CITY AMUSEMENTS

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It is a matter of astonishment, that among all the benevolent enterprises of the day, no society has yet been formed for the purpose of inquiring into and bettering the amusements of the people. It is a subject of vast importance, and one worthy of commanding the attention of reformers and philanthropists. The school-room, the church and the press, undergo a continual supervision by legal and self-constituted committees, to see that the public mind be not corrupted by improper aliment. But the Theatre, the Circus[1], and other places of public amusement, are shunned, as though good people could be contaminated by breathing even their names. Yet the minds of the young are more powerfully affected in their amusements, than in their studies, and deeper impressions are made upon their hearts in the unguarded relaxation of places of recreation, than while listening to wearisome lectures or long doctrinal sermons. Unhappily, the theatre has been so managed for many years in this city, that a man or woman of delicate sensibilities could not visit it. But those who have the good of their fellow-beings at heart are not allowed to indulge in squeamish feelings; and a virtuous motive will preserve the garments of adventurer from contagion, even in the passing through the rabble rout of

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[1] In her book, *The Circus Age*, Janet Davis claims that after Joshuah Brown began showing circuses in canvas tents in 1825, "the circus market expanded swiftly, now reaching into previously isolated rural areas" (17). Gregory Renoof describes circuses at this time as: "the display of handsome steeds, skilled riding, exotic animals, and demonstrations of human strength and athleticism. But troupes also included risqué acts." Due to its accessibility and its diverse shows, Renoof asserts, "Circuses invariably attracted rowdy young men who viewed circus day as an occasion to drink, carouse and fight… The dangerous combination of disorderly men and morally questionable entertainment prompted evangelical leaders and class conscious elites to denounce the circus" ("Circuses"). Davis also states that, "many Protestant clergymen denounced the circus for its seminude athletes and the practice of gambling on the show grounds. Based on the protest from the clergy, Vermont and Connecticut state laws banned the circus in the antebellum era" (17).

Comus[2]. It is therefore a duty which good men owe to society to overlook the amusements of people, and when they cannot abolish a pernicious amusement, they must strive to improve it.

It seems to be quite impossible to extinguish the love of dramatic representations. It is none of the earliest temptations which beset youth; and the entire management of the theatre being in the hands of unprincipled and mercenary managers, the stage has become a prolific source of corruption to our young men. But is should not be so; and it is the duty of the conservators of our morals to see that the abuses of the stage, as well as the abuses of the school –room, be abolished. It is by no means unusual to hear our preachers denounce the theatre, without ever having been inside of one; and pronounce anathemas against practices which never had an existence. Of course, those whom it is intended to benefit by such means only laugh at the ignorance of their instructors, and persevere in their wicked courses. Our city preachers and teachers should go the rounds of our public places of amusement, that they might suggest suitable remedies for their evils, if any exist. Our foreign missionaries inquire diligently into the practices of the heathen among whom they are sent, and become very learned in all the enormities of pagan worship; they could not combat successfully with their evil influences unless they thoroughly understood their origin; neither can our domestic missionaries contend with the vices which it is their aim to overcome, unless they thoroughly understand them.

The Bishop of London[3] is reported to have made, recently, a visit in disguise, in company with other benevolent men, to the lowest haunts of the metropolis; that, by seeing the actual condition of the lower orders, he might be able to act intelligently in his endeavors to reform them. This is the only way in which any good can be done by moral reformers. Let those who declaim against theatres go to the theatres, and learn with their own eyes what is it that is offensive in dramatic representations. Many, we have no doubt, would be struck with the fine morality of the plays, the purity of the dialogue, the correct deportment of the actors, and the forcible lessons of life which the stage presents even in its lowest and most degraded condition; and they would doubtless be astonished that an amusement of so refined a nature, and so capable of conveying moral impressions, should suffer from the denunciations of religious men. But let them leave the stage, and turn to the filthy coffee-rooms and punch-rooms of the lobbies, where abandoned men and women mingle freely together, where every inducement to licentiousness and debauchery is held out to the young, as if on purpose to counteract any good impression which the stage managers have made, -- and they would no longer wonder that the Theatre was denounced by the professedly

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[2] *Comus*: "A revel, merry-making; a personification of revelry as a deity."

