

# Amateur Economies

## *Widowhood and Marriage in Drama for Amateur Performers*

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Before working herself into a hysterical tizzy about a pair of boots left behind a curtain in a hotel room, Mrs. Bellamy, the widowed heroine in Mrs. Burton N. Harrison's *Behind a Curtain* proudly proclaims that she shall "never marry again! What! Sacrifice my life of enchanting independence for the sake of a man!" Yet, by the end of the monologue, Bellamy has decided that marriage to a formerly disagreeable suitor is preferable to life as a widow. This piece, along with the other plays in Harrison's *Short Comedies for Amateur Actors*, follows a pattern wherein a young and often financially secure female character chooses to marry or remarry to ensure male protection, albeit sometimes protection against inconsequential threats like boots and mice. Economic issues relevant to the amateurs who often performed these plays as charity fundraisers figure prominently in most of the pieces, including the negotiation of household budgets for newlyweds and the expense of tokens that show a spouse's love. Financially secure widows appear in a number of plays, and yet those widows are encouraged to re-enter marriage and renounce economic freedom and social independence. Indeed, marriage is often depicted as a means to personal financial and physical security, while trinkets and diamonds are seen as a means of displaying love. The presentation of household economies in these plays predictably reinforces traditional gender roles, reflecting contemporary traditions, and thereby undermines the agency provided to amateur women by the performance experience.

While plays selected for amateur performances more often than not seem to have been comedies, there are enough outliers in and enough performances that have been omitted from the historical record to make drawing any real global conclusions about what type of drama was regularly performed in amateur theatricals difficult. Plays published for nineteenth-century amateur performers varied from adaptations and translations of commercial scripts, as well as pieces written expressly for amateurs.<sup>11</sup> The latter more often appear in

anthologies of amateur drama and tend toward comediettas and quaint pieces, which could suggest that amateurs were performing socially acceptable scripts, although Pamela Cobrin has explored the subversive potential of some parlor drama (see Cobrin, 385–402. For other key treatments of parlor drama, see also Dawson and Halttunen); however, commercial presses were also publishing lists of plays available for amateur performance which include contemporary commercial scripts of every genre. The historical record also shows that amateur performers chose a variety of scripts for their performances, and those plays were not necessarily those designed specifically for amateur performance. Society news and amateur drama columns in New York City newspapers, for example, reveal a dizzying array of performance content, ranging from minstrel shows to melodramas, Gilbert and Sullivan operettas to contemporary commercial plays, and Shakespeare to Sheridan.

What makes Mrs. Burton N. Harrison's plays particularly useful to historians is Harrison's relationship with New York city amateur performers in the 1880s and 1890s who regularly performed her works in public, as well as her later commercial success as a novelist and playwright. As we know that her plays were regularly performed by amateurs on commercial stages, and we know that the women who were performing them were skating on the lines of propriety — some turning professional while others were using amateur theatricals as cover to hide their aspirations at forbidden professional careers — Harrison's comedies and her choice to translate and anthologize these specific treatments of marriage, widows, and financial relationships provide an interesting counterpoint to the production habits of the performers. Felicia Hardison Londré argues that women dramatists at the turn of the century needed to prove that her "essential femininity — her attractive appearance, her social position as a wife, her ability to run a household, her maternal devotion, and so forth — had not been impaired by her writing career" (Londré 131). Throughout her writing career, Harrison certainly followed this model, publishing under Mrs. Burton N. Harrison rather than Constance Cary Harrison, continuing to serve as a hostess and patroness for numerous social events, and incorporating amateur charity theatricals within this social network. While she does not appear to have performed in her plays, the friends who did stage her dramas also negotiated a similar balance between femininity and power, as did many women who used charity work besides theatricals as a means of acquiring a public voice (see Ginzberg, Barker-Benfield; for amateur charity theatricals, see Curley 52–73). Harrison's amateur performers represent an intriguing cross-section of women on the verge of the new century: the unmarried Lawrence sisters aspired to professional careers but satisfied themselves with staging many of Harrison's plays over more than a decade as charity theatricals; Elsie de Wolfe and Mrs. James Brown Potter, on the other hand, courted intense public scorn for their decisions to turn professional — Brown Potter moreso than de Wolfe because she turned her back on her husband, child, and social position. This negotiation of feminine

power and position also pervades the dramas in Harrison's collection, as they undercut women who are in traditionally volitional widow roles with humor and plot machinations that place the women firmly back within a domesticated and subservient role. The plays and subject matter chosen by Harrison could easily be seen as part of the women's collective attempts to balance public perception of their behaviors.

Indeed, the prior success of her plays in the hands of New York amateurs such as Mrs. Brown Potter, Elsie de Wolfe, Alice and Rita Lawrence, and others is seen as a selling point for Harrison, who introduces her plays by claiming that amateurs can successfully perform them:

The five short comedies selected for this volume are easily within the scope of intelligent amateurs. They have been tested and approved as suitable for this purpose by various audiences assembled in private houses, and by the larger hearing accorded on the occasions noted with each play [Harrison *i*].

