significance”⁴⁶⁷

In the weeks before Dickinson's debut as Anne Boleyn in Boston there was “a flutter of excitement among the theatre-going public,”⁴⁶⁸ anticipating that “her season of three weeks will prove a very brilliant one.”⁴⁶⁹ Indeed, papers were proclaiming *Anne Boleyn* the theatrical event of the season. The performance had sold out days in advance, and the demand for seats spawned rumors about tickets going for extraordinary prices. Four days before the debut Dickinson wrote to her sister Susan, “All goes splendidly. Every thing in the house was sold within an hour after the office was opened & people are paying, on the street, \$5 for a seat. And they are buying for all the week—the house is almost entirely sold for the first matinee. Pretty well for an untried coat!”⁴⁷⁰ One paper reported that 150 seats had been reserved for visitors from Dickinson's native Philadelphia and that nearly as many had been reserved for Dickinson's New York

⁴⁶⁷ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, Globe Theatre, Boston, *Daily Evening Traveller*, 9 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁶⁸ *Sunday Herald*, 7 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁶⁹ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁷⁰ Anna E. Dickinson to Susan Dickinson, Boston, 4 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

friends.⁴⁷¹ It had been the “chief topic of conversation for weeks,” not merely among theatre people, but even among “the professed blue-bloods and literary chieftains in and around the revolving ‘Hub.’”⁴⁷² The Boston *Evening Transcript* observed, “Were a play by Anna Dickinson to be performed, without Miss Dickinson involved except as author, the event would be one of peculiar interest and importance.”⁴⁷³ Another notice asserted, “She is so well known as a speaker and writer that the debut will attract an audience scarcely inferior in celebrity and intellect to that which greeted the production of Mr. Tennyson’s new drama in London.”⁴⁷⁴

Some even viewed Dickinson’s advent on the boards as a unique opportunity to revolutionize the stage as “a source of pure and healthy entertainment” and hailed her debut as an important step toward the elevation of the stage as an instrument for moral instruction.⁴⁷⁵

The entrance of Miss Dickinson upon the stage is something more than a theatrical event. It is an act which, from the known character and precedent spirit of the woman, challenges, not the mere curiosity of play-goers, but the attention of the Christian public...Miss Dickinson’s act, as related only to herself, concerns

⁴⁷¹ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁷² *New York Herald*, 6 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁷³ *Evening Transcript*, 28 April 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁷⁴ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁷⁵ *The Golden Rule*, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

the public very little; but as related to the public, to society at large, to the Christian Church, it does profoundly concern us all.⁴⁷⁶

Interest in her costumes was intense. The Boston *Evening Transcript* noted, “Anna Dickinson’s face and figure, are too well known to need description,”⁴⁷⁷ but a number of notices appeared to assure the public that Miss Dickinson, “with her well-known pride and faith in things American,” had designed her own dresses and was having them made by her own dressmaker in New York—not by the French designer, Worth, as speculation had it.⁴⁷⁸ Her wardrobe was said to be “the most elegant which has ever been prepared in this country for the stage.”⁴⁷⁹ Dickinson complained that the fuss about her wardrobe was excessive: “I wish people had less interest in my clothes....they are not my entire stock in trade.”⁴⁸⁰ One critic took the opportunity to bemoan the standards by which the public judges a new actress: “Wardrobe, quotha! What the public ought to be interested in knowing about Miss Dickinson is whether she has the stuff in her out of which great or good actresses are made. If she has, lovers of art will not fail to recognize and applaud it, even though she appear in rags.”⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid. Although Dickinson was an outspoken feminist, her Quaker heritage (which was well-known by the public) led many to view her as a figure of virtue and morality.

⁴⁷⁷ Boston *Evening Transcript*, 28 April 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁷⁸ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁷⁹ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁸⁰ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁸¹ *Arcadian*, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

Although all of the papers agreed that Dickinson's debut would be the event of the season, they were divided in their estimates of her likely success. One announcement predicted, "The rehearsals of 'A Crown of Thorns' promise a very fine performance"; another, "the gossip thereon is highly favorable for the success of Miss Dickinson in her first dramatic venture."⁴⁸² Many pundits took a wait-and-see approach: "whether it has intrinsic interest and dramatic power enough to carry a popular audience to its climax the event alone can determine."⁴⁸³ Some worried for the possible damage the debut might do her reputation. The current state of the stage was not good enough for her: "I hope Anna isn't going on the stage as it now stands. It needs a little fixing up...If she goes on the stage now she is not the sensible woman I have always put her down in my diary to be. She is not fitted for the theatre. She is above it."⁴⁸⁴ Others feared she was not up to the immense challenge she was taking on:

The very daring of the attempt, while it moves our fears, should at the same time provoke our sympathy. To essay an utterly untried art is in itself sufficiently courageous, but when the art in question is confessedly the most difficult of any in the world, and the instantaneous position aimed at the highest attainable therein, the endeavor seems to savor of absolute rashness...The almost insuperable obstacles to success with such a bodeful confronting can hardly be over-estimated.⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸² Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁸³ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁸⁴ *The Hanbury News*, 12 February 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁸⁵ *Boston Times*, 7 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

Other papers were convinced that she would fail, “incited by that chronic spleen that blurs the vision to all things bright and hopeful.”⁴⁸⁶ One article, discouragingly titled, “An Impending Fizzle,” regretted the “sad humiliation for which Miss Dickinson is preparing herself.”⁴⁸⁷ She had no theatrical training; at thirty-three, she was middle-aged. Furthermore, a person so gifted in oratory certainly could not be equally skilled in dramatic arts. But many agreed that “if Miss Dickinson becomes one half as effective in her new calling as in that in which she has heretofore delighted innumerable audiences, she will prove the most attractive ‘star’ on the stage.”⁴⁸⁸

One paper noted, “Miss Dickinson feels quite sure of herself.”⁴⁸⁹ When asked if she was nervous about her upcoming “ordeal,” she answered, “I don’t think of it—of myself, I mean—at all. I am interested in my play and its fate. If I went outside that, and thought of myself, I might grow timid, perhaps, but I won’t.”⁴⁹⁰ The *Boston Times* observed, “Her confidence is magnificent...she has determined at the very outset to test her abilities under the most exacting conditions possible to be conceived of. And this seemingly in no spirit of bravado; neither in any spirit of trepidation...”⁴⁹¹ Indeed, several days before *Anne Boleyn* was to open, Dickinson confessed to her sister Susan

⁴⁸⁶ *Sunday Herald*, 30 April 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁸⁷ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁸⁸ *Evening Transcript*, n.d., cited in unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁸⁹ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁹⁰ *New York Herald*, 6 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁹¹ *Boston Times*, 7 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

that “one or two of the actors, at the first rehearsal [*sic*], tried to [turn dirty], thinking they had a *novice* to deal with,—but I *perceeded* to sail in,—take possession, & conduct my own rehearsal as Mr. [Waller] said—as though I had been accustomed to it for twenty years—since which they have *behaved*.”⁴⁹²

On 8 May 1876, the pouring rain could not keep the throngs away from the Globe Theatre.⁴⁹³ Included among their ranks were such luminaries as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Julia Ward Howe, and Mark Twain. The curtain rose at eight o’clock, and after two brief scenes, Dickinson emerged in a gown of “creamy brocade, with ruby trimming and gold embroidery.”⁴⁹⁴ It was a moment before the audience recognized her, with a blonde wig covering her familiar short dark curls, but once they did she was greeted with thunderous applause. According to one critic, “the excitement of the occasion was so great that the first sentence was inaudible.”⁴⁹⁵ She appeared to have a brief spasm of stage fright but continued with the first act with no extraordinary incident.⁴⁹⁶ She was called before the curtain six times during the course of the evening, notably after the second act when she was presented with extravagant “floral

⁴⁹² Anna E. Dickinson to Susan Dickinson, Boston, 4 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁹³ The house for the debut was estimated at 2,500.

⁴⁹⁴ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, *The World*, 9 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁹⁵ *Boston Herald*, 9 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

testimonials,” including a tremendous basket of calla lilies and ferns that spelled out in red flowers, “Welcome, A.D.”⁴⁹⁷

The Boston papers awarded her a victory. The *Herald* proclaimed, “She has safely and creditably passed the ordeal of a first night, and the unanimous verdict of the vast audience will be that her debut was a success.”⁴⁹⁸ The Boston *Daily Globe* supposed that “such a reception...must have been almost intoxicating to its recipient” and concluded that she was “a pronounced success.”⁴⁹⁹ The Boston *Post* nodded: “A highly successful first night.”⁵⁰⁰ Dickinson wrote to her sister,

All goes well here. That is to say I have made a success, & will do ten times better in the not far off future...I was so nervous my voice was all pressed out of me. I felt as if I had a hand on my throat all the evening until the last act. I didn't do what I wanted to do, but all things considered I really think I worked a sort of miracle....⁵⁰¹

But the criticism emerging from the traveling New York critics was less enthusiastic.⁵⁰² “The New York papers,” Dickinson wrote to Susan, “have been simply

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁸ *Boston Herald*, 9 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁹⁹ *Boston Daily Globe*, 9 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁰⁰ *Boston Post*, 9 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁰¹ Anna E. Dickinson to Susan Dickinson, Boston, 16 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁰² “Thirteen or fourteen years” later, the following account of the debut was published: “Of course every New York paper of note was represented, and there was not one of the critics anxious for the task, unless perhaps Mr. Schwab, who represented the New York *Times*, and rather enjoys an opportunity to wield the caustic pen when it is required.” Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

infernal.”⁵⁰³ The *New York Herald* claimed, “There was no flexibility in her voice, her attitude or her manner.” When reading her love letter from Percy, “instead of being as light as a bird and as bright as a morning in June, she behaved as if she was delivering a woman’s suffrage address....”⁵⁰⁴ Perhaps the harshest review came from William Winter of the New York *Daily Tribune*, whose assessment of Dickinson’s acting was brutal:

In art she was callow. Her presence as a Queen was puny. Her voice was often nasal and thin. Her walk was one-sided. Her attitudes were mostly crouched. Her emotion was that of the mind and not the heart. She does not burn, but she glints. The face was often set in a stare to emphasize a tigerish self-restraint. Great stress was laid on an apostrophe to Jane Seymour and an expostulation with Lord Percy. They sounded like wails from Martha’s Vineyard with the brethren in full possession.⁵⁰⁵

⁵⁰³ Anna E. Dickinson to Susan Dickinson, Boston, 16 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁰⁴ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, *New York Herald* 9 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁰⁵ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, *New York Herald* 9 May 1876, in Dickinson papers. Dickinson seems to have been most injured and, simultaneously, infuriated, by the reviews written by Winter. That Winter’s reviews were especially damaging to her stemmed from Dickinson’s relationship many years earlier with Whitelaw Reid, a rising young war correspondent at the time of their meeting in 1863. The two were fast friends for more than a decade, during which time items announcing their engagement frequently appeared in the papers. Their relationship began to cool in the early 1870s when Reid took over the editorship of Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune*. Although the *Tribune* had generally reviewed Dickinson’s speeches favorably, in 1873—a difficult year on the lecture circuit—it, “in contrast to previous seasons and to its treatment of other lecturers, gave Anna’s New York talk very small notice. Anna felt, rightly or wrongly, and Susan [her sister] shared her belief, that had Reid given her lecture a proper report, she would have had a successful seasons despite the panic. From this feeling, it was a short and easy step for Anna to believe what some friends suggested—that Reid was purposely withholding mention of her in the *Tribune* out of fear that other papers would renew the old story of their engagement... What had previously been an intimate personal relationship now had been transformed into a cold, businesslike affair.” See Chester, 161-2. Before her debut in *Anne Boleyn*, Dickinson had apparently written several letters to Reid. In one, she invited him to her opening night in Boston; according to her biographer, he accepted. See Chester, 174. In the other letter, she said that “a favorable

Although few critics were as dismissive as Winter (who continued, “we see no reason to encourage the idea that Miss Dickinson is an actress because she dresses herself in four gorgeous robes and goes into an ecstasy of elocution”⁵⁰⁶), the response of the New York critics was widely perceived as rude, disrespectful, and unkind: “The New York critics who went to Boston to witness Anna’s debut are accused of having nothing in their travelling satchels except a paper collar and a tomahawk.”⁵⁰⁷ Another paper observed,

The majority of the audience went home Monday night feeling pleased until they read the papers, when they felt they must have been mistaken in their emotions and that it could have been nothing but of disappointment. They were bewildered; they had thought it a triumph; the press told them it was a failure. After all it doesn’t do to trust one’s own senses too much, nor one’s judgment; it is easier and less troublesome to have one’s opinions made for one....⁵⁰⁸

mention in the *Tribune* would be of great service. He read the letter, wrote on the envelope ‘unanswered’ and filed it away.” See Goldsmith, 432. Whether or not Winter was actually operating at Reid’s behest, his crushing review of *Anne Boleyn* in Reid’s paper then seemed to Dickinson like a deliberate public humiliation. See Chester, 182. But Winter’s own prejudices may have factored equally into his assessment of Dickinson onstage. Before the Civil War, Winter had objected to slavery; he “opposed human servitude on moral grounds but never advocated abolition.” Furthermore, “he opposed radical behavior more and wrote with distaste about the ‘effusive, hysterical novel of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* which ‘aroused and inflamed thousands of hearts.’” See Miller, 71. Dickinson’s position as the voice of the radicals could hardly have escaped him. “Harsh attacks against Winter began in the 1870s, questioning his impartiality and openmindedness.” See Miller, 99.

⁵⁰⁶ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, *New York Herald* 9 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁰⁷ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁰⁸ *Boston Times*, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

Some suggested that the New Yorkers were aggravated that Dickinson had chosen to make her debut in Boston rather than in New York. Indeed, nineteenth-century theatre manager Daniel Frohman notes in his autobiography that “In the ‘70’s and ‘80’s, the press and public resented the production of a new play, even as a tryout, outside the metropolis. Here in New York was the court of dramatic judgment and intelligence, and here the new productions must first be submitted for approval.”⁵⁰⁹ Others thought the New York critics simply mean-spirited and rose to her defense.

Boston Auditor: So you didn’t like Anna Dickinson as an actress?

New York Critic: Of course not!

Boston Auditor: Why “of course”?

New York Critic: Partly because she made her debut in Boston, and partly because it gave me a good opportunity to show some fine writing. Nothing like abusive critiques to give the public the idea that you are a smart critic, you know!⁵¹⁰

Another article asserted, “Little ‘Willie’ Winter’s ‘criticism’ upon Anna Dickinson in the *New York Tribune* is neither just nor gentlemanly. However, his abusive articles have no influence in Boston...He is a mild Winter!”⁵¹¹

Even popular playwright Dion Boucicault publicly supported Dickinson, arguing that if newspaper editors were incapable of hiring fair and competent critics, they should send reporters to theatres with instructions to take note of the performance or performer’s

⁵⁰⁹ Daniel Frohman, *Daniel Frohman Presents: An Autobiography* (New York: Lee Furman, 1937), 45.

⁵¹⁰ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁵¹¹ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

effect on the audience, and keep personal opinions to themselves.⁵¹² Boucicault wrote to Dickinson,

I saw the Cr. of Th. last night and thought the play & the actress had been hardly treated—so hardly that I felt unable to find faults in either that might have been apparent if my judgment had been less obscured by [my] feelings....Don't mind the turkey buzzards of the press—you flatter them by appealing from their decision. In doing so you acknowledge their capacity to judge—which I decline to recognize.⁵¹³

Veteran English actor John C. Cowper, who played Cardinal Wolsey, also publicly defended Dickinson in a letter to the New York *Daily Tribune* (Winter's paper.) Cowper opened his letter by referring to his twenty-five years of experience as an actor and stage manager, and stated “without reserve, that Miss Dickinson has achieved more than any lady with whom I have ever been associated.”⁵¹⁴ He praised the play, and recalled his experience playing opposite Charlotte Cushman twenty-two years earlier in a play that had been written for her and which was “one of the direst failures I ever witnessed...In comparison with this performance, Miss Dickinson's first performance in

⁵¹² *The Daily Graphic*, 10 April 1877, in Dickinson papers.

⁵¹³ Dion Boucicault to Anna Dickinson, date illegible, in Dickinson papers. Boucicault also publicly positioned himself as an adversary of the critics: “In the September 1877 *North American Review*, [he] took aim at the professional theatre critic in an article entitled, ‘The Decline of the Drama.’ While this playwright, manager, and actor aired his personal gripes against the ‘mischievous influence of the press,’ he drew the public’s attention to the growing power of newspaper criticism....Boucicault’s article aroused much controversy, and rebuttals from leading dramatic critics. The *New York Mirror (Dramatic Mirror)* of February 8, 1879, however, agreed with several of Boucicault’s points and stressed the worthlessness of professional criticism.” See Tice L. Miller, *Bohemians and Critics: American Theatre Criticism in the Nineteenth Century* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1981), 159-160.

⁵¹⁴ *New York Daily Tribune*, 24 June 1876, in Dickinson papers.

Boston was great.”⁵¹⁵ He noted that he had acted with both Helen Faucit and Mrs. Charles Kean, and that at times Dickinson reminded him of Faucit, “especially in quiet and emotional scenes....I have no hesitation in saying Miss Dickinson will, if she chooses, become a second Helen Faucit.”⁵¹⁶ He also referred to several other contemporary actresses with whom he had played—most notably, Adelaide Neilson—and argued that “there is no comparison to be made between them and Miss Dickinson. The latter has intellect and education—advantages which no one could possibly give the former much credit for possessing. I hope and trust the time has gone by for the dolls. Let us have estimable ladies on the stage who have brains.”⁵¹⁷

Supporters notwithstanding, Dickinson’s success was qualified. In general, she was deemed a better playwright than an actress. A number of reviews noted that her performance was marked by “painful awkwardness and inappropriateness of gesture and mien, and by a conspicuous ignorance of stage business.”⁵¹⁸ One critic observed, “Not

⁵¹⁵ Ibid.

⁵¹⁶ *New York Daily Tribune*, 24 June 1876, in Dickinson papers, reel 25, frame 320. According to theatre historian Alan S. Downer, Faucit was both “one of the most talented players of the century” and “particularly noted for personifying the Victorian ideal of womanliness and for the consummate grace of her limited range of characters.” See Alan S. Downer, “Players and Painted Stage: Nineteenth Century Acting,” *PMLA*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (June 1946), 547.

⁵¹⁷ *New York Daily Tribune*, 24 June 1876, in Dickinson papers. William Winter later wrote of Neilson: “Upon her career as an actress,—a career which extended over fifteen years,—there can be but one judgment: it was a career of continual artistic advance and of splendid achievement.” See William Winter, *The Wallet of Time, Containing Personal, Biographical, and Critical Reminiscence of the American Theatre*, vol. I (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1913 [reissued 1969]), 549.

⁵¹⁸ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

knowing what to do with her hands, she kept them nearly always in motion. Her walk was stilted, embarrassed and awkward, and underwent sudden changes that were as ungainly as they were unaccountable.”⁵¹⁹ The *Press* noted, “Every movement is forced; there is nothing natural, nothing which does not say, ‘I am trying so hard to do this.’”⁵²⁰ According to the *Evening Transcript*, “she acts so much she acts by...this novice, in her intense zeal and eagerness, actually overshoots the mark by sheer waste of force. She uses more effort and energy than the single Anne Boleyn requires. She gives us almost enough for two.”⁵²¹

Miss Dickinson’s gestures have always been quick and abrupt and few in number. She has evidently realized the necessity of acting, and while on the stage many of her movements last evening were awkward. Some seemed to have no meaning, and a few were so peculiar as to make one wonder just what they were intended to mean. In one case Miss Dickinson squared her shoulders and rushed forwrrd [*sic*] with elbows bent and arms close by her side, as if running a race, and with the words, “I have nothing to uncover,” she parted her hands, which were clasped across her forehead, and swept them down to her side as if baring her bosom for a blow.⁵²²

Nearly a year later, Dickinson was still receiving similar reviews of her movement on stage: “She carries her head on one side, and looks askance at the audience and characters, as if to say, ‘Don’t touch me: this is my \$2,000 dress.’ Her arms seem

⁵¹⁹ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁵²⁰ *The Press*, 2 December 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁵²¹ *Evening Transcript*, 19 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁵²² Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, Globe Theatre, Boston, *The Sun*, 9 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

pinioned, and are raised at regular intervals, like cranks.”⁵²³ According to the *New York Dispatch*, “She jumps and hops about the stage like a school-girl, she uses her right arm and hand as if she were on the lecture platform, and she has a disagreeable habit of applying her hands to her head in a manner more suggestive of adjusting her wig than of expressing any possible emotion.”⁵²⁴

Similarly—though perhaps more surprisingly given her remarkable oratorical career—many reviews criticized her voice: “Her voice lacks the necessary power and compass for a successful actress.”⁵²⁵ Another critic noted, “Her voice is peculiar. It has but little strength, or searching power, until forced, and then a disagreeable tremor or quaver, a crescendo with a speedy diminuendo, mars its effect, and leaves the auditor painfully conscious of an anti-climax.”⁵²⁶ “Her voice,” another commented, “which is not a strong or mellow one, is undisciplined, and is unattuned to the stormy gamut of tragic passion. It is, besides, uncommonly sharp, with a Quaker intonation.”⁵²⁷ Some critics remarked on her odd pronunciation: “Her voice is unpleasing, and her pronunciation has a Provincial twang, as different as possible from the clear English tones which are not uncommon among even third-rate actors, since the stage keeps for us

⁵²³ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, *The Arcadian*, 12 April 1877, in Dickinson papers.

⁵²⁴ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, Eagle Theatre, New York, *New York Dispatch*, 8 April 1877, in Dickinson papers.

⁵²⁵ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁵²⁶ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁵²⁷ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

the tradition of good speech far better than does society.”⁵²⁸ “Her accent is very peculiar,” observed another, “If you were not told that she was a Philadelphia Quaker, you would take her for an educated Irishwoman—not that she has a brogue, but that her accents and vowel pronunciations are Irish.”⁵²⁹ Many of the criticisms of Dickinson’s voice alluded to her career on the lecture platform; the “narrowness of her voice” had been “so long attuned to lectures and platform readings.”⁵³⁰ One review noted that “the elocution was labored and declamatory”⁵³¹; another, “Her voice is so trained for the platform and the pulpit, that years of experience and study can never fit it for the stage.”⁵³²

For many critics, Dickinson had simply retained too many habits of the rostrum. “The sensation experienced by the average spectator as she came upon the stage,” marveled the *Evening Bulletin*, “was extremely odd. It may not be worthy of analysis, but if the reader can imagine how he would feel if he saw Wendell Phillips coming in from the wings as Othello, or Henry Ward Beecher advancing to the footlights in the character of Claude Melnotte, some notion of the first effect of this appearance may

⁵²⁸ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁵²⁹ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, *The Daily Evening News*, 24 October 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁵³⁰ *St. Louis Journal*, excerpted in *The Voice*, Cleveland OH, 12 November 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁵³¹ Unidentified clipping (probably *Boston Daily Globe*, 9 May 1876), in Dickinson papers.

⁵³² *The Press*, 2 December 1876, in Dickinson papers.

perhaps be obtained.”⁵³³ *The Daily Graphic* was convinced that, “Public oratory is a...hindrance to a purely dramatic career. Miss Dickinson’s mannerisms were a part of her individuality on the lecture platform, but they are out of place and a real drawback on the stage.”⁵³⁴ One critic remarked, “When Miss Dickinson appeals to the audience, she does it in the old-time platform style. She has not yet learned the art of stage presence. With words relating to women’s rights, or war, or reform, her style would be effective, but she cannot picture the Queen.”⁵³⁵ Another observed that her performance was “marked by all the old pathetic, tearful, high-treble and woeful inflection of her lecture delivery.”⁵³⁶ “In her longest speeches,” another paper asserted, “she trembled between an orator and a Down East scold. Lacking the vehemence and vulgarity of a virago, she also missed the impetuosity, the volubility and the force of an outraged woman.”⁵³⁷

Most critics felt that Dickinson’s own personality overwhelmed that of the character. One paper claimed that her performance “displayed a mind and temperament

⁵³³ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, Arch St. Theatre, Philadelphia, *Evening Bulletin*, 28 November 1876, in Dickinson papers. Interestingly, nineteenth-century theatre manager Daniel Frohman described him as “one of America’s greatest actors,” and added, “it seems to me that besides being an actor, he was one of the greatest dramatists America has ever produced, for constantly and incessantly, he dramatized himself.” See Daniel Frohman, *Daniel Frohman Presents: An Autobiography* (New York: Lee Furman, 1937), 23.

