Paper Money Men
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Commerce, Manhood, and the Sensational Public Sphere in Antebellum America

David Anthony
As we proceed to develop our investigation, we shall find, in general, that the characters who appear on the economic stage are mere personifications of economic relations; it is as the bearers of these economic relations that they come into contact with each other.

—Karl Marx, Capital, Volume 1 (1867)

I love the paper money, and the paper money men;
My hundred, if they go to pot, I fear would sink to ten . . .

I hold the paper money men say truly, when they say
They ought to pay their promises, with promises to pay;
And he is an unrighteous judge, who says they shall or may,
Be made to keep their promises in any other way.

—Thomas Love Peacock, Paper Money Lyrics (1837)
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He dreamed that he had discovered an immense treasure in the center of his garden. At every stroke of the spade he laid bare a golden ingot; diamond crosses sparkled out of the dust; bags of money turned up their bellies, corpulent with pieces of eight, or venerable doubloons; and chests . . . yawned forth before his ravished eyes, and vomited forth their glittering contents.

*Tales of a Traveller* (1824)

As the rays of the lanterns fell within the pit, there flashed upwards, from a confused heap of gold and of jewels, a glow and a glare that absolutely dazzled our eyes. . . . The chest had been full to the brim. . . . Having assorted all with care, we found ourselves possessed of even vaster wealth than we had at first supposed. In coin there was rather more than four hundred and fifty thousand dollars—estimating the value of the pieces, as accurately as we could, by the tables of the period. There was not a particle of silver. All was gold of antique date and of great variety—French, Spanish, and German money, with a few English guineas, and some counters, of which we had never seen specimens before. There were several very large and heavy coins, so worn that we could make nothing of their inscriptions. There was no American money.

—Edgar Allan Poe, “The Gold-Bug” (1843)

One of the key images in the development of antebellum sensationalism is the staging of a relationship between men and treasure. A kind of nervously repeated primal scene, in which we see men hugging hoarded piles of gold bullion, fantasizing about chests of coins and jewels, or, most often, lamenting the recent loss of such riches, these moments proliferate in the cultural production of the period, and provide readers with an embarrassed fantasy glimpse at the source of their economic origins. For Freud, the primal scene is rarely accessible by way of direct recollection; instead, only in dreams is
this moment available, surfacing throughout one’s life as a kind of continual trauma. Literary sensationalism is the cultural repository of such dream images for the antebellum period. Repeating in fantasy form the charged scene in which a capitalist selfhood is created, they remind us that by the mid-nineteenth century, America had become a kind of fiscal neurotic, given over to insecurity, anxiety, depression, and irrational fears—all states of affect stemming from the residual question: what was the originary relationship between men and money, and how did it go so terribly wrong?

Dream moments of found treasure inform the work of canonical writers such as Washington Irving and Edgar Allan Poe. But they are more frequent in the period’s pulpier material, such as urban sensation fiction, magazine stories, and melodramatic stage productions. Moreover, these moments are usually crucial to the very fabric and structure of these narratives, often providing the backdrop against which both character and plot are organized. “[H]e surveyed the prospect disclosed by the opened chest, with a glance of the deepest satisfaction,” we are told at a key moment in George Lippard’s best-selling novel, The Quaker City (1845), as the criminal Devil-Bug first views a cache of gold he has stolen with the help of his accomplice Gabriel Von Gelt. “By his side knelt the Jew, his dark eyes sparkling with delight, as he gazed upon the treasures of the opened chest . . . and over the rich stores of coin” (238). Von Gelt’s comments are equally telling. “Bi-Gott!” he says. “I smellsh te gooldt already. . . . Doubloosh! Doubloosh!” (239). Lippard’s unembarrassed anti-Semitism offers the Jew Von Gelt as a negative figure of greed, but the somewhat obscene covetousness Von Gelt displays is not enough to displace the more general significance and desirability of the treasure in this passage. Indeed, described as analogous to the missing “funds of the United States Bank” (200), the “rich stores of coin” are at the thematic and emotional center of the novel; representing a form of financial stability otherwise absent from the world Lippard depicts, the gold is (far more than the various imperiled women the reader encounters) the real object of desire in this novel.

As I will discuss over the course of this book, there are an even greater number of moments in which antebellum narratives pivot around the exchange of currency—for example, the dramatic moment in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) when young George Shelby seeks somewhat naively to arrest the commodity status of his good friend, the slave Uncle Tom, by giving him his golden dollar. “I’ve brought you my dollar,” George says to Uncle Tom (171; emphasis in original). Stowe makes it clear that the gift is a direct response to the crisis of debt that has engulfed his family and forced his father to sell Uncle Tom to the slave trader Haley (“He had speculated largely and quite loosely,” we are told of Mr. Shelby
But the repeated sale of Uncle Tom proves that the dollar is no match for the vicissitudes of the modern paper economy—just as George is himself unequal to the task of bettering speculative capitalism, this despite his eventual assertion of his manhood when he punches the slave trader Simon Legree (592). And as I will show, it is precisely this inequity between hard money and the speculative economy that drives much of antebellum sensationalism, and the form of manhood it so often depicts. By way of starting, though, I want to emphasize how literary representations of treasure—money hoarded and stored, longed-for and sometimes located—retain their own special significance in the works of this period. For what they offer is a fantasy response to the very problem experienced by George Shelby. Indeed, as Lippard’s mention of the U.S. Bank begins to suggest, these moments signal, both directly and indirectly, a broader set of concerns over the period’s economy. Specifically, they take part in a complex meditation on the shift from a mercantilist form of capitalism, in which value is thought of as stable and linked to local trade and secure sites of gold bullion, to a sense of the world informed by the drama and dynamism of capitalist exchange. What these stories comment on, in other words, is the shift from money as treasure to money as capital. And, I will argue, this shift makes all the difference for the representation of manhood, especially as manhood was linked more and more closely to the context of the boom-and-bust economy of mid-nineteenth-century America.

“I love the paper money, and the paper money men,” writes Thomas Love Peacock in *Paper Money Lyrics*, a satiric work produced in the wake of the 1837 Panic. “I hold the paper money men say truly, when they say / They ought to pay their promises, with promises to pay” (115). I want to follow Peacock, and refer here to a paper money manhood, one emerging with particular force and complexity within antebellum sensationalism. On the one hand, this designation refers simply to the speculator villains who populate so much of the period’s fiction—the men whom Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, writing about the early republican period, refers to as the “corrupt new men of paper and place—the new capitalism’s stock-jobbers . . . [who] live in a passionate and venal world driven by fantasy and credit, obsessed with stocks, speculation, and debt” (“Domesticating Virtue” 172). But paper money manhood also implies the far greater number of aspiring professionals who found themselves the victim of the new and unstable paper economy in the period from 1819 to 1857. As historians such as Charles Sellers, Scott A. Sandage, and Steven Mihm have shown, this period was marked by widespread economic insecurity and failure, as the increasing extension of paper forms of credit connected local communities and their inhabitants with distant, unseen markets and
as the value of paper currencies fluctuated with changes in those markets.\(^1\) “Wherever the market extended,” Sellers writes in a description of the seemingly inevitable series of economic panics that rocked the nation during this period, “the remorseless process of debt liquidation chastened not only modest venturers, but also the apparently wealthy who had plunged and borrowed most recklessly. Specie to satisfy their creditors could not be had” (Market 137). Sandage puts it thus: “Nineteenth-century Americans had to live in a new world where the sky was always falling. . . . From Wall Street to the muddiest rural lane, failure and the fear of it left a garrulous people at a loss for words” (Losers 22; 24).

The image of the specie-poor, failure-anxious citizen was particularly poignant and especially frequent in the countless representations of fiscally imperiled professional manhood that I will be examining here. Critics and historians have made it clear that early-nineteenth-century professional manhood was especially volatile, in particular as a new breed of men migrated from the country to the city, and took up careers that were increasingly intertwined with and vulnerable to distant market forces beyond their control.\(^2\) Thus Toby Ditz suggests that the “imperiled” masculinity characteristic of the wholesale merchant classes in early republican Philadelphia reflects “dislocations caused by the long-term transformation of markets from temporally and spatially delimited places and events into impersonal, unbounded, and abstract processes” (“Shipwrecked” 51). The result, she argues, is a “precarious” form of male selfhood, one centered less and less on an interior form of self-possession and “inner being,” and increasingly contingent on a commodified and frequently “elusive” form of reputation. To become economically insolvent in this world, Ditz explains, is to become “unmanned” and “feminized” (72; 66). David Leverenz provides similar analysis of the professional male of the antebellum period. As he explains in his seminal study, Manhood and the American Renaissance (1989), “The basic class conflict between 1825 and 1850 comes with the rise of a new middle class, for whom manhood is based much more exclusively in work and entrepreneurial competition. Traditional norms of dignity and social status, implying as they do a relatively stable world of small villages, can mitigate the basic connection between manhood and humiliation. In a world of much greater mobility and competition, manhood becomes a more intense anxiety” (74). For Leverenz as for Ditz, early forms of professional American manhood were located at the uneasy dividing line between older forms of mercantile capitalism and the new, more fluid world of the paper economy. Indeed, as they make clear, the various versions of a dominant capitalist manhood emerging during this period were themselves ideological, and designed to guard against the vicissitudes of risk and competition.
Building on the work of Ditz, Leverenz, and others, Dana Nelson further complicates the capitalist manhood emerging during this period. Arguing that the “radicalizing energy of local democratic practices” was “rerouted” (National 34) during the early national and antebellum periods into the psychological and affective energies of “market competition” (15), she suggests that the white professional manhood came to embody a new and “corporate” (21) form of national selfhood. The result, she says, is an anxious manhood constantly at odds with itself. “[E]merging models of competitive manhood, quite differently from the communal models they replaced, required individual men to internalize in terms of personal responsibility the political and economic vicissitudes of the early nation,” she says. “These new ‘responsibilities’ propelled a substantially intensified need for management and control and a particular pattern of emotional anxiety among white men” (62).

Nelson demonstrates throughout her study the way in which the anxiety of the professional male is often projected onto figures of Otherness such as women and Native Americans. As I detail throughout this study, the period’s sensationalism performs a similar logic of displacement, whereby sensational figures of financial anxiety such as the Jew and the speculator (and, more specifically, characters such as Irving’s Headless Horseman and Melville’s Bartleby) embody the putative “theft” of masculine wholeness and enjoyment, even as they represent the disavowed desires of the emerging professional male. But by way of starting, I want to emphasize two main points. First, and as the above critics suggest, we need to continue to extend our study of the professional male during this period, and in doing so extend our understanding of the very psychology of capitalism as it was both shifting and coalescing within the emergent professional classes. How was desire negotiated by the professional male in postmercantile America, and how did this negotiation reflect the more fluid world of paper money and credit? What was the role of fantasy in helping the professional male negotiate the shift from mercantilism to capitalism proper, and how did the very notion of fantasy change for these new men in this new world? Moreover, what do these changes tell us about mid-nineteenth-century capitalism, at least as experienced by an emerging class of professional men? And, finally, what is the role of anxiety in shaping the professional male of the mid-nineteenth century? The period was punctuated by economic panics, cataclysmic upheavals that underscored the precariousness of the paper economy. Can we read these traumatic events (especially the panics of 1819, 1837, and 1857) as triggers for a more general masculine psychology of anxiety and loss? I suggest above that we might read the sensational staging of men and treasure as a kind of embarrassing primal scene, wherein
antebellum culture was able to glimpse, if unconsciously, a supposedly original relationship to money, but one tinged already with the discomfiting reality of erotics and desire. Are such dream images also informed by the anxious knowledge that, in a world of economic panics, a primary relation to money—hard money, money as treasure—is no longer possible? In seeking to answer these and related questions, I will be emphasizing the second issue I want to stress here at the outset: the fact that paper money manhood appears across the spectrum of early American cultural production. Clerks, merchants, financiers, confidence men, lawyers, bachelors, libertines, doctors, politicians, philosophers, investors, speculators, dandies: these and other figures of male professionalism are the ubiquitous but often-overlooked supporting cast of antebellum cultural production. This book argues that this cast of characters is especially important as we seek to understand the story that this culture was telling itself about itself in a period of tremendous social and economic upheaval. This book argues further that it is antebellum sensationalism that specializes in depictions of this new and quite anxious form of manhood. Over and over we see in this material the tableau of a struggling professional male negotiating the frightful—but also sometimes thrilling and titillating—world of credit and paper money. “To retrieve my fortunes so that I might marry—I speculated in stocks and lost all I possessed,” says a plaintive Mark Livingstone in Dion Boucicault’s hit play *The Poor of New York* (1857), a narrative that thematizes the panics of 1837 and 1857: “The poor!—whom do you call the poor? ... [T]hey are more frequently found under a black coat than under a red shirt. The poor man is the clerk with a family, forced to maintain a decent set of clothes, paid for out of the hunger of his children. ... These needy wretches are poorer than the poor, for they are obliged to conceal their poverty with the false mask of content” (145). A kind of white-collar *agonistes*, Livingstone here gives voice to the plight of several decades of professional men who precede him in the period’s sensationalism, for whom the sense of selfhood and self-possession has become contingent on the uneven tides of the economic marketplace. Indeed, distinct from the struggles of the “red shirt” working-class male, the white-collar professional male as embodied in Livingstone is absolutely central to antebellum sensationalism, and thus to antebellum culture. For it is in the sensational representation of this figure that we see the anxieties, desires, and fantasies of antebellum capitalist culture staged for audiences who were themselves negotiating life in the paper money world of the mid-nineteenth century.

We might therefore turn to the frequent staging of a relationship between professional men and treasure in the pages of the period’s sensationalism. Two useful examples are offered in the above-quoted stories by Irving and
Poe, both of which revolve around the search for treasure said to have been buried by the notorious pirate Captain Kidd. The Irving story is titled “The Golden Dreams of Wolfert Webber.” Part of a series of stories dubbed “The Money Diggers” in *Tales of a Traveller*, the story centers on the increasing worry and embarrassment experienced by the title character, Wolfert Webber—the family “patriarch[]” and “rural potentate”—as his once isolated and successful family farm is gradually surrounded by the modern urban world (*TT* 228).5 “The chief cause of anxiety to honest Wolfert . . . was the growing prosperity of the city,” we are told. “[W]hile every one around him grew richer, Wolfert grew poorer, and he could not, for the life of him, perceive how the evil was to be remedied” (229). But in what follows, Webber is invigorated with hopes of economic recovery when, visiting his local pub, he hears a series of tales about buried treasure in the area. One story claims that the Dutch governor Peter Stuyvesant buried chests of gold specie when the British invaded, and continues to haunt the region. Another and more frequent story has it that the treasure was buried by Captain Kidd. The problem, however, is that regardless of who buried it, such treasure is as elusive as gold specie itself in America in the wake of the 1819 Panic. Though Webber dreams nightly of immense treasures in his garden, his increasingly desperate efforts to find the gold buried on his farmland prove futile. Worse, his search causes him to abandon his crops, with the result that he and his family are soon faced with dissolution. “Wolfert gradually woke from his dream of wealth,” we are told. “By degrees a revulsion of thought took place in Wolfert’s mind, common to those whose golden dreams have been disturbed by pinching realities. . . . Haggard care gathered about his brow; he went about with a money-seeking air, his eyes bent downward into the dust” (238). Late in the following story of “The Money Diggers” sequence, the apparitional Captain Kidd appears before Webber, but it is only to taunt him, and we are left to understand that, at least for Irving post-1819, found gold is merely a fantasy.