As the plays were part of the repertoire of Harrison's circle of amateur friends, they were indeed regularly performed as charity fundraisers at commercial theatres and public halls across the New York metropolitan area in the 1880s and 1890s. Their successful fundraising with these plays ensures their viability as performance pieces and charity fundraisers, but also as vehicles which other amateurs can stage without tainting their own images and reputations.

Harrison also sells her pieces to the reader by remarking that her choice to translate these short French farces is a benefit to amateurs, because they will "have the benefit of an untrodden field, and be spared comparison with professional predecessors" (Harrison *i*). Harrison's concern here is not for the content of the plays, except insofar as successfully acting for the duration of a full-length play is significantly harder than in a one-act, but rather she wants her amateur performers to avoid comparison with professional performers, as would happen with a commercial piece (Harrison, *i*). "Few amateur aspirants bear in mind that, in selecting for performance the established dramas identified with the names of artists who have successfully interpreted them, they are exposing themselves to a two-edged sword of criticism" (Harrison *i*). Indeed, she neither dissuades the purchasers of her plays from performing what is popular in contemporary theatre nor avoids what is commercially successful in her selection of plays.

Harrison's career as a playwright was overshadowed by her later and more successful career as a novelist, and yet her comic plays certainly fit within the broader dramatic and playwriting traditions of the end of the nineteenth century. Engle characterizes this period as "governed by popular melodrama, musical theatre, light comedies, and burlesque" in her study of American women playwrights at the turn of the twentieth century (Engle 28), and Harrison's forays into playwriting for amateur and professional theatre both reveal an understanding of commercial trends as well as participation in the tradition of translating foreign texts. Her most successful play was an 1883 adaptation and

translation of a Scribe comedy, *A Russian Honeymoon*, and the 1901 *The Unwelcome Mrs. Hatch* also follows commercial production patterns towards realism and social critiques. *A Russian Honeymoon*, prior to becoming a vehicle for professionals was produced at the Madison Square Theatre by the same amateur performers who regularly performed works from her *Short Comedies for Amateur Players*. *The Unwelcome Mrs. Hatch*, after being the source of a legal authorship dispute between Belasco and Harrison, was staged first by Minnie Maddern Fiske and not by amateurs and was made into a 1914 film; by 1895, however, Harrison's amateur compatriots had all either died, moved to Europe or turned professional, and her writing career was sufficiently developed that perhaps the professional stage was a more logical place to debut work.

The four plays and one monologue in *Short Comedies for Amateur Players* combine a number of these dramatic and social traditions. As with Harrison and her amateur performers, the female characters are potentially powerful and yet never able to fully embody their aspirations without succumbing to traditional gender roles. Comic pratfalls, mistaken identities and witty humor abound, and thus traditionally strong young widow characters are undercut and disempowered by remarriages justified by utterly nonsensical reasoning and by the comic need for a happy resolution. The one unmarried woman who agrees to move up in society through marriage in *Two Strings to Her Bow* learns that she, like the widows, needs to act demurely and passively rather than put on airs or, in the case of the widows, adopt the power of her financial position. Each of the plays addresses marriage and the economic exchanges inherent in such an arrangement, and yet throughout the plays, the complicated intersections of economic power and gendered propriety routinely suggest that all women, regardless of their financial power, need to be returned to the protective arms of a husband. The juxtaposition of Harrison's volitional amateur performers and these characters adds an intriguing layer of analysis to plays that already suggest that women who were performing amateur drama should not eschew traditional gender roles, even when financially independent.

*Tea at Four O'Clock* satirically chronicles the misery that Mrs. Effingham, a young widow, experiences while trapped in her parlor, receiving guests and unwelcome suitors. She wants "nothing better than a turn in the park!" (Harrison 57) and bemoans that "society is a prison into which we are cast, as soon as we are born, and in vain we cry, 'We can't get out!'" (Harrison 57–58). Economics in this play are squarely centered on the concerns of the upper class in their parlor discussions and attempts to marry one another. Effingham's suitors include Grayson, who spews sentiment despite repeatedly getting cut off by other suitors. Mr. Appleby, "the millionaire, the match of the season" (Harrison 67) according to the foolish Mrs. Coddington is viewed by his rival Walton as "the miser millionaire [... who] is even saving of his words, which accounts for his never being able to complete a sentence." (Harrison 61). Dr. Grantley, who expounds at length about tariff bills even while no one listens to him, covers

Appleby's lack of dialogue, while Walton and Sabretache tell competing stories of military prowess. The utterly hopeless debutante, Arabella Coddington, prodded into speaking by her mother, concocts a story about a duel involving Effingham's preferred suitor, Arthur Rutledge, who despises these receiving hour events and is absent through much of the play.