⁵³⁴ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, Globe Theatre, Boston, *The Daily Graphic*, 9 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁵³⁵ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁵³⁶ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁵³⁷ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

rigidly and inflexibly determined upon the self-assertion which is totally incompatible with the assertion of identities distinct from the self. Miss Dickinson presented Miss Dickinson....”⁵³⁸ When Dickinson took *A Crown of Thorns* on tour, similar criticisms were proffered all across the country. *The Press* noted,

She does not compel her audience to forget that she is Anna Dickinson and to believe that she is England’s unfortunate queen. Her auditors...never become oblivious of her personality. She does not lift them out of realization of their surroundings, does not take hold of and control their imaginations.⁵³⁹

Another observed that all of the scenes of the play were “marked by the lady’s individuality. This is never completely hidden.”⁵⁴⁰ A St. Louis critic remarked, “she is too decided in her personalities to ever become a great actress.”⁵⁴¹ Still another complained, “One never loses sight of her personality; never is carried away by an illusion that he is in the presence of the character represented, rather than before Miss Dickinson, who is making an attempt to speak its speeches with all possible elocutionary correctness.”⁵⁴² A Philadelphia critic averred,

To be a successful actor requires strong individuality, and the actor succeeds in proportion as he invests his different impersonations with an individuality of their own. Miss Dickinson has this strong individuality,

⁵³⁸ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁵³⁹ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, *The Press* (Portland) 19 June 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁴⁰ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, *The Sunday Press* (Philadelphia) 3 December 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁴¹ *St. Louis Herald*, 4 November 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁴² *The Gazette* (Boston) 21 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

but she cannot get rid of it. She runs over, so to speak; there is not enough room for her in Anne Boleyn, and it seems like a vain attempt to put a bushel into a peck measure. In vain does she try; the Dickinson is always too much for the Boleyn.⁵⁴³

The *Washington Capital* summed up:

The novelty of a woman—young and not ill-looking—upon the platform in a day of intense popular excitement, uttering views that were fresh if not of any great depth, attracted and entertained. But this was all. We can well understand, therefore, that the novice upon the stage was the veteran of the platform: Anna Boleyn was no more, no less, than Anna Dickinson.⁵⁴⁴

Some critics remarked that it was difficult to assess Dickinson's acting because of the newness of her material: "She evidently acts after her own fashion and idea, and it is difficult to estimate her merit as an actress in a play of her own. In some other character, in some other standard play, a better judgment could be formed of her power. There is some promise in her acting."⁵⁴⁵ Another grumbled, "An actor ought not to expect his characters to suit him; he should suit himself to the characters. Ability to personify is the ultimate test of fitness for the stage, and Miss Dickinson cannot hope to prove that she has it by making her own parts as she does her costumes."⁵⁴⁶

⁵⁴³ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, *The Times* (Philadelphia), 28 November 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁴⁴ *The Capital* (Washington), 14 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁴⁵ *Courier Journal*, 24 October 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁴⁶ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

Yet many critics, whether or not they approved of Dickinson's performance, remarked on its intelligence. Critics described it as "charmingly intellectual,"⁵⁴⁷ "a triumph of intellect and will"⁵⁴⁸; a "strange intellectual experience."⁵⁴⁹ Many linked the intelligence of her performance to her speaking career: "She is continually lecturing the characters and enforcing her argument with her head."⁵⁵⁰ The *St. Louis Times* averred, "She argues in every act, and her entire performance appeals to the intellect rather than to the heart."⁵⁵¹

It is probably unsurprising, then, that reviewers were most critical of Dickinson's performance in the play's love scenes.⁵⁵² The *Evening Times* concluded, "Miss Dickinson does not succeed in love-making. She is too much given to smirking and

⁵⁴⁷ Buffalo *Courier*, 30 January 1877, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁴⁸ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁴⁹ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁵⁰ *The Arcadian*, 12 April 1877, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁵¹ *St. Louis Times*, quoted in unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁵² Interestingly, when Dickinson played Claude Melnotte in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Lady of Lyons* in 1882, she was specially commended for her onstage love-making. *The Daily Globe* (St. Paul) noted that, "Miss Dickinson makes a rare lover; and wherever she learned the art, she has learned it well. The delicacy and tenderness which characterized the love scenes between herself and Pauline surpassed any love making ever seen on the stage in St. Paul while it lacked nothing in dignity and manly fervor." 12 February 1882, in Dickinson papers. In addition, one review of her Hamlet remarked that "the scene with 'Ophelia' was one of the best of the evening." Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

making eyes, to be effective, and much of the time was positively silly.”⁵⁵³ Another column asserted, “Her love-making wants heart. Neither man nor woman can make love with the mind.”⁵⁵⁴ The *Evening Mail* lamented, “[W]hen we ought to have seen the womanly nature burning with intensity of feeling, Miss Dickinson disappointed us by merely embodying in her action a superficiality of emotion entirely unlike a woman’s nature when she is really in love.”⁵⁵⁵ One especially harsh critique sneered:

Anna Dickinson is a failure in the love scenes of her own plays. When the experienced actor sidles up to her and reaches his arm around her rigid waist, she grabs him by the wrist and holds him off at arm’s length while he says his piece, and then, when she reaches the melting moment, she lowers her head to let it droop upon his shoulder. The constrained action is so like the gesture of a venerable William goat in the act of assisting a teasing boy over a pasture fence, that the audience gleefully look to see the unhappy lover butted clear over the orchestra fiddles, and there is a general murmur of disappointment when he braces his feet and receives the drop of her head with a scarcely audible grunt.⁵⁵⁶

In an interview Dickinson protested such allegations, and complained that she seemed to have acquired a reputation for being “untouchable”:

If I do not take kindly to having a man’s arm around my waist, on the stage I certainly expect to do all that is required of me in love-making. But even the actors have heard so much of this thing that they think Miss Dickinson is a touch-me-not, and scarcely meet the actual demands of

⁵⁵³ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, Albany, *The Evening Times* 26 January 1877, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁵⁴ “Dramatic Doings” column in unidentified clipping, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁵⁵ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, New York City, *The Evening Mail*, 3 April 1877, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁵⁶ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, *Burlington Hawkeye*, reprinted in unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

the stage and with about as much passion as is in that claret bottle.⁵⁵⁷

As noted in Chapter Two, many critics were offended by Dickinson's presumption in taking on a starring role with no previous theatrical experience. But there were also many who defended her, arguing that it was absurd to intimate that simply because she had not had years of training she could never be an actress. One article acknowledged Dickinson's lack of preparation but concluded, "we think that she could be taught to act acceptably."⁵⁵⁸

We have never been of the opinion, that it is necessary to devote a lifetime, or even a long apprenticeship, to the stage, in order to achieve success as an actor. We think the love of the profession should inspire a certain degree of enthusiasm. After that, study, apprehension, and resolve, will accomplish much. But it must not be forgotten that there should be natural advantages....⁵⁵⁹

It was not until April 1877 that Dickinson brought *A Crown of Thorns* to New York. When asked in an interview if she was particularly nervous about confronting a New York audience, she acknowledged that she had lost ten pounds in the past two weeks, but said that she would rather play for a New York audience than many others because "they have seen everything: they know how to compare and to appreciate and consequently are larger minded and more generous than a provincial audience."⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁷ Interview with Anna Elizabeth Dickinson in unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁵⁸ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁵⁹ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁶⁰ Anna Dickinson, interview in *The World*(New York), 2 April 1877, in Dickinson papers.

But her New York debut was far from a success. The *Herald* described it as the “long-threatened event”: “Of Miss Dickinson we have little to say that is complimentary and therefore wish to say as little as possible.”⁵⁶¹ The *Evening Mail* acknowledged the warmth of her audience, but noted that “[i]n every instance where she was called upon to express the more delicate forces of emotion, she failed.”⁵⁶² The *Evening Post* was no more encouraging: “Miss Dickinson appears to have fallen into the mistake of supposing that there is some connection between the lecture platform and the stage, whereas there is really nothing in common between them except the fact that actors and lecturers speak in public.”⁵⁶³

Dickinson had reached her breaking point. One evening after the curtain fell on her performance, she returned to the stage, clippings in her hands, and introduced herself as a champion of the oppressed—a category in which she now placed herself. She then delivered an hour-long harangue in which she bitterly assailed the critics for treating her unjustly. She did not object to criticism itself but to the deliberate misrepresentation of her work in the press. She argued that *A Crown of Thorns* had certainly been a success in Boston, if audience response was any indicator, and that no one perceived it a failure until reading the responses of the New York critics the following day: “Every man and

⁵⁶¹ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, *The New York Herald* n.d., in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁶² Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, *The Evening Mail* (New York), 3 April 1877, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁶³ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, *The Evening Post* (New York), 5 April 1877, in Dickinson papers.

woman went out of that house...knowing that with all my faults, crudities and manifold matters to be learned and unlearned, I had the elements of what would go to make a successful actress.”⁵⁶⁴ She told of how William Winter wrote a second stinging review two weeks after her opening in Boston, though he had not seen the play a second time: “It was not generous, it was not manly, it was not just.”⁵⁶⁵

What! this one small, weak, sick, heart-broken, miserable woman against the combined newspapers of New York City! God knows I did not want to fight, I was too utterly crushed. I struggled on, and I will continue to struggle, because, having taken up my work to do, I will not put it down until I completely fail. I am hoarse, because I have swallowed so many tears that they have strangled me; I go heavy about my work because my heart drags down my hands and feet.⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶⁴ Anna Dickinson, quoted in unidentified clipping, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁶⁵ Anna Dickinson, quoted in unidentified clipping, in Dickinson papers. Winter was not the only critic accused of unethical reviewing practices over *Anne Boleyn*. According to John Rothman in *The Origin and Development of Dramatic Criticism in the New York Times, 1851-1880*, the critic of the *New York Times* during this period was Frederick A. Schwab, about whom a number of unflattering articles appeared in the *New York Dramatic News* (14). In April 1877, the *Dramatic News* accused Schwab of “[writing] of Miss Dickinson’s play without seeing it. He rushed out after the first act to go to the Academy. He records the opinion of the Crown of Thorns that it is beneath criticism.” See *New York Dramatic News*, n.d., in Dickinson papers. The review itself “implies that he had seen the original performance in Boston some eleven months earlier, and that he was convinced within a very short time that there had been no substantial changes in the production. It is impossible to tell from the review whether or not Schwab left after the first act; but his opinion...seems to have concurred with the consensus of the New York critics.” See Rothman, 19. It is worth noting, however, that neither the *Times* nor Schwab himself seem to have made any effort to contest the charges, which is, according to Rothman, “extremely suspicious,” since “a man in Schwab’s position would have almost been forced to institute libel action if the charges had been untrue. It is even more suspicious because the *Times* always had a kind of predilection for publishing, and frequently participating in, controversies among theatrical people.” See Rothman, 19.

⁵⁶⁶ Anna Dickinson, quoted in the *St. Louis Times*, 13 April 1877, in Dickinson papers.

Her tirade lasted until nearly midnight. She concluded by appealing to the audience for their fair judgment: “Don’t read...what the New York papers say and then sit in judgment, but give Anna Dickinson a chance with her own work. Go and see and listen, and then if you condemn, Anna Dickinson has not one word to say in her own defense.”⁵⁶⁷

Described as “one of the nerviest things in modern literature,” Dickinson’s appeal nevertheless failed to have the desired effect.⁵⁶⁸ Her performance only provoked further ire from the New York press, who retaliated by making her the target of caustic commentary and cartoons [see Fig. 1].

Miss Anna D.
She sez, sez she,
For fight I’m jest a spoilin’;
I know my biz,
My dander’s riz--
In fact I’m Anna Bo(i)leyn.

Them critic chaps
Will squirm, perhaps,
When I get down among ‘em,
They’ll holler wuss
And make more fuss

⁵⁶⁷ Anna Dickinson, quoted in unidentified clipping, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁶⁸ *St. Louis Times*, 13 April 1877, in Dickinson papers.



ANNA DICKINSON CHASTISES THE BOYS.

Oh, dear, what was the matter?
To-day, dear, why didn't we let her be?
Why'd I have supposed she was a better be?
Just see how she chastised her boys!

We promised to say the plain truth for our town:
We promised to put no Alceas in a corner;
And now we have caught just the liveliest Alceas—
Oh—ain't that a terrible end!

Figure 1: "Anna Dickinson Chastises the Boys," *The Daily Graphic* (New York), 14 April 1877, in Dickinson papers.

Than if a sarpint stung ‘em.

So now here goes—
If they suppose
I’m skeery, Heaven help ‘em!
First thing, I’ll swoop
Right down and whoop!
Geerusalem! won’t I skelp ‘em?⁵⁶⁹

Some argued that in fighting back she merely confirmed what so many had argued—that she should have remained on the lecture platform and never attempted the stage: “Her assault upon her critics was an unconscious and curious corroboration of them. What they had said she devoted herself to proving.”⁵⁷⁰ One snide item remarked: “Central Park was thronged yesterday with crowds which basked in the sunshine. On one of the seats in the Mall sat two persons discussing the theatres and the press, one of whom suddenly asked, ‘What makes the spring so early’ and the other replied, ‘Because Anna Dickinson has made it too hot for Winter.’”⁵⁷¹ Another argued that she had no one to blame but herself:

She has provoked the criticism to which she so bitterly objects by attempting at one stride to reach the topmost place in a profession which has always reserved its prizes for those of its members who serve a faithful apprenticeship, and who are endowed with the peculiar artistic temperament essential to conspicuous success on the stage. Unfortunately for MISS DICKINSON, she has not had this apprenticeship, and she seems to lack the temperament of the actor. Perhaps if she had made a

⁵⁶⁹ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers [*Detroit Free Press* written in above clipping, 14 April 1877].

⁵⁷⁰ *The Allentown Herald*, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁷¹ *The Telegram* (New York), 16 April 1877, in Dickinson papers.

modester and earlier beginning, she would not now be swallowing the tears of disappointment and mortification.⁵⁷²

In a later interview, Dickinson reiterated that she was not objecting to the criticism but to misrepresentation:

It was nothing to me that these puny little men, whom I know, should pronounce me old and ugly, vile and awkward, with nasal twang, or that they should defame my play. But when they said their verdict was the unanimous verdict of the press throughout the country, that was a deliberate, willful lie, and calculated to do me the greatest injury. You know the power of that mighty editorial 'we' which these small men hide behind. The public does not see the Mr. Winter, or Mr. Schwab, or Mr. O'Kelly...It is the great *Tribune*, the *Times*, the *Herald* which render this favorable or unfavorable opinion.⁵⁷³

And it was the *Tribune*, the *Times*, and the *Herald* that prevailed. Dickinson had many supporters across the country, but they could not sustain the play's run in New York City. Within a week, *A Crown of Thorns* closed. It would be five years before Dickinson would undertake another significant role onstage.

Hamlet

Dickinson first played Hamlet in Rochester, New York, on 19 January 1882—another debut described in the press as “the greatest dramatic event of the season.”⁵⁷⁴ This performance, although (again) popular with audiences and many critics across the country, was (again) lambasted by critics from New York City, who considered her

⁵⁷² *The Sun*, 15 April 1877, in Dickinson papers. This article was probably written by A.C. Wheeler (“Nym Crinkle”) who was the critic for *The Sun* in 1877-78.

⁵⁷³ Anna Dickinson, quoted in unidentified clipping, 12 April 1877, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁷⁴ Review of *Hamlet*, Rochester, NY, *The Press*, 19 January 1882, in Dickinson papers.

attempt “a conspicuous example of pretentious and presumptuous [*sic*] incompetence” and dismissed the approval of her audiences as “unmitigated stupidity.”⁵⁷⁵

On the evening of the debut, Rochester’s Grand Opera House was packed with “prominent people, lawyers, doctors, editors, critics and actors,” as well as with “professional people who had been attracted by the novelty of seeing a blue-blooded Quakeress in tights.”⁵⁷⁶ Also present were a number of prominent dramatic critics, including representatives from New York and Philadelphia—a further indication of the magnitude of the event, for the metropolitan papers ordinarily would not have bothered with an opening in a town such as Rochester. According to the contemporary press, most audience members were drawn to Dickinson’s debut more out of curiosity than anything else; they seemed to be “united with the hope that she might succeed, and the opinion that she would not, a dubiety which seemed universal.”⁵⁷⁷ One paper observed,

[Curiosity] is her strong ally now. More people visit the theater merely to see how a woman will treat the virile character than attend from any desire to indorse [*sic*] or encourage the efforts of the actress. Indeed, there is some slight suspicion that Miss Dickinson banks more upon phenomenon than ability; that she prefers juggiery to honest endeavor. There is a smack of sensation in her assumption of male parts.⁵⁷⁸

⁵⁷⁵ Review of *Hamlet*, *New York Times*, 21 March 1882.

⁵⁷⁶ Review of *Hamlet*, Rochester, NY, *The New York Herald*, 19 January 1882, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁷⁷ Review of *Hamlet*, Rochester, NY, *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁷⁸ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers. *The Courier-Journal* (reprinted by the *Omaha Republican*—written in) snidely predicted, “When Anna Dickinson, as ‘Hamlet,’ stoops to pick a posy from the grave of ‘Ophelia,’ and her back suspender buttons snap off, it will be worth the price of admission to see her grab the waistband of

The curtain opened late, and the assembled masses awaited Dickinson's first appearance with "breathless anxiety."⁵⁷⁹ Remaining hidden until Claudius' line, "But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son—," Dickinson emerged with the aside, "A little more than kin, and less than kind." A momentary hush descended upon the audience, who then greeted her with applause. "Waiting for the applause to subside, she stood revealed for the first time to hundreds of curious eyes in the garb of a man, her legs encased in tights, a tunic falling just below the hips."⁵⁸⁰ Rather than "customary suits of solemn black," Dickinson wore "a closely-fitting garment of light purple white...which, by the way, the star considers as the only mourning color for royalty."⁵⁸¹

Although her voice faltered in the beginning of the performance, any semblance of stage fright soon subsided. Her interpretation of the character was marked by several innovations, the purple costume only one among them. Dickinson used Edwin Booth's version of the playtext but made some significant revisions of her own.⁵⁸² She restored

her trousers with one hand and put the fingers of her other hand into her mouth in search of pins."

⁵⁷⁹ Review, *The New York Herald*, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁸⁰ Review of *Hamlet*, Rochester, NY, *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁸¹ Review of *Hamlet*, Rochester, NY, *The Press*, 19 January 1882, in the Anna Dickinson papers.

⁵⁸² Booth played Hamlet for nearly forty years and continuously made minor revisions to the playtext. The elimination of the Fortinbras frame and the cleansing of all sexual references (both of which were customary) are the most significant (and consistent over time) features of Booth's text. It seems most likely that Dickinson would have used the 1878 version, which was published by William Winter in a Prompt Book edition.

Hamlet's full conversation with the gravediggers, a scene often eliminated from contemporaneous productions. She omitted the popular "advice to the players" because she felt that it was out of place "coming from the lips of the prince at a time when the murder of his father was uppermost in his mind,"⁵⁸³ and that it, like many of Hamlet's soliloquies, retarded the action of the play:

For a man to stop right in the middle of a crisis of the play and deliver a long moralizing monologue on life and death, on the theory of acting, is manifestly absurd and their frequent introduction in the plays of Shakespeare shows that they have nothing to do with the character proper, and were simply used so that Shakespeare could have a medium for the expression of his lofty and philosophical ideals.⁵⁸⁴

These ideals, she argued, had nothing more to do with the character of Hamlet "than if an essay on cookery were interpolated at the same point."⁵⁸⁵ Although she acknowledged that many of these passages were "so sublime that it seems a shame to cut them out," she felt that they were really "preposterous" given the dramatic situation.

Like Charlotte Cushman, America's most notable female Hamlet, who first played the role in 1851 (and to whom Dickinson was frequently compared), Dickinson

This version omitted Hamlet's tale of his voyage at sea and indicated that Hamlet's speech while Claudius prays is "sometimes omitted"; in addition, Booth had initially restored "the battery of comical names which Hamlet fires at the Ghost in the cellarage; but audiences disliked to hear the good son addressing his father's spirit disrespectfully, so in 1878 most of the name-calling was suppressed." See Charles H. Shattuck, *The Hamlet of Edwin Booth* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1969), xvii.

⁵⁸³ Review of *Hamlet*, unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁸⁴ Anna Dickinson, interview in "Hamlet' a College Boy: Anna Dickinson's Life, Her Plans and Her Opinions," n.d., clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

adamantly denied that Hamlet was a vacillating character.⁵⁸⁶ For both women, this stance was a significant departure from the currently prevailing conceptions of the role. Cushman saw Hamlet as “dynamic and manly.”⁵⁸⁷ (She must have implemented her view successfully enough to lead one reporter “to wonder why she did not simply challenge and assassinate Claudius outright.”⁵⁸⁸) Dickinson also protested such a “weak” interpretation of the character: “There was no indecision about him. When there was any real definite course before him he trod it with a bold foot.” The efficiency with which Hamlet orchestrates the demise of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, for example, illustrated her point: “Here there is not the least trace of hesitation.” Furthermore, in hesitating to kill his uncle immediately, Hamlet was merely using good sense, “since to do so without further evidence of his guilt than the ghost’s word would have been absurd.”⁵⁸⁹

Dickinson’s most significant innovation, however, was to portray Hamlet as a very young man—a college boy—rather than as an adult of thirty. She disagreed with

⁵⁸⁶ One article previewing Dickinson’s debut in male roles remarked: “Anna Dickinson is determined to follow in the footsteps of Charlotte Cushman...Miss Dickinson resolves to appear in men’s attire...She has a strong nature, and is capable of facing obstacles and surmounting difficulties which would appall weaker women.” Unidentified clipping, 9 December 1881, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁸⁷ Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, *Wearing the Breeches: Gender on the Antebellum Stage* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 99.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 99. “Cushman...did not seem to want to play a man who exhibited the same characteristics as a nineteenth-century woman, a marginal and ‘private’ individual, especially since women were the objects rather than the subjects of antebellum discourse.” See Mullenix, 99-100.

⁵⁸⁹ Anna Dickinson, interview in “ ‘Hamlet’ a College Boy: Anna Dickinson’s Life, Her Plans and Her Opinions,” n.d., clipping in Dickinson papers.

those who argued that the Gravedigger's speech in the last act ("Here's a skull now hath lien you i' th' earth three-and-twenty years.") proved that Hamlet was thirty years of age. She considered this "simply a lapse on Shakespeare's part."⁵⁹⁰ According to Dickinson, it was ridiculous to think that the Gravedigger would recognize Yorick's skull after it had been buried for twenty-three years;⁵⁹¹ it was similarly ridiculous to think that Hamlet would be able to remember the clown from his youth as "a fellow of infinite jest." Everything else in the text, she believed, indicated Hamlet's extreme youth.⁵⁹²

"The Worst Hamlet in the World"

On the night of her debut, Dickinson was called before the curtain and applauded enthusiastically at the end of each act, and even though the performance did not end until shortly before midnight, the audience apparently "remained quiet and interested to the

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁹¹ Edwin Booth dealt with this problem by attaching a remnant of a fool's cap to the skull that would identify it as Yorick's.

⁵⁹² Seventeen years later, at the age of 54, Sarah Bernhardt also played Hamlet as a very young man-- to greater acclaim. Earlier in the century, women who played boy roles (unlike those who played adult men) had been the darlings of the critics. See Mullenix, 129. Not coincidentally, the characteristics of the ideal boy (as elaborated in nineteenth-century periodicals)—moral virtue, purity, subservience, and self-abnegation—bore a striking similarity to those of the True Woman. See Mullenix, 138. Mullenix argues that critics "contained the subversive activity of theatrical woman [*sic*] by constructing images for them—like the boy—that reinforced dominant gender ideology...By reading the actress-as-boy as a woman, critics could draw upon a common nineteenth-century association, reinforce femininity, and move the performer away from threatening alternatives. If the actress-as-boy was perceived as a woman, s/he was no longer seen as a young *man*, a male child who would undoubtedly grow into privilege and power. Moreover, ubiquitous associations between the breeches performer and feminine youthfulness might counter or perhaps dispel anxiety generated by the players of serious/tragic male roles, and in some way redeem the convention as a whole." See Mullenix, 161-162.

close,” which the *Rochester Union and Advertiser* took as clear evidence of her triumph. Although the Rochester papers reported her success with enthusiasm, critical response to her interpretation varied wildly. As they had with Anne Boleyn, many remarked that Dickinson’s own personality was so strong as to be inescapable: “On the stage...her individuality is too marked, and the interest is in Anna Dickinson rather than in Hamlet....”⁵⁹³ Others commended her for her synthesis of personality and character:

The role of *Hamlet* is one providing peculiar opportunities for Miss Dickinson’s genius. She has an intuitive perception of the poetic power of the character, and enters into its psychological mystery by a power of spiritual insight, of fine divination, that is almost unprecedented in the *Hamlets* of the stage. The perfection of dramatic impersonation is only found when the real character of the actor assimilates, by natural affinities, with the role to be created.⁵⁹⁴

Most reviewers acknowledged her relative lack of experience on the stage and couched their criticisms sympathetically. Many suggested either that “It [was] inevitable that the advent of a woman in male parts should be regarded as an experiment,”⁵⁹⁵ and just as many decided that she did very well in the part—for a woman. One paper noted,

We have certainly seen in Miss Dickinson a Hamlet of much greater excellence than we had expected to see in a woman, better by far than we have seen given by many pretentious men, in that it lacked those senseless mouthings and studied mannerisms which actors are sometimes apt to mistake for correct interpretation of human passion.⁵⁹⁶

⁵⁹³ Review of *Hamlet*, *Chicago Inter Ocean*, 21 November 1883, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁹⁴ Review of *Hamlet*, Grand Opera House, Rochester, in unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁹⁵ Review of *Hamlet*, *Post and Tribune*, 27 January 1882, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁹⁶ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

The Daily Times offered:

In view of the disadvantages she labors under in being a woman and a small one at that; in confronting the prejudice that exist [*sic*] against a woman taking a man's character, etc., and premising that allowances should be made for these in judging her, we consider her performance the best Hamlet we have seen. In this we mean, not that she excels Booth, Barrett and some others in the parts in which it requires a man's physical strength to delineate, but that she has created a new Hamlet, boyish and natural, which gives us a better idea of Shakespeare's grand conception than any we have seen at any time.⁵⁹⁷

But again, a sizeable portion—again, particularly those from New York City—were vicious: “The wonder is not that she can play so well, but that she is able to play at all. She is the worst ‘Hamlet’ in the world.”⁵⁹⁸

As they had with *Anne Boleyn*, many chose to defend Dickinson from what they perceived as unjustified abuse from the New York papers: “The New York press has not treated her fairly.”⁵⁹⁹ More than one paper referred to the low expectations produced by the negative reviews. One paper reported the response of a theatregoer who “said he had been most agreeably surprised. From the comments of the New York theatrical critics, he had supposed that she had found it impossible to overcome the difficulties of sex in

⁵⁹⁷ Review of *Hamlet*, *The Daily Times* (Scranton), 15 April 1882, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁹⁸ Review of *Hamlet*, *The Sentinel*, 15 March 1882, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁹⁹ Review of *Hamlet*, *The Daily Tribune* (Scranton), 15 April 1882, in Dickinson papers.

playing the part, or to escape from the tendency of monotone, caused by so many years of lecturing.”⁶⁰⁰ Another noted,

On account of the conflicting reports of the press concerning the success of Miss Dickinson in her new profession, and especially in the role of personating a male character in one of Shakespeare’s heavy tragedies, our people were evidently anticipating no remarkable acting, and were prepared for perhaps a really feminine effort in the personation of Hamlet. . . . The curtain went down, however, amid a storm of applause, and the verdict was in favor of the young prince. During each of the succeeding acts Miss Dickinson evinced increasing power, her voice becoming apparently stronger and her acting almost faultless.⁶⁰¹

A Chicago paper called for fairness:

This new departure has been anticipated for more than a year, and the funny men of the press have had ample time to get off any amount of innocent witticisms on the subject. These . . . men have had their first cut at Anna, and it now becomes the duty of more serious critics to take it up tenderly, handle with care, and in the spirit of true inspection criticize a performance which has had, in its principal character, as much critical study and faithful introspection as ever was brought to bear by an impersonator of “Hamlet,” either male or female, upon a dramatic representation.⁶⁰²

And one paper even seized upon the controversy as an opportunity for its own self-promotion:

The New York dailies have agreed that Anna Dickinson made a total failure of her attempt to play Hamlet at Rochester. The Boston dailies have agreed that she made a great success. The Rochester dailies side with Boston against New York. Who is to decide when the telegraphic critics of New York and Boston disagree? Why, *THE MIRROR*, of course. Read our Rochester correspondence, and you will get the truth,

⁶⁰⁰ *The Tribune* (not New York; city unclear), n.d.

⁶⁰¹ *The Herald*, 25 February 1882, in Dickinson papers.

⁶⁰² Review of *Hamlet*, McVicker’s Chicago, *Chicago Morning News*, 31 January 1882, in Dickinson papers.

the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about Miss Dickinson's debut. *THE MIRROR* reflects the facts.⁶⁰³

Again, many papers received angry letters to the editor from irate audience members who were either insulted or outraged at the brutality of the negative reviews: "One would think from the harsh and untruthful criticism of the New York *Herald* and *Sun*...that these representatives were the gentlemen that occupied one of the boxes for only a short time on Thursday evening...the gentlemen did not witness the acting..."⁶⁰⁴

Again Dickinson suffered complaints about her voice, which was often described as too feminine; it betrayed her sex and destroyed the illusion: "The only drawback to a full and complete enjoyment of her acting...is her voice, which is incapable of unison with her actions, and certain feminine airs--ways of looking, inflections of the voice and the like--that detract from her otherwise powerful representation of Hamlet."⁶⁰⁵ "[H]er principal defects are in her voice," noted another critic, "It lacks depth and volume, and has rather the harsh, faltering discord of a woman in advanced years [she was thirty-nine] than the musical profundity which none can fail to associate with so youthful a figure as Hamlet."⁶⁰⁶ The *Evening News* lamented, "[H]er acting was sadly marred by her

⁶⁰³ *The Mirror*, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

⁶⁰⁴ *The Express*, 23 January 1882, in Dickinson papers.

⁶⁰⁵ Review of *Hamlet*, Schultz & Co.'s Opera House, (Zanesville written in) *Daily Times*, 20 September 1883.