In *Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself* (1836), Robert Montgomery Bird reworks Irving’s story of a debtor male’s futile search for Captain Kidd’s gold. “I found the whole coffin full of gold and silver, some in the form of ancient coins, but most of it in bars and ingots,” he says in describing his nightly dream vision of the treasure. “Ah! how much torment a poor man has in dreaming of riches!” (35).6 But the more famous revision of Irving’s story is offered in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Gold-Bug” (1843). Like “Wolfert Webber” and *Sheppard Lee*, the tale revolves around a man marked by financial failure. “He was of an ancient Huguenot family, and had once been wealthy,” we are told of William Legrand. “[B]ut a series of misfortunes had reduced him to want. To avoid the mortification consequent upon his
disasters, he left New Orleans. . . and took up his residence at Sullivan's
Island, near Charleston, South Carolina" (“Gold” 234). While on Sullivan's
Island, Legrand is bitten—quite literally—by a “gold bug,” which is to say that
he finds and is bitten by a large beetle whose “scales were exceedingly hard
and glossy, with all the appearance of burnished gold” (242). But Legrand is
also bitten by the fetish for gold. As Marc Shell demonstrates, Legrand’s
increasing obsession with gold echoes the similar obsessions of Democrats
such as Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren, and Thomas Hart Benton in
the 1830s (Money 5–23). Believing that, along with the beetle, he has found
a map to Captain Kidd’s long-rumored and much-sought-after store of bur-
ried treasure, Legrand, like Irving’s Wolfert Webber, becomes obsessed with
locating the hidden hoard of gold bullion. As he explains, the gold will, if
found, “reinstate me in my family possessions” (“Gold” 242). By story’s end,
of course, we find that Legrand has been correct in his guess about Captain
Kidd’s hidden gold. With the help of the narrator and his ex-slave Jupiter,
he finds $450,000 in gold specie, as well as a fortune in jewels (254). If not
quite enough to calm the more general climate of financial panic plaguing
the nation in the wake of the 1837 Panic, the treasure is certainly enough
to restore Legrand to his accustomed position of propertied manhood. But
we might consider as well the fact that, as the above quote reveals, “[t]here
was no American money” (254) among the “antique” coins found in Kidd’s
treasure chest. The comment is telling, for it suggests that the chest is quite
literally filled with old money—money created, that is to say, during a time
when the new economy had yet to take hold, and when America’s economic
instability was still far off in the future. What Legrand locates is thus money
as treasure rather than money as capital. I will be arguing here that this is a
crucial distinction in seeking to understand not only the form of manhood
emerging during the antebellum period but also the very nature of the sto-
ries antebellum culture was telling itself about selfhood and money.7

Literary fantasies of found gold are not new to literature, of course. The
discovery by Beowulf and Wiglaf of the hoard of treasure in the Dragon’s lair
in Beowulf; Jack’s theft of the goose that lays the golden eggs in Jack and the
Beanstalk; the pirate treasure finally located at the conclusion of Stevenson’s
Treasure Island (1883); Jonathan Harker’s discovery of the Count’s hoarded
gold in Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897): such narratives make it clear that the
dream of finding hidden stores of gold treasure is repeatedly enacted across
a range of historical periods and narrative forms, and always, it would seem,
as a means of addressing a variety of social concerns. Thus in Beowulf, for
example, the dragon and his treasure represent a corrupt king who with-
holds wealth from his people. Conversely, in Cotton Mather’s The Life of
Phips (1697), the description of William Phips’s search for treasure is exemplary precisely in that it acts as a lesson for Puritans concerned about the fates of their souls. As Jennifer Baker puts it, “images of payment or sudden outpourings of wealth had long suited the Puritan notion of a covenant of grace, through which Christ’s sacrificial death redeems the debt of human sin for the elect” (Securing 35). In this sense, she argues, Mather’s story of Phips’s trial and doubt imparts the crucial lesson that “treasure can only be obtained through a faith that rests somewhere between the dangerous extremes of assurance and despair” (37).

But what about stories such as “Wolfert Webber” and “The Gold-Bug”? How might we understand them as reflecting the emergence of a new sort of narrative in antebellum America? More specifically, how might we understand the very notion of American literary character as undergoing a shift in such narratives? And more specifically still, how is American literary manhood changing in such stories? One place to begin in seeking to answer such questions is with the representation of money—and especially treasure—in the period’s literature. For, and as Fredric Jameson suggests, the literary depiction of money has shifted across time and literary genre. Thus he observes that narratives such as the art-novella are quite different both in content and form than their later incarnations, precisely because of evolving conceptions of money at different historical junctures. As he explains in a passage that I want to quote at length:

The art-novella, then, will be governed by the experience of money, but of money at a specific moment of its historical development: the stage of commerce rather than the stage of capital proper. This is the stage Marx describes as exchange on the frontiers between two modes of production, which have not yet been subsumed under a single standard of value; so great fortunes can be made and lost overnight, ships sink or against all expectation appear in the harbor, heroic travelers reappear with cheap goods whose scarcity in the home society lends them extraordinary worth. This is therefore an experience of money which marks the form rather than the content of narratives; these last may include rudimentary commodities and coins incidentally, but nascent Value organizes them around a conception of the Event which is formed by categories of Fortune and Providence, the wheel that turns, bringing great good luck and then dashing it, the sense of what is not yet an invisible hand guiding human destinies and endowing them with what is not yet “success” or “failure,” but rather the irreversibility of an unprecedented fate, which makes its bearer into the protagonist of a unique and "memorable" story. (Ideologies of Theory 52)
For Jameson, it is only with the entrance into a more advanced stage of capitalism proper—the stage Marx describes in terms of the distinction between “money as money” and “money as capital”—that success and failure become interiorized psychological conditions (Capital 247). Notions such as luck and fate, Fortune and Providence, or—as with Mather’s narrative—the covenant of grace, are part of an earlier literary ethos, one that is simply inconsistent with the more dynamic fiscal world of the nineteenth century, in which fiscal panics are increasingly common, and in which it is the invisible hand of mysterious market forces that guides human destiny. Accordingly, it is only with a more advanced system of capital, one marked by what Marx refers to as “the unceasing movement of profit-making” (254), that writers such as Irving and Poe begin to invent characters for whom success and failure have their specifically monetary resonance.

Characters such as Wolfert Webber and William Legrand, that is to say, are the product of a new economic order. Indeed, Jameson’s observations also allow us to see how the narratives produced within the context of capital can reflect a longing for an earlier, precapitalist period, even as they make it clear that such a period is permanently foreclosed. For if, as Jameson suggests, the concept of treasure signals a period that predates the vicissitudes of modern capitalism, then certainly the “golden dreams” of a character such as Wolfert Webber reflect a kind of desperate desire to escape the very psychology of success and failure in modern America. Literary treasure is in this sense a reference to the earlier moment of mercantile capitalism; even better than the “funds of the United States Bank” ironically invoked by Lippard, such stores of currency represent an immutable form of value and stability—one that, by extension, is linked to a longed-for form of fiscally secure, self-possessed masculinity. Captain Kidd’s money is therefore nostalgic, precisely in that finding (or losing) such treasure is quite different from making or losing a fortune on a speculative business venture. Both represent luck and contingency, but it is the later phase of “capital proper” that produces the more internalized, anxious form of selfhood that is all but wholly based on market notions of “success” and, more often (especially in American narratives post-1837), “failure.” This, then, is the payoff for Legrand in locating Kidd’s money: finding the treasure means escape from a felt sense of failure, but it also provides him imagined (and, for the reader, allegorical) passage back to a very different historical moment, one that precedes the very notion of an individual who has “failed” in the context of the economy proper.

Sandage’s analysis of the links between nineteenth-century ideals of manhood and ideologies of market success is especially useful here. “Failure troubled, hurried and excited nineteenth-century Americans not only because more of them were going bust,” he explains, “but also
because their attitudes toward ambition were changing. . . . An American
with no prospects or plans, with nothing to look forward to, almost ceases
to exist. . . . Failure is the lost horizon of American manhood” (Losers 13;
20; 87).

The above nineteenth-century narratives thus tap into an issue that
would saturate American culture from the 1820s through the 1850s, and
that predominates in the narratives I will examine over the course of this
book: what had become of the nation’s gold bullion? In one respect, of
course, this was a question that occupied political economists and more
general social commentators, especially during periods of economic panic,
when the specie reserves of the nation’s banks dwindled and the value of the
paper money in circulation plummeted. Writing during the Panic of 1819,
the first fiscal panic to affect the nation as a whole, James Swan put it thus:
“Let us reason a little on the present scarcity of silver and gold coin: what-
ever be the cause of that scarcity[,] whether it be real or fictitious, whether
it has been sent abroad, or been concealed at home from fear or bad inten-
tions—we are without it” (Address 12). Nearly twenty years later, concerns
about the nation’s supplies of gold bullion had only increased in intensity.
Echoing Swan’s concern that America’s hard currency has been siphoned
away to other countries, William Gouge explained that the problem was
the use of paper money as a circulating medium. As he explained in his
influential treatise, A Short History of Paper Money and Banking (1833): “A
hundred years ago, the chief feature in the commercial policy of nations,
was the amassing of gold and silver, as a kind of wealth par excellence. Now,
he is the wisest statesman, who is most successful in driving the precious
metals from a country. . . . Eagles have disappeared for the same reason that
dollars have disappeared. Whenever Bank notes are used, no more specie is
retained in a country than is necessary for transactions of a smaller amount
than the least denominations of paper. . . . It has been found impossible in
England to make sovereigns and one pound notes circulate currently; and
we all know that small notes in the United States have not only driven away
gold coins, but also such silver coins as are of a higher denomination than
half a dollar” (67; 107).

For Gouge as for many others, the demand for specie in countries that
did not use paper money necessarily resulted in the inexorable exit of hard
money out of the United States and into the coffers of foreign merchants
and their banks. Worse, the absence of hard money within the United States
resulted in economic instability. As Gouge also argued in the same text: “In
foreign countries the paper of [U.S.] Banks will not pass current. The hold-
ers of it, therefore, present it for payment. The Banks finding their paper
returned, fear they will be drained of coin, and call upon their debtors to
repay what has been advanced to them. . . . The circle extends through society. Multitudes become bankrupt, and a few successful speculators get possession of the earnings and savings of many of their frugal and industrious neighbors” (25).

Such proclamations were the product of a long-running debate over the new economy initiated by Alexander Hamilton in the early 1790s over the vociferous objections of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and other Republicans. Insisting that the country needed a means of creating cash in order to compete on a world stage, Hamilton created a national bank with the powers to fund a national debt and to forward credit in the form of banknotes and paper money without relying on an actual gold standard. The Jeffersonian opposition to these measures centered on the argument that real material value inhered only in actual specie (gold and silver), while paper money and banknotes not backed by specie offered the mere illusion of value. For example, in a pamphlet titled The Bank Torpedo, or Bank Notes Proved to be a Robbery on the Public, and the Real Cause of Distresses Among the Poor . . . (1810), Benjamin Davies claimed, “There is nothing on which men more generally agree, than on what is called the right of property. . . . But how can he enjoy this right, while the Bankers are suffered to use paper, lieu of gold and silver [?]? Does it require any more labor to fabricate a note, than to counterfeit money? Do not then the Bankers enjoy the benefit of labor without laboring themselves?” (10). Such arguments were echoed by a range of critics in the years before and after the Panic of 1819, each of whom decried a system in which a proliferating number of state banks were not backed by actual capital but instead specialized in transactions based on intangible, paper forms of value (such as banknotes and corporate stocks) and persisted in the policy begun during the War of 1812 of refusing specie payment “on demand.” Even the Bank of the United States, rechartered in 1816 to rein in these state banks by enforcing specie payments, cashed in on the boom by overextending its own loan line, especially in western banks involved in land speculation. Rather than provide stability, the U.S. Bank added to a precarious and absurdly circular situation: any bank pressed for specie would be forced to demand repayment from debtors, most of whom were unable to pay except in notes held on banks that had no specie reserves.10

The bullionist stance was intensified in the 1830s by Andrew Jackson and his high-profile “war” against the U.S. Bank and its president, Nicholas Biddle. Backing Jackson’s 1832 veto of the bill to recharter the Bank, as well as his 1833 decision to remove the federal deposits from it and redistribute them to smaller state banks, “hard money” Democrats depicted a corrupt economy floating precariously on the airy foundation of uncertain promises.
Concerns about a floating bubble economy are central to numerous satiric narratives about the tensions between paper money and gold. For example, in a pamphlet titled *Specie Humbug* (1837), the narrator relates his plan for a bank “founded on the great principle of making money out of nothing” (*Specie* 6); in “Colloquy Between a Bank Note and a Gold Coin” (1835), the two forms of currency debate theories of inherent worth while jostling around in the pocket of an unnamed citizen (“Colloquy” 45–49). But these worries are best represented by writers such as Gouge and Theophilus Fisk, the latter of whom produced two lengthy pamphlets in 1837, both of which were aimed at explaining the threat that paper money and the banking system posed to the nation’s core ideals of labor and value. Writing in *Labor, the Only True Source of Wealth*, Fisk claims that the “most respected” people in the new economy are “the air bubble paper money nobility which considers honest labor fit only for serfs and bondmen” (*Labor* 5–6). Similarly, in *The Banking Bubble Burst*—where he quotes at length from Gouge and British writer William Cobbett’s *Paper Against Gold* (1822)—Fisk argues thus: “Bank notes are not money—they are only ‘promises to pay’ money. They pass as money so long as the credit of the institution from which they are issued remains unimpaired; but this is easily deranged, and then they are comparatively worthless, having no intrinsic value whatever. . . . [P]aper money produces nothing but an army of consumers (who fabricate it) and who diminish the real wealth of the country in exact proportion to the number of those who live without labor. The president, cashiers, clerks, &c. &c., do nothing but consume the wealth others have earned; consumption is the end of production” (*Banking Bubble* 36–37; 40).

Elaborating on Jackson's warning in his 1837 Farewell Address that “[I]f your currency continues as exclusively paper as it now is, it will foster [the] eager desire to amass wealth without labor” (“Farewell” 302), Fisk depicts a dystopian society based on pure consumption. From this perspective, the notion of self-possession rooted in labor and a correspondingly reliable form of specie value has given way to a dispossessed, laborless model of selfhood, one that is not only insubstantial but also, perhaps inevitably, self-consuming.

The debates over gold were made particularly dramatic in many of the political cartoons produced in response to the period's banking controversies. For example, in an 1833 image entitled *The Doctors Puzzled or the Desperate Case of Mother U.S. Bank* (figure 1), Jackson is depicted as a wise medical practitioner who looks on with bemused satisfaction from a rear window as a corpulent U.S. Bank is purged of its specie reserves (this is the missing money Lippard refers to some years later in *The Quaker City*). Pro-Jackson in orientation, the image suggests that Jackson’s 1833 order for the withdrawal of federal funds from the Bank and their placement into
Figure 1  The Doctors Puzzled or the Desperate Case of Mother U.S. Bank. 1833 published by Anthony Imbert. Lithograph on wove paper; 28 x 39.2 cm. Reproduced with permission of the American Antiquarian Society.
state banks (actions signaled here by the broken vials on the floor in front of the vomiting Mother Bank) will save the nation’s specie from the corrupt clutches of Bank president Nicholas Biddle and return it into the hands of honest workingmen. “D—n that Doctor Jackson,” Biddle says as he straddles the Bank, seeking to comfort her. “This is the effect of his last prescription.” For the Biddle of this image, the loss of gold bullion means a curtailing of speculative excess; for Jackson, it means a chance to recover the nation’s integrity by retrieving its lost gold.

Anti-Jackson images also relied on fantasies of treasure saved or restored. For example, in an 1833 lithograph titled Troubled Treasures (figure 2), we see a reversal of the dynamic offered in “The Doctor’s Puzzled.” Here it is Jackson who is bent over and vomiting—in this case, he is expelling his veto of the U.S. Bank, this while a devil figure makes off with the $200 million in Treasury funds that Jackson had threatened to withdraw from the Bank. The implication here is that the nation’s treasure has actually been saved as a result of Congressional resistance to Jackson’s fiscal policies. Similarly, in Capitol Fashions for 1837 (1837), Jackson’s successor, Martin Van Buren, is caricatured as wearing a cloak trimmed with “Shinplaster” banknotes, the mocking term for the small-denomination banknotes that were circulated during the 1837 Panic in an unsuccessful effort to compensate for the run on the nation’s specie reserves (figure 3). “I like this cloak amazingly,” says a vain Van Buren, “for now I shall be able to put into execution my designs without being observed by every quising [sic], prying Whig.” The joke here is that Van Buren seems unaware that his hard-money banking policies have failed, and that, as America’s specie reserves are being drained away, the nation is increasingly reliant on unstable paper currencies. This is driven home both by his aside that “this kind of Trimming is rather light, not so good as Gold” (emphasis in original), and even more so by the image to his left, in which we see a large audience streaming into a theater in order to catch a glimpse of “A Real Gold Coin The Last In This Country.” Once more, it is the seeming scarcity of gold that is located at the heart of the nation’s problems, both fiscal and social.