The meaningless conversations in the parlor intertwine and include false gossip news that Rutledge, Effingham's suitor, is engaged to another and that he was involved in a duel at a club. Grantley's pontification about the tariff bill punctuates Effingham's increasingly panicked attempts to learn news about Rutledge, simultaneously making this discussion of taxes incredibly boring and inconsequential in the face of social news. At points, this heady economic discussion becomes the source of comedy, as Effingham panics when she hears Dr. Grantley mention "the proposed horizontal reduction" and interprets his comment as "Horizontal! That means poor Arthur was lying on the ground." The rest of Grantley's comment about the tariff, "[w]as stupidity itself" then reflects back upon Effingham's histrionics or perhaps upon the awkward Arabella's concocted story which she shares because her mother cajoles her to be social and talk so that she can attract one of Effingham's suitors for herself (Harrison 78).

Effingham, unlike the other three widows in the collection, does not profess that she wishes to remain unmarried, but the dialogue suggests that she, like the others, is resisting all of her suitors. After a comical exchange with her servant about broken figurines, she remarks that she "can't understand why Arthur didn't come yesterday; not so much as a note or a bunch of violets. I was so cold on Saturday when he said good-bye. His eyes had that deep wounded, yearning look" (Harrison 57). The play, then, becomes a prolonged afternoon of suffering which makes her realize that she does wish to marry Arthur, in part perhaps because she feared that she had lost him. However, Effingham's lines at the end of the play only allow her to resolve that Arthur is not dead and Arabella's stories were all false (Harrison 78–80); she never vocalizes any change of mind about Arthur nor agrees to marry him. He simply takes her hand, while refuting the false rumor that he was to marry Fanny Golightly, and she does not refuse him (Harrison 80).

While *Tea at Four O'Clock* neglects to address why Effingham would want to remarry, *The Mouse-Trap* displays a widow's willingness to give up freedom and financial independence to marry an earnest if foolish man when faced with a source of terror; in this case, the threat is a mouse. The widow Mrs. Prettipet opens this one-act with a humorous set of vehement instructions to her servants, begging them to lock the door and search the house because "[t]here's no knowing whether the monster wouldn't try to follow me" (Harrison 3). Presumably, there is an expectation that the audience will understand the suggestion that she is trying to uncover a threatening man, for it isn't until the end of a long paragraph of instructions that she notes that the creature which scared her, grasped at her, and sent her into this tizzy had a tail and was a indeed mouse

rather than a devilish man. Prettipet then transitions immediately into a discussion of her suitor, the bumbling lawyer Mr. Briefbag, who “[has been] proposing to me at intervals of three weeks regularly [and] doesn’t mind refusals in the least.” Like the other widows, Prettipet has no intention of marrying and notes that she would only do so “to find a protector” (Harrison 4). Given that she has been panicking about a mouse and remarking that the only failing in her late husband was his fear of mice (Harrison 4), Briefbag’s success in wooing her will depend on his ability to protect her from that mouse.

Briefbag’s foolishness is surpassed only by Prettipet’s squeamishness about the mouse. Until it reappears and she faints, Prettipet boldly refuses all of Briefbag’s advances and toys with him. When a servant announces that the cat has caught the mouse, Prettipet leaps up and runs to the door, only to discover that the servant cannot tell the difference between a mouse and a ball of yarn. Her current support system of servants and cat cannot protect her from the mouse, and she again begins fretting. Briefbag, misinterpreting her emotional display, tells a concocted story of his bravery to impress her and at the climax, the mouse leaps from her knitting basket, runs across the room, and Prettipet faints. The juxtaposition of events here suggests that she, as a world and suitor-weary widow, is not fazed by his advances and machinations but instead feigns to be indignant about his behavior at the appropriate moments. The mouse, on the other hand, causes her to fret, faint and then leap onto a chair, shrieking. After a brief moment of confusion, Briefbag realizes there is a mouse and leaps onto another chair in terror. While Prettipet offers to finally accept his hand in marriage if he scares off the mouse, asking him to “rid me of this, our common enemy” (Harrison 12). Briefbag is too terrified and refuses. At this moment, Prettipet finally begins to act like an independent woman and starts planning ways for them to work together to shoo the mouse out of the room; they fail, however, as her attempts to hit the mouse with books and yarn go wide and hit Briefbag instead. Finally physically pummeled into action, Briefbag limply and ineffectually flaps his umbrella. Prettipet suggests making noise, and the pair create a cacophony that again fails, but which reminds Briefbag that he “once had some success in my imitations of a cat” (Harrison 12). He roars, embracing the inner animal which has been hidden throughout the piece, and sends the mouse scurrying into the hall and into the paws of Prettipet’s cat.