⁶⁰⁶ *The Gazette*, 25 February 1882, in Dickinson papers.

feminine voice and style of delivery.”⁶⁰⁷ “At times,” proclaimed another, “her voice is very effeminate--in fact, more so than some years ago, when she was in the lecture field, and to atone for this, she is guilty of the unpardonable sin of ranting.”⁶⁰⁸

Dickinson seems to have been most interested in putting forth her conception of the character of Hamlet. She declared, “I think the chief fault and the most general one is that the actors blindly hug the traditions of the past, and take every opportunity to make a point, without the least regard to the artistic unity of the character.”⁶⁰⁹ And many critics gave her credit for her own unique interpretation. The *Daily Democrat* remarked, “Miss Dickinson’s ‘Hamlet’ is so different from any of the numerous ones that we have seen that we are hardly sure of our own opinions in regard to it.”⁶¹⁰

As they had with Anne Boleyn, many remarked on the intelligence Dickinson brought to the stage. One critic observed, “There was nothing sensuous about her, either in appearance or in the speaking of the most equivocal lines; it was an intellectual rendition throughout, softened and tempered by close study and a thorough mental grasp of her ideal of ‘Hamlet’s’ character.”⁶¹¹ Another noted that her strategy was “to give a

⁶⁰⁷ Review of *Hamlet*, Whitney’s (Detroit), *The Evening News* (Detroit) 12 October 1883, in Dickinson papers.

⁶⁰⁸ Review of *Hamlet*, English’s Opera House, unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁶⁰⁹ Anna Dickinson, quoted in “‘Hamlet’ A College Boy,” n.d., in Dickinson papers.

⁶¹⁰ Review of *Hamlet*, *Daily Democrat*, 30 May [1882], in Dickinson papers.

⁶¹¹ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

strictly intellectual tone to the performance; to reach her auditors through continued and powerful mental impressions alone; to teach them the unimportance, as far as this play is concerned, of that physical glamour which Booth, for instance, can throw around the personality of *Hamlet*.”⁶¹² According to the Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle*,

Some of her best lines were given marvelously well and the fine emphasis, the keen appreciation of the sentiment, the subtle comprehension of the most intricate of the fascinating mysteries, the occasional original innovation [*sic*], all betrayed the most profound study and the deepest analytical [*sic*] researches of one of the finest of intellects in this country.⁶¹³

“Her conception of the character,” proclaimed another paper, “is in a measure her own, differing in some points from those customarily seen, but it is pleasing and artistic and gives evidence of careful study.”⁶¹⁴

It was perhaps inevitable that many critics chose to draw comparisons to the male Hamlets of the day—most frequently that of Booth, who, interestingly, was *also* noted for presenting an intellectual portrait of the Prince. “Miss Dickinson is not a Booth,” stated an Indiana paper, “nor does she want to be. Her method is her own, and differing from that of others who assume this part is no argument of its weakness.”⁶¹⁵ Another midwestern paper argued,

⁶¹² *The Herald* (Omaha), 2 February 1882, in Dickinson papers.

⁶¹³ Review of *Hamlet*, *Democrat and Chronicle* (Rochester), n.d., in Dickinson papers.

⁶¹⁴ Review of *Hamlet*, Comstock’s Opera House, unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁶¹⁵ Review of *Hamlet*, South Bend, *The Sunday Register* (South Bend), 28 May [1882], in Dickinson papers.

It would be unfair to compare Miss Dickinson's Hamlet with that of Booth, McCullough or Barrett. Hers bears no resemblance to the Hamlet of the Shakespearean scholars mentioned. With Miss Dickinson, the present attempt is simply an experiment, and it should be treated as such. That the actress is deserving of praise cannot be denied: she has accomplished what no other woman in this country could--she has dared to depart, in a measure, from the well-beaten path of custom, and present a Hamlet which, if not a thoroughly artistic performance, is at least somewhat original.⁶¹⁶

"To a majority of Americans," noted one contemporaneous critic, "Booth is the ideal representative of the great character, although there are those who regard Fechter and his flaxen wig as the modern principal and accessory [*sic*] most worthy of unlimited and unstrained praise."⁶¹⁷

The writer of one letter to the editor of a New York paper claimed to have seen all of the actors, "great and otherwise," who had played Hamlet in New York in the previous 30 years, and had "no hesitation in saying that I think Miss Dickinson looks the part better than any of them."⁶¹⁸ The writer went on to compare her to those actors in some detail:

Forrest presented him as a terrible creature, with a voice like distant thunder, and with the muscle of a prize-fighter. Fechter portrayed him as a sort of German *Tony Lumpkin* with a high treble voice and much burdened with adiposity. Davenport showed him as a scholarly old gentleman, whose appearance indicated that he had been born long before his queen mother. Barrett personates him as a prince of strong Hibernian flavor; and Booth represents him as an artificial, saturnine fellow, entirely wrapped up in himself, and without human sympathy. But Miss Dickinson's *Hamlet* is an exceedingly graceful, winning, handsome boy. Her face is youthful, her eyes beautiful, her features well cut, and her

⁶¹⁶ Review of Hamlet, McVicker's, Chicago, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

⁶¹⁷ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁶¹⁸ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers, 23 March 1882.

smile, disclosing a perfect set of teeth, most charming. Her expression is bright and full of feeling, and it varies constantly, in harmony with her moods. Her figure is slender and lithe, and her carriage easy and natural throughout. She dresses [sic] the part faultlessly. Her acting is most excellent, from her first appearance before the audience to the death-scene in the last act. Never does she display for even one moment the slightest awkwardness, or betray the fact that she is a woman.⁶¹⁹

Many reviewers mentioned Dickinson's innovations, and many quite liked her performance, but nearly all were more interested in her ability to impersonate a man than in her opinions about Shakespearean character. Even those who spoke positively about her performance were convinced that it was impossible to forget that Dickinson was a woman. As one critic noted, "Shakespeare's Hamlet had a physical male make-up that was almost perfect. Anna's bust is naturally too large."⁶²⁰ *The New York Herald*, which pronounced her endeavor "a dire failure," minced no words:

Miss Dickinson did not seem to have the first requisite for the accomplishment of her task. She did not look Hamlet. She did not speak as Hamlet should. She did not act as Hamlet must. Her appearance was not that of a man or a boy. She had not the figure or carriage of a male, and while her nether limbs were graceful and of manly vigor, they tapered down to a woman's dainty foot, encased in French high-heeled gaiters. The other extremity equally belied her

⁶¹⁹ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers, 23 March 1882. Another letter to the editor--this one directed to the *Evening Post* and written by a woman--also noted that "she has seen Fechter, Davenport and others in Hamlet, and she is therefore prepared to judge whether Miss Dickerson [sic] fell very far below those fine exponents of the modern drama. She believes Miss Dickinson's effort compares favorably with those of the above named actors." *Evening Post*, n.d. A letter to the editor of the *Chicago Tribune* expressed a similar sentiment: "The writer hereof has not seen McCullough in this character, but he would be pleased to know the name of another actor besides Booth who can personate Hamlet with such sustained excellence as Anna Dickinson." *Chicago Tribune*, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

⁶²⁰ Review of *Hamlet*, unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

assumption, and her womanly face and voice and hair were as laughably unlike a man's as the most orthodox [*sic*] of Rosalinds.⁶²¹

But newspaper descriptions of Dickinson's physical appearance are as contradictory as the critiques of her performance. Some accounts described her as a paragon of femininity: "she has all the prettiness and coquetry of a charming woman....she is neither masculine nor mannish, but pre-eminently feminine and womanly."⁶²² Others claimed, "Of the pretty-woman type she has not a touch."⁶²³ The *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* reported:

Her hair was combed down over her forehead, giving a strong, masculine look to the features, but her Hamlet was masculine in appearance only. Her voice, her manner, the very spirit of her action were feminine and not once could the consciousness be ignored that it was a female interpretation of the character.⁶²⁴

The Herald agreed, "Her appearance was certainly masculine, but her actions were distinctly feminine, and no one in the audience ever forgot, for a moment, that she was Anna Dickinson and a woman."⁶²⁵ The *Times*, likewise, wrote, "Her appearance was

⁶²¹ Review of *Hamlet*, Rochester, NY, *The New York Herald*, 20 January 1882, in Dickinson papers.

⁶²² "Anna Dickinson in Hoosierdom," *The Commercial*, 31 March 1869, in Dickinson papers.

⁶²³ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁶²⁴ Review of *Hamlet*, Rochester, NY, *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

⁶²⁵ Review of *Hamlet*, Rochester, NY, *The Herald*, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

masculine, but her actions were distinctively feminine. It was impossible to lose sight of the fact that it was a female interpretation.”⁶²⁶

But some critics observed precisely the opposite:

She has none of the dainty, but undramatic femininity in her ‘Hamlet’ walk or attitudes. Her stride is easy, natural and man-like, without being over-done: her poses are statuesque without stiffness, and invariably artistic; her costume is worn as though she had always been used to it; she manages the small sword without a trace of awkwardness or inconvenience; and in the duel with ‘Laertes’ she showed a quite unexpected mastery of that weapon, making beautiful a scene that too often becomes ridiculous through ignorance of fencing.⁶²⁷

The New York Telegram agreed that “She trod it firmly and with a right manly bearing...she moved about as unconcernedly in tights...as though she had worn male attire all her life.”⁶²⁸ One critic acknowledged that “Miss Dickinson looked at first a little top-heavy,” but went on to say that “she had a very neat limb in tights, and the very idea of her being a woman was soon lost in the interest taken in her acting.”⁶²⁹ Another noted that “Miss Dickinson’s features, while not absolutely masculine, vary sufficiently from the regular and accepted feminine pattern, to enable one with a tolerably strong

⁶²⁶ Review of *Hamlet*, Rochester, NY, *The Times*, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

⁶²⁷ Review of *Hamlet*, *The Free Press*, 27 January, 1882, in Dickinson papers.

⁶²⁸ Review of *Hamlet*, Fifth Avenue Theatre, New York, *New York Telegram*, 21 March 1882, in Dickinson papers.

⁶²⁹ Review of *Hamlet*, McVicker’s, Chicago, unidentified clipping in the Anna Dickinson papers.

imagination to figure her as a very young man or large boy.”⁶³⁰ *The New York Times*

took the middle ground and argued that she was androgynous in the role:

Miss Dickinson’s outward appearance was that of an oppressively intellectual youth, somewhat man-like in shape, and large in face and features. She had two or three gestures, and these were made as serviceable as possible. Her action was either strained and stiff or irritably swaggerish; an action neither flesh nor fowl, neither of man nor of woman, and, as one might describe it, genderless.⁶³¹

These contradictory criticisms are closely related to prevailing attitudes toward the character of Hamlet himself. It was a subject about which there was no consensus. The “ideal” Hamlet was by no means a stable or fixed ideal. Throughout much of the nineteenth-century the character was conceived as a feminine one. Less than a year before Dickinson’s debut, E. P. Vining had published *The Mystery of Hamlet*, in which he argued that the character of Hamlet was actually a woman in disguise—she had been costumed as a man by the Queen in order that she might succeed to the throne. According to Vining, Hamlet’s “feigned madness, his trial of the mimic play, are all strategies that a woman might attempt and that are far more in keeping with a feminine than with a masculine nature.”⁶³² Although Vining’s extreme thesis met with skepticism, the relative femininity of the character was widely accepted. Edwin Booth played the melancholy Dane as “kindly, courteous, gentlemanly, possessed with a natural

⁶³⁰ Review of *Hamlet*, Corinthian Hall, Atchison, Kansas, *The Champion* (Atchison), 24 February 1882, in Dickinson papers.

⁶³¹ Review of *Hamlet*, *The New York Times*, 21 March 1882, in Dickinson papers.

⁶³² Jill Edmonds, “Princess Hamlet,” in *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914*, edited by Vivien Gardner and Susan Rutherford (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 62.

dignity.”⁶³³ Booth rejected the idea that Hamlet was a woman, but he did attribute his own success in the role to his portrayal of the character’s refined femininity. In 1882 he wrote to William Winter about Vining’s book (and in doing so referred to Dickinson’s recent performance):

The “Mystery of Hamlet” is an argument by Mr. Vining...attempting to prove that Hamlet is really a woman. (Good for Anna!) It is very ingenious & aside from the absurdity of the writer’s theory I agree with much that he urges in support of it. I have always endeavored to make prominent the femininity of Hamlet’s character and therein lies the secret of my success—I think. I doubt if ever a robust and masculine treatment of the character will be accepted so generally as the more womanly and refined interpretation. I know that frequently I fall into effeminacy, but we can’t always hit the proper key-note.⁶³⁴

It was this tradition of feminine Hamlets that inspired reviews in the spirit of the following from the *New York Times*:

It was the combination of mechanical hardness with aggressive incapacity which made this performance of Hamlet one of the worst ransackings of that high and beautiful creation that we have yet endured. The proud, the gentle, the effeminately delicate and passionate Hamlet, with the strange illumination of imaginative power which glows through his nature and with the exquisite poetic charm and incomparable grace of his manner--this mysterious and enchanting being was, in the handling of Miss Dickinson, a garrulous and awkward spitfire...⁶³⁵

⁶³³ William Ackerman Buell, *The Hamlets of the Theatre* (New York: Astor-Honor, 1968), 69.

⁶³⁴ Edwin Booth to William Winter, Nashville, 10 February 1882, in Daniel J. Watermeier, ed., *Between Actor and Critic: Selected Letters of Edwin Booth and William Winter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 203.

⁶³⁵ Review of *Hamlet*, *The New York Times*, 21 March 1882, in Dickinson papers.

But the feminized Hamlet, though widespread, was only one ideal of the time. Others, paradoxically, conceived of Hamlet as a figure of towering masculinity. The *Chicago Inter Ocean* was convinced that Hamlet was “a sturdy, daring, manly fellow, vigorous and athletic, not a whipster of dulcet voice and puny physique.”⁶³⁶ This newspaper acknowledged the merits of Dickinson’s interpretation, but lamented that “her characterization lacks the virility which is an essential of Hamlet, and for which there is a warrant in every line uttered by the unfortunate Prince.”⁶³⁷ Another critic warned, “Those who expect to see a Hercules playing Hamlet, will, of course, be disappointed, but to the intellectual, her performance is a source of sincere satisfaction.”

Cultural historians have characterized the late nineteenth-century as a time in which men’s ideas about what it meant to be a man were in flux.⁶³⁸ For the greater part of the century, the middle class had distinguished itself by “stressing its gentility and respectability”;⁶³⁹ ideals of middle-class manliness had been tied to qualities of “physical

⁶³⁶ Review of *Hamlet*, *The Chicago Inter Ocean*, 4 February 1882, in Dickinson papers.

⁶³⁷ Review of *Hamlet*, *Chicago Inter Ocean*, 2 February 1882, in Dickinson papers.

⁶³⁸ See Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Peter G. Filene, *Him/Her/Self: Sex Roles in Modern America*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); J.A. Mangan and James Walvin, eds., *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America 1800-1940* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987); Elizabeth H. Pleck and Joseph H. Pleck, *The American Man* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1980).

⁶³⁹ Bederman, 11.

courage, chivalric ideals, virtuous fortitude,”⁶⁴⁰ and, most importantly, self-mastery and self-restraint.

The middle class saw this ability to control powerful masculine passions through strong character and a powerful will as a primary source of men’s strength and authority over both women and the lower classes. By gaining the manly strength to control himself, a man gained the strength, as well as the duty, to protect and direct those weaker than himself: his wife, his children, or his employees.⁶⁴¹

By the 1880s, economic crises had left many such “self-made men” struggling for survival. This, combined with challenges to their political authority from working-class men, immigrants, and women, had caused the “concept of manliness [to suffer] strain in all its dimensions...”⁶⁴² As immigrants, working-class men, and women threatened (and infiltrated) the white-middle-class male political world (and economic hegemony), men found themselves “actively, even enthusiastically, engaging in the process of remaking manhood.”⁶⁴³ The old definitions were no longer viable if men were to maintain control of their society. By the turn of the century, men of the middle class were “unusually obsessed with manhood.”⁶⁴⁴ The refined Victorian model of manliness based on self

⁶⁴⁰ Mangan and Walvin, 1.

⁶⁴¹ Bederman, 11-12.

⁶⁴² Filene, 69.

⁶⁴³ Bederman, 15.

⁶⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

control and self-restraint was weakening as a new model, characterized by “neo-Spartan virility...stoicism, hardiness and endurance,” came to the forefront.⁶⁴⁵

Just as immigrants and women presented a challenge to the political authority of white middle-class men, Dickinson’s Hamlet may have inspired some overly hostile reviews because critics (undoubtedly aware of her outspoken support of women’s rights) saw her assumption of this most coveted male role as a threat to masculine dominance of the theatrical profession. In her study of antebellum breeches performers, Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix has noted that “It was...serious or tragic performances that generally appeared most threatening to critics who feared that actresses, who sought to play masculine heroes such as Norval and Richard III, were aiming to wear their breeches in a more figurative sense.”⁶⁴⁶ As one critic suggested:

The appearance of Anna Dickinson as Hamlet...taken in connection with the fact that the assumption of male parts in light operas by females is common, suggests the possibility that the theatrical profession may in time pass altogether into the hands of women. Up to the restoration in England no women appeared on the stage. Female characters were played by men and boys. Now, women not only monopolize the female personations, but encroach extensively on the male. If this process continues it is easy to see what it will lead to.⁶⁴⁷

Another critic warned, “If [Dickinson’s] voice continues to grow deeper and stronger, the Hamlets of today will have to better themselves, or they will loose [*sic*] their laurels

⁶⁴⁵ Mangan and Walvin, 1.

⁶⁴⁶ Mullenix, 25.

⁶⁴⁷ *Globe-Democrat*, cited in unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

before a rival of the fairer sex.”⁶⁴⁸ Although the idea of an all-female theatrical profession, especially in the late nineteenth century, may seem ludicrous, even paranoid, the mere suggestion indicates that the theatre was not immune to the types of anxieties that drove men to remake their manhood during this period in American history.

Indeed, it is hardly surprising that some viewed Dickinson’s attempt at male roles as an effort to out-do the men. One newspaper item related: “Anna Dickinson, it is said, made a pat remark when somebody deprecated her playing the man’s part—of Hamlet. ‘Yes,’ said she; ‘but there are not three men in this country who can play it; and it is time the women tried.’”⁶⁴⁹ Another sympathetic commentator noted,

Her labors upon the rostrum were for the elevation of woman and the establishment of the principle that a woman had the right to engage in general business or professional pursuits if she so desired, as well as men. Her assumption of a male character upon the stage is, undoubtedly, *for the purpose of emphasizing this theory, and, by her own deeds, awaken in other women this sentiment*, which ought to prevail, but which the world at large frowns upon. She took the chances of invoking jeers and harsh criticism upon herself that she might in her own person enunciate a great principle and one which sooner or later will be generally accepted...There are men who can see only evil in the attempt of a lady to mark out an honorable career, and achieve fame outside of the beaten lines, but there is no manly man who does not extend to Miss Dickinson a hearty God speed in her chosen mission [*italics mine*].⁶⁵⁰

⁶⁴⁸ Review of *Hamlet*, *The Peoria Transcript*, 8 March 1882, in Dickinson papers.

⁶⁴⁹ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁶⁵⁰ *Daily Globe* (St Paul), 11 February 1882, in Dickinson papers. Interestingly, Charlotte Cushman had been “solidly opposed to the one privilege that was the keystone of the early women’s rights movement: nondiscriminatory suffrage.” Although Mullenix suggests that Cushman’s reasons for this were elitist—that “the vote of one good highminded woman is to be rendered completely...void by the vote of Biddy in the Kitchen”—it seems possible that Cushman’s lack of vocal support for the suffrage movement may have protected her from some of the more vicious varieties of criticism. See Mullenix, 104.

And one of Dickinson's obituaries remarked, "Miss Dickinson long ago betrayed impatience with the limitations of her sex, and, since nature did not decree that she should be a man, she strong-mindedly determined to play the part at any rate."⁶⁵¹

The sheer amount of publicity that Dickinson's Hamlet generated is worth noting in itself, for after 1860 critics tended to turn a blind eye to women who played tragic or serious male roles.⁶⁵² Earlier in the century, even Charlotte Cushman had been largely ignored in the press for her two serious (adult) male roles—Hamlet and Cardinal Wolsey.⁶⁵³ Mullenix notes that such disregard may have indicated that the popularity of the breeches performer was waning; she also suggests that they were "neglected on purpose by dramatic journalists who hoped that by rendering the breeches-wearing

⁶⁵¹ *The Newark Daily Advertiser*, cited in unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁶⁵² Mullenix, 239.

⁶⁵³ "Considering the condemnatory criticism generally written during this period about breeches performers who attempted serious roles, Cushman's victory over the critics--or, at the very least, the paucity of harsh responses directed toward her--proves telling. Perhaps she escaped harsh criticism because she was an international star, because she had enchanted London audiences and won the crucial English seal of approval. It is also possible that her 'untouchable' quality was due to her overwhelming popularity with her audiences; critics may have felt that by castigating Cushman, they would alienate treasured subscribers." See Mullenix, 62. Of course, Mullenix also notes that "Cushman proved the major exception to critical patterns established in the 1840s and 1850s as her performances were largely exempt from harsh critiques." See Mullenix, 59.

actress critically nonexistent, audiences might loose [*sic*] their interest and stop patronizing this usurper of male privilege.”⁶⁵⁴

Why, then, did Dickinson’s Hamlet receive such an enormous amount of critical attention? While critics may have been able to contain the threat posed by other breeches actresses simply by ignoring them, Dickinson had been a national celebrity for nearly twenty years. As an outspoken feminist and suffrage advocate, she had established herself as an enemy of masculine authority. Furthermore, five years earlier she had publicly attacked the New York critics, assailing their integrity and fairness—indeed, directly contesting their supremacy. For all of these reasons, critics may have felt compelled to challenge her directly.

Some critics may also have attempted to neutralize the threat implied by Dickinson’s assumption of the male role by representing her in a non-threatening way. A photograph of Dickinson in her Hamlet costume shows a rather convincingly masculine

⁶⁵⁴ Mullenix, 241. The numbers of breeches performances also declined from 1870-1900. Mullenix attributes this decrease to three main factors: “the sexualization of the equestrian breeches performer, the hysterical antiburlesque discourse circulated in 1869, and [Olive] Logan’s castigation of all breeches actresses (burlesque or otherwise.)” See Mullenix, 276-77. She notes that “late-nineteenth-century responses to the cross-dressed actress became much more acrimonious... Very rarely did examples of positive criticism and/or innocuous reports pepper the columns of “Things Theatrical” as they had during the first half of the century; rather, breeches performance repeatedly met with harsh criticism or no criticism at all, which was perhaps more damning. Actresses who played men’s roles were taken less seriously in their dramatic pursuits, and were instead often considered eccentric and immoral: they were “mongrels” who “mocked masculinity” and “belittled the drama.” Critical responses during the later half of the nineteenth century made it quite evident that the breeches actresses had permanently fallen from grace because of her association with the burgeoning leg show.” See Mullenix, 233-234.

figure [see Figure 2]. She stands with legs astride, arm across her chest, in what seems a sturdy, determined—and certainly unladylike—stance. The silhouette of her female body is concealed by a cape that she wears over her doublet and hose, and she also wears a hat with a feather that hides her trademark short curls. On the other hand, the sketch of Dickinson as Hamlet that appeared in the newspapers is clearly a feminized portrayal [see Figure 3]. Though her hair is short, her facial features are soft and feminine. She stands with her feet positioned almost like a ballet dancer, in a graceful and slightly quizzical pose. The costume—a short doublet, her legs in tights—reveals a clearly feminine body. While Dickinson’s actual body in costume may indeed have been able to pass as a man, the figure as represented by the sketch artist is unmistakably a woman—a reminder (or perhaps a warning) that the player belonged to the feminine sphere.

Before Dickinson brought *Hamlet* to New York, one newspaper item related:

She has tried it on several thriving towns and cities and they have, in Miss Dickinson’s opinion, liked it. Miss Dickinson will now, as it were, cross the dramatic Rubicon and move at once upon New York. What New York is going to do about it is not as yet clear, but Miss Dickinson proposed to find that out in the next forty-eight hours, and she believes, and it seems not unlikely that she is right, that she will convince her audience that all the great readers have not discovered all that can be done with that much wronged Prince.⁶⁵⁵

⁶⁵⁵ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.



Figure 2: Photograph of Dickinson as Hamlet. New York Public Library, New York.



Figure 3: Sketch of Dickinson as Hamlet. Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

Hamlet, of course, fared no better in New York than had *Anne Boleyn*. Odell records: “The engagement closed on April 1st, a rather significant date, if one cared to make jokes at Anna Dickinson’s expense.”⁶⁵⁶

Anna Dickinson: Actress

One theatre historian has described American acting in the plays of the 1870s as “unperturbedly conventional.”

It pleased; it was often lively and often in good taste; but that’s about all. No playwrights in a land of energized newness came forward with anything newly shaped or newly said to stretch the skills of the players beyond the ordinary. No critics, as in France, examined the art of acting and worked out theories about it. No innovators, as in England, challenged old fashions and at least tried for something more novel, more real, more truthful in impersonation. In the United States the theater as one of the arts was only a pleasant extra, a place to go for a laugh or a thrill, a place where shrewd managers could make money by offering democracy’s crowds a little culture. And actors were only rather odd people who earned a soft living by being glamorous.⁶⁵⁷

Dickinson’s acting, on the other hand, might be described as “perturbedly unconventional”—to such an extent that some reviewers hardly knew how to describe it. Many reviews remarked upon acting choices that did not accord with theatrical tradition: “[S]he does a great many unconventional things, that are novel to an old theatre-goer, totally at variance, perhaps, with the old stage traditions.”⁶⁵⁸ Another critic observed, “She has founded a new school of gesture, and time alone can tell whether that school

⁶⁵⁶ George C.D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, Vol. 11, 465.

⁶⁵⁷ Edwin Duerr, *The Length and Depth of Acting*, with a forward by A.M. Nagler (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 362.

⁶⁵⁸ *The Evening Leader*, 22 November 1876, in Dickinson papers.

will have other disciples. We may learn to understand it, but certainly do not now.”⁶⁵⁹

The Buffalo Courier was stymied:

We cannot avail ourselves of those comparisons which in the work of analysis are oftentimes so convenient; her method differs from every other actress of whom we have any knowledge; her effects are produced in a manner peculiarly her own; and then her range of dramatic expression seems to have certain boundaries set to it which are not easily defined.⁶⁶⁰

Yet there were others who found much to commend in her “original” style:

We have become so used to a conventional style of acting that any thing outside of it we regard as “inartistic,” when the very unconventionality and naturalness make it artistic in the extreme, only we don’t know it. So used are we to seeing Nature travestied that when she is presented as she is, we fail to recognize her, shorn of all the extravagance. So while Miss Dickinson gave us tender and beautiful touches of Nature, we complained because she did not give us the caricature.⁶⁶¹

The Evening Transcript noted:

Of Miss Dickinson’s acting in general, it may be said that it is all her own, and that she is, perhaps to too great an extent, always herself. She has none of the conventional mannerisms of the stage, makes her “points” and emphasizes her utterances in a way wholly her own, borrowing nothing from those who have gone before. In this respect her acting is fresh, original, and, to the close student, constantly interesting, suggesting that, as time goes on, and she becomes more and more familiar with the requirements of her new profession, she will meet them in ways unlooked for as yet, and even unknown to herself, but always original and unhackneyed.⁶⁶²

⁶⁵⁹ *Daily Evening Traveller*, 18 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁶⁶⁰ *Buffalo Courier* 30 January 1877, in Dickinson papers.