This perceived lack of gold bullion is perhaps why the fairy tale Jack and the Beanstalk was popular in America in the first half of the nineteenth century (the related Jack the Giant Killer was also a popular stage production). The tale almost always begins with a description of young Jack as profligate and lazy, so much so that his widowed mother is forced to desperate measures to support the two of them. “Oh! you wicked child,” she says in one text from the early 1840s. “[B]y your ungrateful course of life you have at least brought me to beggary and ruin! Cruel, cruel boy! I have not money enough to purchase even a bit of bread for another day—nothing
Figure 2 Troubled Treasures. 1833 by R. Bisbee. Lithograph on wove paper; 23.2 x 32.9 cm. Reproduced with permission of the American Antiquarian Society.
Figure 3  Capitol Fashions for 1837. 1837 by F. J. Winston. Etching on wove paper; 30.1 x 24.4 cm. Reproduced from the Collections of The Library of Congress.
now remains to sell but my poor cow!” (Surprising History 4). Made thus to feel guilty, Jack volunteers to take the cow to market, and therefore begins the difficult transition from childhood (and its link to the mother) to manhood (and its location in the commercial world of the father). Hence when Jack is apparently swindled into accepting magic beans instead of money, we see an image of masculine economic failure, one that would surely have resonated in antebellum America. (In the first American version of the tale, The History of mother Twaddle, and the marvellous atchievments [sic] of her son Jack [1809], the man who sells the beans to Jack is “a Jew,” which is to say he is a stereotypical symbol of market corruption. “Come buy,” he says, “dis rare bean for a faring / It pofsefses such virtues dat sure as a Gun / Tomorrow it vill grow near as heigh as de Sun” [H.A.C., Mother Twaddle 4].)

I will turn more fully to the sensational figure of the capitalist Jew in chapter 3, but suffice it to say here that the deeper one travels into antebellum sensationalism, the more dramatic the examples of anti-Semitism, and the more one realizes the centrality of the Jew in American culture’s attempt to imagine its relationship to money.

Jack’s bad luck at market is countered, however, by the magical interposition of good fortune. Overnight a beanstalk grows to an impossible height, and when Jack climbs it he is amazed to find a castle in which resides an evil giant, who it turns out has killed Jack’s father and siblings, and stolen the family fortune. “Having gained your father’s confidence, he knew where to find all his treasure,” the fairy tells Jack. “[Y]ou must persevere in avenging the death of your father, or you will not prosper in any of your undertakings, but be always miserable” (Surprising History 10; 11). In the ensuing scene, the giant’s wife lets Jack into her house, and hides Jack from her flesh-eating husband in her oven. As a result, Jack manages in successive trips up and down the beanstalk to rob the giant of his goose that lays golden eggs, his sacks of gold and silver, and his magical singing harp. The image of Jack that appears in an 1857 version of the story published by John McLoughlin in New York, in which we see Jack struggling with two bags stamped with the words “SILVER” and “GOLD” (Jack and the Bean Stalk 8), captures the masculine fantasy of found treasure (figure 4). Indeed, especially as staged in the context of antebellum America, the giant comes to represent both an Oedipal father figure who must be defeated, and (as with the market Jew) the abstract, devouring forces of market capitalism that have ruined his father’s patriarchal agency. Jack’s theft from and subsequent slaying of the giant, meanwhile, suggests a revitalized form of market manhood. In some versions Jack cuts off the giant’s head, while in others he chops down the beanstalk and the giant breaks his neck. Either way, Jack’s slaying of the giant amounts to a return form of symbolic castration, and successful entry into
Figure 4 Image from *Jack and the Bean Stalk*. 1857 by William Momberger. Published by John McLoughlin. Reproduced with permission of the American Antiquarian Society.
the world of both manhood and capitalism (no more hiding in the maternal oven for Jack).

Here the fairy’s words to Jack at the end of an 1856 version of the story published in New York by H. W. Hewet are suggestive: “Now, my dear Jack, you may take possession of all your father’s property again, as I see that you will make a good use of it, and become a useful and good man. . . . If you had remained as idle and lazy as you once were, I should not have exerted my power to help you to recover your property, and enable you to take care of your mother in your old age” (*Jack and the Bean-Stalk* 32). On the one hand, the quote suggests that an Algeresque form of pluck and initiative has rescued Jack's fortunes. But it's important to note that Jack's success is possible only through the fantastical work of the fairy and her beanstalk. In fact, in early American versions of the story the fairy is often adamant in explaining to Jack that it is her agency, rather than Jack's, that has brought about his reversal of fortune. “By my power, the bean-stalk grew to so great a height, and formed a ladder,” she says in the *The Surprising History of Jack and the Bean Stalk*. “I need not add that I inspired you with a strong desire to ascend the ladder” (11). Thus, although Jack is “indolent, careless, and extravagant” (4), his is not a story of success and failure proper. Rather, the tale is a deeply nostalgic fantasy of a premodern form of young manhood, one guided still by the sort of “Fortune and Providence” Jameson suggests. And what this suggests is that the giant’s gold is quite different from the money Jack uses to pay for his beans. Discovered only through a magical form of good fortune, the giant's hoarded gold—much like Captain Kidd's treasure in Poe's story—is located outside of, and in many ways precedes, the modern stage of speculative capitalism that Jack's money inhabits.

The same form of nostalgia informs a version of the Mother Goose narrative from the early 1840s titled *The History of old Mother Goose, and the golden egg* (1840–42). In this version of the story, a boy named Jack discovers that the goose he buys at market “had laid him / An egg of pure gold” (*Mother Goose* 1). Not surprisingly, his mother is delighted by this news, and tells him that he is a “good boy.” But when Jack seeks to convert his golden egg into cash, his luck takes a turn for the worse. “Jack sold his egg / To a rogue of a Jew / Who cheated him out of / The half of his due,” we are told. Worse still, the Jew then steals the goose itself: “The Jew got the Goose / Which he vow'd he would kill / Resolving at once / His pockets to fill” (3). Here, though, Jack's mother—Mother Goose—intercedes, and in a magical narrative resolution she flies off with the goose “up to the moon.” In this fantasy, Jack can again be cheated at market (and physically beaten: we learn that the Jew “began to belabour / The sides of poor Jack” [4]), but it doesn't matter. For the narrative insists on a dream rescue of Jack's treasure from
the clutches of the capitalist male (embodied once again in the figure of the Jew), a conclusion that echoes the outcomes of both *Jack and the Beanstalk* and Poe’s “The Gold-Bug.” In each case, we see manhood rescued from the complex and emasculating world of modern market relations. Indeed, it is only the discovery of gold that seems to satisfy such fantasy needs. This is why, in stories ranging from Charles Brockden Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn* (1799–1800) to very recent novels (and their cinematic reproductions) such as Scott Smith’s *A Simple Plan* (1993) and Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men* (2005), the discovery of large caches of paper money leads only to disaster and masculine failure. Paper money is in these narratives false treasure, and its dramatic discovery a false triumph that is part and parcel of the capitalist ethos that real treasure—found gold—is able to counter. Unfortunately, though, while a character such as Jack is able to find his stolen riches at the top of the beanstalk, most of America in the period 1819–57 was left to wonder who had made off with its supplies of hard money.

**Theft and Compensation:**

**Men and Money in the Sensational Public Sphere**

Canonical authors such as Irving and Poe were not the only writers seeking to tell the story of gold lost and (occasionally and with the help of tremendous luck) found. Rather, stories such as “The Gold Bug” were intimately linked with a diverse media, which included not only pulpy works such as *The Quaker City*, but also penny press newspapers such as the New York *Herald*, stage melodramas such as Bouicault’s *The Poor of New York*, murder pamphlets, lithographs, minstrel songsters, and more. Again and again these sensational texts stage narratives in which male characters—especially professional men—seek to negotiate the related crises of economic self-possession and gender. I thus suggest that this work consolidates within the representational space I will refer to here as the “sensational public sphere.” Marked by the emergence of penny press newspapers and cheap urban-sensation novels, as well as the increasing popularity of magazine fiction, melodramatic stage productions, and political cartoons, the sensational public sphere offered a space in which an emergent professional class of men was able to see itself reflected in a whole range of narratives, virtually all of which were located at the fraught moment of transition I am describing—that which marks the shift from an older form of mercantile capitalism to the new and much less stable world of the emergent paper economy. Moreover, the various texts that compose this public sphere appeared with a frequency and an intensity that reflects what I will suggest is a profound
sense of lost security. For what these stories outline is a notion of masculine selfhood that turns quite intimately on one’s relationship to money. Moreover, it is a form of manhood specific to the context of the boom-and-bust economy of mid-nineteenth-century America, and thus to the various forms of cultural production seeking to respond to the shift from mercantilism to capitalism proper.

By invoking the notion of a “sensational” public sphere I am thus seeking to add to recent critical work that complicates and challenges the notion of a “rational” public sphere theorized by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989). For Habermas, the public sphere acted as a space of discourse in which citizens were able to bracket inequalities of status and private concern, and to engage in unrestricted and rational political discussion devoted to the common good. But, and as critics such as Nancy Fraser, Mary Ryan, Lauren Berlant, Michael Schudson, and others have made clear, the idealized space Habermas conceives is exclusively white, male, and bourgeois in orientation, and is in fact structured by the exclusion of, and in conflict with, alternate publics. As Fraser puts it, “[T]he bourgeois public sphere was never the public. On the contrary, virtually contemporaneous with the bourgeois public sphere arose a host of competing counterpublics, including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women’s publics, and working-class publics” (“Rethinking” 7). I want to argue here that the sensational public sphere is a “competing public sphere” of the sort Fraser outlines (7). It is of course true that the emergent professional classes of the antebellum period were predominately white and male, as well as upwardly mobile in ways that the working classes generally were not. Accordingly, it might seem as though a discourse oriented around such a class is reasonably close to the sort of public sphere Habermas describes. But the sensationalism I am describing is the virtual antithesis of the rational-critical discourse Habermas attributes to the bourgeois public sphere. Indeed, revolving in large part around the excessive emotions, passions, and desires of the professional classes, and marked by “sensational” extremes of violence, sexuality, fear, and titillation, the sensational public sphere staged a professional selfhood in the very act of responding—often poorly, but usually in interesting ways—to the intense pressures and anxieties of life under an emergent and quite unstable capitalist economy. One might say that this counterpublic acted as the emotionally charged and often irrational underbelly of the period’s more properly bourgeois public sphere. This is not, then, a “subaltern” counterpublic of the sort Fraser envisions (14), a space that gives voice to minoritized populations. Instead, the sensational public sphere provided a new, alternative space for expressing the concerns and anxieties of the very figure—the professional male—that Habermas associates with a rational sphere of discourse.
A useful example of the print discourse that characterized the ante-bellum sensational public sphere is offered in the lead story from an 1842 issue of *The Weekly Rake*, one of many short-lived, tabloid-style rags aimed primarily at the young men of New York’s clerking classes. Titled “The Dandy and the Soap-Fat Man,” the article recounts an assault perpetrated by a working-class Irish laborer on a “finical, conceited fop” who not only has accrued debts throughout town but also has had the poor judgment to challenge the laborer physically (*WR* 10-1-1842). The real violence of this narrative, however, is contained in the accompanying cartoon (figure 5). Offering a freeze-frame of Jacksonian class politics—with the Soap-Fat Man embodying the prolabor, anti-Whig posture voiced by Jacksonian critics of paper money, and the dandy representing the fiscal recklessness of the upwardly striving professional male and the economic market more generally—the cartoon suggests that professional masculine selfhood is frequently staged in terms of humiliation, disempowerment, and a general sense of class instability. But the cartoon also implies that this sensational masculinity is being negotiated in a very public manner. For while the assault is viewed by the many clerk types who have gathered to cheer the dandy’s embarrassment, it is also subject to re-presentation within the very pages of *The Weekly Rake*—something made overt by the figure of a newsboy in the foreground of the cartoon, watching the assault and carrying a bundle of the paper’s recent issues. The interest the newsboy takes in the action thus tells us what we already know: that the city’s fast-growing market for sensational media was organized to a great extent around the vociferous class politics of masculine conduct and sensibility. In *Public Sentiments* (2001), Glenn Hendler argues that “[a]s early as the 1840s, when the ideology of gendered separate spheres was being forcefully inscribed in American culture, sentiment and male embodiment were already being deployed together as part of a public discourse of political reform and masculine self-fashioning” (43–44). Whether packaged as “sentimental” (Hendler’s primary focus), “gothic,” or “sensational,” the masculine postures of affect and self-fashioning Hendler describes are everywhere in evidence within the sensational public sphere. And again, they counter the ideal of the traditional bourgeois public sphere, in which a bourgeois male public could supposedly debate political questions in a purely rational and abstract fashion. Instead, by offering a space for the depiction of masculine affect, class violence, and fiscal crisis, the sensational public sphere was forwarding vexed questions of class, gender, and self-possession into public discourse in new ways.

At present, most of the critical work on antebellum sensationalism builds on the historical work of Sean Wilentz’s *Chants Democratic* (1984) and examines its working-class orientation. For example, this perspective is poignantly argued by Michael Denning in his seminal work on dime-novel
sensationalism, Mechanic Accents (1987). “Who read these stories and what did they think of them?” he asks (27), and goes on to suggest that the majority of these readers were working-class laborers. “The dime novels were part of the popular culture of the ‘producing classes,’ a plebian culture whose metaphoric centers of gravity were the ‘honest mechanic’ and the virtuous ‘working-girl’” (46). Denning’s reading is echoed by critics such as Eric Lott in Love and Theft (1993) and Shelley Streeby in American Sensations (2002). Extending the work of Denning as well as that of historians such as David Roediger and Alexander Saxton, both Lott and Streeby argue that working-class whiteness was the central issue in antebellum mass culture. Focusing on blackface minstrelsy, Lott argues that the minstrel show provided a kind of fantasy space onto which white, working-class male audiences could project anxieties about desire and embodiment, while at the same time gaining vicarious access to these same repressed modes of feeling. As he explains, “[W]hite pleasure in minstrelsy was . . . a willed attempt to rise above the stultifying effects of capitalist boredom and rationalization. . . . It was a rediscovery, against the odds, of repressed pleasure in the body” (148–49). For Streeby, meanwhile, the many imperial narratives that appear within antebellum sensationalism—especially those that revolved about the U.S.–Mexican War—represent a complex negotiation of class, gender, and nativism for (primarily male) working-class readers. “[I]nterest in the material and the corporeal makes sensationalism an aesthetic mode that supports an emphasis on laboring bodies and the embodied relationships that workers have to power,” she says. “[S]ensationalism is the idiom of many nineteenth-century working-class cultures” (15; 27).

These and other studies are invaluable to our understanding of the cultural work performed by antebellum sensationalism. But, and as I have been suggesting, a great many of the stories we see in the period’s newspapers, magazines, cheap novels, plays, and (now) canonical fictions revolve around professional men, whether merchants and clerks or speculators and confidence men. Sometimes these characters are depicted as positive, morally striving members of the community and nation; other times they are corrupt villains whose proximity to the economic market have left them materially and ethically vitiated. Either way, they act as the “center of gravity” of the sensational public sphere, the representational space that revolves around the career of the professional classes—and especially the professional male—emerging during the antebellum period. I thus echo Paul Gilmore’s suggestion in The Genuine Article (2001) that the focus of critics such as Lott on “mass culture as exclusively (or nearly exclusively) working class” works to “obscure[1] the active presence of professional and middle-class audiences (4), as well as a “mass cultural sphere” that “responded to and
helped to figure” the period’s dramatic economic and social upheavals (6). As he puts it in describing the emergence of entrepreneurial sensationalist venues such as P. T. Barnum’s American Museum, “In their synthesis of middle-class respectability and Bowery-born sensational entertainments, such as minstrelsy, these more middle-class-oriented mass cultural arenas provided a model for combining older artisanal and genteel paradigms of gender ideals within a highly commercialized realm” (6). For Gilmore, this mass cultural sphere was particularly noteworthy for the way in which the representation of race and racial difference worked to bolster a white middle-class formation he terms “literary manhood.” I will also pursue the sensational representation of race in several chapters of this study. But I am arguing more generally that the sensational public sphere was the discursive representational space in which a professional manhood was being staged in an extended and quite vexed relationship with the stage of “capital proper” described by Jameson. More specifically, it was the sensational public sphere that made most evident a form of manhood for which success and failure have become interiorized psychological conditions.