The mouse has brought the pair together insofar as she has ceased affecting indignation and he has stopped pompously pretending to be worldly. Rather than quickly resolving their marital arrangement with the expulsion of the mouse, however, the play continues the confusion and mixed messages through another exchange wherein he threatens to leave and she finally convinces him to stay, as long as he buys a mouse-trap. The symbolic usage of such a mundane fear as a mouse here in *The Mouse-Trap* works within the confines of the farce, but her quick willingness to remarry implies that financial security is not enough. Notably, these widows are not falling in love with strong male characters, in

part because of the farcical tone of the plays, but the implication is that women should not and cannot be alone. Indeed, Prettipet even explains while she is refusing the idea of marrying Briefbag that “[i]t is hard for a woman to tread the path of life alone” (Harrison 4). Rather, the widows run into these marriages for protection from minor threats which send them into hysterics, perhaps reinforcing that the successful treatment of hysteria is when a male doctor, or in this case a second husband, “had mastered her will and her body” (Smith-Rosenberg 211). Thus, the widow Prettipet here renounces freedom not because she is financially insecure or in love with her new husband, but because he can offer her protection from minor terrors that live in her knitting basket.

*Behind a Curtain* is a monologue that runs a brief four pages, but contains many of the tropes from the other plays in the collection in its presentation of a widow who agrees to remarry as a result of nonsensical fears. The critique of economically independent women becomes more pointed in this piece as it also draws upon contemporary assumptions about hysteria in a less physically comic fashion than in *The Mouse-Trap*. While Prettipet throws books at the mouse in her home and recovers quickly from the perceived rodent threat, Mrs. Bellamy is significantly more mobile as widow and thus more at risk of her succumbing to her mental infirmities. The young widow Bellamy stages a meeting with her suitor, “that tiresome Captain Fitzhenry” (Harrison 49) and then runs away rather than receive him. The piece opens as she arrives in a New York hotel, having left a false message for Fitzhenry with her butler: “‘called to New York on business of importance’” (Harrison 49). Moments after she arrives, Fitzhenry announces his presence in her New York hotel through a letter, where he reveals that he was able to learn her plans and follow her to New York through “judicious bribery of your servants” (Harrison 50). Fitzhenry’s earnest desire to marry Bellamy is revealed in his letter: “I was, during the whole journey, in the rear car of your train. It was horribly dull there, in company of a maiden lady, who ate lozenges; but I was comforted by thinking, if an accident occurred, I should, at least, have the happiness of perishing with you” (Harrison 50). Fitzhenry, who never appears on stage, needs to be depicted as devoted and persistent but essentially harmless through this letter, for the rest of the monologue shows Bellamy’s increasingly neurotic fears about her hotel room, imagined threats to her life, and her plans to buy off potential attackers with her wealth.

Women’s understanding of the power and usage of wealth is shown as misguided and ineffectual throughout, and yet money is clearly related to power and protection. After all, Fitzhenry has the means and power to bribe Bellamy’s servants into betraying her trust. The presumption here is not that Bellamy is not well off, but rather that the widow, despite her wealth, does not fully control her employees. Indeed, moments before Bellamy learns of the betrayal through Fitzhenry’s letter, she was sitting in the hotel room laughing at her success, noting that she hadn’t completely lied to Fitzhenry, and remarking that Mr. Bellamy did leave her quite wealthy upon his death: “It’s true, I have an excuse



for coming. To-morrow is Augusta's wedding-day. [...] When I was married before her, three years ago, she was quite green with jealousy; but when poor Mr. Bellamy died, six months after, leaving me all that money, August was ready to tear my eyes out. Poor Augusta! She never could stand another person's luck! (Harrison 49–50)." The suggestion that being widowed and wealthy is something worthy of jealousy is then repeated in Bellamy's reaction to Fitzhenry's letter, for she proclaims that she does not want to give up her "life of enchanting independence" (Harrison 50). Yet, this announcement is cut-off by her panic over a noise in the room and her revelation that she fears traveling without her maid, who was injured and unable to accompany her. Thus, independence is equated not with self-sufficiency, but with the accompaniment of trustworthy servants—a device that appears in other plays in the collection as well.

This noise begins Bellamy's descent into a paranoid frenzy that leads her check for a burglar under the bed and to stack chairs behind the door so that she "won't be murdered without knowing it" (Harrison 50). Her choice to read newspapers has not led to intellectual enlightenment, but rather to melodramatic observations that "villains seem to pick out solitary females; widows especially" (Harrison 51). The sensational paper in her room then confirms this fear: "'Only last week a young and charming widow—chloroformed at—her *hotel!*'" (Harrison 51). She then views a pair of boots, left behind by the last hotel customer, and becomes convinced that there is a burglar in the room who will slit her throat for her diamonds, which he of course knows that she has carried with her on this trip. The fear of being left "weltering in my gore" leads her to wish that Fitzhenry were there to save her from the imagined burglar (Harrison 51), and presumably thus from her own inability to be in a room by herself without having an irrational and emotional breakdown.