⁶⁶¹ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁶⁶² Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, Globe Theatre, Boston, *Evening Transcript*, 9 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

Similar sentiments were echoed in the following letter to the editor of *The Daily*

Graphic:

If we miss from her impersonations a certain mannerism and conventionality that are woven into the very warp and woof of stage instruction, we gain a refreshing freedom and originality...She obeys no special code of rules, neither does she prune or train her action to the exact shape and dimension of some well-known model. She accepts from these certain hints and suggestions, and goes to work in a manner which has both novelty and power to command it.⁶⁶³

Such remarks are, perhaps, indicative of the ambivalent attitude Dickinson's contemporaries had about formal theatrical training. Some swore that acting ability was a gift endowed only by nature: "All depends on dramatic instinct, a good voice, a pliable figure, and intelligence. If you possess these requisites, you can overcome the lack of early training, and...find the place to which you are fitted by nature."⁶⁶⁴ Others emphasized the necessity of long and arduous training.

It is part of the folly of humanity for every one to suppose that he can turn author or actor as readily as he can change his coat. Every one is willing to acknowledge that even a shoemaker must learn how to make a shoe before starting in the business, but few are willing to admit that they cannot write or act without any prefatory study whatever.⁶⁶⁵

But at the same time, formal training was becoming desirable for workers in all skilled trades. There was a proliferation of professional schools of all sorts—medicine, law, engineering, pharmacy: "the ideal of systematic professional training for all

⁶⁶³ Letter to Editor, *The Daily Graphic*, 9 April 1877, in Dickinson papers.

⁶⁶⁴ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁶⁶⁵ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

practitioners dominated virtually all learned occupations....”⁶⁶⁶ Actors, however, were slower to adopt such formal training systems. Three years after her theatrical debut, Dickinson herself returned to the platform to call for the establishment of schools of theatre in “Platform and Stage” (1879). She observed,

Every other art, all the sciences under the sun, have their seminaries, their schools, universities, colleges. But this art, which is the epitome of all arts, is allowed to go unsupported, unsustained, untaught, uncomforted, unfed. If a young girl or young man wants to enter that profession, he has got to get there through the slums to get there at all. He is told that the only school for him is to begin as a “supe,” to begin at the bottom and clambered [*sic*] up by slow stages upward. He says, “This is an art, this is a science; I want to learn it as an art or science; I want to get into it as a lady or gentleman should.”

What I am asking of society is, since this power of the stage is there, vast and overpowering as it is, let it have its schools, its training, its colleges, as less and minor sciences have everywhere on the face of the land, and thereby lift it in the estimation of the people to the position it ought to be held.⁶⁶⁷

⁶⁶⁶ Benjamin McArthur, *Actors and American Culture, 1880-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 98.

⁶⁶⁷ “Platform and Stage: Anna Dickinson’s New Lecture,” *New York Daily Tribune*, 18 January 1879, in Dickinson papers. This call was received enthusiastically by at least one critic: “What she said about the importance of a school for actors, so that those who have a genius for the profession and find an irresistible attraction in it need not go down into the mud and creep and crawl for years through every defilement to get a foothold on the ladder over which they may possible climb to a respectable position, certainly deserves attention. There is no doubt that such a school would improve the morals of the stage and raise the standard of acting, which is deplorably low in most of our theatres. Such a school would not create stars, but most of the work of the stage is done by subordinates who can never hope to be anything else, and the success of every star and the effort of every performance depends more on the acting of these subordinates than any of the managers seem to imagine.” *The Evening Express* (NY), 18 January [1879], in Dickinson papers. It is interesting to note that the emphasis here—both Dickinson’s and the responding critic’s—is primarily a moral one. That is, the concern is not so much with the teaching of proper skills and techniques but with rescuing the stage from its degenerate reputation.

Although Dickinson was clearly aware of the need for education and training in the craft of acting, the extent to which she was familiar with the ongoing debates about acting methods and the teaching of acting is murky—her own “process” as an actress even more so. Although it is clear from her clippings that she followed “things theatrical” for many years, there is little evidence to suggest that she sought out any particular kind of training prior to her debut on the stage (or, indeed, following it). She did not write specifically about preparing her roles for the stage, nor did she leave behind any kind of rehearsal notes or detailed promptbook.⁶⁶⁸ The extant manuscripts of her plays do have extensive markings—words underlined, dashes separating words—presumably to indicate emphasis or pauses, but it is impossible to determine how such markings might have translated into her onstage performance. The only piece of evidence in the Dickinson papers that may indicate her study of the contemporary debate in acting theory is a copy of Coquelin’s *The Actor and His Art (L’Art et le Comedien)*, published in English in 1881. Coquelin, a French actor most noted for originating the role of Cyrano de Bergerac, had been enormously influenced by Diderot’s theory of the paradox of acting: “I hold this paradox to be literal truth; and I am convinced that one can only be a great actor on condition of complete self-mastery and ability to express feelings which are not experienced, which may never be experienced, which from the

⁶⁶⁸ Her papers do include, of course, copious notes on Anne Boleyn, but it is difficult to ascertain what, if anything these reveal about the acting of the part, because of course she did a great deal of research in order to write the play. There are also notes on Hamlet, but they all seem to have been taken from sources published after she played the role.

very nature of things never can be experienced.”⁶⁶⁹ Strongly opposed to naturalism on stage, Coquelin argued that “the actor needs not to be actually moved. It is as unnecessary as it is for a pianist to be in the depths of despair to play the ‘Funeral March’ of Chopin or of Beethoven aright.”⁶⁷⁰ And indeed, as a practicing actor himself, Coquelin “was theatrical, a presenter rather than a representer.”⁶⁷¹

Although Dickinson did not seem to have taken notes on Coquelin’s theories, she did apparently mark a number of paragraphs (including those quoted above) in blue pencil. In addition to those already cited, she had marked a passage about the aim of the actor, which is “to please. Only, with an actor ambitious for himself and his art, it is to please by satisfying the nobler or more delicate instincts of the public; by charming with a display of the beautiful; by transporting with the spectacle of grandeur; by rousing healthy laughter or reflection through the representation of truth.”⁶⁷² She also apparently marked a paragraph about the difference between stage speech and speech in everyday life:

Should I speak on stage as I do in a parlor, in the same friendly tone with which I inquire for your health, I should not be understood, nor even heard. Your room, which I can cross in a few strides, is quite a different thing from the vast space where from fifteen to eighteen hundred people are hanging on my words, each having an equal right to hear me. To produce an effect equal in value to that produced within the four walls of

⁶⁶⁹ C. Coquelin, *The Actor and His Art*, trans. from the French by Abby Langdon Alger, (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1881), 26-7.

⁶⁷⁰ Coquelin, 31.

⁶⁷¹ Duerr, 395.

⁶⁷² Coquelin, 24.

your room if I were talking alone with you, I should raise my voice, accent my words more strongly, and to be clearly understood should introduce tones and expressions which in private I should not require to use, because in private you would be thoroughly conversant with my character.⁶⁷³

There is no way of knowing when Dickinson obtained her copy of Coquelin's book. Because the English translation was published in 1881, it is possible that she had read it before undertaking *Hamlet* (obviously not before *Anne Boleyn*). But it is not difficult to see why Coquelin would have appealed to Dickinson. She too saw the theatre as a place to "rous[e] healthy laughter or reflection through the representation of truth"; she described it as a place where "everybody feels a delightful companionship, a common bond of humanity."⁶⁷⁴ Furthermore, given her (albeit unwitting) "intellectual" acting style, Dickinson probably would have found Coquelin's affinity for Diderot attractive. Certainly she never expressed an interest in reproducing authentic emotion onstage, but rather was concerned with communicating her individual interpretation of a character—a function of the intellect. As one critic noted,

Miss Dickinson has set up an ideal which she strives to reach, with utter disregard of her audience. She makes no effort to please, save as her conception and personation of the character may carry pleasure to her audience. In this she is conscientious, preferring to educate and elevate rather than to charm for an hour. Miss Dickinson has made a mistake; she is working on a false theory. Old theatre-goers will not be inducted into new ideas of the good, the true, and the beautiful in dramatic art by one who is herself a novice, and has no better practical argument to offer than an indifferently executed specimen.⁶⁷⁵

⁶⁷³ Coquelin, 36-7.

⁶⁷⁴ "Platform and Stage: Anna Dickinson's New Lecture," *New York Daily Tribune*, 18 January 1879, in Dickinson papers.

⁶⁷⁵ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

The Female Voice

That Dickinson should receive adverse criticism while performing in male roles (indeed, in arguably the most coveted male role of all time) is unsurprising. Considerably more remarkable, however, is the extent to which she—formerly a brilliant orator—was criticized for her voice.

In *Voices of the Nation: Women and Public Speech in Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture*, Caroline Field Levander has explored the way in which women's voices became a central point of discussion in American literary texts in the nineteenth century.⁶⁷⁶ Levander argues,

[D]iscourses about the female voice—its sound, tone, and volume, for example—play a central role in the attempts of commentators to define and enforce the social changes instituted by the emerging bourgeoisie...the female voice assumed a public function, despite theories that argued women inherently lacked the capacity for public activity...the female voice became a subject, in both oral and written debate, around which ideas about and challenges to the new middle class revolved and were temporarily resolved.⁶⁷⁷

Levander notes that many nineteenth-century writers (of both sexes) “highlight the female voice in their narratives in order to lend rhetorical weight to the political import of their texts.”⁶⁷⁸ “Such invocations,” says Levander, “indicate that great political significance was attached to the female voice throughout the nineteenth century.”⁶⁷⁹

⁶⁷⁶ Caroline Field Levander, *Voices of the Nation: Women and Public Speech in Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2.

⁶⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

⁶⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

Although as a lecturer Dickinson did not receive universally positive reviews of her speaking voice, the responses were generally good (see Chapter One). Yet when she went on the stage, she repeatedly suffered extensive criticism about her voice:

Her looks have inspired us, but her voice! Can anything—beauty or dramatic effect—carry us over that voice! For myself I am entirely a stranger to Miss Dickinson’s platform manner or tones, for I have never seen or heard her upon the platform, therefore I am taken entirely by surprise. I am sitting the fourth seat back from the orchestra, and I can hear every tone and whisper. But the voice is so light, with so little power and strength, so little penetration, that I feel then and there certain that she cannot be heard much beyond my range. I was amazed to find that it did not reach to some of the more distant portions of the house, though there were those who complained of its reaching them but faintly...it falls thinly and without resonance. It is a head voice and not a chest voice, and is never effectual of itself, but always a drawback.⁶⁸⁰

When Dickinson went on the stage in male roles in 1882, critics again attacked her voice—this time often describing it as too feminine. “In the stronger passages her voice fails her, and they therefore become lacking force and virility. At times her voice is very effeminate.”⁶⁸¹

These criticisms of her voice particularly aggravated Dickinson, who complained to an interviewer that “a great many [of the critics]...are continually harping on the woman’s treble which they allege my voice is. The fact is,” she protested, “my voice is

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁰ Nora Perry, letter to editor of *Chicago Tribune*, reprinted in *Boston Daily Globe*, 29 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁶⁸¹ Review of *Hamlet*, English’s Opera House, unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

every bit as deep in tone as many male tenor voices.”⁶⁸² While touring in *Hamlet* she wrote to her sister: “Same old talk about voice & c. The King remarked this morning ‘Never heard so noble a voice from a woman on the stage. Papers must be fools or knaves that would print such stuff.’ But of course since that is what a lot of them began to say they will ‘keep on’ saying it for some time to come.”⁶⁸³

Levander has examined the way in which nineteenth- and early twentieth-century linguists conceived of women’s “natural” use of language. Throughout the nineteenth century there was a pervasive idea that “‘woman’s language’ was incapable of accommodating factual information and thus was essentially tonal.”⁶⁸⁴ Citing a number of writers who extolled women’s “duty” to speak in soft, sweet tones, Levander traces how “[w]ith resounding unanimity, theorists of American English...defined women’s speech as essentially tonal in order both to determine and to delimit the impact of women’s speech on the creation of a distinctly American elocution.”⁶⁸⁵

Furthermore, according to Levander, “as women’s interest in politics increased, linguists correspondingly argued that their vocal tone was deteriorating.”⁶⁸⁶

Richard Grant White, in his 1881 *Every-Day English*, claims that, while American women are physically attractive, when they open their mouths,

⁶⁸² “‘Hamlet’ a College Boy.”

⁶⁸³ Anna E. Dickinson to Susan Dickinson, Zanesville Ohio, 19 September 1882, in Dickinson papers.

⁶⁸⁴ Levander, 15.

⁶⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

they produce “a mean, thin, nasal, rasping tone, by which you are at once disenchanted.” According to William Dean Howells, women’s speech is not adequately feminine, because its users, in focusing too much on “brilliant” content and on unwomanly expression, sacrifice sound....Henry James describes American English as threatened by the tonal deterioration of its female population as they claim political equality with men. James links women’s focus on the content rather than the sound of their voices with their burgeoning interest in the public sphere....⁶⁸⁷

“Linguists warn that the cacophonous speech resulting from women’s interest in politics poses a direct threat to the future of the nation,” notes Levander, but “when safely ensconced in the private arena of the home and more particularly the nursery, women’s language reinductates, by example and ideological articulation, the gendered notions of speech that are needed to maintain a coherent, cohesive, and male political rhetoric.”⁶⁸⁸

It seems possible that Dickinson’s critics were responding to her voice in much the same fashion. Dickinson burst onto the national scene in an effort to have a voice in American politics. As an advocate for the oppressed she claimed a space in public discourse in a seemingly unthreatening fashion—a young girl idealistically bent on reform. As she tried to forge a career in the theatre, she continued to seek a voice in American culture. At a time when women in the theatre functioned most often as objectified bodies (i.e., the leg show), Dickinson had something to say—in other words, as a performer, she was interested in *content* rather than in sound or image. If Levander’s theory holds true, critics’ negative comments about Dickinson’s voice may have

⁶⁸⁷ Levander, 17.

⁶⁸⁸ Ibid., 18.

functioned as a means of neutralizing Dickinson's voice in the culture—rather than as an assessment of its actual sound.

Intellect vs. Emotionalism

Ultimately, Dickinson's intellectual stage presence seems not to have accorded with current taste.⁶⁸⁹ As Susan A. Glenn has noted, "Female audiences in particular strongly identified with and wanted to see actresses giving free reign to their passions, whether they be grief or love."⁶⁹⁰ The most admired actresses of the mid- to late-nineteenth century, such as Matilda Heron and Clara Morris, tended to be known for playing "fallen or martyred women," roles in which they could "drown the stage in floods of tears" and die harrowing, pathetic deaths.⁶⁹¹ Indeed, Morris was dubbed "The Queen of Spasms" for her astonishing skill at shedding tears. Weeping and wailing her way across the boards, she regularly packed houses with her highly emotional exhibitions.⁶⁹² Fanny Davenport, with whom Dickinson collaborated on *An American Girl*, was also

⁶⁸⁹ Others who were "too intellectual to appeal to American taste of that period" included Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. See William Peirce Randel, *The Evolution of American Taste* (New York: Crown, 1978), 157.

⁶⁹⁰ Glenn, 21.

⁶⁹¹ Mary C. Henderson, *Theater in America: 200 Years of Plays, Players, and Productions*, with a foreword by Joseph Papp (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1986), 154.

⁶⁹² Garff B. Wilson, *A History of American Acting* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 126. It is also interesting to note that regional audiences and critics seem to have responded to Morris in a manner exactly opposite of the way they responded to Dickinson—"Hooted by audiences in Cincinnati and Cleveland early in her career, she met a different reception in New York: critics and audiences loved her. Favorable reviews of Morris's performances were reprinted in newspapers throughout the nation, and New York's opinion became that of America's [*sic*]." See McArthur, 9.

admired for the range of emotion she was able to project.⁶⁹³ Those actresses who eschewed emotionalism (such as Maude Adams and Ada Rehan) in favor of what one theatre historian has termed “the personality school” appealed to their audiences on the basis of their “womanly loveliness and feminine virtue.”⁶⁹⁴

Critics equated the intelligence of Dickinson’s performances with a lack of emotional capacity and remarked on the “total absence of warmth or tenderness.”⁶⁹⁵ “There was no real fire beneath,” said one critic, “and there was consequently no heat above.”⁶⁹⁶ According to the *Washington Capital*, “She belongs to that class that appeals to the intellect, and is as cold and repellant as a lump of granite.”⁶⁹⁷ Another critic remarked, “Her rendition of the part of ‘Anne Boleyn’ is intellectual, cultivated and full of nice perceptions, but it is wholly devoid of even a scintillation of dramatic fire.”⁶⁹⁸

Miss Dickinson never succeeded in touching the emotions of her listeners. She aroused admiration for the pluck and determination with which she

⁶⁹³ Felicia Hardison Londre and Daniel J. Watermeier, *The History of North American Theater from Pre-Columbian Times to the Present* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 203.

⁶⁹⁴ Wilson, 141.

⁶⁹⁵ *New York Times*, 9 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁶⁹⁶ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁶⁹⁷ *The Capital* (Washington), 14 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁶⁹⁸ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers. Although generally critics who remarked on her intelligence saw it as a defect in her performance, there were a few who admired it: “The lady who personates Anne Boleyn has shown herself an apt scholar; she brings to the stage an active, thinking brain, a superabundance of fine feeling, a lofty sense of the poetic and the eloquent, and such personal magnetism as but few can boast of....” *Buffalo Courier*, 1 February 1877, in Dickinson papers.

fought against her disadvantage, and afforded some degree of pleasure to those who can appreciate force of intellect exercised in a struggle between a laudable ambition and the hopeless accomplishment of the task it has set itself to do.⁶⁹⁹

The consensus seemed to be that “spectators are more impressed by the lady’s intellectual power than by her dramatic talent.”⁷⁰⁰

It was not until Minnie Maddern Fiske brought Ibsen’s heroines to the American stage in the 1890s that “intelligence” became a desirable (or at least acceptable) attribute for an actress. Aware that Ibsen’s plays required a different approach to acting, “Mrs. Fiske found that she had to ‘discover and comprehend all that has gone before’ in the lives of Ibsen’s characters in order to play them effectively.”⁷⁰¹ As they had been with Dickinson twenty years earlier, “critics were put off by [Fiske’s] cold, intellectual approach and indicted her for lacking emotional power.”⁷⁰² Yet unlike Dickinson, Mrs. Fiske was highly successful on stage—and at the box office—for twenty years. It is tempting to think that twenty years later, Dickinson might have found a more receptive audience for her more intellectual style. Although contemporary criticisms of her

⁶⁹⁹ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁷⁰⁰ Review of *A Crown of Thorns*, Buffalo, Commercial Advertiser, 31 January 1877, in Dickinson papers.

⁷⁰¹ Henderson, 156-7. Henderson qualifies the description of Fiske as an “intellectual” actress: “in the usual sense of the term, she was anything but. To her critics and audiences, however, the word signified ‘reserved’ or ‘restrained.’ It meant not throwing herself around the stage with violent athleticism. It meant a slight inclination of the head, a barely audible gasp, a delicate movement of the hand. It meant, too, a long stage pause now and then, with her back turned to the audience, a thrown-away phrase or an unintelligible word.” See Henderson, 157.

⁷⁰² McArthur, 177.

acting—that her own personality was too strong, that she was unable to submerge herself within the character—indicate that she did not have the dramatic *technique* to become a realistic actress, her interest in psychological motivation and complex female characters would, to some extent, have been legitimated by the rising popularity of Ibsen.⁷⁰³

The negative responses to Dickinson's intellectual presence are also intriguing when considered in light of Dickinson's speaking career and "dramatic" oratorical style. At its most pronounced (as in her Joan of Arc speech, discussed in Chapter One), her theatrical oratory gave a sense that she *became* her subject: "At times there was an intensity of dramatic action, into which the speaker threw her whole soul. Every motion showed that she was thoroughly in sympathy with the character of the wonderful woman, whose life she so vividly depicted."⁷⁰⁴ Another newspaper observed that "the

⁷⁰³ The first production of Ibsen (in English) in America was in 1882, the year of Dickinson's *Hamlet*; by 1896, an American writer would note, "Ibsen has become so familiar to the American public that one need scarcely touch upon the incidents of his career." Michael Meyer, *Ibsen: A Biography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1971), 497; Edgar O. Achorn, "Ibsen at Home," in *New England Magazine*, 13 (1896), 737-48, quoted in Michael Meyer, *Ibsen: A Biography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1971), 739. In an 1898 speech about Ibsen, fifteen years after her own theatrical career was well over, Dickinson wrote, "I don't believe—as actors, we will ever really appreciate just how much of a benefactor Ibsen has been to us...Our gain, as actresses, from Ibsen is the fact of getting warm, living, breathing parts to play. I wonder if any one realizes this tremendous fact, that in all of Ibsen's plays, at least all the familiar social plays & doubtless also all the unfamiliar historical, legendary & poetical plays, there is not a single part that it would not be interesting to act—& which would not also tax our very best powers, adequately—to act. See "Ibsen," in Dickinson papers.

⁷⁰⁴ *Providence Journal*, 20 December 1892, in Dickinson papers.

audience...were astonished to see in their once quiet quaker haranguer an accomplished dramatic artist, who portrayed a character rather than delivered a lecture.”⁷⁰⁵

Why, then, was Dickinson unable to make the transition from platform speaker (however dramatic) to actress? In *Women in the American Theatre*, Faye Dudden has chronicled the transformation of the American theatre from an essentially aural institution between 1790 and 1830 to an increasingly spectacle-driven commodity in the latter half of the nineteenth-century. In the early nineteenth century, the actress’ body was a less important career asset than her voice.⁷⁰⁶ But bolstered by developments in photography in the 1830s, the theatre took a “turn toward the visual.” Theatre managers began to privilege spectacle because “images made better commodities than words; they were cheaper to produce and easier to consume.”⁷⁰⁷ This shift, according to Dudden, occurred in large part because theatre managers “came to realize that entertainment could be produced and sold like other mass-consumption items, and they eventually found that...exposing female bodies brought in large audiences.”⁷⁰⁸ Dudden examines how “[t]he same commercialization that took the stage to a mass audience pushed the objectification inherent in stage representation a step further, into commodification. It converted women’s bodies into a realizable asset.”⁷⁰⁹ This trend, sustained by spectacle

⁷⁰⁵ *Boston Globe*, quoted in unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

⁷⁰⁶ Dudden, 5.

⁷⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 5.

⁷⁰⁸ Dudden, 4.

⁷⁰⁹ Dudden, 8.

melodrama, found its apotheosis in the leg show, perhaps the most extreme and obvious example of “the way theatrical producers made a spectacle of women, positioning them as passive objects for audience consumption.”⁷¹⁰

The trend toward visual entertainment also affected the legitimate stage.⁷¹¹ Although physical beauty had not been a crucial factor for an actress’s success in the early to mid-nineteenth century (Charlotte Cushman, for example, was astonishingly successful despite her “homely face and muscular figure”), the late nineteenth century saw the advent of a “cult of beauty” after which “requirements for acting success changed. Actresses had to exhibit qualities of face and form.”⁷¹² This new emphasis on visual display prompted the New York critics to begin “systematically focus[ing] upon the body of the actress as opposed to her talent, her voice, her age, her masculine disguise, or her dramatic interpretations.”⁷¹³

Dickinson, however, refused to position herself as a passive object for audience consumption. Though she went on the stage in large part to make enough money to support herself, in *Anne Boleyn* she was also making a purposeful effort to present a

⁷¹⁰ Glenn, 3.

⁷¹¹ The legitimate stage, the venue in which Dickinson attempted to break into the theatre, “attracted audiences that wanted to demonstrate their cultivated dramatic tastes.” See Glenn, 17.

⁷¹² McArthur, 41.

⁷¹³ Mullenix, 244.

female character who had “heart, and brains, and a conscience”—who was, in effect, more than merely a body (whether weeping or seductive) on stage.⁷¹⁴

Why did I write my play do you mean? Because I could find no character that suited me. Most dramatists are men. And like the male novelists they have all failed in portraying women’s characters. If a woman is good she is weak and silly. If she is strong and intellectual she is bad and intriguing. The idea that a woman can be at once clever and amiable, possess both brains and virtue, seems never to have entered the masculine writer’s mind.⁷¹⁵

And when Dickinson made her debut as Hamlet, she donned breeches in order to challenge currently prevailing conceptions of the character. Of course, most critics, although they acknowledged her innovations, were far more interested in her physical impersonation of masculinity than in her opinions about Shakespearean character; they devoted their energy to the spectacular elements of the performance—the extent to which Dickinson was convincing as a male character—not its intellectual content. One critic warned, “Those who expect to see a Hercules playing Hamlet, will, of course, be disappointed, but to the intellectual, her performance is a source of sincere satisfaction.”⁷¹⁶

One critic remarking upon Dickinson’s performance as Anne Boleyn noted, “Such an intelligence ought to be able to take captive an audience, and it does not, which proves incontestibly that there is a wide difference between the rostrum and the stage,

⁷¹⁴ *The Commonwealth* (St. Louis), 4 November 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁷¹⁵ *Boston Times*, 14 May 1876, in Dickinson papers.

⁷¹⁶ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

and that it is not a step from one to the other, but a journey.”⁷¹⁷ Dickinson argued that many critical assessments of her acting were unnecessarily and unfairly predicated on her oratorical career—indeed, that her celebrity denied her the possibility of an impartial judgment of her abilities as an actress:

I have a marked personality, certain movements, ways of using my hands and peculiarities which are a part of my identity. Now, if I were another person they would be part of my stock in trade. Kean, Garrick, Macready, Charlotte Cushman had them, and they were accounted to them as merits...As for me, having so thoroughly traversed the country, every man, woman and child has become so familiar with my ways, that when they see them on stage they exclaim, ‘Oh, that’s Anna Dickinson; it’s her voice; that is the way she always uses her hands’--and that they recognize them is assumed as an indication that I cannot act—I am still Anna Dickinson. And the critics have made the most of them. I am sure I would succeed for this reason better with an audience to whom I was entirely unknown.⁷¹⁸

Yet it is doubtful whether Dickinson ever truly recognized the extent of the difference between performing as a platform speaker and performing as an actress. Despite the dramatic nature of her storytelling on the platform and her awareness of acting as a craft (as evidenced in her call for theatre schools in “Platform and Stage”), Dickinson does not seem to have recognized the enormous difference between oral interpretation and the embodiment of a character—perhaps because her goal, communicating a position or an argument, remained essentially the same.

Now utterly forgotten by theatre historians, Dickinson’s theatrical debut was not only the most important event of the 1876 season but also the spark for a lively debate

⁷¹⁷ *The Daily Ledger-Globe*, 24 Oct [1876], in Dickinson papers.

⁷¹⁸ Anna Dickinson, interview in *The World*(New York), 2 April 1877, in Dickinson papers.

over what constituted the ever-changing qualifications of an actor. At a time when acting was only just beginning to become a profession that required formal training, her foray onto the stage drew attention to the instabilities of a theatre world in flux.

Furthermore, the controversies provoked by Dickinson's performance as Hamlet reveal an unconventional woman's consciously innovative interpretation of a classic role. Dickinson understood well enough the consequences of departure from theatrical tradition: "if, by the aid of individuality and talent, [an actor] works out a new conception of a character, the critics are horrified and shower down ridicule on his unlucky head."⁷¹⁹ But she firmly believed that there was "too much blind worship of the traditions of the stage among our tragedians," and she defended both her interpretation and her right to play the role.⁷²⁰ Dickinson's Hamlet also underscored the crisis of masculinity in late nineteenth-century America. The obsessive emphasis on her portrayal of Hamlet's masculinity and/or femininity aptly illustrates the shifting nature of cultural constructions of gender ideals and the anxieties engendered by women who deviated from the norm.