Exact dates of origin are difficult to pin down, but I argue that the sensational public sphere took shape in April 1836, with the dramatic sales of penny press newspapers in New York City during the coverage of the Helen Jewett murder trial.23 As I discuss at length in chapter 4, the case, in which a young male office clerk was accused of murdering a high-priced female prostitute, became an immediate sensation, fueling intense but also quite lurid media coverage and rivalry between papers such as the New York Herald and the New York Sun. These papers took up competing postures toward the case, offering as they did so a long-running debate about an emergent white-collar masculinity, about male and female sexuality, and about political economy more generally. Sales of the city’s penny papers soared, and a tabloid-style form of sensationalism was born. Very quickly, writers such as Poe, Lippard, George Thompson, and Ned Buntline, as well as Nathaniel Hawthorne and other “highbrow” writers, all began to adopt the titillating and affecting mix of gothic horror and sentimentality deployed by the Herald, the Sun, and other papers, as well as their obsessive interest in the career of the professional male.24

In designating a sensational public sphere, I therefore hope to encompass the range of material that consistently tapped into the psychological undercurrents—the desires, fantasies, and anxieties—of antebellum capitalist culture, especially as experienced by the emerging professional classes that were so often the central subjects of this material. In doing so, I am arguing that much of this psychological work revolves around a fairly particular logic, wherein sensationalism seeks to rewrite masculine insolvency
by providing what I will term “compensatory fictions.” Indeed, the central premise of this book is that the sensational public sphere offers narratives that engage in a kind of psychic trade-off, wherein the absence of American gold (or “American money,” as Poe puts it) is countered with other, compensatory forms of currency and value. And what these alternate forms of currency provide is a kind of fantasy redress for the failed or imperiled manhood of the new paper economy. Thus while characters such as Wolfert Webber and George Shelby are forced to discover the compromised and vulnerable nature of manhood in the era of paper money, the fiction itself seeks to provide readers with alternative solutions to the crisis of male selfhood everywhere evident in this material. For, in fact, the narrative of treasure actually found that we see in tales such as “The Gold-Bug” or *Jack and the Beanstalk* is relatively unusual: amidst the climate of financial unrest, antebellum writers were inventing new ways of imagining a stable (and usually male) selfhood, one that might rewrite the sense of failure faced by so many of the professional men depicted within the period’s sensationalism.

In “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” (1979), Jameson suggests that works of mass culture must of necessity offer some “genuine shred” of fantasy content to consumers as they confront the alienating effects of life under capitalism (144). For Jameson, this means giving voice to “genuine social and historical content,” or, more abstractly, to what he describes as the “deepest and most fundamental hopes and fantasies” of a social order longing for collectivity or Utopia (144). Thus he suggests that part of the lure of a mass culture phenomenon such as Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* (1975) lies in its ability to tap into the image of an older, more traditional America (figured in the salty World War II veteran and small business owner Quint)—even as this image of national cohesion is killed off by the giant shark as leviathan, and replaced by the new alliance between technological corporate capitalism and bureaucratic law enforcement (embodied in the characters Hooper and Brody). Similarly, he suggests that films such as *The Godfather* (1972) and *Godfather II* (1974) hinge on the fantasy content of the ethnic family, even as it displaces the role of corporate capitalism onto the scapegoated Mafia. This sort of reading might well be available in the works of various antebellum writers (for example, the famous “A Squeeze of the Hand” chapter in *Moby-Dick* certainly offers a counter to the ruthless drive of the American capitalism Ahab embodies). But I am more concerned with the way antebellum sensationalism often seeks to compensate readers with narratives in which male characters heal the psychic wounds of fiscal crisis. For in doing so, what these narratives reflect is a longing for the kind of stable selfhood—and indeed the social cohesion—that have been “stolen” by modern capitalism and the new economy: hence, again, the lure of treasure
in so many sensational narratives. But in the absence of treasure found, antebellum sensationalism seeks to answer to the felt sense that American manhood has lost a precious, essential part of itself—its very potency—by imagining alternate forms of male selfhood. Thus, while I am not engaging with notions of a collective unconscious according to Jameson, I am interested in the way mass culture—and especially the sensational public sphere of antebellum America—engages readers with compromise strategies that offer fantasy solutions to life in capitalist culture, solutions that often tap into libidinal psychological currents running beneath the surface level of conscious modern life.

My thinking here takes off from the following insight David Leverenz offers in *Manhood and the American Renaissance*, one we might take as axiomatic for the literary and cultural production of the early national and antebellum periods: “[A]ny intensified ideology of manhood is a compensatory response to fears of humiliation.” Thus, for Leverenz, “manhood becomes a way not of dominating, but of minimizing maximum loss” (4; 73). I want to extend Leverenz’s insight to show how the sensational public sphere is one of the key sites within which such compensation is offered, and the dramatic losses of the paper money period are “minimiz[ed].” Other critics of nineteenth-century sensationalism have suggested related readings. For example, in *Mechanic Accents* Denning suggests that the mid- and late-nineteenth-century dime novel revolves around a specific form of fantasy compensation for working-class readers, in which “powerlessness” finds imagined redress in stories of social alchemy. “The dime novels that elicit allegorical readings in order to make sense of them are novels of disguise,” he argues. “[T]he stories of tramps who are discovered to be heirs, and of working girls who become ladies. All depend on magical transformations to compensate the impossibility of imagining ‘realistic’ actions by powerful agents” (74). Thus, for Denning, dime-novel sensationalism rewrites the story of working-class disempowerment by repeatedly staging narratives that are not unlike the sorts of fairy tales I cite above. Just as Jack magically ascends the beanstalk in order to retrieve his lost family fortune, the characters Denning examines perform impossible shifts of class status and agency as a means of answering to the fantasy needs of working-class readers unable to achieve such change in their own lives.

This book suggests that the sensational public sphere is engaged in a similar process of fantasy resolution. Specifically, I show how sensationalism performs a kind of dual task, in which readers see both economic crisis, and its compromise resolution. One of my main goals is therefore to demonstrate how this material seeks tirelessly to project fiscal crisis—and more specifically, capitalist desire—onto figures of Otherness such as the
Jew and the speculator, suggesting thereby that it is they who have stolen away the kind of fiscal security that went along with the nation’s supplies of gold bullion. This, indeed, is one of the prime forms of cultural work performed by the sensational public sphere, and it is without doubt one of the primary reasons this material was so popular. Quite simply, these texts allowed a reader to see his own complicity in the capitalist system embodied in a figure of recognizable alterity: not only the speculator and the Jew, but also the libertine and rake; the always sexually charged black male; the female prostitute and other threatening females; gothic figures of Otherness such as Irving’s Headless Horseman; even Melville’s Bartleby. These are all sensational characters who absorb, crystallize, and help manage the forms of pleasure and enjoyment that we see circulating, often madly and excessively, within the world of sensationalism, and the sensational public sphere more specifically. Indeed, they are a kind of symptom, one expressed widely and variously throughout the sensational public sphere in what we might think of as the messy psychological aftermath of the primal scene staging the embarrassing intimacies of men and treasure.

In *The Clerk’s Tale* (2003), Thomas Augst examines a range of diaries maintained by young professional men in the antebellum period, and argues that they reflect the painstaking efforts of the period’s emergent class of white-collar men to fashion an interior and disciplined form of selfhood. Arguing that the clerk’s life was measured, often obsessively and frequently quite anxiously, against the presence of his “moral Other,” he suggests that “[f]or middle class men, free time was not merely a privilege, but a moral test” (58; 62). And certainly the period’s advice books for young men stress the need for self-control. Again and again writers such as Henry Ward Beecher, William Alcott, Daniel Wise, and Timothy Shay Arthur warned against excess expenditure of finances, sexual energy, and even emotion. “Always let your expenditure be less than your income,” writes Daniel Wise in an altogether typical passage from these tracts. “Deny thyself, in little as in great things, is a necessary condition of prosperity” (*Young* 146; caps and emphasis in original). But the period’s sensational public sphere suggests that many if not most young professional men failed the test Augst describes. For what this material performs is a panicky and often guilty unease about the very excesses, lusts, and appetencies said to have supplanted the putative security of a gold-backed form of selfhood. Indeed, from the mercurial Ichabod Crane in Irving’s 1819 “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (whose “devouring mind’s eye” signals his desire to sell off the Van Tassel estate “for cash” [SB 279; 280]), to the racy pages of *The Weekly Rake*, to the notorious Mr. Tickels in George Thompson’s gritty 1849 urban gothic novel, *Venus in Boston* (“one of the those wealthy beasts whose lusts run riot
on the innocence of young females” [11]), male desire and capitalist desire are the sine qua non of the period’s sensationalism.

And this goes for the many characters (persecutory creditors, misers and hoarders, and so on) whose obsessive, clutching relationship to money—especially gold bullion—is excessive, even disgusting, precisely because of its negative relationship to circulation. This negative form of avarice is often embodied in the figure of the Jew, and usually the Jewish usurer. The above passage depicting Gabriel Von Gelt gazing with delight upon a chest of gold partakes of this tendency, as does the “rogue of a Jew” who swindles Jack and tries to steal his goose in the Mother Goose narrative. But Gentile figures such as the “old miser” in Melville’s The Confidence-Man (1857) are represented as equally negative and problematic. “My gold, my gold! Ugh, ugh, ugh!” the miser cries out after being duped into giving over his “ten hoarded eagles” to “the stranger” without receiving a receipt for his supposed investment (104). Indeed, Jew or otherwise, the miser and similar figures of hoarding place us in the terrain of “filthy lucre,” that site which Freud famously outlines in theorizing the symbolic links between money and excrement. “We know that the gold which the devil gives to his paramours turns into excrement after his departure,” Freud says, “and the devil is certainly nothing else than the personification of the repressed unconscious instinctual life. We also know about the superstition which connects the finding of treasure with defaecation, and everyone is familiar with the figure of the ‘shitter of ducats’” (“Character” 9: 174). “Gold,” he goes on to say in a related discussion of dreams in folklore, “is seen in the most unambiguous way to be a symbol of faeces” (“Dreams” 12: 187). Christopher Herbert suggests that the contradiction Freud points to, in which an object as socially significant as gold is linked with that culture’s most repulsive form of filth, reflects the fact that “Christianity idealizes poverty and anathematizes money” (“Filthy” 190). Quoting the biblical moment when Paul in the First Epistle to Timothy says that a pious man must be “not greedy of filthy lucre,” Herbert explains that “The Victorian worship of money, rooted though it is in Protestant culture, is shot through with the dread and aversion that such passages enjoin upon all faithful believers” (190).

Herbert’s discussion is useful for understanding the seeming contradiction we often see in antebellum American sensationalism. Though, as I have been suggesting, gold was for many the longed-for embodiment of fiscal and social stability, its accumulation could also be perceived as unclean or pathological. This was especially true for Whig-Republicans opposed to the hard-money postures of Jackson, Van Buren, and other Democrats. Consider, for example, the strain of humor that informs political cartoons such as Treasury Note (1837) and Cleansing the Augean Stable (1844) (figures 6 and 7). In each, the joke revolves around the imagined relation between
Figure 6  Treasury Note. 1837 by Napolean Sarony. Printed and published by H. R. Robinson. 25 x 44.2 cm; lithograph on wove paper. Reproduced with permission of the American Antiquarian Society.
Figure 7  Cleansing the Augean Stable. 1844 by H. Bucholzer. Lithograph with water color on wove paper; 30.1 x 44 cm. Reproduced from the Collections of The Library of Congress.
feces and the “mint drop” coins issued by Van Buren during the Panic of 1837, in response to a shortage of hard money after the suspension of specie payments by New York banks on May 10, 1837. In the image to the right of “Treasury Note,” we see Jackson depicted as an ass excreting mint drops as Van Buren collects them in a hat. In “Cleansing the Augean Stable,” presidential candidate Henry Clay and various other Whigs, such as Daniel Webster and John C. Calhoun, shovel piles of mint drops from the floor of the newly vacated White House. Clearly, for some, the Jacksonian fetish for gold was no better than the excess greed of the speculator. Indeed, as a “shitter of ducats,” Jackson is here guilty of a relationship to hard money that is both morally corrupt and pathological. Thus, whether male capitalist desire was represented in relation to paper money (the speculator) or hoarded money (the miser and usurer), what we see within the period’s sensationalism is an attempt to negotiate the problem of desire—and especially male desire—under capitalism.

The forms of psychological management and negotiation I am describing within sensationalism—in which we see projected onto sensational figures of alterity the linked and sometimes contradictory anxieties about (on the one hand) the felt theft of an older, mercantilist way of life and (on the other hand) the excess desires of capitalism—are usefully captured in the dynamic of projection Slavoj Žižek terms the “theft of enjoyment.” As he explains in a well-known passage:

What we gain by transposing the perception of inherent social antagonisms into the fascination with the Other (Jew, Japanese . . . ) is the fantasy-organization of desire. The Lacanian thesis that enjoyment is ultimately always enjoyment of the Other, i.e. enjoyment supposed, imputed to the Other, and that, conversely, the hatred of the Other’s enjoyment is always the hatred of one’s own enjoyment, is perfectly exemplified by [the] logic of the “theft of enjoyment.” What are fantasies about the Other’s special, excessive enjoyment—about the black’s superior sexual potency and appetite, about the Jew’s or the Japanese’s special relationship towards money and work—if not precisely so many ways for us to organize our own enjoyment? Do we not find enjoyment precisely in fantasizing about the Other’s enjoyment, in this ambivalent attitude toward it? (Tarrying 206; emphasis in original)

Žižek’s insights about this process of “theft” are especially interesting when thinking about the fiscal anxieties of the antebellum period. As I have been suggesting, it is the very notion of theft or loss that informs this culture’s relationship to money, and to the economy more generally. How else to explain the continuing obsession with treasure and lost gold during the
period? Gold, that illusive and quite magical substance, represents the very way of life that has been (or is believed to have been) “stolen” by the new economy. Hence, one suspects, the power for antebellum readers of *Jack and the Beanstalk*, the story of a voracious, flesh-eating giant who has stolen the family fortune, and whose greatest pleasure is to count the stolen coins each night before bed. Like the figure of the Jew or the speculator, the giant is the excessive Other who has stolen “our” lost enjoyment.

And yet Žižek makes clear that this ideology of theft also allows for much that is pleasurable within sensationalism. Indeed, the constant staging of Otherness that sensationalism specializes in allowed antebellum readers to fantasize about their own outré forms of desire and enjoyment even as they denied that this link existed. Thus, although as Žižek argues, “*The hatred of the Other is the hatred of our own excess of enjoyment*” (*Tarrying* 206; emphasis in original), reading about the sensational Other is another matter altogether. For what sensational reading provided is a kind of indirect access to the libidinal world of capitalist desire that is both anxious-making and, simultaneously, quite titillating. The many depictions of Jack gazing longingly at the giant’s gold are in this sense ironically revealing reminders that the giant’s obscene covetousness is in fact a mirror image of Jack’s own excessive greed—greed that is of course linked to the youthful capitalist manhood that Jack, especially in American versions of the story, embodies. “If Jack was pleased at the sight of the silver, how much more delighted he felt when he saw such a heap of glittering gold!” we are told in *The Surprising History of Jack and the Bean Stalk* (19), a passage highlighted by a telling image of Jack peering over the giant’s shoulder at a pile of coins (figure 8). This, I would suggest, is a somewhat embarrassing moment when the ideology of “theft” and stolen enjoyment gives way, and we receive a glimpse of the very excesses it is supposed to mask.