Continuing to display her simplistic understanding of finances and humanity and her tendencies towards hysteria, Bellamy proffers her diamonds and cash to the burglar, hoping to buy him off and assuming that he is a good soul who has simply fallen on hard times: "No doubt you are more unfortunate than guilty. A series of financial reverses may have impelled you to this method of earning a livelihood. Your wife, no doubt, is dying. Your children, poor little things, are gnawing crusts" (Harrison 51). She begs to keep her instruments of vanity and control over her feminine appearance but which cannot offer protection, her "comb and brush, and my tooth-brush," and then offers the rest of her purse to the boots which sit behind the curtain. Eventually she resorts to pleading with the boots: "O Mr. Burglar, spare me! Have pity on a woman who never did you any harm!" (Harrison 51). Her overactive imagination has clearly been addled by emotional strain, but it also reveals an over-reliance on motifs from melodramas and the sensationalist press; rather than having the presence of mind to think clearly about the situation and go look behind the curtain, she reverts to fantastic interpretations and terror, simply because she is alone. Of course, the hotel staff soon interrupts to ask for the boots, but rather than laugh



at her fears, she confirms her inability to be alone in the world and vows to marry Fitzhenry, who will save her from herself.

The play works to reveal that Bellamy has neither the nerve to live an independent life nor the capacity to understand a true threat from an imagined one, just as she was incapable of effectively creating a scheme to avoid Fitzhenry, whom she should just marry. The text also plays upon contemporary presentations of hysteria in women; Bellamy never had children with her late husband, and thus cannot be reacting hysterically to the demands of marriage and parenthood. She does embody the remainder of Smith-Rosenberg's description of the hysteric who simply cannot cope: "Any general description of the personal characteristics of the well-to-do hysteric emphasized her idleness, self-indulgence, deceitfulness, and 'craving for sympathy.' Petted and spoiled by her parents, waited upon hand and foot by servants, she had never been taught to exercise self-control or to curb her emotions and desires" (Smith-Rosenberg 205). Bellamy gleefully lies to her suitor and runs away rather than face him, and yet she also wants the burglar and Fitzhenry to pity her; clearly, she works herself into a frenzy in the piece because she cannot control her emotions long enough to think rationally about the situation or to recognize the impact that sensational news has had upon her mind. Indeed, the play seems to be arguing that the idle and carefree life of the widow will create an opportunity for hysteria to arise in a woman rather than free a woman from the pressures which might have led to conditions classified at the time as hysteria; Bellamy's redeeming quality at the end of the play is that she understands that she cannot handle these freedoms and thus needs the grounding of a man to protect her from her own emotional instability.

While *Behind the Curtain* and *The Mouse-Trap* show widows in emotionally overblown situations who decide to remarry, *Weeping Wives* presents wedded life two years after the remarriage of the widow Delphine. Her relationship with her husband Prosper Chambly, a sometimes whiny man with a love of gambling, is juxtaposed against the newlyweds Albert de Rieux and Clotilde, who are honeymooning. Delphine and Clotilde know each other from the convent, while the two men knew each other at school, and each couple happens upon the other while on vacation in Baden. The discussions of household economics and the relationship between love and monetary expenditures provide the foundation of this entire play, with Delphine staunchly inspiring much of the action throughout.

At the outset, Chambly is bemoaning his inability to win when gambling as well as his decision to let his wife control the household finances:

And here I am, with forty-five thousand louis of rent upon my books, and not twenty francs in my pocket. [...] So much for having said to Madame Chambly in my first moment of marital expansion, "Take the key of my secretary, my beloved. From this moment you are the keeper of our fortunes—the disposer of my purse." Strange to say, she accepted. [...] At that time it made little difference. We were not at Baden, and this passion for play had not taken hold of me [Harrison 18].

Immediately, it is established that their financial accounts have been combined, and later discussions confirm that not only does Delphine control the finances, but also that she also freely spends her own money on diamond earrings while refusing to give her husband more than his monthly allowance (Harrison 33). Much of the plot then involves Chambly attempting to connive money out of Delphine while a servant, Jean, tries to then bribe and extract money from Chambly. He fails because his wheedling is ineffectual; Chambly plays the role of submissive wife, but he is clearly unskilled at it, while Delphine embodies the strong volitional widow heroine of earlier comic traditions.