A number of factors, of course, contributed to Dickinson's ultimate failure as an actress: inexperience, mismanagement, a public persona too strongly identified with another context, the loss of the youth that had made her a novelty, a feminist reputation that had earned her enemies among powerful men of the media. But it is also true that what Dickinson brought to the stage—intelligence, verbal acumen, and a desire to create

⁷¹⁹ Anna Dickinson, interview in " 'Hamlet' a College Boy: Anna Dickinson's Life, Her Plans and Her Opinions," n.d., clipping in Dickinson papers.

and portray smart and complex female characters—simply did not accord with late nineteenth-century theatrical trends. She thought of the theatre as a communicative art; that is, she was interested in *saying something* as an actress. When she played Anne Boleyn, she was “interested in [her] play and its fate”; when she played Hamlet, she was concerned with presenting an interpretation. It is possible, then, to view Dickinson’s attempt at an acting career as a further manifestation of her citizenship quest—her endeavor to participate fully in the public life of the nation. Through her onstage performance, she endeavored to communicate many of the same ideas she espoused on the lecture platform—ideas she hoped would produce an effect in the larger society.

Ultimately, Dickinson’s strengths and goals were out of step with a theatrical market that traded on women’s bodies in pursuit of masculine titillation and its attendant profits. The passionate intensity, quick wit, and intellectual fervor with which Dickinson entranced her lecture audiences as American’s Joan of Arc simply could not compete in a profession in which the female body was becoming increasingly manipulated, objectified, and commodified.

⁷²⁰ Ibid.

CHAPTER 4: NOTHING LADYLIKE ABOUT IT

In her study of more than fifty nineteenth-century American women theatre managers, Jane Kathleen Curry demonstrates that for the most part, “absolute barriers to women’s participation in the profession of theatrical management did not exist.”¹ Although the ideology of separate spheres was powerfully insidious, and theatre management was a challenging and uncertain endeavor, many women did succeed (even if just for a time) despite the risks. These women, however, had to learn to “[maneuver] to balance the demands of management with an awareness of suitable gendered behavior.”² Aware that their presence in the business of theatre was a violation of social norms that could provoke resistance and hostility, women theatre managers tended not to rock the boat by producing plays that might be construed as progressive with regard to women’s issues. Rather, their choices in repertory generally mirrored those of male managers and they trafficked in the same retrograde (or so Dickinson would have considered them) images of women.³

When Dickinson entered the theatrical profession, she was an outsider in every sense. A novice in both playwriting and in acting, she was also a novice at the *business* of theatre. And although she was friendly with a number of influential theatre people, she lacked a professional network in the theatre community. Despite all of these factors,

¹ Jane Kathleen Curry, *Nineteenth-Century American Women Theatre Managers*, Contributions in Women’s Studies, No. 143 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 6.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 9.

Dickinson pursued her theatrical course single-mindedly, often ignoring the advice of those with greater experience and insisting on her own way in situations that called for a modicum of compromise or negotiation. In her heyday in the lecture business, when she was earning enormous sums of money, Dickinson could afford to make such demands. Indeed, one entertaining chapter of her memoir is devoted to an account of her refusal to perform when the presidents of two lecture associations “had quietly exchanged dates, and were so good as to inform me at the last moment of their little arrangement.”⁴

Dickinson behaved similarly—refusing to perform under conditions she considered unacceptable—in the theatrical world, but there her behavior resulted in repeated pecuniary failures. In addition to blaming hostile critics for their (perceived) unwillingness to give her a chance, Dickinson frequently complained about the incompetence and/or dishonesty of her managers.⁵ She had broken with the Redpath lecture bureau in 1873 because she felt the fees were too high.⁶ After Redpath, she began her longest and seemingly most felicitous managerial relationship with O.G. Bernard,

⁴ Anna Dickinson, *A Ragged Register* (Longs Peak, CO: Temporal Mechanical Press, 2000 [1879]), 110.

⁵ The term “manager” had several meanings in the late nineteenth century. It might refer to an individual who ran a theatre company, leased/owned a theatre building, selected plays, hired actors, ran rehearsals, etc. It also might refer to an individual who functioned more like an actor’s agent, securing bookings, arranging travel, negotiating contracts, etc. Some theatre managers, like the Madison Square Theatre’s Daniel Frohman, began their careers as “advance agents” (for either actors or companies) and eventually ended up managing their own theatres. See Daniel Frohman, *Daniel Frohman Presents: An Autobiography* (New York: Lee Furman, 1937).

⁶ This break spawned a legal battle in which the bureau came after her for unpaid fees and Dickinson countered with her own lawsuit. See Chester, 145.

who began managing her lecturing career and continued as her manager when she went on the stage. Bernard toured with her throughout the country and became an advisor as well as a family friend; when Dickinson split with him in the fallout following the Fanny Davenport affair, her managerial troubles really started. She then had a succession of unsatisfactory managers, none of whom lasted very long and several of whom found themselves embroiled in legal battles with Dickinson over their handling of her affairs.

This succession of unhappy managerial relationships raises a number of questions. Were these managers truly inept or dishonest? What should Dickinson have expected as an inexperienced woman attempting to navigate a male-dominated profession? Perhaps the difficulties she encountered can be more readily explained by her determination to maintain control of her career. Did she have unrealistic expectations both for financial terms and for working conditions, particularly as a woman and a newcomer to the profession? To what extent did her theatrical career fail because of poor decision-making on her part—or an unwillingness to listen to the advice or accept the terms of the managers with whom she worked?

This chapter explores the way in which Dickinson's theatrical career was managed—both by herself and by others. It concentrates on two episodes in Dickinson's career that (in large part because of the extent of their documentation) reveal a great deal about the way in which Dickinson negotiated—or, rather, failed to negotiate—the theatrical world.⁷ The first episode, Dickinson's stormy collaboration with starring

⁷ It should be noted that Dickinson had no real management experience. While she depended on professional managers/agents to make most of her arrangements for her,

actress Fanny Davenport, demonstrates the way in which Dickinson attempted to establish herself as a playwright; the second, Dickinson's first abortive plan to appear on the stage in male roles, shows how she attempted to control her career as an actress. She was smashingly unsuccessful in both instances. However, both episodes clearly illustrate Dickinson's determination to dictate the terms and conditions under which she worked.

An American Girl

Fanny Davenport (1850-1898), the daughter of tragedian and manager E.L. Davenport and actress Fanny Vining, began her career in the theatre playing juvenile roles with her father's company. After performing in the famed 1866 production of *The Black Crook*, she joined Mrs. John Drew's theatre company at Philadelphia's Arch Street Theatre. It was at the Arch Street Theatre that she first performed before theatrical impresario Augustin Daly, who promptly hired her for his own company. In 1869 she debuted for Daly as Lady Gay Spanker in Boucicault's *London Assurance*; in 1873, she began a transition from light comedienne to an "emotional star" with her performance as a tramp in W. S. Gilbert's *Charity*.⁸ She remained with Daly's company for nine years, appearing in a remarkable number of roles "ranging from the stately iambs of Shakespeare and artificiality of the old comedies to the storm and fury of modern

it was with the expectation that they would do so in order to maximize her profits and that they would accommodate all of her demands.

⁸ Garff B. Wilson, *Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre from Ye Bare and Ye Cubb to Chorus Line*, 2nd ed (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982), 168-9.

melodramas,” solidifying her star status with Daly’s own *Pique* in 1875.⁹ Her career entered a new phase in the 1880s when she began starring in the French sensation melodramas of Victorien Sardou. Whereas earlier in her career she had been acclaimed as an attractive, feminine, and charming light comedienne, she then became “a leader in the field of feminine emotionalism.”¹⁰ William Winter remembered her as “a voluptuous beauty, radiant with youth and health, taut and trim of figure, having regular features, a fair complexion, golden hair, sparkling hazel eyes, and a voice as naturally musical and cheery as the fresh, incessant rippling flow of a summer brook.”¹¹ Theatre historians and nineteenth-century critics alike concur that Davenport was a “good, though not a great actress.”¹²

Dickinson’s association with the Davenport family had begun years earlier—indeed, at least as early as 1873, when E.L. Davenport wrote to Dickinson about her proposed theatrical debut. He wrote, “My dear Lady, I understand you are about to enter ‘our’ profession. I rejoice at it for all great & brilliant minds tend to add new lustre to it.

⁹ Arthur Hornblow, *A History of the Theatre in America from its Beginnings to the Present Time*, vol 2 (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1965 [J. B. Lippincott & Co, 1919], 243; Ruth B. Manser, “The Influence of the American Actress on the Development of the American Theatre from 1835 to 1935,” Ph.D diss, New York University 1937, 83; Edwin Duerr, *The Length and Depth of Acting*, with a foreword by A.M Nagler (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1962), 362.

¹⁰ Garff B. Wilson, *A History of American Acting* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 135.

¹¹ William Winter, *Vagrant Memories: Being Further Recollections of Other Days* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1915), 229.

¹² Wilson, *A History of American Acting*, 135.

If you propose to visit Philadelphia I should be most happy to negotiate [*sic*] for your appearance at my theatre.”¹³ There is no indication that Dickinson ever responded to his kind offer or that anything came of it. In August 1879, Mrs. E.L. Davenport wrote to Dickinson, despairing of what the combination companies were doing to the traditional stock companies, and soliciting Dickinson’s aid in establishing a School of Dramatic Art in New York.¹⁴ Dickinson replied:

I think in some ways I am the very worst person for you to consult—in one way I may be the best—that is in a hearty desire to do anything for you that is in my power, but my life & work have kept me very ignorant in regard to the details. The whys & theways of the business of which you speak.—If you decide to carry it out, & you see wherein I can help you, tell me just how & if it be possible I will be glad to do so—be sure of that.¹⁵

She added to her letter, “Will you please remember me in the kindest manner to Mrs. Price, & say that I wish her all the happiness & prosperity her life can hold”—presumably a reference to Fanny’s wedding, since she had married Edwin Price in the summer of 1879.

Negotiations

¹³ El Davenport to Anna Dickinon, Minnequa, Bradford Co Pa, 7 May 1873, in Dickinson papers, reel 9.

¹⁴ Mrs. EL Davenport to Anna Dickinson, Davenport Cottage, 15 August 1879, in Dickinson papers. Why Mrs. Davenport—a member of a prominent theatrical family—should turn to Dickinson for aid in her proposed endeavor is a mystery. As Dickinson indicated in her reply, she was a novice when it came to theatrical affairs.

¹⁵ Anna Dickinson to Mrs. EL Davenport, Elizabeth NJ, 31 August 1879, in Dickinson papers. Emphasis here (and in all subsequent quotations) is Dickinson’s.

Davenport was still performing in *Pique* in 1879 when she and Dickinson made their first tentative contacts about a collaboration. She wrote to Dickinson in October 1879, suggesting that Dickinson come to see her in *Pique* or have dinner with her and her husband so that they might “have our chat.”¹⁶ Dickinson apparently hesitated to respond, since there are several letters from Fanny requesting a meeting and asking for a play:

I suppose there is no use my asking for Anne Boleyn as you would not part with it—but what of Joan of Arc. I am to play in Boston in February or April would that not be a fine opening for it—I want a play and you I know can write me one you know just what I can do and I have every faith in your talents as an authoress. I have never see [*sic*] the “[Fair Anne?]” but mother has told me of its beauties & powers—can I not see you when in New York about these things.¹⁷

Dickinson finally answered, “I will not do ‘Jeanne Darc’ at present, for you, myself, or any one else to play. I can’t. It will require a great deal of work & I have not the time to give it.”¹⁸ Dickinson also expressed her doubts about doing any kind of historical play in the present climate: “I am doubtful of a go for an historical piece on any subject.—Have you set your heart on such an one? And if so have you another

¹⁶ Fanny Davenport to Anna Dickinson, Albany, NY, 21 October 1879, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁷ Fanny Davenport to Anna Dickinson, n.d., in Dickinson papers. A number of the Davenport letters in the Dickinson collection are undated. Throughout the chapter, I have ordered them according to the logic of their content (when necessary). Furthermore, all of the Davenport letters—written in a nearly illegible scrawl—lack standard punctuation. I have opted not to regularize them but to reproduce them as faithfully as possible to the originals.

¹⁸ Anna Dickinson to Fanny Davenport, Elizabeth, NJ, 6 November 1879 in Dickinson papers.

favorite character you desire to play--& who is she?"¹⁹ She then asked Davenport if she had "a leaning towards a modern play?—melodrama or American comedy-drama, & have you a choice between these?"²⁰ She concluded, "If you care for that sort of work I think I could do it for you, but I have so much else on my hands at present as to make it impossible for me to undertake anything more serious."²¹

Davenport explained that she had asked about Joan of Arc because "it was spoken to me as being a fine play containing feeling with dramatic effect."²² She was apparently reluctant to let go of the idea, for she expressed her disappointment in a later letter: "I regret 'Jeanne' won't do for she is a great[pet] of mine however I bow to your judgment in the matter."²³ Davenport's persistence in the idea of a Joan of Arc play apparently irritated Dickinson, for in a later letter she noted pointedly, "I told you very frankly I would not do 'Jeanne Darc' & was uncertain at the time of writing what I could or could not do in any other direction."²⁴

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Fanny Davenport to Anna Dickinson, n.d. in Dickinson papers.

²³ Fanny Davenport to Anna Dickinson, 20 November 1879, in Dickinson papers.

²⁴ Fanny Davenport to Anna Dickinson, Philadelphia, 16 January 1880, in Dickinson papers.

Davenport, for her part, was quite clear that she was looking for “a play that is lasting, not a frothy society drama.”²⁵ She continued, “I want a picturesque dramatic strong character—I think something of your fine language continued with startling effects.”²⁶ In another letter later that month—in a note that indicates her clear understanding of the current state of American audiences—Davenport added, “I would like a child in it and a rattling good Irish comedy part...with just a lovely brogue.”²⁷

While Dickinson and Davenport were in the midst of their negotiations through correspondence, Dickinson’s manager, O.G. Bernard, approached Davenport for a “friendly call” while they were “conveniently” staying at the same hotel. (It is unclear from the letters whether Bernard was simply capitalizing on being in the right place at the right time, or whether he had made a point of being there for just such purposes.) He wrote to Dickinson in early November, 1879, detailing the means by which he had obtained an interview with the actress, who initially responded to his calling card by sending a messenger to inquire into the nature of his business. He replied, “No business. Miss Davenport may, perhaps, remember me as associated for many years with Miss Dickinson.”²⁸ A request to meet Mr. Price in the hotel parlor immediately followed; Bernard responded that he was “indisposed” and that he would be represented by Mrs.

²⁵ Fanny Davenport to Anna Dickinson, n.d. in Dickinson papers.

²⁶ Fanny Davenport to Anna Dickinson, n.d. in Dickinson papers.

²⁷ Fanny Davenport to Anna Dickinson, 20 November 1879, in Dickinson papers.

²⁸ O.G. Bernard to Anna Dickinson, Cincinnati, 19 November 1879, in Dickinson papers.

Bernard, who was “most cordially received” by Mr. Price. According to Bernard, “He explained that when my first card was presented his ‘wife’ was dressing and did not recognize the name until the boy had departed with her message”—about which Bernard could not help commenting, “Innumerable excuses!!”²⁹ But the meeting concluded with plans for an interview the following day. Bernard wrote Dickinson, “I understand exactly what you want, and in my interview with Mrs. D will be governed accordingly.”³⁰

The next day after the meeting, Bernard wrote Dickinson, “I find Miss D very anxious for a play from you. Ditto Mr. Price. She is sincere and is willing to pay for it and I think prepared to pay liberally. She carries 18 people in her company now, and freely admits it don’t pay and recognizes the necessity of a play with about 10 people in it.”³¹ He emphasized, “She is in want of a play. She is tired of her old pieces—says there’s little money in Pique now—made all she can out of that. She is doing...Rosalind in the absence of anything else to deliver her from Pique or Divorce.”³² He noted that Davenport’s mention of Anne Boleyn provided him with the opportunity to talk about the idea of an historical play: “She agreed with me finally that an historical play is not suited to the present time and taste.”³³

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ O.G. Bernard to Anna Dickinson, Cincinnati, 20 November 1879, in Dickinson papers.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

Bernard's account of the meeting also indicates his conscious manipulation of Davenport's desire for a play. He wrote:

I told her that when we were in Chicago several years ago you sketched an American play that I thought would suit her—but did not think you would write a play for her, or anybody save yourself. Then it was she told me that you had promised to write her a play, and then it was I said if you had promised so to do you would be true to your promise—I have her fully to understand that you were utterly indifferent about writing plays for others, and I rather think my line of argument enhanced the value of your contemplated work. You understand—you wasn't [*sic*] anxious a bit. You had refused to my knowledge many very liberal offers.³⁴

In all, Bernard felt the meeting was very successful. He urged Dickinson:

“Now's your time. Strike at once. Write her a play—such as you know will fit her. The Russian Jewess will suit. She is prepared for that. She knows you have given that long and close study. She has great confidence in your reputation...Make her pay for it. Advise me what to do if anything. Mr. Price is equally anxious.”³⁵

But Dickinson apparently did not strike at once. On the very day of her interview with Bernard, Davenport had also penned a letter to Dickinson in which she asked, “Do I understand you that you are willing to let me read the play, as it were on approval and am not forced to take if don't suit. Would it not be better just to make out the synopsis and ideas—you will write me a play won't you if possible?”³⁶ It was nearly two months before Dickinson responded to the letter, and when she did, her tone was dismissive: “If you will refer to our correspondence I think you will very readily see there is no want of

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Fanny Davenport to Anna Dickinson, 20 November 1879, in Dickinson papers.

‘sincerity’ to be placed to my account... As the business began you talked play to me. In your last letter you talked of...a ‘synopsis.’ Two very different matters. I might have gone on with the first. There was nothing to be said to the second.”³⁷ She concluded, “There is no one whom I admire more heartily on the stage, nor anyone for whom I would more willingly do work on a satisfactory basis—(if I am able to do it at all) than yourself, but my time & strength are of too much value to me to waste them in experiments.”³⁸

Davenport clearly was desperate for a play, for her letter in response was deeply apologetic:

I am truly sorry I have offended you... So most seriously I ask your pardon relative to my mention of synopsis. Your “time and strength” are indeed valuable & never for one moment did I wish to impose or desire you to experiment. I merely thought you would not mind giving me an idea of the work you proposed.... How can we come to an understanding—when may I have your play? May I make some few requests about it—do you wish a royalty or money down, do you intend it to be merely imaginative or historical. I am more and more convinced that strong melodrama is again coming on to popularity. It I think is my forte—pray do not let us differ over a matter of such vital importance to me dear. Write me and say I am forgiven.³⁹

³⁷ Anna Dickinson to Fanny Davenport, Philadelphia, 16 January 1880, in Dickinson papers.

³⁸ Anna Dickinson to Fanny Davenport, Philadelphia, 16 January 1880, in Dickinson papers.

³⁹ Fanny Davenport to Anna Dickinson, Washington, D.C, 29 January 1880, in Dickinson papers. In the same letter, Davenport also suggested “Josephine” or “Marie Antoinette” as possible subjects for her play, adding, “The latter queen is my idol as a woman and Queen.”

Negotiations continued, but apparently at a slow pace. Dickinson continued to receive letters from Davenport, pleading to let her know the status of her request. At one point Davenport also lamented, “I like you, and I like not everyone and would like to claim you as a friend, if time will weave the garland between us, play or no play. I am a wee bit sorry you prefer treating with me through another. I would have liked we alone—to settle this however please yourself and you please me.”⁴⁰ She continued to press Dickinson for information about the character types and scenic demands, and several months later wrote to Bernard, chagrined that the process was taking so long. She wrote, “I am truly sorry we are no further advanced than when Miss Dickinson and I had our talk in Phila—I had hoped all would have been signed and sealed by this time.”⁴¹ She expressed her concern at Dickinson’s apparent reluctance to write, saying, “I do not care to think tis compulsion that dictates the writing of a play for me as I think unless Miss D’s heart is in her work her work will not be a good work nor can I think writing would be to my or her advantage when described a physical misery.”⁴² But the main focus of her letter was concern over the stiffness of the terms Dickinson had laid out and her fear that such terms would prohibit her from making enough money on the play. She wrote, “Could I in justice to myself pay Miss D \$1500 down I would—her writing is worth ten times that amount to her,” but Davenport felt that the \$1500 down plus the

⁴⁰ Fanny Davenport to Anna Dickinson, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

⁴¹ Fanny Davenport to O.G. Bernard, 22 April 1880, in Dickinson papers. It is unclear when this talk took place or what transpired during it.

⁴² *Ibid.*

\$350 per week royalty Dickinson demanded would hamper her ability to pay other expenses—the company, the printing and travel costs. She asked Bernard, “I wish to be just & I wish to be generous... can you not arrange this better for me?... I must play to immense business, you can see that plainly. Will you kindly reply to this at once: as I am most anxious it should be settled the coming week—“⁴³

Though it is not entirely clear from the correspondence, Davenport’s concern seems to have had more to do with the manner of payment—perhaps having to pay such a substantial amount up front—rather than the amount, for her next letter to Dickinson stated, “The play is mine: and much as I wish you had seen fit to make the payment of the fifteen hundred easier I do not complain of its amount.”⁴⁴ She asked merely that Dickinson keep her informed of the play’s progress and that she come to her home to read the play to her by the end of the summer:

Of course dear I am to know a little something of the play as it progresses. I have but one thing to request and only fair too that you will read the play to me yourself. The hospitality of our own home Hillside only a few hours from yours is at your disposal & you shall meet with a hearty welcome for your own dear self as well as for the child of your brain you will bring with you—I am certain you will not refuse me this. I know your work will be brave and I want all the advice...you can give me so well to make your play my crown: which I am certain to do with your suggestions & aid.⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid. Interestingly, on the very same day, Dickinson wrote to her sister, “It is pretty nearly settled that I let Fanny Davenport have a play for next season--& in that case I am about sure of a hit & a lot of money.” Anna Dickinson to Susan E. Dickinson, Bay City, Michigan, 22 April 1880 in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁴ Fanny Davenport to Anna Dickinson, 13 May 1880, in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Davenport also suggested that, as they were pressed for time, the parts be copied as Dickinson finished acts. She also reminded Dickinson that the costumes must be modern and again asked her to tell her “the style of characters” as soon as possible so that she could obtain her principal actors. “These are my only anxieties. I know the play will be right—“⁴⁶

For her part, Dickinson continued to have misgivings. She wrote to her sister later that month: “Fanny has come to terms & I suppose that will be all right. Tho’ my experience with these astounding people has been such that I will know the thing is ‘right side up with care’ when I have my bonus in my pocket, & sit in front & actually see the play.”⁴⁷ Two days later she wrote Susan again: “Bernard is prowling on some business in Minneapolis, when he comes back he is to write Fanny’s contract & I will send it her to sign.—Tis the Russian piece will be best for her.—& then it is more than half done.—I have no mind to sit down to a ‘spick span new’ work this summer.”⁴⁸

Davenport continued to plead for hints about the play throughout the summer. In July she wrote, “I thought I was entirely forgotten. So the play is progressing...”⁴⁹ But over the next several weeks she sent Dickinson telegram after telegram, vainly trying to set up a meeting.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Anna Dickinson to Susan Dickinson, Minneapolis, 23 May 1880, in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁸ Anna Dickinson to Susan Dickinson, St. Paul, 25 May 1880, in Dickinson papers.

⁴⁹ Fanny Davenport to Anna Dickinson, 13 July 1880, in Dickinson papers.

They finally met to sign a contract on 27 July 1880 [see Appendix A]. In spite of Davenport's pleas to Bernard, the terms of the contract worked out entirely in Dickinson's favor. She maintained "all her rights, title and proprietorship in the aforesaid play, and her copy-right thereof."⁵⁰ She agreed to deliver the play to Davenport by 13 August, at which time she would receive \$1,500. Her royalty was set at the aforementioned \$350 per week, payable by New York draft at the end of each week of performance. The *New York Dramatic News* later described this amount as "ridiculously large," and marveled, "I cannot comprehend any strait that would make a commonly sensible player give such terms, even to the most thoroughly tried and successful writer. And Miss Davenport will be sorry she did so before the season is over."⁵¹

But Davenport continued to request information about her play. On 1 August she wrote, "I have been anxiously waiting to hear a line from your...self—where are ye? Where are ye contract?" and asked again for details about the character types, noting, "I am having the greatest trouble getting the people I want."⁵² And two weeks later, on 14 August, the day after she was supposed to have received the play from Dickinson, she sent a telegram: "Thought I was to receive yourself and my play yesterday at perfect standstill until do so engagements for people unsettled everything in an uncertain state

⁵⁰ Agreement, Anna E. Dickinson with Fanny Davenport Price, 27 July 1880, in Dickinson papers.

⁵¹ *New York Dramatic News*, 9 October 1880, in Dickinson papers.

⁵² Fanny Davenport to Anna Dickinson, 1 August 1880, in Dickinson papers.

answer immediately.”⁵³ When Dickinson finally responded with a long letter two days later, its contents were not to Davenport’s liking:

My dear, I am more sorry than I can say to know that you, too are “under the weather.” I hoped you might be quite well by this time. The summer has been cruel to everybody, & has so hurt & staid me & my work as to make me almost wild when I realized what was to be done--& the time in which to do it.

You are not to think I am scolding. (if you were well, I might—a little) when I say I wish you had consented, last winter, to take a comedy part.—the play would long ago have been done.

You know about the Russian piece—never in my life did I work so hard at any thing as to make Esther an emotional star part. (I think I run, naturally, more to combination than to star or ordinary company pieces)—I made myself sick with the effort. Esther has to divide & more than divide with the Princess Marina & Folkowski. That is one thing.

Another, is that she must wear plain clothes—even those of which you spoke would be out of all keeping with her, & in the third act she ought to be in shabby disguise, & to play the part as I see it best, in her own simple dress in the 4th act.

I have pondered over the end of the piece a great deal yesterday & today (with some new light upon it, & taking a “new departure”) & have seen that if you cared to play the part of the Princess Marina I could make her in the 3rd & 4th acts as strong as she is brilliant. In the 1st & 2nd she balances Esther, far stronger in the first & weaker in the second than she—The 3rd act I could make largely hers, & the 4th as strong or stronger than Esthers. She of course is richly dressed through & in the 4th should be superb--& throughout is brilliant & sympathetic comedy.

I write you all this with a motive. You know when I left you I had very little time in which to do a frightful amount of work. I could have done it with ease if I had been well, but I have been sick & not only sick, but in torture with this nasty neuralgic-gout (or whatever it is) that takes possession of my right shoulder when I write much & worry a great deal.

⁵³ Fanny Davenport to Anna Dickinson, Canton, PA, 14 August 1880, in Dickinson papers.

Still I have done my best--& the best was what I would not finish (when I came to read it carefully over on Thursday) nor have been willing to sell to you if it were done, & you wanted it. It would not have served you, & it would have hurt me. So I put it into the fire in disgust, & crawled into my bed in despair. God knows you cannot be so sorry for this as I—provided you are not well disposed to something else of which I have thought. I have walked my floor of nights in such misery as I hope you will never know, when I saw how it was going, thought of what you were depending on, & said “it is not right, spite of all my tired head & sick body can do.”