[3] Charles Blomfield was Bishop of the Church of England from 1828 to 1857. He advocated improving the environment for the poor; "It was at his initiative that Edwin Chadwick and the poor law commissioners were instructed in 1839 to compile a *Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population*, and throughout the 1840s Blomfield supported associations and legislation to improve sanitation in urban slums" (Burns).

virtuous; but they might well wonder why these filthy holes should be appended to the theatre, while the lecture-room, the concert-room, and all other places of amusement, are free from them. The reason is very obvious. In the time of Charles the Second[4], the stage, in common with every other department of art, was highly immoral; and religious preachers of every denomination, but mainly puritans, launched their loudest invectives against it, as well they might; and the feeling against the stage with us has been inherited from these puritans, and exists now among their descendants as rankly as with them, even when the cause which gave birth has ceased to exist for nearly a century. None of the indecent plays[5] of Charles the Second's time has been represented in our theatres for fifty years past; but the literature of the period, which was tinctured with the same moral qualities that disgraced the stage, is still preserved in our libraries, and we have no doubt that every clergyman's bookcase in the city contains more objectionable reading than is presented on the stage during a year. The truth is, that the greater number of acting plays are as moral and prosy as an afternoon sermon; for before a play can be put upon the English stage it must be approved by the Chamberlain[6], who blots out every coarse expression and every scene of doubtful morality; and as we produce no plays of our own, we present only those that the English licensers have pronounced fit for the people.

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[4] Charles the Second (1630-1685) advocated political and religious tolerance. When Oliver Cromwell, a Puritan, dethroned Charles the Second, he banned the theatre in England. After Charles the Second was restored back to the monarchy in 1660, he supported the theatre by granting patents to Thomas Killigrew and Sir William Davenant. Using these funds, Killigrew opened the Theatre Royal on Drury Lane, and Davenant established the Duke's Theatre in the Lincoln Field's Inn.

[5] Restoration comedy, which was popular after Charles the Second reinstated theatres in 1660, was known for its wit, licentiousness, and cynicism. Women also began to take the stage at this time.

[6] In 1551, a Royal Proclamation declared that all plays in England required a Royal license before they could be performed. Originally, the Master of the Revels, head of theatre entertainment at court, censored the plays under the authority of Lord Chamberlain. The Licensing Act, advocated by Robert Walpole (see note 8), was passed in 1737, making the Master of Revels full-time 'Licensers of the Stage,' still under Lord Chamberlain's jurisdiction. The Theatre Act passed in 1843 required every new play to be submitted to Lord Chamberlain's office, and it also allowed him to fine or take away the license of any theatre that staged a banned or unlicensed play. Although the Lord Chamberlain no longer had the absolute power to veto plays without any explanation, under the Theatre Act of 1843, he still had the authority to prohibit plays that were "not fitting for the preservation of good manners, decorum or of the public peace so to do" (Woodfield 109).

But we still keep up the hereditary cry against the immoralities of the stage; and one state[7] in the Union forbids by law any dramatic representation within her borders, when the stage has become almost as moral as the pulpit. Indeed, a good moral is an essential part of every stage performance, without which no play can be successful. No other species of amusement demands this; yet the stage is still called immoral, religious people are forbidden to frequent the theatre, and only the reckless and abandoned have courage to visit it, and *it is to suit their tastes, because they form the chief supporters of the stage, that the objectionable places which we have hinted at have an existence*. But let the theatre be visited by respectable people, men of refined tastes and good morals, and the punch-rooms and coffee-rooms would soon be abolished, and the people would have what they continually seek—a place of amusement where they might derive some moral profit, while indulging in the relaxation from the cares of business which is necessary to preserve a healthy tone in the moral and physical system.

The upper classes, as the rich are called, feel the want of a place of public amusement, though they have a thousand resources which the poor lack, and they are striving to establish an Italian opera house for their peculiar enjoyment; and one of our morning papers, that holds the theatre in such abhorrence as to exclude all dramatic advertisements from its columns, professes to be in ecstasies with the measure. But the Italian opera, in its very highest condition, is only the recreation of Sybarites[8]; it appeals only to the animal sensations, but makes no aim at the heart; which the lowest order of dramatic entertainments professes to do. If half the exertions which are bestowed in attempts to establish an Italian opera in this city, were made in behalf of the theatre to establish it on a proper basis, a place of amusement would be furnished for the people which would be acceptable and profitable to all classes. An Italian opera never can succeed in this city. If it cannot in London and Paris without the aid of government or government officials, how can it be supported here, where its patrons are fewer and its expenses higher?