Their relationship, while altered somewhat for nineteenth-century concerns about gender and finances, follows well-established patterns of dramatic widowhood. Panek notes that marrying a widow could be a boon for a man, but it also “threatened his manhood even as it established it, for having already relinquished to his wife, at least in part, the masculine role of financial provider, a widow’s new husband risked entering a continuous power struggle for the masculine attributes of domestic government” (Panek 327). *Weeping Wives* explores the ramifications of that “power struggle” within this marriage, and yet firmly places the blame for the battles on Chambly and his ill-advised plan to marry a widow:

A widow. That has always been my dream. A young girl knows nothing of life, of character. Her experiments may so easily make shipwreck of your happiness. A widow, now — there are no whims, no illusions about *her*! If she has been unhappy with her first, she is the more disposed to be satisfied with number two. Or if she has been devoted to number one, she is inspired by tenderness to make the most of number two [Harrison 24].

His decision to marry based on emotions rather than finances relegates him to a feminine role, and his choice to allow Delphine to control their money is the source of trouble throughout the plot.

Albert and Clotilde provide a counterpoint to this remarried widow and emasculated husband, with Clotilde’s constant requests that Albert prove his love by buying her diamond earrings paralleling Chambly’s requests for money from Delphine. The newlyweds reinforce traditional gender dynamics by placing Albert in control of the finances, but both relationships employ money as rhetorical exhortations of affection. As Delphine refuses to give Chambly gambling money or to fall for his claims that “I am no longer beloved!” (Harrison 38) she is simultaneously schooling Clotilde in methods of extracting tokens of love, the diamond earrings, from Albert. Clotilde asks Albert for the earrings again, while betraying her true feelings:

If you only knew how I have set my heart on them. (*Aside*.) I haven’t really, but Delphine says my future is at stake!” [Harrison 30].

The duel between the newlyweds for the earrings is presented by Delphine as a battle for control over the entire relationship:

After only six weeks of marriage you allow your husband to say “No”? Clotilde, you are the verge of a bottomless abyss! [...] My poor, innocent child, don’t you know you life’s happiness depends on the stand you take during the honeymoon? Oh, it was your lucky star that led you to my hands. If you want those diamonds, you must have them — there! [Harrison 28].

Delphine has this power over Clotilde in part because she has been married longer and twice, but also because she has an identical set of the earrings and control of the household finances, which awes Clotilde. Inspired, Clotilde successfully weeps and gets Albert to outbid another buyer and acquire the earrings, thereby gaining the upper hand in the relationship for a moment, while Chambly’s attempts at manipulating Delphine through tears predictably fail (Harrison 38).

For Albert, Delphine is clearly a corruptive force, and her power extends both from her position as a knowledgeable former widow and from her control of Chambly’s money. In attempting to commiserate with Chambly about the cost of the earrings, a pair of which Delphine also owns, Albert learns that Delphine bought them for herself. His puzzlement is momentarily overshadowed by Chambly’s request to borrow money, which of course Albert loans to his old friend, but then Albert overhears a conversation between the two women where he learns that he was manipulated by his new bride: “I am the dupe of these designing women! Oh, it is contemptible!” (Harrison 35). Chambly is still brooding on his atrocious gambling luck, while Albert has a crisis of faith which he blames entirely upon Delphine:

Suppose I were to tell you that your wife — my wife — both our wives — are — monsters of duplicity; that they are leagued together to destroy our happiness? [...] That together they revel in hypocrisy, coin sentiments to betray us with, invent soft speeches to ruin us; feign tears [... Delphine], if anything, is the worse. *She* leads the way, and my wife follows. *She* is the high priest, Clotilde the neophyte. “Weep, weep, my dear,” counsels your insidious wife, “and *nothing* will be refused to you” [Harrison 36].

Albert references the fact that both of their wives had been in the convent, but Delphine’s inappropriate position of power in her marriage has enabled her to lead Clotilde astray. But, while Albert assumed that Clotilde would thus be innocent and pliable, Chambly wanted to marry a widow and gave Delphine the power that is now corrupting Albert’s relationship. Thus, Chambly’s scheme and willingness to then cede control of the family finances can be read as the direct cause of the new tension in Albert’s relationship. Of course, rather than agreeing with Albert about Delphine’s unnatural power, Chambly is so consumed with his gambling and submissive to his wife that he hears Albert’s tale and decides to try crying to Delphine to get money from her (his tears work on Jean, the comically unintelligent servant, but not on his smart wife).

Throughout, the fact that Delphine was widowed provides explanations for her strength of character and forceful nature. She, like the widows in the other plays in Harrison’s collection, did not want to remarry at first, and she rebuffed Chambly’s advances with laughter. While Chambly recounts her refusal to wed

him, notably she simply laughs again in response to his story and never admits why she chose to marry him:

“Why can you not love me?” I asked mournfully. “Because I have vowed never to marry again,” you answered. “But there must be some other reason,” I urged. “Well, then, my dear M. Chambly, you are — if you will have it — you are —” “Go on; put me out of my misery, madame.” “You are too fat!” The fact is I was immense — nothing poetical about me. “I will grow thin or die!” I exclaimed. From that moment I went in for athletics [Harrison 19].