Friday night as I tossed to & fro, saying –what shall I do? What shall I do? It suddenly came to me what you said last winter “what would you think of doing something in a piece with me?” or words to that effect.

At that I flew out of bed—ran for a manuscript that has been tucked away for a year past—“The Test of Honor” & sat down to consider it. It is a comedy-drama. Scene—England. Time—the present. Needing in all (12) twelve people & of its kind, the best work I can do...It is not a star piece--& yet any one of the four leading characters could be used as a star part...

Does it please you, or does it not please you to have me go on with the Russian play as I have suggested--& see if I can get it done by the 13 of Sep. say—to be accepted & used or not as circumstances may decide?--meanwhile to use “The Test of Honor” (which is ready to be read to you at once if you wish to hear it) & with this arrangement, if you like:--you to play Kate Ryde, I to play Elfrida Irwine—in New York at least—afterwards if we see it to our mutual benefit. If it is a “great go”-- (& of course it will be!!) you will not need, perhaps, another piece. If you do, how would you like to do Princess Marina—I to do Esther—with Sheridan perhaps as Volkowski, in “Friend & Foe”—for that is the same of the Russian play.

Understand distinctly I do not go as a star, nor a “feature” (Is that the word?) except as the author of the piece, or pieces. If I am to act, my name in the company, on the bills &c, is simply that of a member of your company. We could talk over the whole question, terms &c—if it is to be, far better than I can write now—(for I am saying scriptural language over to myself with every twinge of my shoulder as I scrawl this volume.)

You will say this is not a great star, sombre part, on & if you care for money, I think there will be a great deal more for both of us by this arrangement, with less risk to yourself.

To sum up: —if you want to hear “Test of Honor,” & consider it, I will come to you at once—...for while I am forlorn I am not in bed—as I was, last week. If you like & we settle on it, it can be put in rehearsal so soon as you please. It will need small expense aside from the company (Kate needs a riding habit, & one awfully loud, gorgeous get up) & will be easily mounted. If it is enough—so much the better. If there should be need to change the bill, & you want to know the Russian play is in reserve, I will go on with it, & do my best to have it done in time.

I hope & pray you may find something in all this to your content and profit & now & always—with most cordial regards to Mr. Price & your mother, know me to be faithfully your friend.

Anna Dickinson⁵⁴

At this point Davenport must have realized that it was time to give up on the collaboration:

Words written no nor spoken cannot convey to you my entire disappointment. I feel as though I had received a blow in the face and from the last person in the world I expected it.—I had depended so much upon our joint work—not as actresses but as author & actress. This dream is over for the idea of dividing my attraction as a star cannot for a moment be [brought] off. The Russian play is fine but not for me and neither Esther nor Marina my role: I understood you had the American Play greatly under way and by your...telegraph letting me all was going well thought everything was so—my astonishment can be imagined today when in place of the palace I had...—I find only a magnificent ruin—of my hopes. You poor sick woman I sympathize with your every ache & pain both physical & mental; I know and feel you have done your best and I thank you for it. The last play you mention is not for me dear & tis better to let all business between us end here good friends still. I hope, I wonder if you would entertain my producing “Anne Boleyn” in Phila. and for what: hoping this release you all future misery & anxiety may speedily restore you to health.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Anna Dickinson to Fanny Davenport, Elizabeth, NJ, 16 August 1880, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁵ Fanny Davenport to Anna Dickinson, Canton, PA, 17 August 1880, in Dickinson papers.

Dickinson, who, despite playing hard to get, desperately needed the income and prospects promised by the collaboration with Davenport, was forced to scramble for an acceptable resolution. In her next letter, she backpedaled frantically:

You are very wide of the right understanding of my offer when you speak of “dividing my (your) attraction as star.” In making the suggestion that I would play as a member of your company, if you desired it, I had no thought whatever, save that I might be of some service to you. If the reverse is the case, then there, of course, is the end of that matter.

But not of my work. I take for granted you have been absolutely in earnest in what you have said & written to me & in the contract to which you set your hand. Certainly I have been painfully in earnest to do all & more than all you desired.

I have been at work day & night since Sunday on the American play (the part that baffled & annoyed me & that I destroyed being re-written in an entirely different shape) & you shall have it within a week. I know this is scant measure of time, & it was because of this that I thought the English piece might serve as a stop gap to give longer time for preparation.— There is the comfort, however, that half of the greatest successes have been made by pieces pitchforked on to the stage—outside of your own, & as there are but six characters, who amount to any importance, one of these alone being a lady & she a middle aged one, the people are easily had.⁵⁶

Davenport must have been likewise reluctant to give up on the project at such a late date, for after receiving Dickinson’s letter, her husband sent Dickinson a telegram: “Wife satisfied and anxiously awaiting you on Friday next.”⁵⁷ It was several more weeks

⁵⁶ Anna Dickinson to Fanny Davenport, Elizabeth, NJ, 19 August 1880, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁷ E. Price to Anna Dickinson, New York, 21 August 1880, in Dickinson papers. On the same day, Susan Dickinson wrote a letter to the editor of *The Press* (which was published two days later) to correct an item that had appeared in that paper: “I find the

before Davenport received the play, however; the reading did not take place until after 30 August. There is no account of the meeting in the correspondence, though a subsequent letter from Davenport makes reference to a time “when we two get our heads together over the mss. all will go ‘merry as a marriage bell’ speedily eh?”—suggesting that while pleased, Davenport wanted to make changes to the script.⁵⁸ In the same letter she asks Dickinson to change the name of the heroine, Kate Vivian: “One thing I forgot to say do leave my name ‘Ruby.’ ‘Vivian’ is affected & doesn’t seem to have the bounce of the former name—spell it Rhuby or Rubey or something like Ruby—how is Rawson or Ransom? I don’t like Vivian all the other names are fine.”⁵⁹ Dickinson did not alter the name. Davenport added, “by the way I am sorry I am not in a travelling dress in the last for I have a lovely design for one in grey & wine color can’t we leave it a voyage.”⁶⁰

Rehearsal

following in your ‘Amusement Notes’ in this day’s paper, probably copied or condensed from some other journal: ‘Esther Arnim is the name of the play which Miss Anna Dickinson wrote for Miss Fanny Davenport and which the latter declined. It is a tragedy.’ I desire to state distinctly that Miss Fanny Davenport has NOT declined any play which Miss Anna Dickinson wrote for her. Miss Davenport wished to play Esther Arnim, the motive and plot of which Miss Dickinson submitted to her. Miss Dickinson thought that the part of the heroine was not suited to Miss Davenport’s genius, and said so, but it was not until the play was nearly completed that Miss Davenport became convinced that Miss Dickinson was correct in her views, and decided to have Miss Dickinson write for her the American comedy which the latter had originally proposed for her. Will the papers which have given the misstatement please do Miss Dickinson the justice to copy this correction?” *The Press*, 23 August 1880, in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁸ Fanny Davenport to Anna Dickinson, Hillside, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Once *An American Girl* began rehearsals Davenport apparently decided that portions of the script needed changes and requested that Dickinson make them. According to Dickinson's biographer, she refused—and Davenport made them anyway. Such an occurrence would have been unthinkable while Davenport was a member of Augustin Daly's company. Daly was a notorious autocrat: "From the moment the play was read and the parts were given out until the final curtain when the piece was withdrawn from the boards, he, the manager, was in absolute control."⁶¹ Dickinson, lacking the clout of a powerful manager like Daly, simply ceased communication with Davenport and refused to attend any rehearsals. (Indeed, there is no evidence that she attended rehearsals at any point.) Apparently, however, Davenport wrote to Dickinson the day before opening:

I do hope you will be pleased with what I have done—you know you have trusted entirely to me and left every bit of business situations, etc., in my hands. I have changed but slightly little bits here and there not to mar your work, but to render the general effect better. I have cut out an entrance for myself as in the rehearsing I found it bad to enter three times.⁶²

⁶¹ Marvin Felheim, *The Theater of Augustin Daly: An Account of the Late Nineteenth Century American Stage* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969; Harvard University Press, 1956), 17. Although Daly's rigidly enforced rules of discipline resulted in some actors leaving his employ, these methods contributed to the sustained excellence of his company.

⁶² Chester, 209. As far as I have been able to determine, there is no such letter in the Dickinson collection at the Library of Congress. Chester's book is unfootnoted, so it is impossible to determine his source for the quotation. Young, author of the unpublished biography, does not cite the letter. Since I have found a number of inaccurate statements in Chester's book, I question the reliability of this part of his account. There are gaps here that the materials in the Dickinson collection simply cannot fill in. However, several weeks after the play opened in New York *The New York Times* reported: "Of her own volition, and without any aid from Miss Dickinson, Fanny Davenport has made several changes in the *American Girl*. She has cut down much of the dialogue, and

Dickinson also received a friendly letter from Edwin Price three days before the opening, asking her to speak with a reporter from the *New York World* about the play in order to promote it but not to reveal any details about it:

He would like to interview you, as regards your opinion of what An American Girl is. He says he knows of Boston girls, New York girls, but no American girls. He does not want to make the plot of the play known, but would like to get up a controversy as regards the existence of such a lady as An American Girl. If you will kindly allow me, I would suggest that you create all the interest you can without giving them any idea of the play. We have kept it from them so far, puzzled the wise-acres and thrown them off the track entirely.⁶³

Dickinson does not appear to have granted this interview.⁶⁴

Davenport, however, did grant an interview to a reporter from the *New York Herald* in which she described her collaboration with Dickinson in quite different terms than is evident from their correspondence. She said that she had originally asked

introduced a couple of what, with some stretch of imagination, may be called situations. These changes have improved the play, but they have not made it a good one. The fact is, Fanny Davenport recognizes its weaknesses, but insists that an experienced hand can do a great deal for it. At the termination of the run at the Fifth Avenue, she will have the piece rewritten by somebody else if Miss Dickinson will not do it." *New York Times*, 2 October 1880. I have found no evidence to indicate that she ever did so.

⁶³ Edwin Price to Anna Dickinson, New York, 17 September 1880, in Dickinson papers.

⁶⁴ The *World* was a Democratic organ in the Civil War years. Its subsequent response to the play was not flattering: "the dialogue in 'An American Girl,' is a series of sub-editorials on things in general—the rights of women, the status, of actresses, the importance of 'money-grabbers' in the body politic, and the advantages of a bank account—the conclusion of all being the commonplace truism that 'money is money.'" The *World*, 21 September 1880, in Dickinson papers.

Dickinson to write her a tragedy, but that Dickinson repeatedly told her that she should play comedy. Yet:

one day I received a telegram from her saying that she had three acts of a tragedy ready that she had just written and would like to have me hear them. I heard them, and thought they were three of the strongest acts I had ever heard read, but the heroine was an *ingenu* and not at all in my line. She was more suited to the delicate delineations of Clara Morris...But the villain of the piece was superb; I don't know a finer since Iago, but I felt the heroine was not suited to me. Still, I determined to take it, and actually telegraphed to England for Mr. Sheridan to play the villain and had begun to get costumes made. The scene of the play was laid in Russia and there was some hard work necessary with the costumer.⁶⁵

However, at this point in the process, according to Davenport, she received a letter from Dickinson requesting an appointment:

We met and without any beating about the bush she said at once, "Fanny Davenport, I know you are not suited with that play and I don't intend that you shall take it. I have another sketched out which will certainly suit you better." She then gave me the plot and plan of "An American Girl." I at once saw my opportunity and embraced it. "I want to put a real, true American girl on the stage," said Miss Dickinson, "one who represents the right thinking, pure minded girl of America, and not the silly, frivolous girl of the period." And she has done what she said she would. This girl is, I fancy, very much such a one as Miss Dickinson might have been in her girlhood—a girl with a purpose in life, though not a strong-minded girl. I wanted to dress her in plain clothes. "Nonsense," said Miss Dickinson, "it is not incompatible with good sense to wear good clothes. Let her wear the best; the public like it," and I have followed this advice.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ *New York Herald* 20 September 1880.

⁶⁶ *New York Herald* 20 September 1880. One can only imagine how Dickinson must have responded to Davenport's "revisionism" here. Indeed, if the interview is reported accurately, it does suggest that Davenport was looking to present herself as a "serious" actress.

Finally, Davenport told the reporter that she was entirely responsible for the rehearsals and staging of the play: “the putting the play upon the stage is mine. I have written in all the business, arranged the tableaux, planned the costumes and the scenes and directed the rehearsals.”⁶⁷ And she added, “Everything had to be created, and by me, for Miss Dickinson has been ill ever since the rehearsals began, and is now confined to her bed in Philadelphia.”⁶⁸ Clearly Davenport wanted no hint of her troubled relationship with Dickinson to taint the play’s opening.

Notices of the play’s opening had been appearing regularly in the New York papers since the beginning of September. The *New York Times* described it as “the first occurrence of special importance of the new season,” and observed that the “conjunction of such well-known names as Miss Dickinson and Miss Davenport will add a double attractiveness to the regular opening of the season.”⁶⁹ “The event in the dramatic world tonight,” proclaimed the *New York Commercial Advertiser*, “will be the opening of the regular season at Haverly’s Fifth Avenue Theatre... Aside from the interest manifested in the first performance of Miss Dickinson’s play, the reappearance of Miss Davenport upon the Metropolitan stage will no doubt attract an enormous gathering.”⁷⁰

And indeed, two days before the opening *The Daily Graphic* noted, “Nearly all the seats for the inaugural performance of ‘An American Girl’... have been sold”; on

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ *New York Times*, 12 September 1880; *New York Times*, 19 September 1880.

⁷⁰ *New York Commercial Advertiser*, 20 September 1880.

opening day, it reported that “Few if any seats for the initial performance to-night are now to be had.”⁷¹ Audiences were flocking to purchase tickets for what promised to feature the most glorious costumes of the season. The *New York Herald* teased: “[Miss Davenport’s] costumes are said to be something wonderful.”⁷² The *New York Evening Post* was even more tantalizing: “Information for the ladies. It is announced that one hundred persons are at work upon six dresses for Fanny Davenport to wear in Miss Dickinson’s play of ‘An American Girl,’ and that two weeks were occupied in preparing the designs for these gorgeous habiliments. It is plain, therefore, that if the play is as good as the millinery there is a treat in store for New York.”⁷³

A somewhat less enthusiastic preview emerged from *The Daily Graphic*, which reported that in the presentation of *An American Girl*, “nothing foreign is to be seen on the stage,” and noted wryly, “although there is no objection to its showing itself in the auditorium at regular prices.” It continued:

As the announcements have it, this is “an American play, by an American author, enacted by an American actress, produced with an American company, in an American Theatre,” and we are otherwise assured, none but American scenery painted by American artists, and American costumes made by American dressmakers and tailors, will appeal to American eyes. It is understood that an American orchestra will also be on hand, and play nothing but American music, provided it can be trained in time. With such attractions the great American heart is confidently expected to pulsate one and one-half times faster than ordinarily, and

⁷¹ *The Daily Graphic*, 18 September 1880; *The Daily Graphic*, 20 September 1880.

⁷² *New York Herald* 19 September 1880.

⁷³ *New York Evening Post*, 10 September 1880.

American legs are calculated on to travel twice as fast as they usually do, when there isn't a fire or a dog fight within sight....⁷⁴

The Response

“The deepest impression that was produced last evening,” remarked *The Sun*, “was upon the retina.”⁷⁵ Although most critics deemed the production better than the play, most took care to point out the advantages of both. The *Commercial Advertiser* noted that Davenport “was received by a numerous audience, principally composed of members of the dramatic and literary professions,” and that she was “excellent as to form and physical beauty, and well nigh dazzled the audience with the magnificence of her costumes.”⁷⁶ *The Daily Graphic* nodded, “‘An American Girl’ is worth getting acquainted with. It is often brilliant in its dialogue, has some strong situations and is absolutely perfect in the matter of feminine upholstery. Every woman will want to go as a matter of course, and every man may go in the full assurance that he will enjoy it.”⁷⁷ “Regarded simply for its literary worth,” observed the *New York Herald*, “as a piece of fine writing containing many forcible expressions of shrewd opinions on the men and women of the day, measuring their better natures and their human weaknesses in well-

⁷⁴ *The Daily Graphic*, 17 September 1880. Two days after this article appeared, Dickinson's sister Susan wrote to her: “I see if the Graphic says some things in not the most *gracious* way at least it makes the point that it is Anna Dickinson's play (not F.D.P's *in spite of* the dresses...)—& for some reasons it will stand in better stead than an elaborate complimentary advance notice would be.” Susan E. Dickinson to Anna E. Dickinson, 19 September 1880, in Dickinson papers.

⁷⁵ *The Sun*, 21 September 1880.

⁷⁶ *New York Commercial Advertiser*, 21 September 1880, in Dickinson papers.

⁷⁷ *The Daily Graphic*, 21 September 1880.

balanced sentences, remarkable at times for their clearness, point and vigor, and always expressed in excellent and often in elegant English, it was an entire success.”⁷⁸ And the *Evening Post* reported that “The audience laughed readily whenever a sentence characteristic of Miss Dickinson was uttered.”⁷⁹

Reviews of Davenport’s acting were, for the most part, favorable. According to *The Daily Graphic*, Davenport was “the centre, the beginning and the end of it all.”⁸⁰ The *New York Times* argued,

Miss Davenport’s rendering of the chief character was far more interesting than the character of the text; the lighter portions of her acting were easy, graceful, and natural; and though she was under a constant strain of nervousness, her vivacity was, for the most part, in a true spirit of comedy...She threw herself into the part with a great deal of earnestness, and brought out its contrasts in the strongest possible light; and her action—especially in the third act—was boldly dramatic.⁸¹

The *Herald* observed that “her acting of the lighter comedy of the play was quite up to her usual standard—a standard which made her a great favorite on the New York stage as the picture of the fashionable drawing room belle.”⁸² According to *The Sun*, “The sweet, girlish simplicity and the unaffected, ingenuous gratification with which Miss Davenport bore herself through it all touched the heart of every woman in the audience.”⁸³ “In the

⁷⁸ *The New York Herald*, 21 September 1880.

⁷⁹ *Evening Post*, 21 September 1880.

⁸⁰ *The Daily Graphic*, 21 September 1880.

⁸¹ *New York Times*, 22 September 1880.

⁸² *New York Herald* 21 September 1880.

⁸³ *The Sun*, 21 September 1880.

third act,” noted the *Tribune*, “Miss Davenport depicted, with real power, a moment of hysterical passion, and she created herein a deep effect of sympathy.”⁸⁴ The *Evening Post* agreed: “Miss Davenport simulated with much brilliancy the hysterical condition of a woman midway between tears and laughter.”⁸⁵

But even the popular Davenport was not immune to criticism. The *New York Times* noted that her “articulation is possibly heavier than it used to be, and this is a fault that tells against an actress who aims at bright and brilliant effects, while the hollow tones of her voice are still far from pleasant.”⁸⁶ “In the more intense lines,” remarked the *Herald*, “calling for the expression of deep emotion, Miss Davenport was less successful, laughter rather than tears best suiting the young lady.”⁸⁷

Several papers also commented on the inappropriateness of her lavish costumes:

Miss Davenport’s toilets, of which a great deal has been made in advance notices, were simply superb—far too handsome for the scenes in which they occasionally were introduced, satins and diamonds hardly being appropriate for a promenade on the garden walks of a Long Branch or Hudson River cottage. But when worn in the interior sets they were both surpassingly beautiful and appropriate.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ *New York Daily Tribune*, 21 September 1880.

⁸⁵ *The Evening Post*, 21 September 1880.

⁸⁶ *New York Times*, 22 September 1880.

⁸⁷ *New York Herald*, 21 September 1880.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

The *New York Times* noted, “In over-dressing her part she exhibited more feminine weakness than good taste or sound judgment.”⁸⁹ There were even those who suggested that Davenport was getting old (she was thirty) and fat: “She has grown too large, too stout and too mature to play girls. When she runs she waddles. Her voice is no more the ringing organ it was...Her shoulders and bust and arms and chin have developed hugely...If Fanny Davenport would succeed in the future, it must be in mature dramatic parts, not in those of unmarried girls.”⁹⁰

Dickinson was not present at the opening of *An American Girl*. She seems to have received her information about the performance from Bernard, who wrote to her on the play’s second night.

I have just come from the theatre. It was packed to the doors—all money. Frohman tells me that last night & tonight were the two best nights Haverly ever had in New York. There were over \$500-worth of tickets sold for tonight before noon of today, & every seat was sold tonight. The play has scored a popular success beyond a question. Everybody conceded tonight the play is a “go.”

The play: It was better acted, and better received than last night. It ran smoothly—splendidly, and ended at 10:30—a gain of $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour on last night.⁹¹

He wrote of “how sincerely and persistently the audience called for you last night. It was simply a repetition tonight,” and tried to persuade her to come to the theatre—both to witness her success and to please the Prices.

⁸⁹ *New York Times*, 22 September 1880.

⁹⁰ *New York Dramatic News*, 25 September 1880, in Dickinson papers.

⁹¹ O.G. Bernard to Anna Dickinson, New York, 21 September 1880, in Dickinson papers.

Mr. Price had a long talk with me tonight. He told me that nothing in this God's world would could or should prejudice F.D. agst [sic] you, that she is greatly devoted-attached to the play and that she would be supremely happy if you would come to the theatre & give her the benefit of such suggestions as might occur to you. They wd [sic] like to see you at the theatre and feel your absence...

For their sake I hope you will see fit to be on hand to-morrow night. No one need or will know of yo[sic] presence. You will be sure to see a large & friendly audience & while you are making observation you can witness yr own triumph & gladden the hearts of both Mr. and Mrs. P.... If you want to see a good play, a good house, and want to be good to the Prices, you will show yourself at the 5th Ave to morrow night. I will here promise not to disturb you.⁹²

But Dickinson apparently never made an appearance at *An American Girl*, and a week later, upon receipt of her first royalty from Davenport, wrote to inform Davenport that the form of her payment—a deviation from that specified in their contract (the contract required the royalty to be paid by New York draft, and Davenport sent a check)—was unacceptable, and asked that it be changed according to their arrangement. A series of telegrams transpired over the next couple of months, with Dickinson repeatedly demanding absolute punctuality for the arrival of her royalty—in the correct form—and sending an inquiry immediately if it failed to arrive promptly. And apparently the women's dispute over textual alterations had not yet subsided, for at the end of October 1880, *The New York Times* announced,

It has been publicly reported that litigation is likely to rise between Miss Davenport and Miss Dickinson as to the play of the "American Girl." Miss Davenport wishes, it is said, to make certain alterations in the play to

⁹² Ibid. Bernard also critiqued the play in this letter, offering his suggestions for improving moments that didn't quite work. He was clearly aware that his remarks might not be appreciated: "There are some other points I should like to cover but fear perhaps I have already said enough to justify your desire to pitch me out of a third story window."

the end that it may better be adapted to her special use, but Miss Dickinson, with an author's pardonable jealousy, claims the right to "improve" was not among the rights sold to Miss Davenport, and that the play must be acted as written, or not at all.⁹³

Nevertheless, Davenport's six-week run (the original four-week run was extended by two weeks because of its great popularity) at the Fifth Avenue Theatre in New York was remarkably successful. But ultimately it was diminishing returns that signaled the death knell of *An American Girl*. Although Davenport had played to repeatedly sold-out houses in New York, she apparently could not sustain the same level of income while on tour. By the beginning of December, receipts had dwindled to a point at which Davenport was forced to write and request that the royalty be lowered.

You cannot say I have not given the "American Girl" a fair trial for pecuniary success. It is however not one. The time has now come when I must throw it overboard or you must reduce the royalty.—will you? I am willing to pay \$200 a week or \$50 a performance—I do not argue the matter—nor need you in answer. It is a business proposition upon your answer yes will depend the continuance of the play, upon your answer no—will depend my substituting another piece—If I should not hear from you by Saturday, I shall assume that your answer is no & act accordingly.⁹⁴

Dickinson responded curtly: "In answer to your letter of the 7th I refer you to the terms of our contract."⁹⁵

Around this time Dickinson had apparently also broken with Bernard, who contacted Davenport "to make sure that Anna would not leave him holding an empty

⁹³ *New York Times*, 28 October 1880, in Dickinson papers.

⁹⁴ Fanny Davenport to Anna Dickinson, Baltimore, 7 December 1880.

⁹⁵ Anna Dickinson to Fanny Davenport, Elizabeth, NJ, 10 December 1880.

bag.”⁹⁶ Davenport wrote to Dickinson, “I yesterday received notification from ‘O.G. Bernard’ to pay you no more royalty on an ‘American Girl.’ I hold the same until further developments.”⁹⁷ On 24 December, Dickinson sent Davenport a telegram: “Unless royalty is paid at once according to contract will attach your property in New York.”⁹⁸ Finally, on 31 December, Davenport cut all ties: “[the] judgement of party of the second part decides as per contract your play a pecuniary failure & accordingly ceases to perform the same.”⁹⁹

The details of the continuing dispute are unclear from this point on; the legal maneuvering that transpired is only spottily documented in Dickinson’s papers. The *New York Times* reported two days later that the two women had “agreed to disagree.”

The result of the dispute between the fair author and actor will be, it is feared, a lawsuit—although a friendly settlement would be preferable to a so extreme measure. We learn through Miss Davenport herself that she is determined to break her relations with Miss Dickinson, and, if necessary, to begin a lawsuit herself. Miss Dickinson, on her side, is equally determined.¹⁰⁰

About one week later, Dickinson’s sister Susan wrote to her: “I am dreadfully sorry for thee about F.D.P.—of course, it’s impossible to say I’m surprised, with that creature. But I do hope thee don’t have to go on further in search of her. Some paper I saw within a

⁹⁶ Chester, 214.

⁹⁷ Fanny Davenport to Anna Dickinson, Charles Town, 21 December 1881.

⁹⁸ Anna Dickinson to Fanny Davenport, Elizabeth, NJ, 24 December 1880.

⁹⁹ Fanny Davenport to Anna Dickinson, Elizabeth, NJ, 31 December 1880, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁰⁰ *New York Times*, 2 January 1881.

day or two before thy letter came said 'F.D. is billed for New Orleans this week.'

Nothing more."¹⁰¹

Dickinson continued to pursue the money she felt she was owed, and Davenport wrote to Dickinson's attorney with her version of the story. Surprisingly, and in contrast to earlier reports, Davenport argued that she made such substantial alterations to *American Girl* that the play had become her own.

This royalty and limitation was annexed to the play as furnished. The play however was rewritten almost entirely by F.D. with the knowledge of A.D. and as rewritten played continuously by F.D. without protest from A.D. F.D. however has paid monies from time to time for the use of so much of the scheme and dialogue of the play she played as remained from the original version, F.D. however ceased playing any version, A.D. demands the sum of \$1050 which she says is balance of royalty and treats the original contract as fully in force... I think it clear that A.D. *American Girl* has not been played but that A.D. & F.D. *American Girl* has been played.¹⁰²

The letter goes on to argue that that she had already paid Dickinson more than the use of her ideas was worth.