We should therefore understand that while the professional male of American sensationalism was seeking to deny his own relation to the desires and appetencies of the paper economy, he was at the same time involved in an often desperate effort to retrieve this very enjoyment back from the figures of Otherness who have stolen it away from him. This, of course, is one way to read Jack’s return theft of the giant’s stolen treasure in *Jack and the Beanstalk*. In the majority of the period’s sensational texts, however, we see a different process at work, which revolves around the logic of compensation I am describing. For what antebellum sensationalism much more frequently provides is the fantasy of enjoyment retrieved, but also—via a version of the alchemy Denning describes—a fantasy of an enjoyment purged of its more troubling relations to capitalist desire. Indeed, though antebellum sensationalism is obsessed with figures of Otherness who embody capitalist desire, it
ed with new guineas, and the other with new shillings.

They were both placed before the giant, who began reprimanding his poor wife most severely for staying so long; she replied, trembling with fear, that they were so heavy that she could scarcely lift them; and concluded at last, that she would never again bring them downstairs; adding that she had nearly fainted, owing to their weight.

This so exasperated the giant, that he raised his hand to strike her; she, however, escaped, and went to bed, leaving him to count over his treasure by way of amusement.

The giant took his bags, and, after turning them over and over, to see that they were in the same state he left them, began to count their contents. First, the bag which contained the silver was emptied, and the contents placed upon the table. Jack viewed the glittering heaps with de-
is just as obsessed with inventing narratives through which readers might see capitalist desire cleansed of its most troubling aspects, and thus returned to its male characters in safer—perhaps “laundered”—form. Put another way, antebellum sensationalism frequently repackages and defuses male desire in ways that make its link to capital difficult to see. This compensatory masculinity thus acts as an *alternative* to the form of manhood we might associate with an earlier, mercantilist period—regardless of whether this form of manhood ever existed. It is not, in other words, manhood directly linked to gold and treasure. Rather, knowing that treasure à la William Legrand’s discovery in “The Gold-Bug” is unlikely, the sensational public sphere seeks to forge other, compensatory forms of currency and value—differing versions of a gold standard—for the professional men of the antebellum period. This, it seems to me, is the corollary to the fantasy of found treasure, and it is one of the primary fantasies driving the sensationalism of the antebellum period.

An example from one of the ensuing chapters might clarify what I am suggesting here. This is from chapter 2, “Shylock on Wall Street: The Jessica Complex in Antebellum Sensationalism.” Here I show the compensatory logic at work within the many antebellum sensation narratives that reimagine the Shylock and Jessica story from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. In particular I argue that the economic tensions that inhere in American versions of the Shylock character—his tendency to hoard and withhold, as though he has himself stolen the nation’s missing gold bullion; his excessive and sometimes perverse forms of pleasure and desire—are perhaps most complex when played out in the many texts that reimagine the romantic life of his daughter. Distant cousins of the Jessica narrative, in which Shylock’s daughter, having stolen her father’s ducats and jewels, elopes with the Christian Lorenzo, these sensational stories recur throughout the period, and are important in two ways. First, they suggest a fantasy strategy by which the Gentile male might reappropriate the forms of economic potency and manhood that have been stolen and hoarded by the sensational Jew. Simultaneously, these updated Jessica stories provide a means of imagining how the otherwise problematic and alien forms of passion and desire housed in the Jew might be “converted,” and smuggled back into the capitalist world of Gentile culture in less threatening form. Here, in other words, it is the figure of the Jew that fuels the compensatory logic I am describing. Streeby shows how sensational narratives about the U.S.–Mexican War and other mid-century imperial encounters, especially as produced in the urban northeast by writers such as Buntline, tapped into nativist sensibilities in order to appeal to a working-class audience. I show here how the language of anti-Semitism offered by Buntline and myriad
other writers performed a similar form of “cultural work” in imagining the relationship during this period between professional manhood and the economic market.

As this example suggests, the sensational logic of masculine compensation cuts across a range of issues, and comes in a variety of packages. But in each case what we see emerging from the welter of material that comprises the sensational public sphere is a fairly specific logic whereby professional manhood is reimagined in terms of an altered relationship to desire. Over and over again sensationalism stages scenarios in which men are threatened by a figure of menacing Otherness (the Headless Horseman; creditors, etc.), even as these texts provide a titillating mix of readerly anxiety and pleasure. But, and somewhat surprisingly, the result is a narrative convention whereby we see the conversion of male desire. The goal, of course, is a conversion of paper money desire into a form of desire somehow associated with a gold standard—a bullionist desire in which value and desire are imagined as proximate. But in the chaotic world of sensationalism (to say nothing of the real world of antebellum America), this form of exchange isn’t possible. Instead, the narratives of the sensational public sphere offer a form of fantasy compensation whereby the excess passions of the professional male are traded for categories of selfhood—Gentile; middle-class; white—that are themselves the new and improved markers of “success” and value in corporate America.

But even this is uncertain. For, and as I show in several of the ensuing chapters, some texts suggest that fantasy compensation is either difficult to achieve, or unavailable entirely. The result in such cases is a sort of narrative crisis, where we see the ideological strain that fantasy resolution actually requires. The most famous such example is Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street” (1853), which I discuss in the epilogue to this study. Here, the unnamed attorney’s narration reflects a kind of desperate effort to retrieve from his enigmatic clerk some portion of his own lost enjoyment, and to thus rewrite his uneasy sense of Wall Street manhood. But Bartleby, of course, is a figure of alterity more radical even than the capitalist Jew, and what we see is that he is in fact resistant to any form of fantasy closure. And yet this sort of text is, I will argue, just as interesting and just as important as those that provide what we might think of as “successful” forms of compensatory fiction. Indeed, the fact that sensationalism of the sort I am describing is uneven and contradictory is simply to be expected. Less a coherent aesthetic space than an amalgam of materials that addressed the sorts of issues—professional manhood, commerce, desire—that I have been describing, the sensational public sphere was not ideologically consistent.
The other chapters of this study take up a similar line of analysis. In chapter 1, I read Washington Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and a range of other stories, novels, and plays from the 1819 period in the context of the Panic of 1819. Arguing first that the chronically nervous and highly gullible Crane is an early embodiment of sensational paper-money manhood (especially given his desire to sell off the Van Tassel estate for cash in order to invest in speculative ventures on western lands), I argue further that the ghostly figure of the Headless Horseman embodies the felt theft of masculine wholeness and potency experienced by American men in the 1819 era. Following my discussion of Americanized versions of the Shylock–Jessica narrative in chapter 2, I turn in chapter 3 to the role of emotion in the negotiation of a capitalist male selfhood. Looking at a range of urban sensation produced in the wake of the 1837 Panic (The Quaker City in particular), I show how this material repeatedly seeks to transform the crisis of excessive masculine expenditure into problems of masculine emotion and self-management. Affect and humiliation, that is to say, become in the urban narrative (especially the urban gothic) a new and compensatory form of male “specie,” one that brings with it the cultural prestige of a sentimentalized and recognizably middle-class manhood.

I pursue a related narrative about masculine anxiety in chapter 4, with a discussion of the 1836 penny press news coverage of the Jewett murder, which I describe above. Focusing in particular on the obsessive coverage of the murder in James Gordon Bennett Jr.’s New York Herald, I suggest that the prostitute Jewett acted for Bennett as a figure of sensational Otherness and “theft” much like the Headless Horseman, the Jew, or the paper money con man, in particular as she came to embody the period’s frightening paper economy. But I suggest as well that the murderer Robinson acted as a kind of male proxy for Bennett in his imagined efforts to “retrieve” the very manhood that she has stolen, a fact that complicates his depictions of the murder considerably. Nor, I argue, is Bennett’s an isolated representational strategy. As I show in a concluding section of this chapter, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Blithedale Romance (1852) stages a similar form of market allegory, in which female characters such as Priscilla (especially as the Veiled Lady) and Zenobia act as overwhelming and at times monstrous versions of the speculative economy for many of the novel’s male characters.

I continue my examination of Hawthorne in chapter 5, as I look at a sensational subgenre I refer to as the “bank romance.” Reading Hawthorne’s The House of the Seven Gables (1851) alongside urban Wall Street novels such as by J. B. Jones’s The City Merchant; or the Mysterious Failure (1851), I suggest that the sensational black body so frequently deployed within this material acts as a site onto which to project fears about the capitalist male,
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and thus about economic failure. Here, in other words, the black male plays the role performed by the Jew and other figures of Otherness in antebellum sensationalism; simultaneously, the category of whiteness comes to act as a kind of compensatory gold standard for masculine selfhood. But I show as well how sensational narratives that promise fantasy forms of whiteness also reveal the blurred edges at the boundaries of such racial categories. For just as the gold standard is in truth illusory—an agreed-upon fiction—so too is the sensational fantasy of whiteness a cultural myth, one writers such as Hawthorne seem to both believe in and undermine in their fictions.

As this overview suggests, it is the attempt to render the excesses of capital somehow comprehensible that is really the key mark of sensationalism as I understand it. Sensationalism—especially the material offered within the sensational public sphere—acted as a key fantasy space for members of the professional classes in antebellum America. Indeed, I would suggest that, as a whole, sensationalism does work fairly similar to that of fairy tales such as *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Here again I turn to Denning’s provocative comparisons of working-class dime-novel narratives to fairy tales such as *Cinderella*. Suggesting that the “magical transformation” often offered within these stories (from working girl to heiress, for example) responds to the “powerlessness” of working men and women, Denning argues that such forms of “wish-fulfillment” offer a “utopian vision of reorganized society” (*Mechanic* 195–96). The sensationalism I am describing, while targeting a different demographic than Denning’s working-class material, is also committed to strategies of wish fulfillment and fantasy resolution as a means of redressing a pervasive sense of social powerlessness. We are not here in the realm of the “liberating magic” Walter Benjamin ascribes to the fairy tale (*Illuminations* 102), but it may be that we are close to the qualities Ernst Bloch suggests when he says that they provide “an immature, but honest substitution for revolution” (*Hope* 368). The tales within the sensational public sphere are often similarly immature, but they also offer a similar form of alternative to social upheaval. What they offer is compensation. Return payment for a felt sense of loss, sensationalism helps imagine an adaptive selfhood, one “reorganized” to confront the troubling realities of life in mid-nineteenth-century America. In this, sensationalism acknowledges that, as Sandage puts it, “the only identity deemed legitimate in America is a capitalist identity” (*Losers* 5). But, I argue, it also allows its consumers to envision an imaginary resolution to the problem of masculine failure so pervasive under the sign of capitalist identity.

This compensatory logic is why the oft-staged fantasy glimpse of America’s fiscal primal scene—the embrace of men and treasure—is so important and so interesting. For it reminds us of America’s very deep-seated and libid-
inal relationship with the economic system of capitalism, and the role that sensationalism played in representing and negotiating this relationship. Like a primal scene, antebellum sensationalism often provides us with a discom-fiting glimpse of our economic origins—a glimpse, that is to say, of the origins of a selfhood based on the market-inflected ideologies of “success” and “failure.” The ensuing chapters will focus on the logic of compensation I am describing here, but it is worth reiterating that this logic stems directly from these primary fantasies about treasure and male selfhood. Indeed, while, in a fantasy of masculine ascension, most nineteenth-century American versions of Jack and the Beanstalk imagine Jack and his mother living “happily ever after” following the death of the giant, the sensationalism of this period reflects the knowledge that the modern, paper money male must resort to alternative narratives of male success. This book examines some of the more prevalent versions of these alternatives. Fantasies in their own right, they militate against the specter of economic failure—something every bit as terr-rifying as the giant that Jack is able in his great luck to slay.
One of the most fascinating representations of money in the antebellum sensational public sphere comes in Herman Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street” (1853). This is the moment when the story’s attorney-narrator discovers in the “recesses” of Bartleby’s desk a small “savings’ bank” that has been hidden way inside of “an old bandanna handkerchief, heavy and knotted” (110). This is not a cache of treasure. Rather, it is money stored and maintained as a hedge against the vicissitudes of the Wall Street world of speculative economic activity that is the story’s setting. And, judging at least from the weight of the bundle, it seems as though the contents of this “bank” is primarily hard currency. It is, that is to say, a form of money quite different from the thirty-two dollars in paper “bills” that the exasperated attorney attempts to give to Bartleby as a kind of severance pay, but which Bartleby refuses (116). “Why,” the attorney exclaims upon returning to his office and discovering that Bartleby has not left the premises, “you have not even touched the money yet” (119). Understood in the context of the period’s discourse of political economy, Bartleby’s refusal to “touch[] the money” suggests a crisis for the narrator: unwilling to accept or even make contact with the attorney’s proffered bills, Bartleby displays an unwillingness to partake of the paper system itself. His is, it would seem, a mercantilist mind-set, one that reflects a desire to resist the ceaseless circulation and exchange of modern capitalism. The attorney, meanwhile, who as a conveyancer does a “snug business among rich men’s bonds and mortgages
and title-deeds” (93), is the very embodiment of this new capitalism. Indeed, while the attorney makes the provocative comment that he likes the name John Jacob Astor because it “rings like unto bullion” (93), he is himself no bullionist when it comes to political economy. The attorney’s unexpected discovery thus stages a question that we have seen in various other texts throughout this study, both “Wall Street” narratives such as The City Merchant, and more general forms of sensationalism such as “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and The Quaker City: how do the tensions between an older form of mercantilism and a modern form of capitalism influence and shape professional manhood in antebellum America?

In a brilliant reading of this story, Gillian Brown suggests that Bartleby—who of course perishes at story’s end when he refuses to eat—is analogous to the very disturbing figure of the anorectic; seeking to control desire and thus maintain some sort of insulation and self-possession against the intrusions of the marketplace, Bartleby, like the anorectic, refuses to consume (Domestic 189–95). But while Bartleby might, as Brown argues, provide a disturbing mockery of sentimental self-possession (192), we need to understand as well the way in which Bartleby’s resistant stance poses a more general threat to the very form of white-collar professional selfhood the attorney represents. For although Bartleby might be thought of as a fairly powerful figure of renunciation, we might also understand him as a figure of “theft” similar to those we have seen throughout this study. Indeed, much as with the other sensational versions of Otherness I have examined here—the Headless Horseman, the capitalist Jew, and the appetitive black male, and so on—Bartleby seems to have access to modes of enjoyment that the attorney believes he has either lost, or has had stolen from him. Saving rather than spending, renunciatory rather than greedy, Bartleby is a figure of alterity both to the attorney, and to the paper money man of antebellum America.

Hence, it seems to me, the feelings of anxiety and even terror that Bartleby evokes in the attorney. For the attorney is haunted by Bartleby, much in the way that Ichabod Crane, Irving’s representative paper money man of the 1819 era, is haunted by the horrific and castrating figure of the Headless Horseman. Described variously as “the apparition in my room” (122) and “this man, or rather ghost” (123) who “persists in haunting the building” (125), Bartleby makes gothic the scene of Wall Street precisely because he represents a return of the repressed for the attorney narrator: “[H]e was always there,” the attorney says (107; emphasis in original). And, as Naomi Reed rightly suggests, Bartleby is apparitonal precisely in that he is a figure for the specterlike nature of the commodity in its alienated form (“Specter” 247–63).

But Bartleby is also ghostly in that he is a figure of the uncanny nature of
the attorney’s own desires, which is to say that the attorney is haunted by his clerk precisely because Bartleby is a figure for his lost enjoyment, returned to him now in familiar but unrecognized form. And again, much of this seems to revolve around the attorney’s discovery of Bartleby’s “savings’ bank.” “My first emotions had been those of pure melancholy and sincerest pity,” he tells us shortly after his search of Bartleby’s desk. “[B]ut just in proportion as the forlornness of Bartleby grew and grew to my imagination, did that same melancholy merge into fear, that pity into repulsion. So true it is, and so terrible too, that up to a certain point the thought or sight of misery enlists our best affections; but, in certain special cases, beyond that it does not” (111).

Here, the “certain special case[]” is Bartleby, but Bartleby as linked to the period’s political economy. For what he calls attention to are the attorney’s own excessive capitalist desires. Žižek describes a similar form of inversion in accounting for American anxieties about the Japanese in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Citing the general sense in the United States that “the Japanese don’t consume enough,” he argues that the real psychological problem stems from the perception that “their very relationship between work and enjoyment is strangely distorted. It is as if they find an enjoyment in their very renunciation of pleasure” (Tarrying 205–6; emphasis in original). Bartleby too seems, at least from the attorney’s perspective, to take a perverse pleasure in the very renunciation of pleasure. And he is thus a figure of intense fascination for the attorney, precisely because it is in the scrivener that he encounters in inverted form his own relationship to the desires, passions, and appetencies of the paper economy itself. This is what the attorney finds fearful and repulsive.