While Chambly did thin down, no reason is given for why Delphine decided to marry him, if she assumed he would not lose weight for her, if he is again compared to a woman here, or if he simply asked for her hand too soon after her first husband’s death. While her “tears were hardly dry in your shining eyes” (Harrison 19) when she first met Chambly, the dialogue implies that her first husband was a vicious man. Her motivations thus remain utterly unmentioned throughout the piece, and in part, they are irrelevant as she made her choice and yet still clearly retained her power over the finances and gained power over her new husband.

While Chambly seems upset with Delphine only because she will not let him gamble, the other men see Delphine’s volition as an unnatural potentially corruptive force. Jean, after watching Delphine convince Chambly to give him money, remarks in an aside: “She was a widow when he married her, I’ll take my oath to it, or she’d never be so uppish” (Harrison 21). Jean also views her power in the relationship as something which emasculates Chambly, noting that he “is not so much his own master as when I saw him last” (Harrison 22) in Paris, before the marriage. For Delphine and Chambly, the play seemingly becomes an exercise in enabling Chambly to find his masculinity again, but there is no attempt to tame a shrewish wife here; instead, the strong widow orders her husband out into the battle that allows him to recover his pride. While gambling, three officers started mocking Chambly, and Albert, unbeknownst to his friend, witnessed the event and challenged the trio to a duel so as to defend Chambly’s honor. Rather than let Albert fight his battles for him, though, Delphine shames Chambly into taking care of his own reputation while simultaneously attempting to restore peace in Albert and Clotilde’s newly fractured relationship. When a letter arrives informing them all about the upcoming duel, Delphine tells Clotilde to not mention the letter or the situation to Albert, but instead to keep him trapped in the hotel. Clotilde, innocent, powerless and hysterically terrified for Albert’s life, fails miserably to calm him, win him back or otherwise control the situation. Her tears, this time, are real but he does not believe her, and he still quite clearly equates her betrayal with “those miserable gewgaws” (Harrison 42) upon which he spent thousands to prove his love. Eventually, Delphine resorts to showing Albert the letter, having realized that Clotilde is insufficiently skilled at controlling her husband through tears or falsehoods; Albert forgives his wife and rushes to the duel, only to be interrupted by the returning Chambly,

who bravely administered “a mere scratch” (Harrison 44) to the offending officer. Women may have been viewed as the moral compass of the nineteenth-century family, but this episode suggests that Clotilde’s innocence and naiveté are preferable to Delphine’s machinations, although Chambly’s willingness to compromise his authority by caving to his wife is seen as equally problematic. The Angel in the House should not control the purse strings.

Once goaded into action by his wife, much like Briefbag had to be encouraged to fight the mouse, Chambly proves himself no longer fully emasculated, and that feeble display of manhood is all it takes for Delphine to submit and turn over the key to the secretary. Here, despite the presentation of a strong remarried widow, is where the text reverts to the same simplistic turn of events that are seen in the other widow dramas in the collection. Chambly’s ability to scratch one of three soldiers parallels Briefbag’s caterwauling in its comically limp reversal of the weak male character and that minor change in character’s ability to cause an otherwise strong woman to suddenly crumble (presumably, Chambly’s use of fencing to lose weight connect to his ability to then employ, in a manner of speaking, his fencing skills in this conflict, but the duel only occurs because he loses money gambling and gets into an argument with his fellow gamblers). In both *Weeping Wives* and *The Mouse-Trap*, the widow retains power only insofar as she convinces an otherwise weak man into proper action and behavior, thereby suggesting a return to sentimentality: the love of a good widow can save a man from himself, and any embodiment of physical prowess is sufficient to protect a former widow; Delphine could protect herself in the future, but Prettipet and Bellamy appear wholly dependent on their second husbands. Thus, the buffoonish second husband points to an inability of widows to choose an appropriate second husband. Certainly, Chambly’s gambling problem suggests that Delphine could have chosen more wisely, and Fitzhenry and Briefbag are hardly intelligently witty or sentimentally pure suitors. Only Arthur stands presented as an acceptable match, a reward for Effingham’s ability to suffer through receiving hours.

With the exception of an oblique reference in *Weeping Wives*, the plays avoid discussions of blending the fortunes and finances of the widow and the second husband. The absence of such details makes sense, perhaps, within the context of a comedy; what wittily flirting couple wishes to stop throwing books at a mouse and discuss how to combine bank accounts? And yet, the absence also implies that women would of course, upon remarriage, become once again subservient to their husband, financially and physically, in exchange for his protection. Indeed, if anything, the lack of discussion of women’s financial contributions to the marriage suggests that such large financial matters are beyond the concern of these women who have other economic concerns, just as Effingham cannot be bothered by tariff bills but is willing to buy a \$50.00 subscription from the foolish Mrs. Coddington (Harrison 77). The widows’ lack of worry over complex finances is further underscored by comically inept servants, who

abound out of tradition, but who stand as evidence of the widow's inability to run her household effectively.