The outline of events becomes even blurrier as 1881 wore on. In October, Dickinson apparently sent several sheriff's deputies to attach Davenport's wardrobe

¹⁰¹ Susan E. Dickinson to Anna E. Dickinson, 7 January 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁰² Fanny Davenport to James H. Heverin, New Denison, 7 February 1881., in Dickinson papers. It is unclear why Dickinson believed she was owed \$1050.00. The amount represents three weeks' royalty as stipulated by the original contract (see Appendix A). However, it would appear from the correspondence that only about ten days elapsed between Bernard's request for Davenport to cease payment to Dickinson and the time that Davenport stopped performing the play. It is unclear how Dickinson calculated that three weeks' sum.

during a performance of Sardou's *Fedora* at Hooley's in Chicago. At about 9:00 p.m.—
after all of the paying audience was inside the theatre—the deputies

served a writ of attachment on Miss Davenport and her manager, and informed them that the play might go on, but that as its conclusion all the effects of the company must remain in their charge until the writ, which called for \$1,200, was satisfied. The deputy sheriff attempted to take charge of the cash box, but the treasurer of the theater kept them at bay, with the door of the box-office barred, and sent for Mr. Hooley, who was at home at the time. The sheriffs continued their siege for an hour and a half.¹⁰³

Hooley finally arrived and “signed bonds in \$2,500” and the deputies withdrew. Price spoke to the press and told them that Dickinson had already been defeated in court and that “this new proceeding seemed to be simply spite work.”¹⁰⁴ *The New York Dramatic News* noted,

It was not a good play—indeed, as I remember, it was an exceedingly bad play. It must be said, however, that it was as bad in the acting as in the authorship. Miss Davenport did not add dignity to the American Girl by fanning her jilted and fainting lover with her skirts. In a very short time the play failed. Miss Davenport laid all the blame to Miss Dickinson and excluded it from her repertoire. Miss Dickinson, on the other hand, was greatly incensed with Miss Davenport, and waited for an opportunity to “get even.” The chance came last Saturday night....Miss Dickinson's conduct was reprehensible certainly, but Miss Davenport's tongue atoned for it, in part, at least. “She not only wants her price,” exclaimed the dashing Fanny, “but my Price, too.” I don't believe a word of it. If the gentle Anna had got her price, the dashing Fanny's Price would not have been molested.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

¹⁰⁴ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers. It is unclear to what court proceedings Price is referring; they do not appear to be documented in either Dickinson's letters or clippings.

¹⁰⁵ *New York Dramatic News*, 22 October 1881, in Dickinson papers.

The incident at Hooley's seems to be the last significant episode in the Dickinson-Davenport collaboration; if it is not, it is certainly the last documented. However the legal maneuverings worked out, there can be no question that the experience did not bode well for Dickinson's continued theatrical endeavors. She lost the manager who had secured for her a contract far better than she had any right to expect, and she alienated a popular theatrical figure whose good will could only have served her well.

Bid for Breeches

Even while her battle with Davenport continued to play out, Dickinson found herself with another opportunity to advance in the theatrical world. Now, however, she was without Bernard, on whose expertise she had relied since 1874. On 19 March 1881, the *New York Mirror* announced, "The biggest sensation of the year, by all odds, will be Anna Dickinson's appearance at Philadelphia as Hamlet, Claude, and other congenial parts that just suit her masculine taste."¹⁰⁶ But this first attempt at breeches roles was also fraught with difficulty. When she abruptly canceled her scheduled appearance as Claude Melnotte at Philadelphia's Chestnut Street Opera House without an explanation, her decision was met not only by public disgust and critical derision, but also by the threat of a lawsuit alleging breach of contract. Contemporary opinions varied wildly, but all seemed to agree that whatever the cause of Dickinson's refusal, there was "nothing ladylike about it."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ *New York Mirror*, 19 March 1881, in Dickinson papers. "Claude" refers to Claude Melnotte in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's popular melodrama, *The Lady of Lyons*.

¹⁰⁷ *Lockport Daily Journal*, 22 April 1881, in Dickinson papers.

Philadelphia theatre manager Fred Zimmerman (later, one of the founders of the Theatrical Syndicate) apparently suggested the idea of male roles to Dickinson after reading a newspaper notice that implied that she would be very successful in them.

The idea struck me very forcibly. I thought it over and consulted Miss Dickinson about it; at first she refused to consider the suggestion. The more I thought of it, however, the more I believed that she would succeed in that line of acting, and Miss Dickinson finally began to seriously consider the matter herself. At length I went over to New York and had a long conversation with her, which ended in her promising to appear in male characters.¹⁰⁸

Zimmerman contacted Boston manager John Stetson, who was then managing the tour of the Italian Shakespearean Antonio Salvini, to arrange for Dickinson's debut in breeches with the Salvini company. She had decided to appear as Hamlet, Macbeth, and Claude Melnotte, roles which proved problematic when coordinating her efforts with the Salvini tour. Salvini was playing Macbeth himself, and Stetson refused to allow anyone else to play the role during his engagement. In addition, the Salvini company did not use the regular English version of *Hamlet*, and they were to arrive in Philadelphia too late for Dickinson to familiarize herself with their text. So Dickinson agreed to play Claude Melnotte with the company in Philadelphia, sharing equal billing with Salvini and receiving twenty-five percent of the gross receipts up to \$800, after which she would receive one-third. The following week she would go to Boston to play both Hamlet and Claude.¹⁰⁹ The contract, as signed by Dickinson and Stetson and witnessed by

¹⁰⁸ Fred Zimmerman, quoted in the *Philadelphia Evening News*, 21 March 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁰⁹ *The Philadelphia Evening News*, 21 March 1881, in Dickinson papers; Chester, 218.

Zimmerman on 16 March 1881, detailed merely dates of performance and the manner in which receipts would be divided:

That the said Stetson engages the said Dickinson to render services at the Globe Theatre Boston Mass. For three evenings and one matinee, said Dickinson to appear only in the role of "Claude Melnotte" in "The Lady of Lyons" on the following dates: Tuesday evening April 19th, Wednesday matinee April twentieth (20) Friday and Saturday evenings April 22d and 23d 1881, the gross receipts of each entertainment above mentioned to be divided as follows: should the gross receipts of each performance reach Eight hundred (800) dollars or over, said Dickinson is to receive one third (1/3) of such sum, but should the receipts of each entertainment amount to less than Eight hundred dollars, then said Dickinson shall receive one-quarter (1/4) of such sum accruing from each of the aforementioned entertainments. It is also understood, agreed, and made part of this contract that the said Dickinson shall play under the management of said Stetson, at the Chestnut St. Opera House Philadelphia Pa. in the same aforementioned role of "Claude Melnotte" on the following days, viz: Tuesday evening April 12th, Wednesday matinee April 13th, Friday evening April 15th and Saturday evening April 16th 1881. Said Dickinson to receive therefore the same share or shares of the gross receipts, as herein before agreed at The Globe Theatre, Boston, Mass.¹¹⁰

The prospect of seeing Anna Dickinson on stage in tights excited great expectations. The *Springfield (MA) Republican* called her announcement "the most astonishing piece of dramatic news ever heard."¹¹¹ Another paper revealed, "Large orders for opera-glasses are being filed in anticipation of Miss Anna Dickinson's appearance at the Opera House...."¹¹² Stetson even suggested that Dickinson could become a successor to Charlotte Cushman, who had been remarkably successful in the roles of Hamlet,

¹¹⁰ "Memorandum of Agreement," in Dickinson papers.

¹¹¹ *The Springfield Republican* (MA), cited in *The Chicago Inter Ocean*, 23 March 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹¹² Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

Romeo, and Cardinal Wolsey. “I do not see why Miss Dickinson may not create for herself a name and fame as great, even though it is different.”¹¹³ And a writer for the *New York Mirror* proclaimed, “It’s too good a thing to miss...I shall have to put on my seven-league boots and run over to the city of brotherly affection for the eventful occasion.”¹¹⁴

But all were not so enthusiastic. “What Miss Dickinson is thinking about in this step we can not conceive,” remarked *The Daily Herald*.¹¹⁵ Although cross-dressed females were far from anomalous on the nineteenth-century stage, resistance to the practice was clearly alive and well.

That is a very interesting ambition which prompts women to assume masculine functions, and the assumption is always made in apparent ignorance of certain physiological facts which an audience apprehend [*sic*] instinctively. Nor does it occur to the women who are restless under the limitations of their sex that whenever a man assumes a femal [*sic*] part before the public he belittles himself in the eyes of the public. When a woman assumes a male parts [*sic*], she belittles the part.¹¹⁶

Some intimated that she had succumbed to manipulative managers who assured her of financial success. Her unblemished reputation as a woman of virtue and morality (aided considerably by her well-known Quaker heritage) made it unlikely that she was motivated by a desire to exhibit her legs.

Some papers came to her defense, charging her antagonists with sexism.

The bare mention...[of Dickinson in male roles] has been sufficient to call down thunders of disapproval upon the head of this woman who has

¹¹³ John Stetson, quoted in unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

¹¹⁴ *New York Mirror*, 19 March 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹¹⁵ *The Daily Herald*, 3 April 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

shown far more pluck and energy than the great majority of men. And it is simply because she has done this, because she has succeeded in making herself a potent influence that much of this carping is due...Miss Dickinson herself would scorn to claim any exceptional treatment on the ground of her sex, but that little, insignificant male gnats should buzz and bark and bite, because she does something, *being* a woman, is contemptible.¹¹⁷

But there would be a delay before the critics could assess Dickinson's aptitude in male roles. On 7 April 1881, *The Philadelphia Press* proclaimed: "WILL NOT PLAY HERE: Anna Dickinson Refuses to Perform in this City."¹¹⁸ This initial notice announced that it was "extremely probable" that the public's interest in seeing Dickinson in male roles would "not be gratified."¹¹⁹ Dickinson's sister Susan (who was a well-known literary figure herself) reportedly said that Dickinson would not play in Philadelphia because Salvini's company would not be arriving in town until the afternoon before the scheduled performance, leaving insufficient time for a suitable rehearsal. George K. Goodwin, manager of the Chestnut Street Opera House and the Walnut Street Theatre, told *The Press* that the contract, signed by himself, Stetson, and Dickinson, was "perfectly legal and binding, and whoever violates it must be responsible."¹²⁰ (The contract of 16 March 1881 in the Dickinson papers contains no provisions about rehearsal time.) Goodwin asserted that all appropriate preparations had been made for

¹¹⁷ *Toledo Blade*, 14 March [1881], in Dickinson papers.

¹¹⁸ *The Philadelphia Press*, 7 April 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* The contract of 16 March 1881, contained in the Dickinson papers, is *not* signed by Goodwin.

Dickinson's performance and said that he had spent a small fortune in telegrams trying to sort out the situation. "I had advertised it largely, everybody knew of it, and I wanted to keep faith with the public."¹²¹

Although he had received a telegram from Stetson indicating that Dickinson would not play "on account of opposition," Goodwin denied understanding of what she meant by "opposition" (indeed, it is not entirely clear from the context of the telegram) and speculated that she was backing out because of a disagreement over who was to play the part of her leading lady, Pauline.¹²² She had insisted that the actress could not be taller than herself, because it would look ridiculous for her to play a male lover to a woman who towered over her. Goodwin had wanted to hire Lillie Hinton, "a clever actress and a perfect little lady," but "Miss Dickinson objected without giving any reason."¹²³ An actress named Miss Stewart, of Salvini's company, was then chosen for the role, to the objections of Miss Prescott, who was the leading lady of the company and who demanded that she play Pauline. Dickinson apparently objected to Prescott because of her height, and Goodwin speculated that this was "really the whole cause of the trouble."¹²⁴

¹²¹ George K. Goodwin, quoted in *The Philadelphia Press*, 7 April 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹²² *Evening Telegraph*, 7 April 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹²³ George K. Goodwin, quoted in *The Philadelphia Press*, 7 April 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

The Philadelphia papers wasted no time picking up the story. “For heaven’s sake,” asked *The Philadelphia Times*, “what is this rumpus about Anna Dickinson?”

Is it possible we are to be deprived the pleasure of seeing her struggle with the Melnotte? If Miss A.D. is smart she will accept Miss Prescott as the gentle lady to be won. What if the unities are not preserved? The funnier it can be made the better. I wouldn’t miss the masculine debut for a hundred dollars. Of course the lady will read the lines intelligently, but the comic element will be abundant.¹²⁵

The following day, *The Press* reported that Goodwin had sent Stetson a telegram saying, “I hope Miss Dickinson will keep her word. She is a lady and she understands professional courtesy. She will probably play if you insist upon her doing so. If she refuses she is good for all damages. Shall it be said that a woman got the best of you? I trust not.”¹²⁶ Stetson supposedly then sent Dickinson a telegram demanding that she fulfill her contract. Still Dickinson remained silent.

Dickinson did receive a letter from a friend who had been at the theatre and reported to her the situation as s/he saw it.¹²⁷

Zimmerman, Goodwin, & Mr. Stetson were all in the room & we were quickly introduced—I said to Mr. Goodwin, I see you have Miss Dickinson’s picture...has she arrived—not to our knowledge & then Mr. Stetson said—she don’t come or answer our telegrams. I said why don’t you see her—he asked if 2 could not go—I said no—then they all went on to say—“if you would only send some excuse—sick—or if you would only play once—everything would be made satisfactory—you should have the Pauline you wanted...(Stuart is to play if you wish her)...Mr. Z. said they had told Mr. Heverin, your lawyer, that you should have your own Pauline & more which I can’t remember & I asked at once if Mr. H.—had

¹²⁵ *The Philadelphia Times*, 10 April 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹²⁶ *The Philadelphia Press*, [8 April 1881], in Dickinson papers.

¹²⁷ The letter is unsigned and dated merely “Monday 11:30 pm.”

sent that message to you—I doubt it—after the poor memory he has exhibited this week in forgetting the engagement he had with you—Mr. L.—said if you failed to appear either here or in Boston--& he added “we don’t even know if she will play there”—that it would hurt you immensely—He had seen a number of newspaper men & one & all were friendly & united in giving you a splendid reception—he says if you do play here make it later in the week as to give yourself all the preparation you want.¹²⁸

The letter writer went on to add,

I’m so sorry anything has happened—but if you should play soon—I think you would have the most rousing reception on record—Think the matter over & don’t—I pray you—make a mistake. You certainly can’t play in Boston if you do not rehearse here...I really do not think from what little I heard tonight that Stetson thinks he is to blame & that he is acting according to the contract—his bluntness comes from ignorance...let people know that you can play the part—some say—it is stage fright--& all sorts of conjectures are afloat.¹²⁹

On 11 April 1881, the day before the scheduled performance, Stetson and Goodwin were still unsure of Dickinson’s plan. Stetson suggested that she was perhaps afraid of hostile criticism, or that “some actors [had] gone to her and said: ‘Look here, you can’t play the part,’ and so frightened her off.”¹³⁰ According to Zimmerman, she had received a letter from an important actor, who had told her: “I would rather see you take chloroform than see you attempt to play *Claude* with one or two rehearsals.”¹³¹ The managers eventually decided to have another play ready to go the next evening if Dickinson did not show up for her morning rehearsal.

¹²⁸ Letter to Anna Dickinson, n.d.

¹²⁹ Letter to Anna Dickinson, n.d.

¹³⁰ *The Philadelphia Press*, 11 April 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹³¹ *The Philadelphia Times*, 12 April 1881, in Dickinson papers.

The following morning, as the Salvini company assembled for rehearsal, one of the leading actors inquired if Dickinson had arrived. The stage manager apparently responded “No; not yet,” so placidly that “an outsider would have supposed Miss Dickinson was concealed somewhere in the building, instead of where he knew her to be, in Elizabeth, New Jersey.”¹³² The company waited three hours for her to arrive, and when she did not “the actors and actresses manifested a spirit of insubordination bordering on positive mutiny, and three young Thespians held an indignation meeting over a pitcher of beer at the back door.”¹³³ It became evident that Dickinson was not going to appear, and the company was sent home shortly after two o’clock. That evening, Salvini’s company gave a performance of *The Guv’nor*, and money was refunded to those who demanded it.

The next day, Stetson published a copy of the signed contract, along with the following statement:

Mr. John Stetson regrets to be compelled to acquaint the public that Miss Anna Dickinson, without assigning any reason whatsoever for her conduct, has seen fit to violate her written engagement to appear at the Chestnut Street Opera House in the character of Claude Melnotte. The lady, although repeatedly solicited by Mr. Stetson to carry out the conditions of the contract into which she had entered at her own special desire, has persistently declined to either attend the rehearsals of the play or even to come to Philadelphia.

Miss Dickinson, with lofty contempt either for professional etiquette, commercial integrity or public opinion, utterly refuses to assign any reason whatsoever for her breach of faith, and Mr. Stetson has no alternative but to ask the Philadelphia public to credit him with having used every exertion in his power to further the interests of a lady who is held in such high estimation in our city, but who has, by ill-judged advice,

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

thrown away the best opportunity that will probably ever be offered her of proving her histrionic merit.¹³⁴

Subsequent newspaper reports of the affair were increasingly critical of Dickinson's behavior. Dickinson herself appeared to have nothing to say on the matter; *The New York Dramatic News* related, "Miss Dickinson will talk to no one but her own intimate friends on the subject."¹³⁵ Her continued silence enabled the papers to engage in all variety of speculation. Reports suggested that Dickinson was taking the stand that Zimmerman (acting for Stetson) had guaranteed her right of refusal in regard to actors in the supporting company, and that because she did not want to act with either Prescott or Stewart, Stetson was required to find someone else for the part.¹³⁶ A number of commentators suggested that Dickinson had been gulled by her manipulative managers into an engagement that was little more than a managerial money-making scheme.

The real truth is, that as the time approached for her appearance, Miss Dickinson began to perceive what she ought to have known from the start, that her manager's motives and purpose were radically opposed to her own. He had but one idea, and it was that the novelty of Miss Dickinson's experiment would excite enough curiosity to make it profitable. The very ridicule which the scheme provoked was to his advantage.¹³⁷

But some of the most interesting speculation suggested that Dickinson was getting squeamish about playing male roles. Stetson, who professed that he had "humored Miss Dickinson more than [he] ever [had] any star who signed a contract," envisaged the

¹³⁴ *The New York Mirror*, 16 April 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹³⁵ *The New York Dramatic News*, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

following scenario: “I am not too imaginative when in my mind’s eye I see her first appearance in the Claude Melnotte costume before a coterie of old maids. When, in her pantaloons, she tripped into the room where they sat they all, no doubt, put their hands up to their faces and screamed, “Oh, my! This will never do!” It is ridiculous....”¹³⁸ *The Washington Capital* suggested a similar reason:

It is said that breeches are the cause of the breach. Anna is neither young nor charming, nor gracefully proportioned. Nature may have given her a sufficient amount of brains, but forgot to pile on the physical, and after a careful study of herself in masculine attire, and under the criticisms of friends, she decided to abandon the role. Now there are a great many people who are curious to know how Anna would look divested of a petticoat, and be willing to pay for it....¹³⁹

On 16 April, Stetson sent a letter (which was then published) to Goodwin, authorizing him to hire an attorney to sue Dickinson for breach of contract, setting damages at \$8,000. Dickinson was finally forced to respond. On April 18, she wrote a long letter to the editor of the *New York Herald*, which published her “explanation” for her behavior. She argued that she had ample reason “in law, justice and common sense” for pulling out of the Philadelphia engagement and accused Stetson of defamation of character and deliberate falsehood in his letter to the public. She intimated that he was engaging in some “very shabby proceedings” which he was about to spring on her when she would not be able to avoid the consequences.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ John Stetson, quoted in unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

¹³⁹ *The Washington Capital*, 15 May 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁴⁰ She evidently believed that Stetson was going to pretend that Stewart was going to play Pauline and then attempt to substitute the tall Marie Prescott at the last minute, when there was nothing she could do about it.

To the public I do not appeal. Let the courts decide. I refuse to follow his lead by making the newspapers the arena of this contest. I refuse to fight in such wise a man whose weapons are the naked fists of bullying and lying. I refuse interviews and statements now as I have again and again refused them under almost intolerable provocation through the past....¹⁴¹

She conjured images of her formerly glorious oratorical career, seemingly convinced that the public was determined never to accept her as an actress:

I am conscious that no American living has more justly earned the right of respectful consideration by her countrymen and women. I have been absolutely condemned without sight and without knowledge in all I have attempted for years, because by this attempt I have dared to do in my own person and for myself what I have done through all my life, since I was a girl of sixteen, done in behalf of others....¹⁴²

“It is my misfortune to have won a great fame,” she continued, “since I have not with it a great fortune nor an idle nature.” She went on to say that the lecture platform had dried up, and her desperate financial need, as well as a long-standing theatrical inclination, had led her to attempt the stage. An unknown woman would have been allowed a full opportunity to make a success of the venture, she said, but she was continually greeted with:

“You cannot come into this theatre or secure this engagement or command a suitable presentation of yourself and your work. Why? Because you are incapable? No. Because we lack confidence in your ability? No. But because you are not rich enough to do this thing alone we will take no risk, since, though we believe you can do it, the American public has decided it don’t want you to do it, and the majority of American newspapers stand ready, whatever you accomplish, to cry you down.”¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ *New York Herald*n.d., in Dickinson papers.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

The letter goes on to express Dickinson's ardent hope of finding "an open pathway to another land" where she would be a complete stranger, where she could "be sure of escaping insults" and be given "a fair opportunity to prove what [she] can do and for an honest verdict on the thing done." She concluded with a wish for her antagonists: "And may Heaven grant that the sort of justice a multitude of people have given to me may never be meted to them, for under it they would live sunk in despair or 'curse God and die.'"¹⁴⁴

Her letter merely fanned the flames of public opinion. A "petulant fit," sniffed one notice.¹⁴⁵ A "wail of disappointed egotism," deemed another.¹⁴⁶ One item sneered, "Anna is sour, sore, sallow—and forty."¹⁴⁷ *The Boston Herald* characterized the letter as "one of the missives that persons of very strong feeling are justified in writing, when under great provocation, as a means of obtaining mental relief, but which they should burn up the next morning."¹⁴⁸ The papers now described her as a victim of a persecution complex and "an abnormal state of mind."¹⁴⁹ "She is suffering under some morbid

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

¹⁴⁶ *The Lockport (NY) Daily Journal*, 22 April 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁴⁷ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

¹⁴⁸ *The Boston Herald*, 21 April 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

misconception of the sentiment of the country toward her,” observed *The Philadelphia Times*.

Stetson suggested that “her mind is in such a state of disorder that she fancies the whole world is at war with her....”¹⁵⁰ He compared the letter to “the jury speech of a lawyer who has a bad case. You know the old maxim, eh! If you have a bad case, abuse the counsel for the other party.”¹⁵¹ Observing that Dickinson did not, in her letter, provide a reason for her breach of contract, and that she did not specify the “shabby proceedings” of which she accused him, Stetson concluded, “She simply abuses me, the press, and the public.”¹⁵²

There were some responses sympathetic to Dickinson. *The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, while describing the letter as “very pathetic,” was convinced that “Miss Dickinson believes every word that she ever utters, and if she totally misconstrues the whole situation which she occupies, it is not a wilful misconstruction.”¹⁵³ “The author is really suffering,” said the *Evening Telegraph*, though agreeing that she was “mistaken.”¹⁵⁴ *The Woman’s Journal*, because of Dickinson’s past efforts on behalf of

¹⁵⁰ John Stetson, quoted in [*New York Herald*], n.d., in Dickinson papers.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, 21 April [1881], in Dickinson papers.

¹⁵⁴ *Evening Telegraph*, 20 April 1881, in Dickinson papers.

women, asked the public for “fair play,” and called for “her countrywomen to aid her defence.”¹⁵⁵

Many of the responses pointedly drew attention to Dickinson’s gender. “Her public role just now is that of a common scold,” asserted one daily, “There is nothing ladylike about it, and what is worse there is nothing tenable about it.”¹⁵⁶ Some thought that such behavior was to be expected from a woman: “It is a childishly petulant complaint, but such as might be expected of woman’s limitations.”¹⁵⁷ “What she could not show in her acting she has demonstrated very clearly in her failure to play,” noted one commentator, “and it is that under all her ability she is a woman.”

It is an adage that women lack the logical faculty. Miss Dickinson writes half a column to the *Herald* to show that she lacks it. Hence she is more of a woman when she writes her own thoughts than she is when she plays some other person’s text. Miss Dickinson claims the right of being judged upon the same plane with men—and yet if a man had written the letter to which she has signed her name it would be called “squealing.”¹⁵⁸

Several papers even went so far as to accuse her of damaging the rising, but still precarious, position of women in society—a cause to which Dickinson had passionately devoted years of her life. *The Daily Evening Traveller* observed that “Miss Dickinson has been regarded as a representative woman of America,” and noted that as women strive to shake off “the average masculine estimate of woman’s character” as flighty and

¹⁵⁵ *The Woman’s Journal*, 23 April 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁵⁶ *Lockport (NY) Daily Journal*, 22 April 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁵⁷ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

¹⁵⁸ Unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

irresponsible and forge a new ideal for womanhood, “it becomes a matter of serious responsibility for all women not to depart from it.”¹⁵⁹ “The cause of woman as a figure in public affairs will not be greatly promoted by the exhibition recently made by Anna Dickinson,” wrote *The Journal*, “all the bitterness of her nature has been brought to the surface, making a public exhibition that is not favorable to the cause of women as public characters.”¹⁶⁰

But Dickinson did have some sympathizers. Several papers seemed to recognize the difficulties faced by independent, intelligent women:

It is a letter whose tragic intensity must touch the heart of every woman who reads it...It is no appeal for the present. It is the condensed anguish of years that pours itself into these words that burn to a white heat. It is only a strong character that thus takes hold of our sympathies. A weak woman may be pitied, but we do not enter closely where there is no depth to admit of entrance...Anna Dickinson has the fatal dower of genius.¹⁶¹

The North American found that the story revealed “a woman’s soul,” and attributed the letter to Dickinson’s alleged realization that she had vainly tried to exceed the limitations of her sex.

She has been sneered at as masculine in thought and method. She feels that she has not been recognized, and she cries out against the injustice. And it is the cry of a woman who, having become a competitor in walks generally occupied by men, has found the competition too great to be borne. Whatever else Miss Dickinson may be, she is not a philosopher. Few women are philosophers, and they fail in that respect not because philosophy is above and beyond them naturally, but because centuries of training in the opposite direction has robbed the female mind of the

¹⁵⁹ *Daily Evening Traveller*, 23 April 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁶⁰ *The Journal*, 22 April 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁶¹ *Daily Evening Traveller*, 23 April 1881, in Dickinson papers.

necessary development. Were Miss Dickinson a philosopher, she would recognize in her troubles only the logical outcome of one woman pitted against all the jealousies and prejudices which have accumulated during twenty centuries. She has bravely flung herself against the wall, and we can only regret that she has not as bravely endured the shock. The wall cannot be leveled by one woman, or by one hundred, and it goes without saying that there are not a hundred Anna Dickinsons in the whole world.¹⁶²

Papers were almost universally of the opinion that it was just as well Dickinson canceled. Most of them were convinced she would have embarrassed herself, and gave their thoughts on the matter with varying degrees of kindness. *The Sun* snorted, “The funniest thing that has happened for a long time is the Dickinson fizzle.”