Thus, while the main question that seems to pervade this story is “what does Bartleby want?,” the real topic here is the attorney and his modes of desire. But this, of course, is what the attorney can’t admit to himself, lest he give conscious articulation to the fact that what he finds repulsive in Bartleby is in fact the projected image of his own excesses under the sign of the period’s speculative paper economy. What we see instead is a kind of affective overload—a form of panic that is in many ways coincident with the Wall Street atmospherics of market panic. Indeed, while the attorney critiques the affective excesses of the murderous debtor John Colt, who as I mention in chapter 3 became a penny paper sensation in the mid-1840s (“imprudently permitting himself to get wildly excited,” the attorney tells us, “[C]olt was at unawares hurried into his final act” [120]), he himself gives over to extremes of emotionality when dealing with Bartleby. “I could not, for the very soul of me, avoid falling into sudden spasmodic passions with him,” he says at one point (107). Describing himself by turns as “fearful” (127), “fairly flying into a passion” (126), and suffering “a state of nervous
resentment” (119), the attorney models what we might think of as a kind of Wall Street hysteria—a condition highlighted late in the story when, after Bartleby has refused the attorney’s offer to lodge at his own house, the attorney flees his Wall Street office altogether. “[E]ffectually dodging everyone by the suddenness and rapidity of my flight, [I] rushed from the building, ran up Wall-street towards Broadway, and, jumping into the first omnibus was soon removed from pursuit” (127). Sounding more like gothic maiden than self-possessed professional, the attorney here reminds us not only that he is haunted by Bartleby but also, as he twice puts it in an earlier scene, that he has been “unmanned” by his clerk’s uncanny presence in his Wall Street office (109). For again, like so many texts within the sensational public sphere, this is a story about professional manhood and its vexed status in antebellum America.

And, at least in the Wall Street world that Melville creates in this story, manhood remains unstable. For though the dream of recovering lost enjoyment drives a great deal of the sensational material I have described over the course of this study, “Bartleby” suggests that the self-and-Other divide that informs paper money manhood cannot be overcome. Toward story’s end the attorney seeks to deploy the sentimentalizing balm of domesticity, one that echoes the sought-after closure of a text such as *The House of the Seven Gables*. “Will you go home with me now—not to my office, but my dwelling?” he asks (127). But Bartleby refuses to be incorporated into the attorney’s private sphere. Instead, intensely located in the world of mid-century professional life, Bartleby gives the lie to the ideology of compensatory fictions. “I know you,” he says to the attorney once he has been removed to the Tombs, “and I want nothing to say to you” (128). The comment seems to include both the baffled attorney, and the equally confused reader of the original version of the story as it appeared in *Putnam’s Monthly* in 1853. “Reader,” Bartleby seems to be saying, “[T]his is not a story in which you’ll find fantasy compensation for your concerns about life under modern capitalism. Whatever precious part of yourself that you’re trying to find or replace can’t be found here.” Hence the power of the attorney’s well-known final lines: “Ah Bartleby! Ah, humanity!” (131). Though easily read as indicating a lack of sincerity, they might also reflect a final moment of pained realization. Perhaps, that is to say, he understands that Bartleby and his “savings’ bank” in fact offered a brief glimpse of a now vanished form of completed, premarket selfhood. No wonder compensatory fictions were so pervasive: they helped manage the realization that figures such as Bartleby and the Headless Horseman would continue to haunt Wall Street, and the paper money manhood it produced, far into the future.
Introduction


2. See, for example, Rotundo, American Manhood; Smith-Rosenberg, “Beauty, the Beast, and the Militant Woman” and “Sex as Symbol in Victorian Purity”; Nelson, National Manhood; Cohen, “Unregulated Youth”; Ditz, “Shipwrecked; or, Masculinity Imperiled”; Gilfoyle, City of Eros; Newfield, The Emerson Effect; Thomas Augst, The Clerk’s Tale; Carnes, Secret Ritual and Manhood; Kimmel, Manhood in America; Stansell, City of Women; and Horlick, Country Boys and Merchant Princes. For a related and quite useful examination of later-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century manhood, see Bederman, Manliness and Civilization. For valuable overviews of the rise of the professional middle classes during this period, all of which have been useful to me here, see Blumin, The Emergence of the Middle Classes; Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class; and Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women.

3. Nelson’s work is, it seems to me, in closest conversation with Christopher Newfield’s The Emerson Effect, a study that reads the emergent form of liberal masculinity in the antebellum period through the lens of corporate relations, or what he terms “submissive individualism.”

4. For extended analysis of the panics of 1819, 1837, and 1857, see especially Sellers, The Market Revolution. On the relations between Jacksonian economic and social policy more generally, see Remini, Andrew Jackson and the Bank War; Watson, Liberty and Power; Rousseau, “Jacksonian Monetary Policy”; Fabian, “Speculation on Distress”; and Wilentz, Chants Democratic, 299–325. For insightful readings of nineteenth-century American and British literature in relation to the climate of economic panic, see David Zimmerman, Panic; and Gail Turley Houston, From Dickens to Dracula.

5. For a related though quite different reading of the “Money Diggers” sequence, see Jennifer Baker, Securing the Commonwealth, 157–67.

6. My thanks to Christopher Looby for suggesting Bird’s text to me.
7. In a related discussion, Franco Moretti suggests that the hoard of treasure that Jonathan Harker discovers in Dracula’s Transylvanian castle should be understood as old money that the Count has brought back to life in the form of capital. “This and none other is the story of Dracula the vampire,” he says. “The money of Dracula’s enemies is money that refuses to become capital” . . . “It must have . . . a moral, anti-economic end. . . . This idea of money is, for the capitalist, something inadmissible” (emphasis in original). Moretti, Signs Taken for Wonders, 93–94.

8. James Thompson also examines this passage in Models of Value, 8–9, and I owe my awareness of it to him.

9. There were occasional counters to this longing for gold. Thus Benjamin Franklin, writing in 1729 as the Busy-Body, critiques the “peculiar Charm in the conceit of finding Money” by quoting his friend Agricola, who leaves his son a plot of land with the following caveat: “I have found a considerable Quantity of Gold by Digging there; thee mayest do the same. But Thee must carefully observe this, Never to dig more than Plow-deep!” (Writings of BF 130; 132). For the Franklin of this narrative, in other words, labor is more important to success than even found gold.

10. For detailed histories of the fiscal crises and “bank wars” surrounding the panics of 1819 and 1837, see Sellers, Market, 103–201; 301–63; Mihm, Counterfeities, 103–56; and Schlesinger, Age of Jackson.

11. Jack and the Beanstalk was first sold in America in 1809 as the title The History of Mother Twaddle, and the marvellous achievments [sic] of her son Jack. For early American versions of the story aside from the ones I list in the text, see the collection at the American Antiquarian Society. Note that there are various spellings for “Beanstalk” (open, hyphenated, and closed) in the titles of different versions of the text and that I use these specific styles when discussing individual texts. But note as well that I use the closed style here and elsewhere when making generic reference to the story.


13. For a compelling Freudian reading of Jack and the Beanstalk, one that has been useful to me here, see Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment, 183–93. Bettelheim also discusses the related Jack and His Bargains, but I have been unable to determine whether this narrative was commonly read in antebellum America.

14. Listed in Works Cited under H.A.C.


17. Published by William Raine, and listed in the Works Cited under his name.

18. Here I am building on the capacious archival work conducted by David Reynolds in Beneath the American Renaissance. Reynolds argues that the pulpysensationalism of the antebellum period was located “beneath” the more refined aesthetic work of writers such as Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville, who were able to draw on this raw material and provide more complicated and ultimately more compelling narratives out of it. I disagree with the general nature of this claim, and I will be seeking instead to show how high-culture works such as “Bartleby” are inextricable from the thick context of urban novels, short stories, plays, penny newspapers, and other materials that imagine the lives of professional men. But the value of Reynolds’s work is incontestable, and it has been of considerable use to me here.
19. Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere”; Schudson, “Was There Ever a Public Sphere?”; Ryan, *Women in Public*; Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*.

20. Other titles include the *Sunday Flash*, *The Whip*, and *Satirist*, the *Libertine*, and the New York *Sporting Whip*. The complete history of these interesting papers has yet to be written, but for excellent analyses of their cultural impact, see Horowitz, *Rereading Sex*, 159–93; Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, 92–139; and Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 92–116.

21. Hendler offers a related analysis in *Public Sentiments* of antebellum temperance narratives, suggesting that “Habermas virtually precludes consideration of the performative, theatrical, and spectacular forms that political discourse took in the Jacksonian era, and similarly militates against consideration of women’s participation in the public sphere” (47). I am suggesting that we understand the period’s sensationalism—and in particular the sensational public sphere—in the sort of “performative” and “spectacular” context that Hendler describes.


23. Reynolds argues that the penny news industry is crucial to the rise of a sensationalist aesthetic in nineteenth-century America, and I have benefited from this background in formulating my understanding of the penny presses and the sensational public sphere. See in particular chapter 6 of *Beneath the American Renaissance*, “The Sensational Press and the Rise of Subversive Literature,” 169–210. There is a wealth of historiography on the Jewett case, most of which I cite in chapter 4.

24. Various critics have argued that U.S. sensationalism often offers a counter to the aesthetics of sentimentality, in particular as the former is usually masculine in orientation, while the latter is usually geared toward a feminine audience. See, for example, Streeby, *American Sensations*; Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*; and Elmer, *Reading at the Social Limit*. But one of the things I hope to do here is show how the sensational public sphere designates a representational space in which these two discourses—the sensational and the sentimental—overlap, and perform a fairly specific kind of cultural work. Indeed, rather than trying to isolate the sensational, the urban gothic, or the gothic from the sentimental or the melodramatic, I will be tracing a range of texts that seek to produce a form of reading that responds affectively—“sensation-ally”—to the many crises of capitalist selfhood faced by the modern male of the mid-nineteenth century. For in fact, as Ann Cvetkovich puts it in her study of the British sensation novel of the 1860s, sensationalism is “not really a distinct genre” at all (*Mixed Feelings* 14). Rather, it is a discursive formation that informs a range of subgenres, most of them mass-produced, but some part of the now-canonical literature that bears an elitist or highbrow stamp. See also in this regard Christopher Looby, who suggests that the sentimental and the (urban) gothic are in fact thoroughly intertwined in antebellum sensationalism. As he puts it in a compelling discussion of George Thompson’s sensational fiction, “[Thompson] wants both to mount a powerful critique of the status quo and to endorse some of its fundamental values; he wants to affirm sentimental domestic norms even as he violates them, expose moral hypocrisy even as his fiction succumbs to it” (“Romance” 653).

25. Eric Lott has shown that the staged excesses of the minstrel show represent a similar instance of ambivalence for white male audiences. As he puts it in an analysis
that is also informed by Žižek's notion of “theft,” white subjectivity “was and is . . . absolutely dependent on the Otherness it seeks to exclude and constantly open to transgression, although, in wonderfully adaptive fashion, even the transgression may be pleasurable” (Love 150).

Chapter One

1. In a related discussion, Plummer and Nelson suggest that Crane is “an intrusive male . . . representative of a bustling, practical New England who threatens imaginatively fertile rural America with his prosaic acquisitiveness” (“Girls” 175). I will be seeking here to extend this analysis, and I understand this story more accurately as an attempt by Irving to narrate the debt-based and frequently humiliated forms of masculinity emerging out of the new economy.

2. In An Enquiry into the Causes of the Present Commercial Embarrassments in the United States (1819), the aptly self-titled “Anti-Bullionist” argues that a currency supported by specie was dangerously unstable because cheaper labor elsewhere in the world would inevitably result in domestic supplies of specie being “drawn off” to those markets where labor, and hence commodities, were cheapest. Arguing instead that a national paper currency not backed by specie reserves would free the country from the fluctuating value of precious metals and hence from anxieties that specie would disappear from the country’s bank vaults, the writer insists that “[W]e must from necessity abandon the agency of the precious metals, as a check to our circulating medium; and . . . a well-regulated paper-money must be established in its stead” (Enquiry 2; 7). A creative variation of this argument was offered by James Swan, who argued in 1819 for a new form of “national paper” issued by a national loan office at three percent interest, one that would replace both specie and the current paper money in circulation. “Who can doubt the solidity of the bills proposed?” he asks. “The Banks which are now in a suspension of payment, have not the power to imprint on their bills the value of specie; but the United States by lending their bills will give to them the action of circulation, and spread at once over our county, a money really superior in value to the precious metals” (Address 13).

3. For a useful history of the split between more traditionally Jeffersonian Republicans and the emergent National Republicans, see Sellers, Market, 97–102.

4. For a useful history of the ensuing Depression of 1819–22, see Rezneck, “The Depression of 1819–1822.”

5. In this sense The Sketch Book echoes Burke’s lament in Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790) over the fate of Marie Antoinette and, as Claudia Johnson puts it, “the fall of sentimentalized manhood, the kind of [chivalric] manhood inclined to venerate her” (Equivocal 4).

6. This vulgarity is even more evident in the depiction we receive of the citizen’s two sons, who seem to represent a posterity that is if anything further removed from Federalist masculinity. “They were arrayed in the extremity of the mode,” Crayon tells us of the man’s offspring, “with all that pedantry of dress, which marks the man of questionable pretensions to style. . . . Art had done everything to accomplish them as
men of fashion, but nature had denied the nameless grace [of the] true gentlemen” (SB 82).

7. In a compelling study of Irving’s use of the bachelor type in his negotiation of masculinity and an emergent form of American authorship, Bryce Traister contends conversely that Ichabod’s appetite is here “a metaphor for sublimated sexual desire,” wherein “the bachelor’s motivating sensuality is represented as appetitive and consuming, rather than sexual and procreative” (“Wandering” 118). For another discussion of Irving in relation to masculinity and bachelorhood (one that does not include “Sleepy Hollow”), see Banks, “Washington Irving,” 253–65.

8. For a reading of Arthur Mervyn as an allegory of anxieties over speculation (especially as related to the overseas slave trade), see Goddu, 31–51. For a more general analysis of early republican fiction in relation to concerns over speculation during the 1790s, one that includes an analysis of Dorval, see Weyler, “A Speculating Spirit,” 207–42.


10. Similar links between fiscal humiliation and male castration mark the early republican period. See for example Sara Wood’s 1801 Dorval. Here a gold advocate named Colonel Morely—whose virtue is reflected in his earlier decision to buy up the worthless paper scrip of revolutionary war soldiers for “gold and silver”—loses his entire estate when he is seduced by Dorval into speculating on the infamous Yazoo land scheme in Georgia (13). Unable to pay his creditors, Morely is arrested and sent to debtors’ prison, where, “unmanned” and humiliated, he soon dies (140). Morely’s real humiliation, however, comes when the widowed Mrs. Morely actually marries the speculator Dorval. After attempting repeatedly to seduce and then rape Morely’s daughter, Dorval eventually murders his new wife, stabbing her in Colonel Morely’s bed with his sword. With Dorval’s “naked sword” (244) standing in for the rapacious phallus of the speculator and the blood-soaked bedding violently mocking Mrs. Morely’s lack of virtue on her wedding night, the republican family romance is transformed rather decisively into something more closely resembling gothic horror—a sensational format overtly linking the evils of speculation with the humiliation and symbolic castration of men such as Colonel Morely.

Chapter Two

1. This image is not pictured here. Noah was frequently derided for his pro-Bank sympathies and close ties to Bank president Nicholas Biddle, but he was also the target of various anti-Semitic slurs. See, for example, the 1828 lithograph “City of New-York. Mordecai M. Noah.” Arranged as a parody of a public notice, the image depicts Noah as being beaten (“cow-skinned”) by a rival news editor, Elijah Roberts. A playbill on the wall behind them advertises “The Jew,” “I Act of the Hypocrite,” and “End with the face of The Liar.”

2. Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow; see in particular chapter 1, “William Shakespeare in America,” 11–82. Harap’s The Image of the Jew in American Literature provides an
especially capacious body of research on representations of the Jew in early American culture, and has been invaluable to me in laying the groundwork for this chapter.

3. The closest we get is the Wandering Jew of Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun* (1860). For an extended discussion of *The Marble Faun* in this context, see Harap, 107–18.

4. See also Jones’s *The City Merchant; Life and Adventures of a Country Merchant*; and *The Western Merchant*.

5. Consider the concerns voiced by popular political economist Edward Kellog in his 1841 *Remarks upon usury and Its Effects*. Beginning ominously with an epigraph quoting Shylock’s famous lines about his hatred for Antonio—“I hate him for he is a Christian / But more, for that in low simplicity / He lends out money gratis, and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice” (1.3.42–45)—Kellog complains as follows:

   [T]he money-lenders predict approaching scarcity of money, and begin to draw their deposits from [the] bank; perhaps even draw a few hundred thousand dollars in specie, which creates some little alarm; the banks begin to call in their loans on stocks, and stocks fall in the market. They curtail their discounts, and an unusual demand for money, and a depreciation in the means of procuring it, ensure, and again the usurer begins to exact his own treble compensation for the temporary loss of interest he chose to submit to; and now, again, he becomes a competitor at bank for discounts, and, by the same means as before, a usurious system of plunder worse than robbery is begun and maintained, to the utter destruction of hundreds otherwise prosperous men. The predictions of the usurers have been verified. Money is, indeed, exceedingly scarce, and is worth (upon the usurer’s rule of value “what it will bring”) what it will destroy any class of business men to pay. (32)

For Kellog, the usurer is a danger not simply because he might ruin America’s many unwise debtors. More importantly, he is a danger at the level of the general economy; this because he is able, by withholding specie during periods of fiscal “scarcity” and then raising rates on it, to control the actual supply of money in circulation, and thus provoke economic crisis—“the utter destruction of hundreds otherwise prosperous men.”

Edward Palmer offers a similar view in a sermon pamphlet entitled *Usury, the Giant Sin of the Age* (1865). As he puts it in words that echo Kellog’s, “[Usury] is a system which is subversive of all true and equitable commerce, and wholly incompatible with permanent commercial prosperity. . . . [U]nder its operation there comes a time every few years when the interest due to capitalists upon obligations then maturing, amounts to more than all the money in circulation. Then, of course, there is a great revulsion in commercial affairs. The crisis is sometimes temporarily postponed by financial maneuvering, but only to be the more disastrous when it comes, as come it must. Then the ‘money market is tight,’ and rates of interest are enormously increased. *The Shylocks must have the amount of their bonds*” (16; emphasis added).

Like Kellog, Palmer views usury as exerting a choke hold on the nation’s money supply, and thus precipitating economic panics. For both authors, in other words, it is usury that is at the heart of the nation’s economic woes. And what this suggests is that
the image of the Jewish usurer so common to the period’s sensationalism is in fact the virtual embodiment of the much more prevalent and insidious form of high-interest lending practiced by the nation’s banks and other “capitalists,” and thus the screen against which to project both anxiety and anger about the scarcity of money circulating within the unsteady economy. This is why both Kellog and Palmer are able, almost in passing, to offer the figure of the capitalist Jew (“the Shylocks”) as a stock stand-in for high interest rates, and for usury more generally. For again, what this figure represents is a negative form of political economy, one that acts as a direct threat to the nation’s economic health.


7. Jonathan Freedman provides a similar argument in his discussion of later-nineteenth-century authors such as Anthony Trollope, George du Maurier, and Henry James. As he explains in outlining what he terms “literary versions of economic anti-Semitism,” “The passions ascribed to the Jew in the culture of capitalism . . . may serve as a powerful way of distancing the affects unleashed by this system from the normative life of Christian culture and gentile commerce. Indeed, the affect-drenched, passionate, lascivious Jew becomes a literal embodiment of all the irrationalities, the perversities, the greeds and lusts, that are arguably the motor, and undoubtedly the consequences, of an economic system that presents itself as a self-correcting and rational mechanism for the maximally efficient delivery of goods and services” (*Temple* 73; 69). Freedman’s work—easily the most nuanced of the many valuable studies of Jews in America and the American imagination—has been especially influential to me here as I have sought to understand the antebellum period’s obsession with a population of Jews that historians suggest was no more than fifty thousand. The return form of Gentile “theft” that I describe below is thus an attempt to build on Freedman’s study.

8. The form of projection Žižek describes might also help explain the contradiction one encounters in realizing that the penchant for hoarding gold ascribed to the sensational Jew mirrors the faith in gold so often voiced by Jacksonian Democrats, and just as frequently mocked by anti-Jackson detractors. From this perspective the sensational Jew is in many ways a dramatic extension of these hard-money Jacksonians: like the Jew hoarding his cache of gold bullion, Jackson and his followers adhered to a strict mercantilist gold policy that bordered on the obsessional. But the mirrored reflection of Jacksonian fiscal policy provided by the sensational Jew clearly went unrecognized. Instead, the Jew remained an uncanny figure that haunted antebellum culture with the very image of its own quite repressed relationship to gold bullion, even as—or precisely because—he acted as the figure who had stolen that money in the first place.


10. See for one of many examples John Todd’s “The Jew” in *Simple Sketches*. Here a sick Jewish daughter beseeches her father to convert to Christianity as she lies on her deathbed, the implication being that she herself has converted. One might note, however, the various tales in which the Jewess refuses, even in the face of death, to convert. See for example “Myrrah of Tangiers” by “Caroline C—.” In this story, Myrrah, “the daughter and sole heiress of the wealthy and excellent Raguel” (125), is accused by a jealous Muslim man of religious infidelity, and is burned at the stake.
11. On castration in *The Merchant of Venice*, see in particular Penuel, “Castrating the Creditor.”

12. A similarly overt moment appears in Ned Buntline’s *Morgan; or The knight of the black flag. A strange story of by-gone times.* (1861). Here a group of “brawny ruffians” (20) storm the home of Solomon the moneylender after he has refused to loan their leader a large sum of money (“he called me a cursed Jew,” Solomon explains, “and swore he would raise a mob to pull the roof down about mine ears!” [19]). The goal of the raid is to seize Solomon’s gold, but in the ensuing scenes we see that the men are just as intent on raping Solomon’s daughter, Miriam. As the libertine leader of the crew puts it in explaining why he doesn’t wish to burn down the Jew’s home, “I do not wish to melt his gold, and there is a fairy within whose ebon tresses I would not scorch for a thousand sovereigns” (21). The “ruffians” are driven off by the “black knight” Morgan, but the mob’s desire for both the Jew’s gold and his daughter underscores the collective belief in the Jew’s hoarded riches as well as the link between the nation’s missing gold bullion and the alluring figure of the Jewess.

13. Tellingly, Miriam’s father goes on to inform her that her love for a Gentile repeats the sin of her own mother, who, he explains, had an affair with a Christian years before (“a Gentile, unclean dog as he was” [Agnes 44–45]).

14. This anxiety is also evident in Buntline’s “Miriam” narratives. For example, in *Agnes; or, the beautiful milliner*, Miriam is locked into a sealed-off attic room where, in what is perhaps Buntline’s sensational zenith, she finds her mother’s skeleton. Miriam thus realizes that she has entered her mother’s death chamber, as well as her own. At first she believes that she will be left to starve, but soon a perfumed gas begins to fill the room, and she understands that her father intends to poison her. Paired with her mother in this makeshift tomb, the horrified Miriam highlights the Jew’s perverse (and perhaps, given the link with her mother, incestuous) desire. But she also underscores the more general form of cultural work performed by the Jewess in antebellum culture. And that is to act as an image of excess, one that, at least in the sensational world constructed by Buntline, is simply too volatile for entrance into Gentile culture. Thus, rather than imagining Jessica’s conversion, Buntline, like various other antebellum authors, depicts her as stolen from Gentile culture, but apparently irretrievable from the clutches of the Shylock figure. Simultaneously fascinating, desirable, and fearful, she embodies the very qualities that antebellum culture—and antebellum manhood in particular—has disavowed in itself. In yet another narrative, *Rose Seymour; or, the Ballet Girl’s Revenge* (1865), the Miriam character is violently whipped for attempting to escape from her father’s home. “Naked to her waist, the lovely young Jewess was fastened up against the wall,” we are told. “A hideous old hag was flogging her with savage ferocity” (46). See also *Miriam; or, the Jew’s daughter* (1860s–70s?).

15. This narrative was substantially expanded from the 1828 version of the text, entitled “Judith Bensaddi, a Tale Founded in Fact,” and appearing in *The Souvenir* in 1828.


17. Beginning with an epigraph from *The Merchant of Venice*—“Antonio and Shy-
lock, stand forth!"—Abednego tells the story of a young man named Basil Annesley who owes money to Abednego Osalez, a Jewish moneylender who seems to have in his debt nearly every wealthy person in the city of London. Basil's goal in borrowing this money is to lend financial support to a poor young Jewish woman named Esther, with whom he has fallen in love. Unbeknownst to Basil, however, Esther is the niece of the childless Abednego—she is, that is to say, a kind of daughter substitute in the Jessica genre.

18. As with the death of the Shylock figure, the looting of the Jew's home is fairly common to this material, so much so that we might read the depiction of mob violence as reflecting a latent—and here displaced—desire within Jacksonian America for collective Gentile action against the nation's mercantile Jews.

19. This passage is also cited in Harap, and it is to his scholarship that I am indebted for this passage.

20. A similar anxiety over the linked categories of Jewishness and blackness is displayed in Edgar Allan Poe's famous short story “Ligeia” (1838). As Joan Dayan has discussed, Ligeia is marked throughout the text by signs of “black” blood. But, and importantly, Ligeia is also described in terms of Jewish characteristics. As Poe's narrator puts it, “I looked at the delicate outlines of the nose—and nowhere but in the graceful medallions of the Hebrews had I beheld a similar perfection. There were the same luxurious smoothness of surface, the same harmoniously curved nostrils speaking the free spirit” (“Ligeia” 63–64). As with Hawthorne's description of the Jewess he sees in London, or Robert Byng's racist description of the villain Densdeth, blackness and Jewishness seem to serve as referents for one another, and blackness lurks menacingly behind Jewishness as a kind of fearful and only indirectly named presence, one that, especially in “Ligeia,” threatens to emerge and overwhelm the unsuspecting Gentile male (Dayan, “Amorous Bondage” 239–73).

21. Garame's anxieties about Judith's racial makeup are further suggested on the day he and Judith depart for what is supposed to be a short separation before their planned marriage. At this point Garame has already begun to experience misgivings about the engagement, all of which revolve around his understanding of Judith as racially distinct. Such feelings emerge as he climbs into his coach, and looks up to see Judith watching him from her bedroom window. As he explains, “On taking my seat I looked up at Judith's window—it was lighted—her sadly declining form was distinctly shadowed forth upon it. . . . 'Shade of my beloved,' said I in my full heart, 'shade of my beloved, fare thee well, fare thee well.' The whip cracked, the wheels rattled over the pavement, and I no more saw even the shade of my beloved” (Benasaddi 119; emphasis added). Marking Judith with racially suggestive terms such as “shadow” and “shade,” Garame—much like Hawthorne in his journal entry—negotiates the vexed terrain of race and desire into which he has entered by transforming Judith into a sort of two-dimensional figure of blackness, one that stands in for the racial miscegenation with a Jew that he both longs for and abhors. Indeed, this is the last time Garame sees Judith in the novel, leading one to suspect that the subsequent revulsion he experiences at the thought of marrying her is at least partially informed by this haunting image of her racially distinct shadow-presence.
Chapter Three

1. There is a wealth of information available on the Webster-Parkman case. The most comprehensive text is Bemis, *Report of the Case of John White Webster* (1850). For an extremely compelling analysis of the case, one that links it to changes in conceptions of liberal selfhood in the nineteenth century, see Karen Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul*, 126–32.

2. It’s worth noting that although American newspapers were almost uniformly moved by Webster’s confession, the *London Times* was much more cynical. Referring to Webster’s “insincerity,” the paper described the text as “written with a vast deal ofunction and sentiment,” and went on to state that “it is difficult to see how the writer could have regretted its [the Confession’s] publicity, before his fate was finally sealed” (7-8-1850).


4. Joseph Fichtelberg provides a similar perspective in his discussion of Emerson’s response to the debt he incurred following the 1837 Panic. “For many conservatives, the lesson of the panic was quite clear: retrench, repent, reform,” he explains. “But other writers, both men and women, sense a more powerful change in these circumstances that no mere assertion of reason could forestall. With insolvency, these writers saw, an older vision of the autonomous self was also waning, and newer conceptions of a more plastic, deft, market-molded individual were demanded” (*Critical* 117–18).

5. See also Jackson’s *A Week in Wall Street* (1841).

6. The main pamphlet for Robinson’s trial is *Trial, Confession, and Execution of Peter Robinson* (1842). I would like to thank Peter Molin for calling my attention to this text, and for sharing with me his unpublished paper on the Robinson murder and Sedgwick’s novel, “‘Genteel Crime Fiction’: The Case of Catherine Sedgwick’s ‘Wilton Harvey.’”


9. On the rhetoric and ideology of male submission in antebellum culture, see Christopher Newfield, “The Politics of Male Suffering,” and *The Emerson Effect*.


11. *The Quaker City* sold 60,000 copies its first year of publication, and 10,000 per year for the next decade. The novel went through twenty-seven American printings, and was pirated in Germany and England, under slightly altered titles. For more on Lippard and the publication of *The Quaker City*, see Reynolds, introduction to *The Quaker City*, i–xvi.


13. Nelson argues that this novel reflects the “gynecological projection onto women’s bodies” of male anxieties about class and gender (*National* 137). For her full discussion of this dynamic, see 143–60.

15. Lori Merish provides a similar point in suggesting the influence of Scottish enlightenment philosophers such as Adam Smith on narratives of female submission within the period’s domestic sentimentalism. As she explains, “[T]he objectification of women as male property is internalized as a psychic mechanism through which men managed their feelings of powerlessness and their developmental dependence on women” (Sentimental 39–40).

16. My information on these early American counterfeiters comes from Mihm, Counterfeiters.

17. See Mihm, Counterfeiters, 113–25.

Chapter Four

1. The Helen Jewett case is often mentioned in histories both of prostitution and of journalism, but the only sustained analysis is Cohen’s The Murder of Helen Jewett. See also by Cohen the following: “The Helen Jewett Murder,” and “Unregulated Youth.” For a briefer analysis that places the murder more specifically in the context of antebellum prostitution, see Gilfoyle, City of Eros, 92–102. For a discussion of the case in relation to the history of journalism, see Stevens, Sensationalism in the New York Press.

2. To the best of my knowledge, virtually all editorial material in the Herald is, unless otherwise indicated, authored by Bennett. I have therefore consolidated all Herald references under Bennett’s name in the Works Cited. Each of these references is cited parenthetically within the text.

3. For readings of the various female reform movements and auxiliary publications proliferating in reaction to the perceived problems posed by the newly mobile “Jacksonian male” and the prostitution industry in general, see Christine Stansell, City of Women; and Smith-Rosenberg, “Beauty, the Beast, and the Militant Woman,” and “Sex as Symbol in Victorian Purity.”

4. For a useful and provocative reading of the cult of the female corpse in America and Europe in the nineteenth century, one that revolves largely around the work of Poe, see Elisabeth Bronfen, Over Her Dead Body.

5. In addition to the Herald, full proceedings were published in the New York Sun, the New York Courier and Enquirer, and the New York Tribune. The transcripts were also published in The Trial of Richard P. Robinson, 1836.

6. The pamphlets are as follows: The Thomas Street Tragedy (1836); An Authentic Biography of the Late Helen Jewett (1836); The Life of Ellen Jewett (1836); A Sketch of the Life of Richard P. Robinson (1836); Sketch of the Life of Miss Ellen Jewett (1836); Trial of Richard P. Robinson (1836). For a detailed reading of these pamphlets, which I do not go into here, see Cohen, “The Helen Jewett Murder.”