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[7] In 1750, the Massachusetts General Court passed: "An Act for preventing Stage-Plays, and other Theatrical Entertainments," which banned theatre to prevent "the many and great mischiefs which arise from the public stage-plays" ("Forgotten Chapters").

[8] *Sybarite*: "A native or citizen of Sybaris, an ancient Greek city of southern Italy, traditionally noted for its effeminacy and luxury." In an article entitled, "Operas and Concerts," published in January 1845 in the *Broadway Journal*, the description of the Italian opera echoes the author of this article's distaste for the artifice of the opera and his reference to the Sybarites: "we greatly distrust this violent and sudden excitement about the Italian Opera. It is not the expression of a discriminating and healthy public appreciation, but it is rather the fussy clamor of a set or clique, with no further end in view than the passing away of idle hours, combined with affected display of dress and fashion" (59).

Horace Walpole[9], in one of his letters to Sir Horace Mann, writes,-

"We have got another opera, which is liked; there was to have been a vast elephant, but just Directors, designing to give the audience the full weight of one for their money, made it so heavy that at the Prova[10] it broke through the stage. It was to have carried twenty soldiers, with Monticelli[11] on a throne in the middle. There is a new subscription begun for next year, thirty subscribers at two hundred pounds each. Would you believe that I am one? You need not believe it quite, for I am but half an one; Mr. Conway and I take a share between us."

This was the last century, to be sure, but it is by similar means that the Italian Opera is now supported in London; and unless the much talked-of "upper ten thousand"[12] are willing to subscribe in this munificent manner for the amusement of each other, which we doubt exceedingly, and Italian opera can never flourish among us.

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[9] Horace Walpole (1717-1797) was the youngest son of Sir Robert Walpole, who is considered the first British Prime Minister. Horace Walpole was a Member of Parliament from 1741 until 1767. In addition to politics, he also had literary, musical, and architectural interests. In 1757 he created a private printing press at Strawberry Hill, a villa he transformed into a pseudo-Gothic showplace, and published his own novels and plays as well as his friends' works (the first works he published were Thomas Gray's *Odes*). Additionally, as the letter quoted in this article states, he subscribed to the opera. The author implores the upper ten thousand (see note 11) to implement a similar method of patronage for funding the theatres in America.

[10] Although "prova" is capitalized in the quotation, in other books containing Walpole's letters, the word is in italics and not capitalized. Therefore, prova might not refer to a place; rather, in this context, it could indicate a test or a rehearsal, which are English translations of "prova."

[11] Angelo Maria Monticelli (1715-1764) was a famous Italian opera singer. Through their subscription to the opera houses, Horace Walpole as well as other political figures helped pay for the performances of Montecilli and other famous opera singers. In another letter to Horace Man, Walpole praises his talent saying, "Monticelli sings it beyond what you can conceive" (Walpole 248).

[12] *Upper ten thousand*: "the upper classes; the aristocracy." The phrase was first published in 1844 in the *Evening Mirror*. J.E. Brown illustrated the following drawing, captioned: "One of the 'Upper Ten Thousand.'" It appears on page 136 in the *Broadway Journal* Vol. 1, Issue 9, Mar 1, 1845:

ONE OF THE "UPPER TEN THOUSAND."

EDITOR'S NOTE

During the mid-nineteenth century in America, public entertainment was a burgeoning industry. Theatres, circuses, opera houses, sporting events, and other forms of public entertainment were developing throughout the country. Mobility allowed the circus to reach more distant areas and due to a growing rate of disposable income, more people could afford to go to theatres and opera houses. Increasing accessibility of public entertainment created spaces for a wider range of people to attend the same events. As a result, the nature of the diverse audiences as well as the "morally questionable" shows in the theatres and circuses fueled religious and conservative institutions to reprimand public entertainment. However, the author of this article claims that the plays performed in theatres were actually "as moral and prosy as an afternoon sermon;" rather, the physical appendages to the theatres, the coffee-rooms and punch-rooms, were the places "where every inducement to licentiousness and debauchery is held out to the young." In response to this issue, the author calls on the upper class to reform the theatre through financial support. Other articles in the *Broadway Journal* contain a similar desire of establishing a kind of moral order in the public sphere.

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