On the whole, it is just as well that Anna didn’t appear. She would have been made a laughing stock whether she deserved it or not. There would have been an attempt made by certain New York people to turn the whole affair into the ridiculous...Anna Dickinson in knee-breeches! It would have been ridiculous, sure enough, and no wonder seats were in demand at the Opera House.¹⁶³

Another even less charitable item remarked, “The papers announce that Anna Dickinson ‘throws up her engagement’ to play male characters. We thought it would make her sick.”¹⁶⁴

Dickinson had engaged Philadelphia attorney James H. Heverin, who wrote to her, informing her of the summons Stetson had issued against her on 21 April. However, the sheriff could not serve it because Dickinson was not within the jurisdiction at the time. Heverin advised her to come to Philadelphia to meet the summons head on or to

¹⁶² *The North American*, 22 April [1881], in Dickinson papers.

¹⁶³ *The Sun*, n.d., in Dickinson papers.

¹⁶⁴ *Lowell Courier*, cited in unidentified clipping in Dickinson papers.

authorize him to act on her behalf in order to fix the jurisdiction of the case in Philadelphia, “where you have lived most of your life and are more than favorably known.”¹⁶⁵ (Stetson could also have proceeded in Boston.) He also feared that public opinion would swing against Dickinson if people perceived that she was trying to evade Stetson’s summons. Dickinson apparently responded, “I authorize no one to accept for me. If John Stetson is going to sue me he must have process served on me personally.”¹⁶⁶ Heverin apparently continued to seek Dickinson’s permission to act on her behalf. She insisted,

I have been most wantonly & brutally assailed directly by Mr. Stetson, indirectly by Mr. Goodwin. I will consent to no arrangement by which this assault is to be “condoned,” “buried in the courts,” “hushed up,”—to their comfort, & my lasting injury. Either the suit is to be absolutely withdrawn & as openly stated to be withdrawn as it was proclaimed at its inception, or it is to be fought out with counter suit, not in their way & for their convenience, but, as far as I can compass it, in my way & my time, & for my convenience & profit. [emphasis in original]¹⁶⁷

Before long, the Philadelphia papers were publishing another letter from Anna Dickinson. She had written this one to her sister Susan, who turned it over to *The Philadelphia Press* for publication.

Two things astonish me. One is the stupidity of human nature, and the other is its meanness, but the first is the most annoying. Even the papers that try to say a decent word utterly beg the question. I do not complain of

¹⁶⁵ James H. Heverin to Anna Dickinson, Philadelphia, 23 April 1880, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁶⁶ Fragment (copy), Anna Dickinson to James H. Heverin, 23 April 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁶⁷ Anna Dickinson to James H. Heverin (draft), Elizabeth, NJ, 16 May 1881, in Dickinson papers.

condemnation of my work, but that by reason of premature condemnation I am prevented any chance to show what I can do, the Managers fearing the risk and I being too poor to “try it on alone.”¹⁶⁸

And finally, Dickinson revealed her reasons for backing out of the Philadelphia engagement:

Does John Stetson suppose people have no eyes, and that theatrical people especially never read the papers? It was because I found he had thrown out Augusta and Charleston, (in which there were no sales, according to those veracious witnesses—the newspapers) for Atlanta and Nashville, bringing in the Company Sunday night or Monday morning, and because he absolutely would not guarantee me but one rehearsal, (the second was promised (?) six days after he knew I would not play at all, to say nothing of the Prescott business, that I kicked over the traces, as it would have killed me professionally, if I had run in them. Now he is howling about changes in the route to satisfy me.¹⁶⁹

In the remainder of the letter Dickinson expressed her desire to take Stetson to task for ill treating her. “It will be a wholesome thing to confront him with his own telegrams on the subject,” she said, “I want him to be taught the value of language, of which he evidently knows nothing, and I think he will discover the difference, in due time, between the cross-examination of the witness box and his gabble with reporters.”¹⁷⁰ She had no fear of going to court because she felt that the weight of the evidence was on her side and

¹⁶⁸ *The Philadelphia Press*, 26 April 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

because she had no money to lose. “If I were not so poor as I am,” she declared, “I should not seek the aid of a manager with capital. You may depend on that.”¹⁷¹

About a month after she was to have played *Claude Melnotte* in Philadelphia, Dickinson further elaborated her reasons for her breach of contract to a reporter for *The New York Dramatic News*. She denied Stetson’s insinuation that she had been talked out of it by her friends, commenting, “Indeed, I must say that all of my friends who saw me dressed for the part, in fact, all the people with whom I had any conversation concerning the matter, encouraged me in the undertaking.”¹⁷² She explained that she had accepted Stetson’s terms, even though they were unfair to her, because she could not get any better. “I had it clearly understood that I was not to be billed an off-night attraction. My advertisements were to be separate from Salvini’s, and were to be equally large. This I insisted upon, and the stipulation was agreed to by Mr. Stetson.”¹⁷³ As the time for the opening approached, however, she found, in combing the pages of the Philadelphia papers, that this agreement was not being fulfilled. “The other theatres had big advertisements, but the one in which I was to play had only a solitary little announcement of Salvini and Dickinson together. Here at the start was the off-night business I had insisted upon avoiding.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ Anna Dickinson, quoted in *The New York Dramatic News*, 14 May 1881, in Dickinson papers. The case never went to court.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

In addition, Dickinson explained that she became aware that the company's touring route had been changed and that they would not be arriving until Sunday night or Monday morning (with the performance scheduled for Tuesday evening). Furthermore, Salvini had the stage on Monday for his rehearsal, and "I could get no guarantee that he would give it up to me." Concerned that she was going to be deprived of even a minimal rehearsal, she telegraphed Stetson, who sent word that he would be there personally. "He apparently thought his personal presence would settle it. I had no fear, for I had nothing to be afraid of. But I objected to the way in which I was being treated."¹⁷⁵

Dickinson next became aware that her request for a shorter leading lady was not to be honored. Prescott had insisted on playing Pauline:

She was to be thrust upon me at the last moment, when I could no longer help myself. I have no objection to Miss Prescott upon general principles, and I would as soon play with her as anybody else. But I did not want to play Claude to her Pauline, for obvious reasons. She is altogether too tall to act with me in such a relation without making it absolutely impossible for me to play my part effectively.¹⁷⁶

It was at this point that Dickinson telegraphed Stetson to inform him that she would not appear, and the papers immediately swooped in on the story:

Then everybody rushed off to buy seats, in the hope of enjoying the novel spectacle of Anna Dickinson being whipped into line. It would have been folly for me to play under these circumstances. No person on earth could have succeeded if surrounded by the adverse conditions which environed me at that time.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

She added that the newspapers had been “trying very hard to look on [her] letter as a wail of despair. It was nothing of the kind. And if it had not contained so many statements of strict but unpalatable truth, it would have been better received.”¹⁷⁸ But Dickinson still appeared undaunted:

When I started as a public speaker everybody said it was ridiculous for a young girl like me to deal with the weighty matters of the nation. But when they came to hear me I soon made them forget whether I was a man or woman. Now they say I cannot play men’s characters. If I have the chance I will show them, just as I did in public speaking—including John Stetson, of Boston.¹⁷⁹

Conclusion

...while she may be a very great woman in some respects, she has no comprehension whatever of justice or of the course necessary to pursue for her own welfare.¹⁸⁰

Unlike the women with whom I began this chapter, Dickinson was not a theatre manager; she did not operate her own theatre. She did, however, attempt to act as her own agent, participating actively in the process of career management. When she signed on with managers it was generally for financial purposes—she did not have the necessary capital to mount a production or a tour. And always reluctant to have others speak on her behalf, Dickinson frequently overruled the managers or agents with whom she worked when she felt they did not have her best interests at heart.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Anna Dickinson, quoted in *The New York Dramatic News*, 14 May 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁸⁰ *New York Dramatic News*, 9 October 1880, in Dickinson papers.

Although Dickinson repeatedly lamented the incompetence and/or dishonesty of her string of managers, her claims do not always bear up very well in light of the available evidence. In particular, it seems fairly clear that up until the time of their acrimonious split in the wake of the Davenport debacle, O.G. Bernard served Dickinson's interests admirably well. Bernard was instrumental in the negotiating of the Davenport contract, which by all accounts was remarkably (or "ridiculously," to use the term of the *New York Dramatic News*) favorable to Dickinson—quite a feat considering Dickinson's limited theatrical experience in comparison to the cachet of Fanny Davenport. Indeed, it was the most lucrative contract of Dickinson's theatrical career and provided her with a healthy income—which she desperately needed—for the months of the production.

But it was really Dickinson's own choices—the decisions she made to manage her own career—that contributed most strongly to its failure. Although it does seem clear that both sexism and anti-feminism were probably factors in the controversy over Claude Melnotte (it is hard to escape the implication of Goodwin's telegram to Stetson: "Shall it be said that a woman got the best of you? I trust not."¹⁸¹), what seems even more apparent is that Dickinson had unrealistic expectations for how she should be treated. For example, she insisted on advertisements separate from and as large as Salvini's, and protested when she found "only a solitary little announcement of Salvini and Dickinson together."¹⁸² Yet Salvini was an internationally famous star and generally acknowledged

¹⁸¹ *The Philadelphia Times*, 10 April 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁸² *The New York Dramatic News*, 14 May 1881, in Dickinson papers.

a magnificent Shakespearean actor. That Dickinson should have considered herself worthy of equal billing was both typical and somewhat presumptuous.

Dickinson repeatedly made choices that hampered the development of her own career because of a perceived injustice. Her collaboration with Fanny Davenport was eagerly awaited. She had been fortunate to team up with one of the country's most popular actresses—someone who knew how to play upon the interests of the public with her lavish costumes. But Dickinson was ultimately not a collaborator: she rejected the requests for alterations to the script, despite Davenport's much greater experience. She also forced the closing of the show—which had provided her with her best source of income in years—by refusing to reduce the royalty (which all had agreed was princely) once the receipts dwindled. Such decisions turned this collaboration—which, had it gone well, could have set the stage for future successes—into a dismal failure. Similarly, the uncompromising way Dickinson handled the Stetson affair also sabotaged her potential success. Rather than negotiating with the managers about the way things were being handled, Dickinson chose to play hardball. She simply didn't show up, infuriating those with whom she was doing business. Her response to the threatened lawsuit from Goodwin and Stetson aptly characterizes her response to any sort of professional quarrel:

Either the suit is to be absolutely withdrawn & as openly stated to be withdrawn as it was proclaimed at its inception, or it is to be fought out with counter suit, not in their way & for their convenience, but, as far as I can compass it, in my way & my time, & for my convenience & profit.¹⁸³

¹⁸³ Anna Dickinson to James H. Heverin (draft), Elizabeth, NJ, 16 May 1881.

Such an attitude, however, ultimately sabotaged her career in the theatre, for it did not allow her to make the best of a situation she considered less than ideal.

Dickinson also seems to have been unwilling to recognize the economic realities of theatrical management in the United States. After breaking with Bernard, she repeatedly complained of being unable to find a manager willing to put up enough money to promote her and produce her work. Rather than understanding the situation in terms of financial risks and rewards, she seemed to believe that the American public, urged on by unfair newspapers, had decided that she was not to have the chance. But commercial managers were always looking for the best deal, a gimmick that would sell. They thought of her as a commodity, a novelty on which they could capitalize for profit. Dickinson, however, had genuine artistic and political goals, goals that were at odds with the world of commercial theatre as it existed in the 1870s and 1880s. She did not fit into the theatre community as it existed and was unwilling to assimilate. Neither were there alternatives to the male-dominated, spectacle-driven, woman-commodifying commercial stage (or at least there were none for someone who was also seeking to make a living).

Indeed, Dickinson's career in the theatre well predates the emergence of independent (i.e., non-commercial) theatres in the United States. Although around the turn of the century there were a few unsuccessful attempts at establishing theatres modeled after the European art theatres, it was not until the second decade of the twentieth century that a true alternative to the commercial theatre emerged in the form of

the little theatre movement.¹⁸⁴ Although the independent theatre model might have offered Dickinson an appropriate venue in which to work, such an alternative probably would also have been problematic for her, because in addition to her political and artistic goals, she needed to support herself and her family. She was, at all times, *very* interested in profit.

Furthermore, unlike the women who managed theatres in the nineteenth-century, Dickinson did not counterbalance her efforts to manage her own career with appropriate feminine behavior. As Curry has noted, nineteenth-century women managers:

presented themselves not as part of a large-scale movement to change socially controlled gender roles, but as individual women who, through personal industry and artistic ability, were qualified to manage the public's entertainment. While women theatre managers were highly visible examples of women holding responsible, powerful positions, providing a sign of hope for other ambitious women, they did not, for the most part, encourage other women to follow their example, and they could not afford to be outspoken advocates of feminist issues.¹⁸⁵

Despite her desire for profit, Dickinson was unwilling to compromise her ideals in its interest. She seems to have felt that the manner in which she pursued her theatrical agenda was as important as the agenda itself. She could not tolerate any situation that would imply her willingness to be manipulated or her compliance with individuals whose interests were at odds with her own. Although she lacked both experience and financial backing, she still expected to enter the theatrical world on her own terms.

¹⁸⁴ See Oscar G. Brockett and Robert R. Findlay, *Century of Innovation: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama Since 1870* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 227-230.

¹⁸⁵ Curry, 5.

Epilogue

In September 1881, “the two young and enterprising managers,” Charles Mendum and Frank Curtis, “full of energy and daring,” announced a forthcoming tour of Dickinson in male roles.¹⁸⁶ Mendum, the manager of Philadelphia’s Arch Street Theatre, was apparently highly respected: “the public recognize the intelligent, earnest manager, whose judgment they will be largely predisposed to endorse.”¹⁸⁷ Soon the following notice appeared:

DICKINSON—Anna Dickinson will play in London at the Crystal Palace, June 5, opening in Aurelian or Claude Melnotte. Besides these parts, Anna will act Hamlet, Romeo and Macbeth!! Frank Curtis and Charles Mendum will undertake to manage her—something nobody has ever managed in doing.¹⁸⁸

There is no evidence that Dickinson ever went to London.

¹⁸⁶ *Sunday Mercury*, Philadelphia, 25 September 1881, in Dickinson papers; *Progress*, 15 October 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁸⁷ *Sunday Transcript*, Philadelphia, 2 October 1881, in Dickinson papers.

¹⁸⁸ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 3 September 1881, in Dickinson papers.

CONCLUSION

Miss Dickinson's entire life has been one of heroic endeavor, and she has achieved something beyond riches or personal fame. She gave the best years of her life to a cause in which she was devoted, heart and soul, and among orators whose voices rang throughout the land, when "fate, wavering, sat and shook her doubtful urn," none helped more effectually than this persistent little woman. From a youthful wonder she grew to be an oracle, and in the gravest questions affecting the nation's welfare this one earnest voice was felt to be somehow more potent than a million votes. A restless, striving, sublime spirit of a woman, she braved more than danger in conquering the platform as a portion of her sex's unquestioned rights, and how many mountebanks now trip smoothly across the bridge she helped to build, and obtain a hearing, which they could never have had but for some courageous soul like this, who would not be intimidated.¹

To be a lady in nineteenth-century American society was supposed to mean domesticity, passivity, submissiveness, purity, and spirituality. It was supposed to mean a private life devoted to husband, home, and children—and that "work" was unpaid and invisible. It was supposed to mean indirect influence rather than direct action.

Anna Dickinson defied each one of these strictures. Forced to become a family breadwinner as an adolescent, a private, domestic existence was always denied her. Out of such necessity was born a passionate belief in the American Dream, as Dickinson's mantra, "The world belongs to those who *take it*" (not to mention her admiration for Napoleon) attests. A working girl out of hardship, Dickinson nevertheless championed her right as an American to be one, contesting the notion that women belonged shuttered away in their homes, ignorant of the masculine worlds of business and politics. And

¹ *The Daily Recorder*, 18 June 1882, in Dickinson papers.

disinclined toward work that was traditionally the province of women, such as teaching, Dickinson chose for herself a profession that would thrust her prominently into a space where ladies did not belong—in the public sphere.

Dickinson's desire to have a voice in American culture was evident at the age of fourteen, when she published an anti-slavery article in Garrison's *The Liberator*. As her image transformed from that of working girl to innocent Quaker and ardent abolitionist, then to partisan spokesperson and professional lecturer, she capitalized on a wartime political climate that seized on her youth and idealism as a beacon of hope in desperate times. Having begun her public life with an eagerly receptive audience, she grew confident in her ability to sway her listeners and equally confident of her claim to a public voice.

Dickinson also recognized the theatre's potential for affecting the minds and hearts of its spectators. But the American theatre of the 1870s and 1880s was not one receptive to weighty ideas. Although as the century drew to a close the theatre became increasingly attuned to social issues, post-Civil War audiences, still reeling from the bloody conflict and presidential assassination, were seeking escape, not catharsis or controversy.² Theatrical impresarios like Augustin Daly and the Frohman brothers carved out a space for theatre in the national culture by catering to the tastes of (and creating

² Thomas Postlewait, "The Hieroglyphic Stage: American Theatre and Society, Post-Civil War to 1945," in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, vol. 2, ed. Don Wilmet and Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 113.

desires for) a public that craved “increasingly sensational excitement.”³ Such excitement was often accompanied by the exhibition of women’s bodies for male visual pleasure.⁴

Dickinson, to whose seemingly prophetic voice wartime audiences had listened eagerly to carry them through the conflict, was not content to recede into the background once Americans’ appetites for issues had subsided. In an age that offered women few opportunities (though certainly these were increasing by the end of the century) to participate in public life, she recognized the theatre as a promising avenue to maintain her place in American public consciousness.

I have suggested throughout that Dickinson’s endeavors to forge a career in the theatre can be seen as a kind of citizenship quest. According to historian Linda K. Kerber, “Women have been citizens of the United States as long as the republic has existed,” in the sense that they were “subject to the laws and were obliged to pay taxes.”⁵ “Citizen,” Kerber observes,

is an equalizing word...the founding generation...used a capacious rhetoric that ignores differences of gender, race and ethnicity, religion and class; any free person who had not fled with the British or explicitly denounced the patriots was a citizen...Philosophically...all citizens are bound equally to the state in a web of rights and obligations.⁶

³ Judith L. Fisher and Stephen Watt, eds., *When They Weren’t Doing Shakespeare: Essays on Nineteenth-Century British and American Theatre* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), xviii.

⁴ Dudden, 4.

⁵ Linda K. Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), xx.

⁶ *Ibid.*

These rights and obligations, however, varied enormously depending on whether the citizen was male or female.⁷ As Lauren Berlant argues,

These abstract principles of democratic nationality have always been hypocritical. From the beginning, entire populations of persons were excluded from the national promise... The populations who were and are managed by the discipline of the promise—women, African Americans, Native Americans, immigrants, homosexuals—have long experienced simultaneously the wish to be full citizens and the violence of their partial citizenship....⁸

Nineteenth-century suffrage advocates argued that voting rights were essential to the concept of citizenship.⁹ But as I noted in Chapter One, Dickinson's concerns for women extended beyond merely the ballot: for Dickinson, full citizenship for women also meant (among other things) non-discriminatory employment and equal pay for equal work. As Berlant observes, "the rules of citizenship constantly change, both in the law and in the public sense of how persons ought to be treated, protected, and encouraged to act."¹⁰ One might argue that, in several ways, Dickinson's oratorical career was devoted to changing these rules. Most obviously, she spoke on behalf of the disenfranchised, asserting the personhood of those dehumanized by the institution of slavery and proclaiming the right of silenced women to participate in American culture. At the same time, in the very act of speaking in public as a woman, Dickinson asserted her own claim

⁷ *Ibid.*, xxi.

⁸ Berlant, 18-19.

⁹ Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 180.

¹⁰ Berlant, 19.

to citizenship. Defying those strictures that defined national politics as a masculine endeavor, Dickinson behaved as a true American citizen—a public figure, participating actively in questions of national importance—even while being denied its attendant rights.

Upon entering the theatrical profession, Dickinson attempted to maintain her status as a public figure with a voice in culture by attempting to transform her messages into another medium. Her background as a stump speaker and political lecturer had accustomed her to enacting her citizenship by exercising her right to speak on issues of relevance to the state. Performing citizenship on the stage—which was resolutely commercial and for the most part divorced from national politics—proved to be more challenging. While an orator, Dickinson had been able to contribute directly to the conversations of greatest cultural moment, and, for a time, she held a privileged position in those conversations. As a novice in the theatre, however, she had no such privilege, though she was convinced that she could earn one easily, given the chance. But she faced a dual challenge. First, what Dickinson had to offer the theatre—intellect and social purpose rather than emotionalism and a sexualized body—was out of step with the most dominant theatrical trends. Had she been willing to market herself as a novelty act, which probably was the way many theatre people (and certainly the New York critical establishment) saw her, perhaps she could have eked out a living. But Dickinson saw herself at the center, not the margins. She wanted to be taken as a serious artist who made carefully considered intellectual and aesthetic choices, choices that were

deliberately at variance with those of most other actresses and playwrights. At the same time, she sought financial success. Although she could see a more elevated purpose for theatre than mere entertainment, her need to make a living was paramount. Yet there was not a venue in which she could successfully combine those two desires. This tension between the commercial enterprise of theatre and Dickinson's artistic goals was present throughout the duration of her theatrical career.

Secondly, and probably even more importantly, with no theatrical training or experience, Dickinson began her career at a severe disadvantage, the degree of which she seems never really to have recognized. The audacity with which she debuted made her an instant target for those who hated her politics as well as those who resented her presumption. She lacked the technique to demonstrate her ideas effectively and therefore could not overcome the disdain of her critics. With a naïve belief in her own power to challenge the status quo in an alien profession, she proposed a different kind of theatre only to be rejected by the critical establishment as an upstart novelty and by the theatrical community as a box office liability.

But Dickinson's ultimate failure in the theatrical profession does not diminish the significance of her accomplishments in it. Unlike most playwrights of the period, she used drama as a medium for ideas, rewriting images of women in history and promoting progressive ideas about women and work. In her acting, she was less interested in technique, embodiment, and emotionalism than she was in conveying a thoughtful interpretation. In managing (or attempting to manage) her career, she insisted on operating according to her own ideal principles, rather than in navigating the system as it

existed. Whatever her liabilities, Dickinson nevertheless envisioned the theatre as a space where a woman might enact for the public her own artistic and political insights. In this way she attempted to maintain a voice and actively participate in American culture.

Susan A. Glenn has argued that by the 1880s and 1890s, theatrical producers came to recognize that the New Woman was a commercially viable product.¹¹ These professional theatre women “helped make unorthodox female behavior more attractive and enjoyable than the nineteenth-century political radicals had been able to do and, as a consequence, helped give new views of women wider acceptance.”¹² Had Dickinson attempted to make the transition from orator to actress a decade later than she did, she might have found an audience more receptive to her theatrical goals. By the 1890s, “the popular theater promoted the development of the first self-consciously ‘modern’ expression of new womanhood.”¹³

While theater’s capacity to create new images and representations of women made it an important incubator for modern ideas about femininity, equally important was the crucial role that female performers played in the process of representing themselves. The extraordinary self-consciousness with which they positioned themselves in relationship to modern social, intellectual, and aesthetic practices and debates made them more than symbols of cultural change. They were also active participants in and critical observers of their own cultural moment.¹⁴

¹¹ Glenn, 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5-6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Dickinson might be considered a foremother of these later actresses, for she too attempted to use the theatre in order to promote (indeed, embody) new images of women and to critique the American culture of her day. Lacking the tools, experience, and networks necessary to succeed in the theatre of the 1870s and 1880s, Dickinson nevertheless began to articulate a vision that would only come to fruition in the hands of more skilled artists in a more receptive time.

APPENDIX A: Davenport Contract

Anna E. Dickinson
-with-
Fanny Davenport Price
Agreement
Dated July 27 1880

This agreement made and executed this 27th day of July.....1880, between Anna E. Dickinson, of the first part, and Fanny Davenport Price, (otherwise known as Fanny Davenport,) of the second part.

Witnesseth: that the part of the first part, in consideration of the sum of One dollar in hand paid, the receipt of which is hereby acknowledged, and further payments hereinafter stipulated, hereby agrees to write a play for production on the dramatic stage, and that the aforesaid play shall be delivered to the party of the second part on or about the 13th day of August A.D. 1880, and upon delivery of the manuscript of the said play the said party of the second part hereby agrees to pay to the said party of the first part the sum of Fifteen hundred (\$1500) dollars.

And it is further agreed that the said party of the second part shall open her dramatic season of the fall of 1880, in the City and State of New York, with the aforesaid play, and shall continue its production throughout the entire season of 1880-81, for the right and privilege of which the party of the second part will pay to the party of the first part, in addition to the stated sum hereinbefore named, the sum of three hundred and fifty (\$350--) dollars, as royalty, for each and every week that said play is so produced during said season, possible at the end of each and every of such weeks by New York draft to the party of the first part, or her authorized agent at any point said party of the first part may designate, except in the event that the said party of the second part shall be prevented from producing said play at any time during said season, by reason of illness, or some other unavoidable cause or causes, and shall not during the time in which she so ceases to perform said play, perform any other play or plays, then and in such case, the said party of the second part shall be exempted from, and shall not be responsible for the payment of said royalty during the time of the non-performance of said play, as aforesaid.

That in the case of non-payment of any one of the aforesaid weekly payments, except during the non-performance on said play, as hereinbefore provided, then the party of the first part reserves the right to take possession of said manuscript parts & c. of said play and prevent said party of the second part from the further production of the same. But it is also further agreed that in the event that the said play shall not in the judgment of the party of the second part be a pecuniary success then the said party of the second part

shall have the right to terminate the production thereof, and shall no longer be responsible for the payment to the said party of the first part of any further royalty or royalties, for the unexpired balance and remainder of said season during which the said play is no longer performed, as aforesaid, and all liability on the part of the said party of the second part for the payment of any royalty or royalties to the said party of the first part shall cease, and the said party of the first part shall thereupon have the right to take possession of said manuscript parts & c. of said play, as aforesaid.

And it is further mutually understood and agreed that the party of the first part hereby reserves and maintains all her rights, title and proprietorship in the aforesaid play, and her copy-right thereof, permitting only the said party of the second part the sole and exclusive right to produce said play for the season named, throughout the United States and Canada, giving said party of the second part the privilege of renewal upon such terms and conditions as may be hereafter mutually agreed upon, upon the expiration of his contract. In witness whereof we have hereunto set our hands and seals, the day and year first above written.

In presence of Anna E. Dickinson
 Fanny Davenport Price
 James P [last name illegible]

APPENDIX B: Anna E. Dickinson Chronology

- 1842 Born, October 28
- 1856 Abolitionist piece published in Garrison's *The Liberator*
- 1860 First speech in public, Association of Progressive Friends
- 1861 Dismissed from U.S. Mint, Philadelphia, for criticizing McClellan
- 1862 Spoke at Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society with Garrison; New England tour
- 1863 Republican campaigns in New Hampshire and Connecticut
- 1864 Speech in House of Representatives before Congress, Supreme Court, and President Lincoln
- 1865 Begins decade of lucrative professional lecturing, during which her speech on Joan of Arc is enormously popular
- 1869 Gave inaugural address for National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and agreed to serve as Vice President
- 1876 Theatrical debut. Wrote and performed in *Anne Boleyn* in Boston and *Laura* in Philadelphia; wrote *Love and Duty*, *Esther Arnim*
- 1878 Wrote *Aurelian*
- 1879 Wrote *An American Girl*
- 1880 Wrote *The Test of Honor*
- 1881 First attempt at breeches role; backed out of contract
- 1882 Debut in *Hamlet*
- 1888 Return to Republican stump
- 1891 Committed to State Hospital for the Insane, Danville, Pennsylvania
- 1897 Declared sane in court
- 1932 Died, October 22

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