7. See, for example, NYH 5-14-1836; and the New York Sun 5-6-1836.

also provides a description by David O’Meara of David Broderick, a local Irish political leader, wearing a "Helen Jewett mourner" hat as a symbol of anti-Whig political sympathies when he led a delegation of New York Democrats to meet President Polk during a visit to Perth Amboy (Rise 208).


10. Owned and edited by Benjamin Day, the New York *Sun* began publication September 3, 1833, with the aim of providing a form of news from which mercantile and trade information, as well as partisan politics, would be absent. By all accounts the *Sun* enjoyed immediate success: within four months it equaled the most popular mercantile papers in circulation, and by 1834, with the aid of increased print technology, its circulation was up to ten thousand. Created in imitation of the *Sun* in 1834, the *Transcript* was the most successful of the penny copycats until the *Herald* was started. For more on the early history of the *Sun* see Crouthamel, *James Watson Webb*, 69–81. Note that I have listed the *Sun* under Day’s name in the Works Cited section.

11. The cash-and-carry policy was crucial to the success of the newly emergent penny papers such as the *Herald* and the New York *Sun*. Instead of having to subscribe to a newspaper, customers were able for the first time to buy editions by the copy. The young boys selling the papers so aggressively on the street would purchase a bundle of one hundred papers for sixty-two and one-half cents, which left them a fairly decent profit margin, provided they sold all of their copies (Crouthamel, *James Watson Webb* 67–81).

12. As with Bennett and the editorials in the *Herald*, Webb seems to have been the author of most if not all of the editorials in the *Courier and Enquirer* during this period. I have therefore listed the *Courier and Enquirer* under Webb’s name in the Works Cited section. For a fuller account of the “Moral War” waged against Bennett, see Crouthamel, *Bennett’s New York Herald*, 34–38; and Crouthamel, *James Watson Webb*, 84–86.

13. The most famous such encounter occurred in 1842, when Webb fought in a duel with Congressman Thomas F. Marshall of Kentucky. Following a series of barbed exchanges over the national bankruptcy act (which Webb himself had made use of and defended vehemently), the two met in the woods outside of Washington to settle their differences. Both men missed their first shot, Webb firing intentionally into the air; but on the second shot, though Webb again fired into the air, Marshall hit Webb in the hip. Webb was not seriously injured, but he was indicted by the New York District Attorney for violating an ordinance against leaving New York State to fight in a duel. Webb was sentenced to two years in prison for his crime but pardoned not long afterward by New York governor William Henry Seward. For more on this duel and various other confrontations between the city’s newsmen, see Crouthamel, *James Watson Webb*, 67–94.

14. For Bennett’s description of his encounter with Townsend, see *NYH*, October 8, 9, 17, 1836; for an account of his beating by Leggett, see *NYH* 1-5-1836. For a very general contextualization of these fights, see Crouthamel, *Bennett’s New York Herald*, 26.
15. For a useful biographical account of Poe’s many rivalries in the publishing world, see Silverman, *Edgar A. Poe*.

16. As Bennett put it in one of many such entries on Townsend, “Mrs. T., I understand, had borrowed money of Ellen—and yet it is said she intends to administer on her property. Ellen had many valuables about her—she had a large amount of jewelry—her wearing apparel was splendid, and worth probably $1,500. What has become of all this property?” (*NYH* 4-14-1836).

17. This claim was never pursued or proved; the following day Bennett reported that Chancellor, though in fact an ex-lover of Robinson’s who had been enticed by him to run away from her parents, was sent by her parents to South Carolina when the affair was discovered. Bennett further reported that Chancellor had later returned to the city, even visited Robinson while he was in prison, and perhaps left the city with him after his acquittal in June.


19. Chichester’s reputation as a ruffian involved in the politics of the city’s brothels is something Bennett takes advantage of in his early coverage of the murder, when he provides an ironic depiction of a conversation between Robinson and Chichester while the two were supposedly housed next to one another the first few days of Robinson’s incarceration (*NYH* 4-18-1836).


21. In one of the most significant moments for labor politics in the antebellum period, Judge Edwards, immediately following the Robinson trial, ruled against twenty-five journeyman tailors for conspiring to strike, a decision that resulted in days of mass demonstration and violence throughout the city. For a history of the strike and Edwards’s verdict, one that provides interesting commentary on Bennett’s role in the events, see Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 255–96.


23. In an 1843 fictionalization of the Jewett story, Joseph Holt Ingraham echoes Bennett’s narrative, explaining that “She was the seducer, not he. . . . Her beauty was her power, and she triumphed in it. She felt a sort of revenge against the other sex, and used every art to tempt and seduce and ruin young men.” *Frank Rivers*; cited in Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 151. For more on the sensational story of the revengeful prostitute as it evolved in the years following the Jewett case, see especially Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 150–57; and Keetley, “Victim and Victimizer.”

24. This quote, as well as most of Bennett’s coverage of the murder from April 11 and 12, is reprinted in *The Thomas Street Tragedy*.

25. Bennett’s strategy here was not an isolated one during the period. As critics such as Nancy Cott have discussed, the ideologies of female “passionlessness” and purity were frequently invoked within middle-class Victorian culture, specifically as a means of maintaining a masculine sense of security against the contaminating influences of the “public” spheres of economic competition (Cott, “Passionlessness”). Perhaps the most famous example of such a representation is Hiram Powers’s *The Greek Slave*, a statue that toured the United States in the late 1840s to the fascination and possibly the sexual titillation of an estimated one hundred thousand paying patrons. Depicting
a young Greek woman standing naked as she is about to be sold into slavery to the Turks, the statue was hailed by critics as a model image of sexual purity and chastity, in particular because of the way the figure’s expression suggested an otherworldly detachment that lifted her beyond the sordid realities of her present situation. For a particularly insightful reading of the cultural politics surrounding the reception of this statue, see Kasson, “Narratives of the Female Body.”

26. Brown, Domestic Individualism, 96–132; Goddu, Gothic, 105–16; and Merish, Sentimental, 172–90. Further citations to Brown are parenthetical within the text. Goddu’s market reading is closest to my own here, and I have benefited greatly from her insightful analysis.

27. For a compelling reading of Blithedale that places the novel in the context of female celebrity and antebellum mass culture more generally, see Brodhead, Cultures of Letters, 62–82.

28. See especially Brown, Domestic, 96–132; and Bronfen, Dead Body, 241–49.

29. Brown refers to Coverdale’s anxiety about bodily contact as “self-protective consumerism” (Domestic 113–14).

30. Russ Castronovo, for example, argues that like the consumptive and increasingly spiritual body of Little Eva in Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Priscilla offers “the airy insubstantiality of an adolescent girl” (Necro-Citizenship 118).

Chapter Five

1. For a related and compelling discussion of this image, see Sandage, Losers, 198.

2. The City Merchant is yet another text that follows the romantic career of the Jew’s daughter. Here, though, we see a fascinating variation of the Jessica narrative that I outline in chapter 3. In this version of the story, we see that Rachel, the daughter of the Jew Ulmar, is married to Billy Grittz, the son of the broker Grittz. The union links the families of the two Jewish brokers, but it has the effect of thinning, or dissipating, Jewishness nevertheless. This is most overt with Rachel, who “being born and bred in the city, had none of the Jew-German thickness of speech, nor any of their avaricious cunning” (City 94); the implication here is that her children will assimilate fairly easily into the world of sensibility ruled over by the racially “pure” Edgar Saxon. This is also true of Billy, who is described as “a descendant of Japhet, as well as of Canaan,” in whom “the blood of both races mingled harmoniously” (235). Billy’s Jewish ancestry helps explain the almost reverential attitude he displays toward hard money when working at Saxon’s counting house. “The boy could not help feeling exceedingly proud when accompanying a dray load of gold and silver,” we are told. “[A]s if by instinct, which seemed to be innate, his eyes and ears were open to observe and hear everything which passed among the revenue officers” (214). At the same time, however, the “Japhet” portion of his blood promises that the avariciousness of his father will also fade out in future generations. Thus, even this substory of Jones’s racial romance demonstrates how the crises both of the Jew and the unstable economy of the Jacksonian moment are defused, the result being that Saxon’s own masculine selfhood and integrity are retained intact.
3. For an excellent discussion of the rhetoric and politics of miscegenation during this period, one that includes examination of Clay’s “Racial Amalgamation” series, see Lemire, “Miscegenation.”

4. Hawthorne’s reliance on a metaphorical slippage between blackness and whiteness in relation to issues of class and labor also informs several of his comments about manual labor in his letters and journal entries from the 1840s and 1850s. This is particularly true of his descriptions of his work as a surveyor in the Salem Custom House, a position that often placed him aboard cargo ships bearing loads of coal. Complaining that his “coal-begrimed visage” or the “sable stains” of his profession give him qualities in common with “chimney sweepers,” or with “the black-faced demons in the vessel’s hold” (he also describes the longshoremen as looking “like the forgemen in Retsch’s Fridolin” [American 296]), Hawthorne seems drawn to the ways in which the coal dust he encounters provides metaphorical connections between manual labor and the racial markings of blackness—markings that he seems quite willing to ascribe to the white working-class men along Salem’s waterfront. This is also evident in letters Hawthorne writes from the Custom House to his wife, in which he expresses how unsuited she is to visit the working-class world of the waterfront. As he puts it in one such letter when informing her that the day’s shipment will be salt rather than coal, “Sweetest Dove, fly hither sometime, and alight in my bosom. I would not ask my white dove to visit me on board a coal vessel; but salt is white and pure—there is something holy in salt” (American 345). Though certainly playful, Hawthorne’s comment also reflects his desire—similar to that in his description of the “sordid stain” left by Ned Higgins’s money—to keep the “pure” categories of upper-class “whiteness” clear of the debasing marks of labor, marks that Hawthorne seems willing to discuss in ways that suggest a relation to racial difference.

5. For contemporary commentary on the perceived threat of upper-class degeneracy at mid-century, see Beecher, Letters to the People on Health and Happiness; and Greeley, An Address Before the Literary Societies of Hamilton College.

6. As Todd and other reformers made clear, the only cure for this disease was heterosexual intercourse within the bounds of marriage. But as Hawthorne explains, Clifford, “who had never quaffed the cup of passionate love[,] . . . knew now that it was too late” (Gables 141)—a fact that highlights the reproductive crisis facing not only the Pyncheon family but, at least symbolically, upper-class white men in general. For readings of antebellum culture in relation to male moral reformers addressing masturbation, see Bertolini, “Fireside Chastity”; and Smith-Rosenberg, “Sex as Symbol.” My thanks to Professor Rosenberg for pointing out to me the connections between Clifford’s enfeeblement and the rhetoric of male sexual purity advocated by moral reformers.

7. Brown makes a related point in discussing Hepzibah’s cent shop, observing that “Miserliness, the preoccupation with hoarding and holding money, highlights the role of the hands in trade, the fact of burst physicality in the touch and love of money, and this is also emphasized in Hawthorne’s depiction of the grasping hand of the organ-grinder’s monkey, noted as well for its ‘too enormous tail’ and ‘excessive desire’” (Domestic 83).

8. Lott argues something similar about Zip Coon and the period’s other black dandy characters. “The black dandy literally embodied the amalgamationist threat of
abolitionism,” he says, “and allegorically represented the class threat of those who were advocating it; amalgamation itself, we might even say, was a partial figuration of class aspiration” (Love 134). Here, in an analysis that certainly reflects usefully on a novel such as The City Merchant, the locus of anxiety is the upwardly mobile white man, whose aspirations are projected onto the dandy character. But again, the Pyncheon family experiences these concerns from the top, down; they are the ones who are threatened with a form of racial tainting that is itself understood in relation to actual contact with class struggle and, inter alia, contact with actual money.

9. One version of a less troubling form of racial difference is offered by Hawthorne in a journal entry from 1838, one suggestively similar to his depictions of Hepzibah’s Jim Crow cookies and the Italian boy’s monkey. Describing a variety of working-class members of a crowd outside of a commencement ceremony at Williams College, he turns to a description of a group of black men who are also part of the crowd. Here is his description of one of the men: “I saw one old negro, a genuine specimen of the slave-negro, without any of the foppery of the race in our parts; an old fellow with a bag, I suppose of broken victuals, on his shoulders; and his pockets stuffed out at his hips with the like provender—full of grimaces, and ridiculous antics, laughing laughably, yet without affectation—then talking with a strange kind of pathos, about the whippings he used to get, while he was a slave—a queer thing of mere feeling, with some glimmering of sense” (American 112). More direct than his representation of the Italian boy’s monkey, Hawthorne’s depiction of the “genuine specimen of a slave negro” reflects a cartoon version of black male subjectivity. Here, this image seems intended to counter concerns of the sort raised by the figure of the black dandy (whose type is referred to in Hawthorne’s mention of black “foppery”). “Laughing laughably,” with pockets clownishly overstuffed, and engaged in a stock routine of “ridiculous antics,” the man is depicted in terms of a two-dimensional aesthetic that seems designed to provide Hawthorne with a kind of security about his own, more interior form of white self-possession—one perhaps challenged by the sometimes raucous festivities of the working-class members of the crowd at the Williams commencement. Perversely, this form of assurance comes most powerfully in the “strange kind of pathos” the man is said to display over “the whippings he used to get.” For though on the one hand the description seems to suggest a sympathy extended across lines of race to one whose feelings might signal an internal—and perhaps shared—form of suffering and pain, it should more accurately be read as a sentimentalized and nostalgic return to the plantation South, perhaps of the sort imagined in “Plantation Melodies” by Stephen Foster such as “My Old Kentucky Home, Good-Night!” (1853), or “Massa’s in de Cold Ground” (1852)—products of mass culture in which the body of the black male acts as a reliable space of difference in the efforts of men such as Hawthorne to make their own relation to class and whiteness cohere.

10. As Gilmore points out, the slaves remind us that the Pyncheon fortune seems to have been derived at least in part from slave labor (Genuine 133; 225n19).

11. For more on the relation between Jacksonian politics and blackface minstrelsy, see Lott, Love and Theft; and Saxton, The Rise and Fall of the White Republic, 165–82.

12. Of course, this exchange between Maule and Scipio also suggests once again that white America’s racial imagination is circumscribed by basic tropes of minstrelsy and racial performance. It may be true that Maule’s comment to Scipio about a shared
“blackness” is motivated by the theft of his family’s property by the Pyncheons. But his comment also signals a rather profound act of racial appropriation. Claiming blackness, Maule appropriates the absolute victimage of this category for its affective resonance; there is simply no more powerful metaphor for pain, abjection, and dispossession in antebellum culture. Indeed, Scipio’s very name, which is repeated throughout Holgrave’s magazine story, is rarely offered without the race-fixing prefix “black” (as in “black Scipio”), a fact that has the double function of taking away what it enforces: Scipio is Other because he is “black,” but his “blackness” is appropriable in ways he is unable to control. Scipio, meanwhile, does not have the option of choosing whether to wear the sign of his abjection. And as suggested by the description of Scipio showing the “whites of his eyes” (Gables 192) when Maule arrives at the Pyncheon front door, Scipio too is rendered in terms of a performed, minstrelized blackness: for Holgrave (and probably for Hawthorne), there is no real difference between the real and the represented of race.

13. Gilmore argues similarly: “Race, rather than class, or, perhaps more properly, race understood in terms of middle-class morality, now defines respectability, so that the historical class differences separating Phoebe and Holgrave no longer matter” (Genuine 146–47).

14. For excellent analysis of the multiple tensions in this novel between surface and depth models of selfhood, see Davidson, “Photographs of the Dead.” Focusing on the new technologies of photography Hawthorne foregrounds, Davidson suggests that the novel represents Hawthorne’s meditation on the status of representational art at mid-century, one that led him to pose often anxious-making questions not only about the distinctions between “high” and “low” art but also about subjectivity in the age of mechanical reproduction.

15. As Oliver Wendell Holmes put it in the Atlantic Monthly in 1859, the photographer was a “great white hunter” who gathered the images of his quarry like the head and skins of his prey (“The Stereoscope and the Stereograph”).


An Authentic Biography of the Late Helen Jewett, *A Girl of the Town who was murdered on the 10th of April, 1836*. Together with a full and accurate statement of the circumstances connected with that event by a Gentleman Fully Acquainted with her History. New York: n.p., 1836.


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