The discussions of marriage finances that do occur always focus on what the groom will provide to the bride; Appleby is worth millions, and Coddington vainly exclaims that the expenditures on the new Sybarites clubhouse "is a premium on celibacy" because the "men [were] spending all that money on a place where women can't be with them!" (Harrison 67). Accordingly, Alphonse de Luceval's inheritance in *Two Strings to Her Bow* figures prominently in the last comedy in the collection, which is the most traditional presentation of a young couple that work towards marriage. As with the widows, Cecile does not wish to marry, but wants to exercise outdoors and go "for a long, delightful ride in the forest" (Harrison 92) rather than meet her suitor. Not a New Woman who loves cycling, though, Cecile is a middle-class country girl with simple tastes and a limited vocabulary. Her parents and godfather dream of financial stability which they can now only gain through their daughter's marriage (Harrison 88). Cecile inherited their incompetence at social graces, but her suitor is equally plain and thus a good match. Alphonse de Luceval has chosen to take his inheritance, flee his impersonal and lonely life at Chateau Luceval and purchase a plot of land next to Cecile's family for sentimental familial reasons. His uncle wanted him to "give up Paris, and settle in the country. [...] The meadow your father has been good enough to part with to me, once contained the little cottage where my uncle was born. Do you wonder that the spot is sacred to me — that I dreamed of attaching myself to it by another link?" (Harrison 111). The lure of the simply country life appeals to de Luceval and is embodied in Cecile; if they can get past the comic machinations, then they will be happy. Chaos ensues when the family's bumbling attempts to appear worldly offend de Luceval. Additionally, Cecile's father and godfather both arrange for suitors, and the threat of financial ruin due to retribution hovers briefly because the second suitor is the Inspector-General's son. However, confusions are soon explained, and De Luceval proves wealthy and honorable enough to protect his new wife and her family.

Of the women who are married in Harrison's *Comedies for Amateur Acting*, Cecile is most sympathetic and yet also the most vapid, largely because she neither is a widow nor has been corrupted by a widow's bad advice. Rather than displaying the corruptive effects of power and financial freedom, fears of remarriage, or the taints of hysteria, Cecile vainly worries that marriage will result in her mother's life: "a double chin" and "disputing with papa about whether or not the beef is overdone" (Harrison 93). While all of the women do marry, Cecile's character suggests that when a woman is honest and does not perform a role, she will be attractive to a good, sentimental, wealthy man. Effingham is perhaps the next most successful at choosing a spouse, for while she panics about Arthur's false wounds, she also nobly suffers through the routine of entertaining tedious guests and suitors and is rewarded with a husband who is an

upright if underdeveloped character. The other widows are matched with emasculated men who need to be cajoled into fulfilling their duties, perhaps because only a widow can encourage them.

Panek argues that Jacobean widow marriage plays used “the notion of the widow as lustful and susceptible to sexual aggression [...] as a kind of compensation mechanism against her threat to a second husband’s masculine domestic authority” (Panek 329). Here, the late nineteenth-century comedies for amateurs instead address that fear by having the women capitulate out of fear, hysteria or completely unexplained character reversals. These widows are not Panek’s “lusty widows,” but rather women who dallied with freedom but learned that they needed protection. All of Harrison’s widows inherit well enough to maintain at least an upper-middle class lifestyle, they are all young, and they have no children to raise. Thus, the only difference between them and another young single woman is their inherited wealth and their worldliness. Cecile, as the only non-widow heroine in the collection, stands in contrast to these disempowered former widows; her financially tenuous situation makes marriage a viable option. But with all of the characters, the connections to the performers cannot be forgotten. Cecile’s concerns about class mobility and desires to marry up parallel with amateur performers, for the fad for theatricals in the late nineteenth-century was greatest amid the middle and lower-upper classes. In each play, the women choose to marry rather than maintain their economic independence and power—a powerful message for women who used these dramas in theatricals which raised thousands of dollars for charitable causes and a powerful reminder to audiences that the ability to earn money through artistic endeavors does not necessarily render a woman unmarriageable.

## NOTES

1. Nineteenth-century amateur drama presents particular analytical difficulties for the performance historian, in part because the historical record for amateur productions is relatively limited. Anthologies and guidebooks for amateur performances survive, as do some personal materials and newspaper accounts of performances, but one has to assume that the vast majority of amateur productions went unrecorded in extant materials. Thus, the study of amateur drama can be quite easily skewed towards the published plays or towards plays recounted in society news columns, both of which have the potential to alter our understanding of what texts were actually being performed.

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# To Have or Have Not

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*Edited by* JAMES FISHER



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